

UNITED FOR FAMILIES: CORONAVIRUS FUND PROVIDES IMMEDIATE SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS



Michigan's COVID-19 outbreak and resulting shutdowns continue to affect families. One of the most pressing needs now is food for children, seniors and struggling families.

The spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) in Southeastern Michigan and resulting state shutdowns have forced families to seek alternative solutions for income, child care, in-home schooling and staying safe. It's also straining the resources of area nonprofit agencies that serve people in need with food, shelter and health care.

United Way for Southeastern Michigan is working with our government, nonprofit and corporate partners to understand where needs are arising and how to best address them. And with the launch of our COVID-19 Community Response Fund, we're helping community organizations and the people they serve get through the outbreak with as much support as possible to weather this crisis.

A MAGNIFIED PROBLEM

Even before COVID-19 spread, nearly half of us in Southeastern Michigan were struggling to meet our basic needs.

With schools and most businesses shut down for weeks, there is widespread uncertainty even among those fortunate enough to live in a stable household. And for families that were already struggling to get by, one missed paycheck can be catastrophic.

“We know that many households in our region are more vulnerable than common perception,” explains Sara Gold, director of Health and Basic Needs for United Way for Southeastern Michigan. “Everything that happens during a crisis just magnifies that situation.”

IMMEDIATE SUPPORT NEEDED

Some support is currently available through government programs. Additionally, the State of Michigan has relaxed unemployment eligibility to extend to more people impacted by closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak. But it’s often not enough to close the gap when bills are due, and it doesn’t arrive quickly enough.

When immediate help is needed, community nonprofits providing meals, shelter, rent and mortgage assistance, or other critical services can become quickly overloaded.

Already, local food pantries have reported sharp increases in traffic to United Way. Also, in the three days after the expansion of unemployment was announced, **55,000 Michiganders** filed claims. That’s an increase of 1,500 percent from the week prior.

United Way’s 2-1-1 helpline has also seen a sharp increase in calls. During a normal day, our call center would receive around 500 calls from people seeking assistance with things like food, shelter and utility assistance. Now, the average is closer to 800 calls per day. As a result, we’re expanding the number of staff taking calls during nights and on weekends.

IMMEDIATE CONCERNS FOCUS ON FOOD, SHELTER

As a leader in Michigan’s nonprofit community, United Way works with more than 250 partners to work toward our goal of helping households become stable and ensuring children can thrive. This ranges from small community groups to regional agencies and foundations.

In the wake of coronavirus-related shutdowns, United Way convened our partners to hear their concerns. We also shared our plan for supporting them.

What we heard, Sara said, is that the most common immediate concern is the ability to ensure that vulnerable populations like seniors and children can get food. With senior centers and schools closing, both groups have lost access to a regular source of meals.

“We’re expecting that concern to expand to folks who were laid off next,” she added.

Another issue is the capacity of emergency housing and homeless shelters. This is especially true as they try to implement “social distancing” measures to keep the individuals and families they serve safe.

“They’re having to shift their models to protect people in congregate settings, a lot of whom are not physically well and at risk,” Sara said.

UNITED WAY OFFERING EMERGENCY GRANTS

When news broke that the coronavirus had spread to Michigan, United Way created a COVID-19 Community Response Fund. United Way seeded the fund with \$1 million from its emergency relief fund. Corporate and foundation partners, as well as individual donors, have since contributed more than \$5 million.

The fund allows us to address immediate and long-term needs of families in our community. Grant funding is available for community organizations, government entities and schools. Grants can assist with things like staffing, outreach or changes to their services because of social distancing measures.

"Many families in our region already struggle to survive," said Dr. Darienne Hudson, president and CEO of United Way for Southeastern Michigan. "Our goal is to support those in need and the organizations that support them."

As of March 27, we have received more than 300 funding applications. We have already awarded more than \$2.8 million in emergency response dollars to more than 75 organizations. We'll share more details in the days to come about how these funds are being used.

As the impact of this pandemic shifts in the weeks and months to come, so, too, will United Way's response. Through it all, we remain committed to helping families in our region. Together, we can overcome this crisis and rebuild stable households in our region.