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# LISTENING, PROVIDING, EVOLVING



how direct service organizations in southern New Jersey are changing to meet community needs, and adapting themselves, during the COVID-19 pandemic

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By the end of May 2020, according to the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, fully 50 percent of the adult population of New Jersey (about 3.5 million) had experienced an employment-related loss in income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who lost their jobs, had hours cut short, or were furloughed, the impacts resulted in deep losses. The unexpected transitions of school and work during this time also hit hard. And organizations providing direct services and supports to communities are now on the front lines, adapting their work and responding to these needs as they arise.



Given the uncertainty that families face during this public health and economic crisis, direct service work has become indispensable. The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University-Camden developed a qualitative evaluation project early in the pandemic to examine the range of responses from a group of direct service organizations as they acknowledged, responded to, and worked to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the families and communities they serve.

To reach that aim, we gathered data through twenty-seven interviews, conducted between May 6 and June 10, 2020, with staff and leadership at eight organizations in southern New Jersey which engage in direct service provision in their communities. They shared with us the impacts of the pandemic on the families they serve (in terms of economic security, education, access to technology, food insecurity) as well as the immediate and lasting impacts on the organizations themselves.

This paper examines how urgent community needs have reshaped organizations' goals and strategies around resource allocation just as the shift to virtual provision of services has reshaped daily practices. Their responses show the creative strategies used to respond to this new context, how organizations stretched and changed, and how individual staff members redefined their work to better help the families they serve. And their responses also highlight their emerging roles as basic service and financial aid providers, essential support systems, and vital sources of information about public health.

## RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC AND SHIFTING COMMUNITY NEEDS

The overarching goal for this project was to examine the range of responses implemented by a cluster of direct service organizations in southern New Jersey as they acknowledged and worked to mitigate the impacts of this pandemic on their organizations, and on the families and communities they serve. Questions in the data collection interviews ranged from identification of the most pressing issues facing families, to leadership and organizational support strategies (for families and staff), to structural and social issues that families needed help navigating, to shifts in job responsibilities and personal impacts on staff members.

Key themes emerged from our data, centered on the experiences of and responses by organizations through the pandemic, and how organizational structures shifted as needs emerged at the beginning of this public health and economic crisis. Echoed throughout this paper, these themes were: organizational contextual responsiveness, organizational flexibility, and individual helpfulness.

### **What new and unexpected challenges emerged and brought these organizations greater awareness of barriers faced by the families they serve?**

‘Contextual responsiveness’ represents how organizations recognized, in the first few months of the pandemic, the immediate and newly emergent needs of families, many of which stem from pre-existing inequities. This theme also reflects how societal structures, both formal and informal, continued to present challenges or issues for families and organizations during the pandemic, primarily related to financial and physical wellbeing, housing, and access to services.

### **How did these organizations shift their engagement practices with families during this time?**

‘Flexibility’ emerged as a theme as organizations shared how their community engagement shifted based on the needs, challenges, and barriers families now face. The engagement changed across tasks, functions, and even organizational policies. It became clear that these organizations need constant flexibility in the ways they prioritize and provide services and they need to adapt, to the best of their ability, their efforts to support families -- while keeping these efforts aligned with their organizational missions.

### How did staff members define or re-define helpfulness in this context?

During interviews, staff members shared their changing views of how to best provide help to families through both broad and narrow acts of helpfulness, such as serving groups of families through topical virtual programming or offering individualized resource sharing and grocery delivery. Guided by their organizational mission and the evolving needs of their communities, individual staff were consistently available to provide support, frequently at the risk of sacrificing personal boundaries of time, health, and safety.

## CONTEXTUAL RESPONSIVENESS



**Nobody was well-prepared for what happened through all of this. But the relationships that we've had with these families have allowed us to work with them closely and serve their immediate needs.**

**- Interview, May 18th, 2020**



Staff members and leadership from these organizations spoke of family income decline, and one respondent noted: “employment will likely be crippled by the reopening of the country and general decrease in demand.” A staff member chronicled a ripple effect they witnessed while helping families apply for unemployment -- “If you don’t have one you can’t have the other. And you need money to be able to pay our bills, yet you need that service to get online to even be able to do unemployment. And it’s just a horrible circle.” This quote is typical of the contextual impacts on communities caused by the current crisis, and typical of what direct service organizations have responded to in real time across southern New Jersey.

Unprecedented job loss and reduced work hours immediately impacted families and their ability to meet basic needs. One staff member framed the concern: “finances are the biggest issue for our families. A lot of them worry they won’t have enough money to last the next few months, they lost their job, they’re not hearing back from unemployment services, or don’t qualify for the stimulus check.”

For families that do not qualify for government assistance, they rely on their current jobs as their only income, noted one staffer. The respondent documented the story of one mother who had to be let go of several jobs because she did not have strong childcare and was unable to bring her toddler with her to work. One respondent explained that for one of her families that is working, income remains a challenge as a large portion of income is allocated towards childcare while working.

One respondent shared the interconnected barriers facing one family who did not know when they were going to eat next because the father had been laid off -- he could not get to work as the bus schedule changed due to the pandemic. "He has no other support, his wife died just last year so he earns all of the money that comes into the family. Now they have nothing. He can't file for unemployment because he's undocumented and he can't go and get a job because he doesn't have transportation." Another respondent, who works with families who are immigrants noted, "it's not easy for them to go out and just get a job at a Walmart or a Rite Aid. They depend on working in the fields or under the table." In a separate April 2020 sampling of working families, just under half of the respondents (49 percent) reported receiving any pay for lost work during the beginning of the pandemic, specifically, in the 8 day period from March 16 through March 24 (Gassman-Pines & Ananat, April 2020). During this same timeframe, work hours among parents who have hourly service jobs fell from 67 percent of parents working a shift on a typical day, to 41 percent working a shift. Others noted how families' jobs may not provide sick time off or time off (paid or unpaid) or that individuals remained working while feeling sick or in fear of getting sick or for need of money. "A lot of families are still working and they're scared to get sick. I have a lot of families that are still working in factories or nurseries because they have to." Another respondent noted how children and teens with parents who are essential workers know their parents are very susceptible to getting sick and are experiencing anxiety because of that. Another respondent noted families are "in fear of being laid off," particularly for individuals who are undocumented, as both their worker's rights and ability to get certain assistance are limited.

This affects the population or demographic we work with differently. I believe our families are in need of the knowledge and education of what's going on, because many of them, if they work, it's not a secure job, it's not something that your job is easily gonna say, you can take this time off or work from home.

Staff members and leadership shared with us that families are also facing additional stressors and limitations beyond their typical work duties, and in some cases, were directly being put at risk. "Some jobs are not providing masks and gloves for their employees. Some employers are either not giving any PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) to their staff or asking them to reuse the PPE they've been using," a respondent noted.

One staff member shared how, early in the pandemic, an individual's employer was not providing anyone with PPE. Two of their co-workers then tested positive for COVID, but the employer did not tell employees who could have been exposed. Staff members had to become well-versed in this new context of public health risks and resources, and aid families in navigating quarantine and other restrictions.

Organizations also shared the growing food insecurity in the communities they serve. As noted by one staffer, "the grocery stores that were walking distance to center city recently closed and now families are struggling with transportation to safely get groceries." Another respondent chronicled heightened concerns with food security because of the sensitivity of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program; "some families had someone recently laid off and lost their SNAP benefits because of the \$600 unemployment the family received. Or other families have six children and both adults work, so they only receive \$16 a month for SNAP use. That's not enough." One staffer noted that food insecurity has been on the rise due to the pandemic, and demand from families they serve has doubled or tripled. A nationally representative survey of adults found that in May, more than one in six adults and more than one in five parents living with children reported that their households experienced food insecurity during the prior 30 days, and adults whose families have experienced employment disruptions during the pandemic also faced a disproportionately high rate of food insecurity (Health Reform Monitoring Survey 2020; Urban Institute, 2020).

Multiple respondents explained that the immediate online transition (for work and school) due to the pandemic made the existing barriers to technology access a vital issue for many. "There's a problem with the digital divide. People are being told that they should go sit in the library parking lot to be able to connect to free Wi-Fi. That's not a solution to this huge problem for all of these people and we need to figure out how to solve this problem for people," noted one staffer. "Technology has been treated as a luxury for the people who can afford to access it. But nowadays having access to the internet is as crucial as having a roof over your head." As one respondent noted, "the most pressing issue families are facing right now is access to laptops; our families could always use more computers." In a recent survey of New Jersey parents, almost half (44 percent) of parents were concerned about whether their family would be able to afford internet access. Nearly a third (30 percent) of parents shared that their child does not receive any technology support, such as free internet or a mobile device from schools (Global Strategy Group, 2020).

## FLEXIBILITY

“

**[Families] know we will work with them hands down to resolve whatever their situation is. They know that. They know that we can be as supportive as possible."**

**- Interview, May 26th, 2020**”

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Staff and leadership in these eight organizations shared how both processes and operational missions were realigned to respond to the urgent needs of the communities they serve, and how this realignment changed how they work. “[W]e’re a typical program that thrives on interpersonal connections and face-to-face meetings, and in that manner it was whisked away from us overnight, and so our response has shifted... to more meeting the four walls - food, shelter, clothing, transportation. Those kinds of necessities.” Entire organizations and their staff shifted resources and efforts as new, community-driven priorities arose. In one example a respondent noted, “we currently have a student who is dealing with the loss of a loved one from COVID-19. So meeting those social emotional needs, they take a priority. Certainly the financial issues, making sure the kids are able to eat. Just yesterday we had to provide a \$200 gift card to a family who was struggling to eat and we sent it electronically so they could. We’ve seen pockets of all of it, even the housing issues.”

One organization described how they are now working to better serve families -- moving from a primarily educational based organization, aiding families with IEPs and 504s [special education services], and transitioning to helping families who need support with their mortgage or bills. The onset of the pandemic led organizations to shift prioritization and provision of services. “We should make sure as an organization people aren’t going hungry, if there are families that could use \$50 or \$100 for groceries, we can make that happen,” one respondent noted. Organizations reflected on the challenge of the moment to continue their work, and noted drastic shifts in service delivery. “It’s a hard time to do this work. As much as we’re trying to be responsive and available, the reality is that it’s hard to work towards long-term and intentional goal planning with families right now.”

Operations and service delivery pivoted swiftly from in-person to virtual. “Libraries and offices that we usually work in suddenly became unavailable and we had to quickly pivot to be able to provide services to our students. For many of our students, they have so many barriers to learning that working with us in-person was critical. But we have no choice but to adapt and work to provide remote services to students.” The use of virtual tools, such as Zoom or Google Hangout, became a vital way for organizations to connect with families. Another organization noted they have been making changes to how they meet with kids, and that changing to a virtual format “has completely impacted our work.”

We had to pretty quickly create instructional webinars to help prepare instructors for meeting the new needs of students. We had to figure out how Zoom works for ourselves and then learn how to teach our instructors how to teach students at home. We created this series of webinars for both our staff and instructors so that they’d be able to adapt.

Academic and education-focused programming also shifted online. “We are an academic program, and in the transition from brick and mortar to online, essentially we ensure kids are meeting academic needs. And that means getting technology either from the school or from us if they weren’t able to.” Organizations are offering homework help sessions and transitioned to virtual tutoring. Some organizations have helped families create and stick to at-home schedule routines.

Organizations described how they changed methods to fit the unprecedented situation: “We’ve been able to transition things online. We offer the same sort of things we would do if we were in the office. So far, everything we just try to tweak to make it fit the situation.” One noted how they have never really done their work through video before, and now they are helping families develop schedules, keeping kids engaged, and aiding in homework help more via phone and video. Several organizations formerly engaged in goal setting and other programming with families shifted the ways they interact and engage with those they serve.

With the families, in the conversations, it’s been around trying to get information around the pandemic and see that they’re understanding what is asked of us all from [the] social distancing perspective, and what’s going on across the state. And to see what needs are and how to best support them during this time. We let our families know if they have a need for things like groceries or improving their internet connectivity, or help with utilities, we’re able to help them out.

Another organization switched from monthly meetings to weekly meetings with students to give updates and assess student needs, and one organization noted that “We’ve completely stopped home visits and now we communicate with families over the phone, by text, or by video. With some families, it’s been easier to communicate through text, it gives them time, like some may not answer it right away, but they can when they’re ready or have a moment.” Another respondent shared how their organization is working to normalize how their [parents] are feeling. “They feel overwhelmed because they don’t understand why the child is behaving a certain way. We have to give them courage; it’s okay if you need time away, the importance of self-care, we help them feel empowered and less stressed.” One organization started to implement wellness-checks, where [organization staff] reach out to families at least once a week by text, phone, or email. They include mental health surveys to see how the community is feeling. “I’ve specifically seen and started to notice first hand, is that feeling and need for social interaction. We know that we’re not ready to go back out into the world and as this has continued to drag on, we try to give some kind of interaction for families, just for their mental health, making sure they don’t go too stir crazy.” As one staff member put it, “I just try to find ways to help the kids with their mental health and let them know I’m there for them.” And another noted “We’ve tried our best to work with the teenagers to open up, but you know, because of their age they don’t communicate as much as mom or dad does or would like them to. But when they get out of this, they’re going to have to process their feelings and it’s going to be a traumatic experience. We just hope we’ll be able to support them through it.”

Staff members we spoke with described an increase in partnerships with local schools to provide resources like toys, chalk, and activities for children. One noted that they are accustomed to sharing resources within and between organizations, but that has been rapidly increasing. “We’re trying to go out there and network with other organizations to see what support they’re offering for undocumented people, like places that are giving food away without documentation and other non-food resources too. We share these resources with our families,” one respondent noted. One organization partnered with local food banks that had to close their doors because they could not socially distance their operations. In response, volunteers started delivering food weekly to families and assisting with school breakfast and lunch distribution. Families that were not able to pay for food because they did not have food stamps were given grocery store gift cards by one organization, as well as boxes of toiletries, hand sanitizer, and canned foods.

One organization started a hotline where people could call and ask about money issues and jobs, and another updated their website and created blogs for references on how to talk to your kids about COVID-19, information about unemployment, state resources available and how to access them, and relevant news updates. Others have shared COVID-19 information through webinars and created videos to promote the Census.

Organizations shifted to provide direct financial support to families and individuals with essential needs when the impacts of the crisis became clear. “The most pressing issue, in my mind, is those families that have not had a real income, to make sure that we’re helping them reach out to every agency and resource that’s available to get some kind of income in their house,” one respondent noted.



We have purchased gift cards to ShopRite and Walmart, and we chose Walmart because sometimes families need a little something else other than just food. We know that they have other things they have to buy. And we did receive the grant from [funder] that was to help with getting and loaning families laptops so we purchased four. We had four other laptops that had been given to us from our work with [organization], so now we have eight laptops to loan out. We are loaning them instead of giving them away so we can keep them for any future use. We had one man that needed his phone fixed, we were constantly trying to reach out and got a hold of him and found out his wife has a chronic condition that causes her to just be in and out of the hospital so for him having a phone is vital. So we paid for that. And then we had one family that was short about \$45 on their rent so we of course helped them.

Emergency funding was also used by one organization to create new content for working remotely with students, and several organizations noted that families and children did not have access to a computer or device, or to reliable internet service. One organization which works with families to build their financial well-being has been able to provide families with up to \$250 mini-grants to pay rent and bills on a case-by-case basis. “It’s not an immense amount of money in terms of bills, but it helps give the families more room to support their families.”

Organizations noted their flexibility to respond to emerging needs concretely, as a respondent shared “we have been able to cover some of the families’ [utility] bills. It’s not a service across the board, but we keep a fund to use with families we think need it.” And beyond allocating new grant funds, organizations noted the redistribution of existing funds to serve community and family needs. “We had a lot of extra money in our budget for food that we would have used to pay for snacks or dinners for family nights or afterschool programming, so we took those funds and put them towards buying groceries.”

## HELPFULNESS



**"You care about these people and I just want to help and nurture and care for them. You just want to make sure they're doing everything they can to be safe."**

**- Interview, May 14th, 2020**



These eight direct service organizations each serve as support networks for families, and individual staff members serve as touchstones. Staff build rapport and trusting relationships with their families through their work and this was key to their ability to provide relevant and timely help during stay at home orders and throughout the pandemic. As shared by one staff member: "We're just here to support, refer, and help as much as we can."

Staff members repeatedly shared their stories about supporting families as they faced barriers both large and small. "Some families that need food or some kind of income, we need to make sure they're on track to get the stuff they need," one respondent noted. Another respondent noted that their organization's response was to immediately reach out to families to find out what they needed if they were still working or if they needed to apply for benefits. The immediate needs ranged from "we need masks and gloves, we need more hours, we lost our jobs." One staff member also spoke to their ability to anticipate families' needs as they faced challenges, such as knowing the family members that might need PPE for work, conducting special mental health check-ins, and linking to services during this anxiety-inducing crisis. Other staffers spoke to offering assistance in the form of navigating available community resources, such as helping individuals file for unemployment or offering free food. One staff member noted the organizations' efforts to help "regardless of their family format."

The sudden shift in everyday communication between staff and families pushed individuals and families to extend themselves to a greater degree to ask for help. In recognizing the heightened need for open communication, organizations shifted in-person programming to a virtual platform.

The nature of virtual meetings and communication presented challenges for both families and staff; staff shared it was harder to read families, technology was difficult, if not impossible, to access for some, and families with school-age children were inundated with constant communication from the school and/or work.

Staff members were able to create opportunities for families to reach out for help and provided much-needed socialization. Individual staff members used their experiences with virtual training sessions to create interactive and engaging tutorials for families to use at home. Staff members shared with us how they extended help to others as they navigated both professional boundaries and their own personal boundaries of safety. The organizations' responsiveness at the start of the pandemic demonstrated their ever-changing definition of helpfulness to address the gaps in service that families experience.

One organization providing social-emotional supports to students opened space for small groups of students to interact with their peers, play games, and learn more about stress and coping with new social-emotional challenges. In opening that space for children to be occupied for a duration of time, the staff provided parents the opportunity to observe strategies for talking to their children as well as time to step away and get work done. "Even with parents, we let them know that anything they need, we can offer to them or we can find a way to help them. We are always touching base with the kids because they're engaged with programming, you can tell that they look forward to talking with us, for parents, I think it's just knowing that they have that support for their kids and that we're there for them too." One staff member shared that they FaceTime or text families every morning with follow up checks-ins regarding the plans and schedules the organization and family developed together. Organizations also hosted relevant events and workshops for teens or families, and that despite fluctuating attendance, consistently served as an open space for families to come and go as it fit their own goals and availability.

Staff members created solutions to address the families' needs and fill the gaps of daily life. New activities ranged from making activity boxes with toys and games for kids to play with, putting together materials for English Learners and delivering them to families, sharing online exercise classes, hosting resume writing tutorials, conducting mock interviews and makeup tutorials, and starting a book club. Individual staff worked off the clock to check in with families by texting or video calling, simply to help and listen to families.

I think it's helped them to know we're working from home too, so I think it's just been helpful for parents to see we're in our home, and it's a little more casual, and they're in their homes and we can see what's going on for them. I think it's made people feel bare and exposed in a way, because you've taken down those walls of professionalism. I think that's helped take away the fear of reaching out from people who need help with something. I think it's been weird but you know, it's also been really helpful. We're all being affected by the same thing and it's peeled some of that [awkwardness] away.

These direct service organizations are part of the fabric of their communities and are deeply knowledgeable of the gaps in service (i.e., daycare, unemployment) and resources (i.e., grocery stores, technology) that families need. Staff provided individualized resources and support to families that targeted their immediate needs and anticipated their long-term needs to keep them on track to achieving their family goals, to whatever degree possible. One staff member shared their perceived role working with families during this time: "I feel like my role here is to maintain aspirations and motivation and keep families on track. I try to keep them with us. It can be challenging for families. I want them to focus on their dreams."

Staff also balanced their own boundaries of personal safety to help families receive access and meet their needs. Community food banks implemented distribution requirements which staff members had to navigate on behalf of families. One staff member knew her families did not have access to transportation to get to food banks, so she requested food in her own name, picked it up, and delivered it to her families. This staff member also drove a child of one of her families to the hospital so they could receive medical care.

Removing unnecessary barriers that prevent families from accessing resources quickly became a crucial piece of everyday work for organization staff. Staff members synthesized resources for their families and created graphics with information on food banks, how to protect yourself from COVID-19, educational and socio-emotional resources for students and parents, and how to avoid internet scams. Staff recognized that families were inundated with information and sought to simplify relevant resources to help families easily identify the resources they may need.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Nine months into the pandemic, the deep inequities and challenges facing families across southern New Jersey persist. New approaches undertaken by direct service organizations to help families meet this moment have changed how they work, plan, and grow, and will continue to do so far into the future. This paper examined how eight direct service organizations across southern New Jersey responded to families' needs during this time. These organizations shared with us how they listened to the challenges of families, provided resources to meet those challenges, and evolved to address ongoing challenges. Through interviews with leaders and staff members in these organizations, three themes of contextual responsiveness, flexibility, and helpfulness emerged. Families lost jobs and may have been placed in precarious work environments; others struggled with the ability to pay bills and afford basic needs such as food and housing.

Organizations embraced new ways to assist families and offered help wherever possible through shifts in communication strategies, activities, and direct support and reiterated their unwavering commitment to the communities they serve. Along with ongoing concern about the spread and impacts of COVID-19, New Jersey lost some 750,000 jobs in April 2020, plummeting employment below 1985 levels. By August, employment levels had risen to 1999 employment levels, but growth continues to slow as this rapid period of recovery not only fades but remains far below pre-pandemic levels (Hughes, Hughes, Seneca 2020; NJ DOL, 2020). Considering the overall financial impact, the World Bank predicts that the global economy will shrink by 5.2 percent in 2020. U.S. GDP output dropped 10.6 percent in the first half of 2020, and most analyses project that the U.S. unemployment rate will remain near the double-digit mark through the middle of 2021 (Mutikani, 2020; Reinhart & Reinhart, 2020).

Millions of jobs have been lost, and many may not be recovered. Thousands of lives have been altered. There have been changes to how we work and learn, the impacts of which will continue for years to come. This project showed how direct service organizations are working to mitigate the wide range of COVID-19 impacts on their communities -- and that they will continue to do so.

We have to be prepared to go forward and constantly ask ourselves, what's next? We have to ask ourselves how do we maintain that contact with our families and provide them with things and resources that they really need. How do we give them support in a positive type of way that they're used to? So it may evolve, we're going to have to, as a staff, think outside the box to think of what steps to take to support families.

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