

Special Report: We Care and the COVID-19 pandemic

Submitted by Rex Cole, Intake Coordinator, to the We Care Board

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We Care is a small non-profit organization, completely administered and staffed by volunteers, that provides one-time financial assistance to people facing financial crises in Oregon's Benton County (population 93,053). Consequently, We Care is actively engaged in the challenges faced by individuals, families, and a community coping with the financial impact of COVID-19. Reported here is the initial experience of We Care during the early weeks of the economic downturn accompanying the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

We Care received its first requests for emergency financial assistance related to COVID-19 on March 26, 2020. In the ensuing seven weeks (March 26 through May 7th) We Care has assisted a total of 27 households financially impacted by the COVID-19 economic downturn. These households, composed of 42 adults and 31 children, received a total of \$19,068 in financial assistance from We Care. The number of financial assistance requests related to COVID-19 appears to be increasing; 13 of the 27 households requested assistance during the last week of April and first week in May, compared to only 14 in the previous five weeks.

Twenty-three of the 27 families assisted received assistance to help pay their rent. Two families received money for utilities, and two received assistance for auto related bills, and two for other miscellaneous bills. Several families received funds to cover multiple expenses. Among the households We Care serves, rent tends to be the biggest household expense and the most difficult to cover in the midst of a crisis. Therefore, the high incidence of requests for rent was not surprising.

What is notable is the large amount of money required to address the needs of most COVID-19 affected families. In 2020 prior to March 26, when none of the requests to We Care were related to COVID-19, the average amount of assistance provided to help a family meet an emergency was \$393. The average amount of assistance provided to COVID-19 affected households has been \$796, with some requesting and needing well over \$1000. The reason for the increase is clear. Prior to COVID-19, the need of most We Care assisted families was for help with one particular bill and they often could contribute a portion of the payment. In most of the COVID-19 families We Care has assisted there has been a total loss of employment income, resulting in the inability to pay, or contribute to the payment of multiple bills all at once. The financial situation for these COVID-19 affected households is truly catastrophic.

Thirty-four of the adults living in the 27 COVID-19 affected households suffered loss of employment income. Thirty-one of these lost their jobs completely, and three had their work hours (and income) significantly reduced. The types of jobs that were lost or suffered reduced hours are listed in the following table.

| Type of Employment | Number | Percent |
|---|--------|---------|
| Restaurant/bar/food service | 12 | 35% |
| In-home Services (Housekeeping, Care Providers, etc.) | 5 | 15% |
| Retail Stores | 4 | 12% |
| Construction | 4 | 12% |
| Agriculture/Forestry | 3 | 9% |
| Hospitality Industry | 2 | 6% |
| Gym, Pilates, Yoga Studio | 1 | 3% |
| Other | 3 | 9% |

While the loss of restaurant/bar/food service jobs were most common among this cohort, there was a fairly broad range of jobs affected. Almost all the jobs lost were service jobs that could not be done remotely. Jobs in construction (jobs that might have been done with social distancing and safety from the coronavirus) were lost because construction contracts had been cancelled by clients who themselves had lost jobs and income. Three of the recipients described themselves as small business owners.

A troubling observation is that Hispanic / Latino families are disproportionately facing financial difficulties because of the COVID-19 crisis. From January 1 through March 19, when We Care received no requests from families affected by COVID-19, this ethnic group accounted for 24% of the We Care assisted individuals. That percentage rose to 52% among the individuals financially impacted by COVID-19 after March 19. This observation parallels national reports. In a Pew Research survey¹ completed in early April, 49% - 61% of Hispanic Americans reported that they or someone in their household had lost a job or taken a pay cut due to the coronavirus outbreak. This compared to 29% - 38% of White Americans. National unemployment statistics² for April indicate that Hispanics had an unemployment rate of 18.9%, while Whites had an unemployment rate of 14.2%. It is noted that the types of jobs in which Hispanics tend to be concentrated quickly succumbed to social distancing protocols and shutdown mandates. A recent poll³ (results published May 5) found that 61% of Hispanic Americans have experienced household income loss as a result of the outbreak (compare to 46% of Americans overall), and 37% of Latinos say they've been unable to pay at least one type of bill as a result of the corona virus (compared to 17% of white Americans who say the same). We Care is witnessing this increased need for financial assistance among Latinos in Benton County. Fortunately, We Care's partnership with Casa Latinos Unidos is helping to ensure that We Care does not neglect this vulnerable population.

Uncaptured by the statistics is the stress and anguish of those who have had their lives abruptly turned up-side-down by a catastrophic loss of income in the wake of the corona virus. At the same time, in We Care's interactions with applicants, donors, landlords, property managers and others, I have noticed the awakening of an appreciation people have for each other and our community, combined with an increased awareness of personal vulnerability. It is a moment in time ripe with opportunity: we just might learn to care about each other more.

¹ Mark Hugo Lopez, Lee Rainie, and Abby Budiman, Financial and health impacts of COVID-19 vary widely by race and ethnicity, [FacTank](#), May 5, 2020

² Tracy Jan, This is how economic pain is distributed in America, [The Washington Post](#), May 9, 2020.

³ Kat Stafford and Emily Swanson, AP-NORC poll: Pandemic especially tough on people of color [AP-News](#), May 6, 2020

APPENDIX. A brief history of COVID-19 in Benton County

- Social distancing to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus became widespread in March 2020.
- On March 16 schools in the Corvallis and Philomath School Districts closed in response to the pandemic.
- On March 21, Benton County reported the first two cases of COVID-19 contracted within the county.
- On March 22, 2020 Governor Kate Brown issued Executive Order 20-11 in response to the financial impact of the virus, placing a moratorium on residential evictions for nonpayment throughout the state. The order is effective for 90 days. Electric companies and municipal water districts followed suit, deciding not to discontinue service for unpaid bills during the time of the pandemic.
- On March 23rd Governor Brown issued a statewide stay-at-home order that went into immediate effect and closed all nonessential businesses.
- On March 30th, Benton County reported its first death from COVID-19.
- The extraordinary measures taken to thwart spread of the disease have been effective. At the time of this writing (May 9), 7 weeks after the first two cases were diagnosed here, there have been only 41 cases of COVID-19 cases in the county, and a total of 5 deaths due to the disease.
- An OSU community testing research project begun April 25th [Team-based Rapid Assessment of Community Level Coronavirus Epidemics (TRACE)] is attempting to estimate the prevalence of the coronavirus in Corvallis. As reported on May 8th: from its initial weekend of testing data it is estimated with 95% confidence that 23 of every 10,000 people in the city have been infected. The U.S Census Bureau estimates the population of Corvallis to be 57,213, and the population of Benton County to be 93,053.