

How 800 nonprofits across the U.S. are helping their local communities survive the pandemic

During COVID-19, the adaptability of nonprofit organizations is proving to be a mainstay of community survival, even though it may risk the survival of the organizations themselves.

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“In our 150-year history,” writes a San Francisco homeless services nonprofit in a Facebook post, “we...have never faced a challenge like COVID-19.” It’s an ominous claim for an organization that’s weathered two outbreaks of the bubonic plague (in 1900 and 1907), the 1918 flu, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But earlier this month, COVID-19 nearly brought the organization to its knees. One of the organization’s shelters became the center of the city’s largest coronavirus outbreak. Ninety-five homeless clients and ten staff tested positive for the disease. Shortly after helping the city move infected clients to more suitable housing, the shelter reopened its doors. The nonprofit concluded its Facebook post defiantly: the pandemic “#CantStopGood.”

In a time when government has abdicated many responsibilities, civic organizations are providing a patchwork of social welfare—improvising to continue long-standing services and innovating in response to unmet needs. Through an ongoing study of 800 nonprofits operating in politically and economically diverse regions of the US, we are finding that, beneath a surface of closed offices and cancelled events, nonprofits are demonstrating surprising resilience in the face of unprecedented adversity. Despite dwindling funds and little support on the horizon, these organizations—be they knitting clubs, soup kitchens, or repertory theatres—are making up for government deficiencies.

Nonprofits are rearranging schedules, workforces, and physical spaces to continue providing essential services. Seeing demand grow from 100 to 1000 meals per day, a program serving the low-income Latino community of Lancaster converted its sit-down dining facility into a “Grab & Go” model. Likewise, organizations providing in-person services before the pandemic are now delivering medicine and food (as well as refrigerators and microwaves) to home-bound seniors. One Detroit-area senior center moved its extensive catalogue of fitness classes online, airing some, like “Gentle Moves Yoga,” on a local TV station twice daily. As one organization puts it, “we’re not cancelled, just different.”

Many nonprofits have also pivoted to meet emergent community needs. A science museum in Florida—a state slow to close and early to reopen—hosted a virtual Q&A with an infectious disease specialist in order to dispel rumors, misinformation, and other common misunderstandings about COVID-19. They also enrolled their powerful computer servers in a grassroots effort to model SARS-CoV-2 proteins. A Miami-area business association established a “rapid relief fund” providing \$500 grants to low-income families otherwise ineligible for state aid. A youth boxing gym in Michigan—a state overwhelmed by infections and citizens vilifying

government-led public health efforts—has braved snow and sleet to deliver 1,000 gallons of hand sanitizer throughout the region. In California, where government response was swift, costume designers at a Santa Clara theatre company are crafting masks for state employees, postal workers, and vulnerable populations—distributing 4,000 since early April. In the lighthearted spirit of a musical theatre, they've also released a song: "*Maskmaker, Maskmaker, make me a mask!*"

Taken together, nonprofits' collective contributions to pandemic relief are akin to the auto industry's contributions to American war efforts during World War II. Where carmakers repurposed their factories to produce plane engines, artillery, and armor, nonprofits are deploying staff, volunteers, and facilities to produce masks, care packages, and essential services. But where the work of GM and Chrysler was underwritten by Uncle Sam, nonprofits are acting on their own volition, often without sufficient support, and performing services that may, in this unsteady economic moment, contribute to their demise. The economic fallout of the pandemic threatens to further undercut already precarious funding streams, and nonprofits are facing difficulties staying afloat.

As nonprofits bend over backwards to serve their communities during the crisis, who is bending over backwards for them?

To be sure, the CARES Act offers charitable provisions—emergency funding, loan forgiveness, and donation incentives. But efforts to access federal support have been hampered by red tape and delay. Foundations, often touted for funding what governments miss, have relaxed their grant restrictions, allowing grantees greater flexibility. But rules governing philanthropic endowments will impede substantial increases in the total amounts foundations give.

If nonprofits cannot secure continued support, their ability to respond to community needs will be undermined and the already formidable fault lines of inequality will grow even wider. Communities will suffer when neither the state nor nonprofits take the lead.

Social service provision and the protection of public health has historically fallen to governments. But COVID-19 struck at a time when services were being offloaded to nonprofits due to public welfare cutbacks. The political climate and unknown duration of the current emergency do not afford nonprofits the luxury of suspending work until normalcy resumes. What's become clear over the past several months is that, given continued governmental failings, the whole gamut of nonprofit services are starting to look essential—both for the maintenance of life and the maintenance of communities in which we live.

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