



COVID-19 Community Impact and Response

April 2020

Introduction

The Forward Promise Village of grantees have pivoted in these past few weeks to respond to the rapidly unfolding, multi-faceted crises created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our most vulnerable communities and populations have been hard hit by this disaster. Forward Promise coordinated several approaches to gain a deeper understanding of our grantees' needs and what they are doing to effectively support boys and young men of color (BYMOC) and their families during this time. This document outlines the challenges emerging in their communities and solutions they are developing to ensure that BYMOC and their villages continue on the path to healing, growing, and thriving.

Overwhelmingly, grantees shared that the COVID-19 crisis is rapidly exposing the deep inequities that have existed within communities of color for generations—both for the youth and families that they serve and for the organizations themselves. The history and consequences of being denied healthcare, good schools, access to food, paid leave, fair wages, and other social supports is being magnified as the pandemic continues to unfold in their communities.

Compounding these inequities, many of the families are working in low-wage industries such as retail or restaurants and are being laid off due to the lack of revenues in these businesses. Others are employed in “essential” industries such as public transit, grocery stores, or



janitorial services. They experience significantly increased work expectations, harmful working conditions, inadequate protection, and denial of testing which puts themselves, their families, and the general public at greater risk.

As if the ability to safely work was not enough of a problem to navigate, issues springing from daycare/school closures, lost wages, and stress are also exposed. As caregivers work, children and youth are often navigating this crisis alone. Many families do not have technology and resources to support effective e-learning. Students with documented IEPs are left without the one-on-one support they may require, both for academic instruction and behavior regulation. As businesses close, families struggle with the financial resources to attend to their basic needs. And, violence is increasing along with the stress levels in communities. The most distressing outcome is that people of color are disproportionately contracting and dying from this disease without the ability to “stay home” and with insufficient access to quality healthcare.

Forward Promise grantees have expressed an urgent desire to secure the youth and families that they love and to prevent even more widespread devastation. Flexibility to use philanthropic funding in the ways that are most needed for their organizations and communities is crucial. It enables them to support

BYMOC and their families with mental health services, technology to close the digital divide ensuring youth can learn, food to sustain families, and cash resources to cover immediate bills.

Emerging Challenges

The issues Forward Promise grantees were most concerned with fell into six main areas: (1) Cash and Food Assistance, (2) Physical and Mental Health, (3) Cultural Practices, (4) Digital Divide, (5) Organizational Resources, and (6) Advocacy.

Cash and Food Assistance

- Families who already live in poverty are struggling with deepening poverty during this crisis. Money for food, rent, and utilities are inadequate, so families are being plunged deeper into poverty as they choose between food and shelter. These families need immediate assistance to meet their basic needs.
- As in many parts of the country, cleaning and safety items such as masks, hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, cleaning agents, and toilet paper are scarce or completely unavailable. When providing services in the community, grantee staff wears personal protective equipment such as gloves and masks; however, the people in the community do not have access

to such equipment. Grantees are deeply concerned that these critical items may remain unavailable for a very long time in their communities, or that families will not have the money to purchase them. This increases the risk of exposure, particularly in low-income communities with crowded living conditions.

Physical and Mental Health

- The realities of hunger or the fear of homelessness is stressful and traumatic for both adults and children.
- Some children and youth are being left alone as parents, who are essential workers, have no choice but to report to work or risk losing their jobs. They also risk their health, and that of their families, if they were to become infected with COVID-19.
- For some youth, the order to shelter-in-place is not a healthy request. Their households are unsafe environments for varied reasons.
- It is not unreasonable to anticipate an increase in community violence as people are struggling to cope financially and emotionally. Some of the grantee organizations work to address community violence in both prevention and intervention spheres. Their ability to do their work is critical to

reducing trauma and long-term mental health impacts for youth and communities.

"COVID-19 has not only exposed the pervasive racism that exists in our society here in the U.S., but it has also shown the fissures of disparities across many communities."

**Interview with
Michael Byun, Exec. Director
Asian Counseling and
Referral Service**

- As early data has shown, COVID-19 is having a disproportionate impact on infection and death rates in communities of color. The Imprint of racism, colonization, and dehumanization is ever-present during this crisis and the dire negative outcomes being witnessed in communities of color are no accident. For generations, communities of color have been denied adequate health care, good schools, access to safe food, paid

leave, fair wages, etc. This denial is resulting in horrific outcomes during this pandemic such as alarming rates of illness and death, harmful working conditions, and limited testing.

- The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic may re-trigger or reignite trauma within communities of color that have experienced past disasters and know well the disparate treatment they received to support their recovery. Since the founding of America, communities of color have experienced multiple traumas such as the displacement of Native Americans from their ancestral lands and the introduction of foreign epidemic diseases. In more recent history, incidents like the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA and the killing of Oscar Grant in Oakland, CA illustrate dehumanizing patterns of community trauma. It is very likely that the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic may be classified as part of a lineage of historical traumas continuing to affect people of color.
- Most of the staff working in grantee organizations are from the communities they serve. They are experiencing many of the same barriers and traumas as their program participants and find it difficult to separate

the crisis mode of work from the pressures of home.

Cultural Practices

- Forward Promise grantees are unique in their approach to culturally relevant healing practices. These healing practices are, by design, relationship-centered. Social distancing challenges these connections.
- The large number of infections in communities are, unfortunately, accompanied by large numbers of death. The inability to gather to honor or bury loved ones according to cultural customs is deeply traumatizing and, in some cases, directly disobeys cultural or religious practices.

Digital Divide

- As school systems move to distance learning, large percentages of student populations are unable to participate in online instruction hampered by the lack of internet access and/or access to computers.
- While we often hear about how the digital divide plays out in communities of color, it can also exist within the grantee organizations themselves. Data shows that organizations run by people of color often have more constrained financial resources, making the transition to working

from home much more challenging.

Organizational Resources

- Smaller grantee organizations, in particular, may not have sufficient reserves to keep their organizations running without laying off staff during this critical time. Their ability to deliver services is, in many cases, hindered by school closures and social distancing which greatly impacts organizational budgets.
- Grantees express an urgent desire to secure the youth and families that they love and to prevent even more widespread devastation. The dollars they are expending to address this crisis enables them to be the glue that helps keep their communities intact. Still, the resources needed to resume full operation at the end of this crisis will be significant.

Advocacy

- With growing infection rates spreading throughout correctional facilities, some grantees are advocating to get non-violent juveniles released from custody and to provide supports if they remain incarcerated. In many cases, young people are essentially in solitary confinement in order to avoid contact with infected staff members. This can significantly exacerbate mental health risks.

- Grantees are concerned about dismantling harmful legislative policies and advocating for beneficial policies to be maintained and/or enacted.
- Grantees have relayed that the concerns of many immigrant communities have grown along with the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to access to technology and language barriers which limits the information being shared with them, many immigrants are either unable to access some public benefits or are concerned about how accessing these benefits could potentially impact their DACA status. Other challenges include increased discrimination, particularly in Asian communities, and lost wages as stay-at-home orders are causing the elimination of many jobs in the service industry often held by immigrants. Additionally, the Trump administration issued a temporary suspension of immigration, which some advocates have read as a possible permanent plan to limit immigration to the United States.

Solutions from the Frontlines

The concerns are numerous and the tasks are daunting; however, the crisis is not insurmountable. Many Forward Promise grantees have implemented concrete solutions to respond to some of these issues. Here are some examples from across the country:

West

Asian Counseling and Referral Service (ACRS), in Seattle provides mental health services to individuals. They have rapidly transitioned to telehealth to continue providing services to their clients. The organization purchased telehealth and electronic records software and are training staff on how to use them. **ACRS** also purchased additional laptops for staff and interns. Their IT department began providing daily training to support staff as they transitioned to remote work.

RYSE, Inc., based in Richmond, CA, leads programs devoted to community health; media, art, and culture; education and justice, and youth leadership. The organization provides safe spaces grounded in social justice for more than 700 young people of color each year to build youth power, love, learn, educate, heal and transform lives and communities. **RYSE** developed a protocol for creating a fund for immediate cash assistance for families. They are assisting staff by providing a \$200 stipend to offset the additional costs they are incurring to carry out their work at home. **RYSE** is

also revising staff roles and working to ensure they can keep staff on payroll.

National Compadres Network (NCN) in San Jose, CA, works to strengthen and re-root the capacity of individuals, families and communities to honor, rebalance, and redevelop the authentic identity, values, traditions, and indigenous practices of Chicano, Latino, Native, Raza and other communities of color. They provide rites of passage, leadership, and character development to reduce teen pregnancies, substance abuse, and relationship-community violence. Since the onset of the pandemic, **NCN** reports a greater interest in healing supports and has shifted its programming to virtual platforms. They plan to support the youth and families they serve targeting communities in crisis. They are also planning for how their work will shift once the COVID-19 crisis begins to subside.

Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) works to interrupt the cycles of violence and poverty by motivating and empowering young people impacted by the criminal justice system. Within hours of the shelter-in-place order in Oakland, CA, **CURYJ** created a fully operational virtual office, shifting their operations to virtual organizing. They continue to provide direct services and are advocating for the release of incarcerated youth and those incarcerated for non-violent crimes.

California Youth Connection, based in Oakland, CA, is a youth-led organization comprised of current and former foster youth, ages 14-24, who build community, organize, and advocate for improvements to child welfare and other systems directly impacting their lives. They are surveying the needs of foster youth in their member chapters and finding ways to reduce social isolation of former foster youth.

Southwest

Amistades is a Latino-led and Latino-serving non-profit community development organization based in Tucson, AZ. They are committed to providing culturally responsive services, advocacy for social justice, and community empowerment. Their projects serve Latino boys and young men in schools and in community settings through psycho-cultural early interventions, cultural mentoring, and peer-led leadership development programs focused on building self-efficacy, self-sufficiency, and strengthening family ties. Currently, all school-based programming is shut down at **Amistades**. However, the organization is still engaging in outreach to families of youth and connecting them to resources through virtual sessions.

The Native American Community Academy (NACA) engages students, educators, families, and their community in developing strong leaders who are academically

prepared, secure in their identities, and physically and emotionally healthy. Based in Albuquerque, NM, **NACA** is meeting the needs of Native American families, both in urban settings and on reservations, as a number of families have left the city and returned to their reservations during the pandemic. Many families that previously relied on two incomes have been reduced to one (or no income at all) with job losses from the COVID-19 crisis. This is compounded on reservations where resources, including food, are already scarce. As a result, **NACA** has provided food, computer equipment, and mini grants to approximately 60 families.

Mid-West

Communities United, based in Chicago, IL, is a nationally recognized organization that advances systems change at the city and state level. They take an intentional alliance-building approach to their engagement of over 60 organizations across Chicago and Illinois to create, implement, and sustain transformative systems change. **Communities United** shifted to a digital organizing approach. Youth are still involved in organizing efforts and youth participatory action research projects.

South

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, based in New Orleans, is a community-led grassroots organization that evolved from the needs and input of families with children in the justice system. They transitioned their justice advocacy work to a digital platform. **FFLIC** is petitioning the governor for the release of incarcerated juveniles in the face of COVID-19. **FFLIC** is also providing mental health and advocacy support to families of the incarcerated juveniles.

Deep Center works to redress the detrimental effects of poverty on literacy of youth in Savannah, GA by encouraging young people to tell their stories through creative outlets such as writing and performance. They are doing virtual arts-based programming with youth, including those who are court-involved. They are opening up virtual spaces as outlets while also trying to ensure that these virtual spaces maintain the relationship-building and interactivity necessary for youth to continue to create, express, and engage with audiences. Moreover, **Deep Center** is working with the youth on ways to show support for their local arts community and performing artists who have been heavily impacted by the shutdowns created by the COVID-19 crisis.

"We've gone through a crisis before.... we were hoping that we had learned a lesson [from Hurricane Katrina] in that knowing that if you needed to do some stuff for the general population, you needed to do the same thing for our families and loved ones that are on the inside—both adults as well as young people."

Interview with
Gina Womack, Exec. Director
Families and Friends of
Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

North East

UTEC, Inc. in Lowell, MA, focuses on sharing best practices in how correctional facilities and probation can work with BYMOC who are criminally involved. Because **UTEC** is currently unable to conduct jail visits and deliver its pre-release programming, they have had to increase staffing to provide more support to families outside of prisons. They are also looking at ways to provide more tele-counseling within the jails since mental health needs are especially acute in this crisis. Additionally, **UTEC's** culinary team



shifted from working in its cafe to preparing hot meals and care packages to deliver to their young adults.

The Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice at the Drexel University School of Public Health, based in Philadelphia, PA, works to promote health, nonviolence, and social justice through trauma informed practice, research, professional development, and advocacy for policy change. Their projects *Healing Hurt People* and *Community Health Worker Peer Training Academy* serve African American boys and young men in hospital and community settings through home visits, group sessions, case management, and trauma-specific therapies for young people injured by violence. Although the grantee typically introduces BYMOC to culturally responsive healing practices in person, there are challenges with social distancing, and the community they serve has experienced an increase in violence. They are currently assessing their clients' digital capabilities in order to innovate engaging ways to assist in their healing process via digital means.

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Conclusion

Forward Promise selected these grantees because they are some of the best organizations in our country working to support the health and well-being of BYMOC. While our

grantees did not hesitate to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, they did so while confronting the structural inequities (e.g., health disparities, concentrated poverty, inequitable education, poor job quality, inadequate housing, etc.) manifested over generations within communities too often left out and left back by government policy, structural racism, and the systematic dismantling of the social contract. The COVID-19 pandemic is causing the problems that communities of color navigate daily to be laid bare for the entire world to see. As mission-driven as our grantees are, the burden of fixing the impacts of racism and colonization that have existed in America since before its official founding cannot fully rest on them.

Just as it takes a healthy village to raise healthy BYMOC, it takes all of us to raise healthy villages. By sharing how COVID-19 compounds the historical inequities, barriers, and traumas faced by communities of color, we hope to motivate direct service organizations and philanthropy to join forces for long-lasting solutions.

The astute perspectives, dedication, and resourcefulness of our Forward Promise grantees has shown that organizations built and run by people of color are best positioned to address the healing needs of BYMOC and their villages. We advocate for creating space in philanthropy for grassroots community leaders, influencers, and programs to be valued and sufficiently funded for their expertise.