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Crisis puts spotlight on food issues

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One week before schools throughout Michigan were ordered to shut down, leaders with **Kids' Food Basket** had already begun to put a plan in place to meet the needs of the children they serve on a daily basis.

"We were watching what was happening around the world and watching Italy and seeing that their schools were shutting down," said Bridget Clark Whitney, founding CEO of Kids' Food Basket. "Very, very suddenly, schools here were shut down and a stay-at-home order was put in place."



Left: Bridget Clark Whitney, founding CEO of Kids' Food Basket, right: Heather Eddy, president and CEO of Kistner Eddy Executive Services

Unlike many businesses and organizations that were caught off guard by the ensuing chaos created by the coronavirus, Clark Whitney's organization was ready because it knew how important it was going to be to continue to provide healthy and nourishing food to the children living in a four-county area that the nonprofit serves. At the same time, the organization recognized that the way it would get its work done would have to change to comply with social distancing guidelines and the stay-at-home orders.

The 250 volunteers who packed up thousands of meals during the week at three different locations have been replaced temporarily by Kids' Food Basket team members who are doing that work until it's again safe to gather.

"Our team members from week two of the stay-at-home orders through now are packing meals," Clark Whitney said. "I've been doing my CEO job for 40 or 50 hours each week and then packing meals on weekends and at night for 20 hours."

Volunteers have been able to assist team members with the distribution of these meals to more than 70 distribution sites located in the neighborhoods of schools served by the organization.

Prior to COVID-19, Clark Whitney said 9,000 meals were being delivered to more than 50 schools in Allegan, Kent, Muskegon, and Ottawa counties, the four-county area served by Kids' Food Basket. The organization's target clientele is children who were receiving the packaged meals through the various school systems, but when the needs for access to healthy food scaled up, so did Kids' Food Basket, Clark Whitney said.

As an example of the increased need, she said there was one site in the Wyoming-Kentwood area that requested an additional 2,500 meals to augment the 500 it had been providing.

The organization has been able to meet the demands through ongoing fundraising efforts.

"We are not funded by government dollars, which allows us flexibility," Clark Whitney said. "Because of people in the West Michigan community, we are able to respond and use every single dollar we receive as efficiently and effectively as possible."

Fundraising efforts have largely relied on the group's message that, "Our collective health as a community depends on our ability to care for our most vulnerable citizens."

"We are 18 years old and since day one we have been in emergency work. Hunger is emergency work and for us now it's just become a scaled-up emergency," Clark Whitney said. "I think people really trust us to use their dollars and resources to ensure that kids have healthy food. The community knowing that about us is one way to fundraise."

"Our children have had a disrupted school and life experience. Between the four counties we serve, 75,000 kids receive free or reduced lunch, and so 75,000 children who were relying on school meals no longer have that resource. That's a really important message."

Competing interests

Heather Eddy, president and CEO of **Kistner Eddy Executive Services**, a Naperville, Ill.-based group offering a broad range of services to the nonprofit sector throughout the United States, said during this time of economic uncertainty, she has been counseling her clients to constantly engage with their volunteers and communicate with their board members. Eddy notes philanthropy for children's issues has been receiving greater attention lately.

Donors who may be supporting a food bank will continue to give at the same level, but now also are giving to other organizations that supply food. Meanwhile, donors who support arts and culture may continue to support that while also asking how they can support the needs of children.

"Children can't control their environment and they need us to keep them healthy and protected," she said.

Unlike the situation children and families face in many Michigan communities, Eddy said schools in her community are continuing to provide meals during the summer. The school district she lives in has reallocated a portion of the dollars it would have spent on its summer school program to the food program.

Those organizations that have been able to meet basic human service needs during the course of the COVID-19 response will likely see an increase in financial support because there is more compassion toward addressing basic human needs, Eddy said, noting her current clients include the YWCA in Kalamazoo and Covenant Community Care in Detroit.

“We know that going into economic turmoil, nonprofits in general do OK if they’re providing direct human services,” she said.

Eddy’s personal passions that she supports with her time and money are programs that focus on food, housing and domestic violence.

“Those who have the privilege not to be hungry generally have more compassion toward feeding people in hunger,” Eddy said. “There’s a lot of intersection we see globally around food and the importance of providing healthy and nutritious food to kids. Hunger becomes a health as well as a societal issue.”

Planning ahead

While working to address the immediate needs created by the pandemic, Clark Whitney said her organization put together a four-month emergency plan and a 14-month strategic plan for the year.

Since March 12, prior to the state-mandated closures, food costs for Kids’ Food Basket have increased by 66 percent. The organization is sourcing food from local vendors and farmers and Feeding America, among other avenues. The organization also is growing food on a 10-acre farm that it owns. Clark Whitney said the group is not taking donations from individuals because it does not want to encourage trips out to the grocery store.

“The food we’re providing looks different based on the best prices we can get. Healthy food costs more. If we’re just serving processed food, it potentially could be adding to the problems we’re already seeing,” Clark Whitney said.

Meeting immediate needs is the first phase of a three-phased approach being taken by Kids’ Food Basket. The second phase is replenishing the depleted food supply followed by a long-term strategy that will enable the group to meet future needs, which includes identifying new revenue streams to bring in additional resources.

Among these is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that gives members the option to fund some of Kids’ Food Basket’s meals.

“This is just the beginning,” Clark Whitney said of a response that will need to be long-term.

Eddy agreed, adding that, “We also know that an economic crisis begins to hit people six to nine months down the road.”

She said this may mean that people who can’t give financially may volunteer and that people who can give will give less because donors at all levels have taken a financial hit. The situation is compounded by the recent protests and riots, which can further distract people from giving.

“As people feel moved to do something about social justice, racial equity and injustice, they may give to that instead of a food bank,” Eddy said.

Even so, Clark Whitney remains optimistic about her organization’s capacity.

“Because we’re working so deeply in all three phases, we are positioned to continue to serve our community with strength,” she said.