



Wellspring Harvest lettuce donations to the Western Mass Food Bank.

Funded Groups Respond to COVID Pandemic

BY BETH GRIFFIN

As the 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 threw the entire nation off-kilter, groups funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) used their grassroots networks to respond creatively to the pandemic.

What follows are stories of how five CCHD-funded organizations either ramped up their existing efforts or pivoted to address the immediate concerns of their communities.

As a general practice, **United Congregations of Metro-East** operates as a community organizing and leadership development hub for faith-based groups in two Illinois counties adjacent to St. Louis, Missouri. “Our member congregations and parishes run the gamut from very poor to more affluent and everything in between,” says the executive director, Rev. Mike Atty. “Through deep listening sessions, campaigns, and actions, we identify and target systemic issues that impact the poor and marginalized,” he says.

United Congregations switched from face-to-face meetings to community action video calls when the stay-at-home orders were enacted.

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and the clear realization that it was having a disproportionate effect on black and brown people, Rev. Mike says United Congregations was appalled at the lack of accessible testing sites. “There was only one facility in the county that includes East St. Louis, and it was located in a hard-to-reach suburb,” Rev. Mike says. “There was no way our symptomatic people were going to see a doctor to get permission to be tested and then make their way to the distant site.”

When outreach to city and state officials failed to ease the testing dilemma, United Congregations scheduled a Facebook Live action to call attention to the disparity.

“Before we knew it (and before the planned action), we got a call that a testing site was opening in a central location,” Rev. Mike says. “We still had the action, but we made it a celebration,” he laughs.

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Through the CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD

across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

This pandemic period has been challenging and unnerving for most of us. At the very least, the virus required a strange adjustment to family and work schedules that seemingly changed overnight. For those who remain healthy, it is also challenging to see colleagues, friends, relatives, and others battle COVID-19, and it is heartbreaking to mourn from a distance those who succumbed to the virus. But I also feel uplifted and grateful.

We might be tempted to despair at the jobs lost and lives upended, particularly at the margins of our society. But I have been heartened and delighted to speak with groups funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) and to hear how they have responded to the changing world around them with compassion and thoughtful, effective action. As described in this issue of the *Helping People Help Themselves*, our partners in dioceses around the country met the pandemic challenge head-on.

Some were in a position to refocus cooperative and worker-training operations to make protective gear for medical and essential workers or feed the newly hungry. Others redirected their considerable advocacy and organizing skills to make sure that virus-testing facilities, unemployment benefits, and high-speed internet were accessible to all people who needed them. Another group challenged its community's largest and most prominent employer to make critical safety accommodations for its workers.

When I started to hear these stories, I recognized the CCHD model of listening carefully and creating solutions together. The funded groups did not have to start from scratch to figure out a plan. Their associates and members articulated their needs and worked with their leadership to devise an effective response. Molly Hemstreet of Opportunity Threads, The Industrial Commons, and the Carolina Textile District in North Carolina says that CCHD helped make her groups particularly agile in the crisis response. Over the last decade, many small businesses had already begun to cooperate to "be big by being small together," she said. "CCHD funding encouraged a systems response and not just a programmatic one," Molly says. As a result, her groups and their affiliates "incubated" a large-scale operation to make, test, and distribute personal protective equipment (PPE). Because they had worked together in

the past and shared similar goals, many small factories turned over parts of their facilities to the new effort. In addition to providing much-needed, high-quality protective gear, the creative solution also kept vulnerable workers employed.

Rev. Mike Atty at United Congregations of Metro-East in Illinois and others interviewed for this issue remind us that the important work of our funded groups does not stop because there's a pandemic. They are still addressing issues of human dignity, social justice, environmental responsibility, workers' rights, and advocacy, among other central tenets of Catholic social teaching. The platform for their work may look different, but the creative, grassroots response continues.

As you know, our ability to fund these outstanding efforts is heavily dependent on an annual collection taken up in parishes, as well as generous donations from newsletter readers. With the phased return of parishioners to church, CCHD funding is strained. Thank you, as ever, for your commitment to our Gospel-mandated work!

RALPH McCLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development



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AMOS leaders, representing 39 member congregations, neighborhood associations, and nonprofits across Central Iowa, lead a public action around income inequality in Norwalk, IA.



Wellspring Upholstery co-op sewed hundreds of masks when COVID hit, here worn by codirector Fred Rose.

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He says the regular community action calls now include a representative of the state health department. "We are building relationships with officials we had not focused on before, and this will help our members reach out to powerful people," Rev. Mike says. "Adversity often causes us to rethink and reimagine what we do. I think this is an opportunity."

Since the beginning of the viral outbreak, United Congregations has also worked with state and federal officials to secure broadband internet access for low-income communities and to address mental health issues that are unique to the pandemic.

The **Rural Community Workers Alliance (RCWA)** in Missouri advocates for people who toil in pork-processing plants and the gigantic "confined animal feeding operation" facilities that produce much of America's meat. RCWA's executive director, Axel Fuentes, says, "We have focused on workplace conditions, wages, and treatment as well as community concerns such as the lack of interpreters in hospitals, clinics, and government institutions."

In recognition of the demographic changes brought by waves of immigrants to northern Missouri, RCWA has promoted racial solidarity gatherings to address racial divisions and give participants an opportunity to discover similarities and share experiences.

The pandemic shed new light on crowded working conditions at a major pork-processing company that is the area's largest employer. "Workers were in a confined area, working shoulder-to-shoulder, without proper protective gear. They were scared and concerned about getting sick," Axel says. RCWA members thought that plant management was not taking adequate steps to protect the safety of the workers.

They described conditions to reporters for a newspaper in a neighboring community, began a petition campaign within the plant, and ultimately filed a lawsuit on behalf of the workers. The suit asked that the company be required to follow health and safety guidelines established by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and to allow an independent assessment of the workers' needs for protective equipment.

Although parts of the case were dismissed, Axel says, "before the verdict, the company took serious steps to protect workers, installing plastic dividers between line workers and hand-sanitizing stations, providing masks, and instituting temperature checks." As yet, the building's halls and cafeteria have made no provisions for social distancing. Still, Axel says the lawsuit was successful, because the court forced the company to implement federal guidelines. This is significant, because adherence to the safety guidelines is generally considered to be voluntary, he says.

The quick success of RCWA's action was a tremendous boost to members, Axel says, because "usually immigrants are easy targets to be exploited by employers, but when workers come together, they can accomplish something significant."

Wellspring is a network of worker cooperatives in Springfield, Massachusetts, whose mission is to create employment and wealth-creation opportunities in low-income neighborhoods. The co-ops provide on-the-job training in skills and business operations. They include a greenhouse that supplies hydroponic lettuce to cafeterias and supermarkets, an upholstery shop that serves colleges and hospitals, and a window-restoration operation that specializes in historic buildings.

Wellspring's codirector, Fred Rose, says the cooperatives are organized to provide goods and services to hospitals, colleges, and universities in the region. "Our partners are anchor institutions that are not going to move. Very little of what they buy comes from the local community, and we are trying to change that," he says.

When virus mitigation measures shuttered the upholstery business, two of the sewers switched to making masks with vapor barriers for health-care workers and food bank volunteers. The greenhouse lost one-third of its sales when its college and hospital cafeteria customers closed. Wellspring responded by raising money to buy lettuce from the greenhouse and donating it to food banks. It also rolled out the sale and delivery of salad boxes to 40 families.

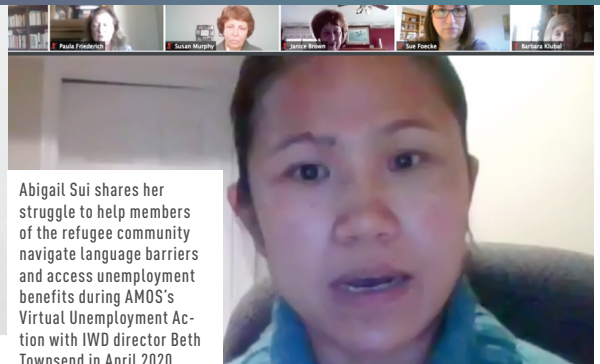
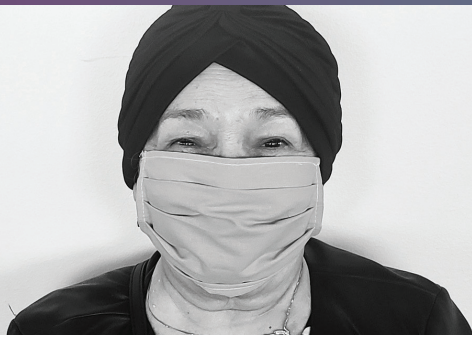
Wellspring is working with another local nonprofit to bring a mobile produce market to inner-city housing complexes. The market uses lettuce from Wellspring's greenhouse member, supplemented with vegetables from others. It sells wares at a reasonable price that is still sufficient to maintain the employment of the co-op workers.

The virus response has helped Wellspring build relationships with local food banks

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Alicia Brown, Wellspring Harvest co-op member, making salads for emergency food delivery.



Left and middle: Denise Green and Marian Salvatierra of Associate with Cooperative Home Care Associates, Bronx, NYC

Abigail Sui shares her struggle to help members of the refugee community navigate language barriers and access unemployment benefits during AMOS's Virtual Unemployment Action with IWD director Beth Townsend in April 2020.

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and introduced its fresh greens to new customers. "Before the pandemic, we had hoped to get into direct deliveries of produce, but the process has been accelerated, and we have made it a priority," Fred says.

A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy Institute of Public Life (AMOS IPL) specializes in finding creative ways for vulnerable people to have their concerns heard and answered, according to Courtney Dufford, the group's lead organizer. "We have a lot of pots in the fire," she says, including recent advocacy for state funding of children's mental health initiatives.

The fallout from the coronavirus jammed unemployment office phone lines and websites. In the Des Moines metro area, this exacerbated an already confusing and frustrating process for the large refugee community. Courtney says Iowa prides itself on welcoming refugees, and the public school system serves children who speak more than 100 different first languages. Nonetheless, unemployment information historically has been available only in English and Spanish. Laid-off workers who called the state unemployment hotline were thrown into an hours-long silent hold. Those who persisted, even without instructions, found the system hard to navigate.

AMOS IPL members organized a virtual action with the director of the Iowa Work Force Development Office (IWD), a dozen state legislators, and 100 leaders from AMOS member organizations. Abigail Sui—the manager of the parent navigator program of Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center (EMBARC), a refugee-led social service agency member of AMOS—and other speakers shared their experiences navigating the unemployment systems and proposed solutions.

"We succeeded in getting IWD to hire 100 additional staff to handle call claim volume. This is a huge victory that would not have happened without our public meeting," Courtney says.

Zack Balcha, EMBARC's community navigator, says the claims issue drew many new people to EMBARC. "We already do case management, provide 1,800 meals each week, and offer news for the refugee community in ten languages through our website. Now we are helping people file their initial unemployment claims and then following up to help with the required weekly claims," Zack says.

reached out to us to make masks, but we were hesitant to switch gears into the completely different world of highly tested and regulated fabrics. We did not want to produce items that weren't safe for health-care workers," Molly says. "Fortunately, we had a producers network here that CCHD had helped grow. No one plant wanted to turn its factory completely over to personal protective equipment (PPE), but each was willing to give over part of their capacity. We also allied with other groups to make sure all our products could be tested."

In a recent representative week, the Carolina Textile District produced 47,000 masks for

“With the onset of [COVID] and the disproportionate effect on black and brown people, Rev. Mike says United Congregations was appalled at the lack of accessible testing.”

Opportunity Threads and **The Industrial Commons** are related enterprises that have incubated businesses and created job opportunities during the past decade in western North Carolina. Molly Hemstreet is the founder of the Opportunity Threads "cut-and-sew" cooperative and is also co-executive director of The Industrial Commons. The latter organization operates several interconnected social enterprises that revitalize industrial businesses, help them become sustainable, and ensure that their workers have meaningful jobs that support dignified lives. One of the enterprises they helped start with support from CCHD is the Carolina Textile District. "This crisis created a feast-or-famine situation," Molly says. Opportunity Threads generally makes custom quilts from T-shirts for its largest customer. "Local physicians

medical and health-care providers. The cooperatively governed network also sewed protective gowns, covers for N95 masks, and other masks to address specific needs, including masks for daycare centers and small businesses.

A lightweight antimicrobial fabric was sourced through a CCHD-funded project that was already working to identify ethical brands for school spirit merchandise. And one organization that requested the masks was Cooperative Home Care Associates in the Bronx, New York. CCHD helped establish the large Bronx group in the 1980s.

"This is really a win-win-win for us," Molly says. "We have a good product for essential workers, which created an economic-development opportunity for our community and helped keep the doors open for people to work in our small rural communities." 🌱