



## We Need To Support Front Line Community-Based Human Services During COVID-19 Pandemic

By Julie Manworren, President and CEO, Volunteers of America of Minnesota and Wisconsin

MINNEAPOLIS, MN - With the nonstop challenges we face in human services nonprofits as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I'm finding this meditation is helping me more than ever: *"Grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*

I accept that despite our very best efforts, some of us will get sick from COVID-19. It is a wily and persistent virus. However, **I know that we still have power to change things**. We can be **kind** to one another. We can **protect** the health of each other. We can also **advocate** for solutions and help from our elected officials.

That's why I want to call attention to an important decision we're facing related to the future of human services nonprofits. The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting our community's health and well-being at unprecedented levels, causing major disruptions for people of all ages and walks of life. While we are all weathering this storm together, the effects are intensified for people who were already on shaky ground prior to the pandemic because of things like low wages, a lack of health insurance, or a health or mental health challenge.

Human service organizations are buffering against some of the most serious health, mental health, economic, and social consequences for our community members. These organizations are housing, feeding, and caring for millions of children, adults, seniors and families who require critical support. They are essential employers in every community across the nation and vital to answering the call to shore up the community, now more than ever.

Just as hospitals and medical personnel are essential to addressing the pandemic, so too are the human services professionals who staff the food banks, deliver resources to homebound seniors, support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and care for the hundreds of thousands of children in our foster care and child welfare system.

But unlike hospitals, human services organizations operate with little or no cash reserves. Many organizations get most of their revenue from government grants that rarely cover the full cost of providing services. Charitable donations are down, and annual fundraising events are on hold. Many organizations report employees continuing to fulfill vital functions, even as organizations can no longer cover their salaries.

While the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act enacted several weeks ago is a good start toward addressing the needs of human services nonprofits, the reality is that it doesn't go far enough to keep these organizations open. Without additional support for the human services nonprofit sector, countless children, families, and seniors will suffer.

Here are some of the ways that Volunteers of America Minnesota and Wisconsin is shoring up our community during this crisis:

- Providing meals to seniors and people with disabilities who are experiencing hunger, including sourcing, packaging, and delivering nutritious food directly to people who are unable to safely leave their homes.
- Making sure older adults, families with children and individuals with disabilities have the stability of a safe and nurturing home by providing a home for people who would not otherwise have a place to live, or are unable to live on their own.
- Assisting with personal care and hygiene practices; and making sure that health and mental health needs are being met for our many community members who need additional support to be able to live healthy at home.

- Transitioning to online programming when possible, including mental health services, distance learning, mentoring programs, and support groups.

While the CARES Act does provide some relief funding through the Small Business Administration for nonprofits, there are some crippling limitations for larger nonprofits that will impact many people who are hurting during this pandemic. One of the unanswered asks from a coalition of more than 200 nonprofit groups across the country was a request for an immediate infusion of \$60 billion for the sector.

And although the CARES Act did include an above-the-line, universal charitable tax deduction to incentivize charitable giving, nonprofits had asked that the universal deduction be expanded beyond the \$300 cap and extended past 2020.

Still, there is some good news for human services nonprofits.

First, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz issued an executive order naming community-based human services employees as essential personnel, which opens up resources to keep them on the job.

Secondly, Reps. Seth Moulton (D-Mass.) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-Pa.) introduced the Save Organizations that Serve (SOS) America Act. The legislation would provide the \$60 billion in emergency funding for nonprofits and create a broader universal charitable deduction.

Today, we are calling on Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and other leaders in Congress to work together in a bipartisan way to broaden resources for the essential employees that make up our nonprofit human services sector.

Their efforts are needed now more than ever. Human services nonprofits are uniquely prepared to help our community navigate through the immediate response to COVID-19 and the long-term rebuilding process that will follow. Our nation cannot afford to lose the vital support system they offer for children, families, older adults and people with disabilities in this time of crisis. May our elected officials have the courage to act for them now.

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Julie Manworren is the President and CEO of Volunteers of America of Minnesota and Wisconsin and has over 35 years of experience working in a variety of complex human services nonprofits. Volunteers of America MN/WI is a health and human serving organization that serves more than 25,000 people across 110 neighborhoods and communities in the two states annually.

Volunteers of America is a member of the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, a network of thousands of committed human services professionals across the country.