

**United Way of Santa Barbara County
2020 COVID-19 Crisis Response Report
Focused Interviews with Philanthropic, Government, and Programmatic Partners**

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak United Way of Santa Barbara County (UWSBC) has worked to meet an unprecedented level of need in the community. The pandemic has pushed our community's crisis response capacity beyond its limits - calling upon all of our organizations and institutions to come together to find creative ways to get people the help they need quickly and efficiently. We could not do any of this work alone and were fortunate to be able to draw on UWSBC's core approach to our work: one that is based on the power of partnership.

UWSBC and its partners in the nonprofit sector, philanthropy, and government have identified systemic weaknesses, gaps in local response efforts, and emerging unmet needs. In cases where our expertise positioned us well to be helpful, we have built alliances with leaders across sectors, along with donors and volunteers, to solve problems and help thousands of our most vulnerable neighbors. The investments we've made as a community over the past year are too valuable to be forgotten when the pandemic eventually recedes, so we've made efforts to conduct program evaluation and capture the experiences, thoughts, and critiques from our partners and program recipients. This document provides a review of information gathered during focused interviews that were conducted with UWSBC's key programmatic, philanthropic, and government partners between December 2020 and February 2021.

A full report on the many pandemic focused programs and initiatives led by UWSBC during 2020 is available online here: www.unitedwaysb.org/reports. Additionally, a summary of results from a survey of cash and rental assistance program beneficiaries is provided as a companion piece to the analysis of the focused interviews. A more detailed report on those survey results is available here: www.unitedwaysb.org/2020-crisis-response-report-1.

Input from Focused Interviews

Strengths of UWSBC's Approach and Programs

We are fortunate to have heard much positive feedback about UWSBC as an organization as well as the effectiveness of UWSBC's staff and team members. Generally speaking, programmatic partners, nonprofits, government agencies, and schools that received funding secured by UWSBC shared their appreciation for opportunities to maintain their impact serving vulnerable populations and expand their services to meet the dramatic increase in need caused by the pandemic.

Our fellow leaders in philanthropy expressed appreciation for UWSBC's ability to quickly identify and respond to emerging community needs, rapidly develop effective response strategies, and coordinate many different funders in support of collaborative solutions. This led to the success of multiple collaborative initiatives and programs.

Partners and funders commended UWSBC for its flexibility and expertise working with many organizations, navigating complex systems to overcome complex challenges, and quickly moving philanthropic investments into concrete community benefits. We also heard that UWSBC inspired trust through its research and analysis on issues and challenges, as well as through its effectiveness. This trust inspired funders to invest and encouraged partners to develop further collaborative models and deeper relationships with each other, often resulting in greater impacts.

This concept of trust is an important one, as we heard from partners and funders that having organizations, recipients, and causes already vetted reduced the sense of risk and encouraged creative and ambitious action together. Various collaborations allowed leaders in all sectors to both amplify and be exacting in their impact. According to interviews, UWSBC's greatest asset wasn't simply coordinating, but understanding a need, knowing who could best fill it, and ensuring that decisions and actions be guided by a sincere desire to help the community without ego or self-interest.

Leadership through partnership also resulted in some very practical benefits: it allowed funders to pool investments and assess risk, enabled government partners to maintain compliance with laws and regulations while giving them a safe and efficient way to staff up and distribute resources, and provided partners a way to support communities in need, avoid layoffs, and minimize overhead costs.

Challenges

Even with so many positive results, involvement in multiple endeavors with many diverse partners and recipients is not without its challenges. We are again fortunate that partners were so open with their feedback. The pandemic has been inherently stressful and the stakes have been high, so it is imperative for UWSBC to evaluate all critiques and find ways to improve.

A theme that rose from the interviews was that of communication. It isn't hard to imagine that partners varied in their desire for frequent communication, capacity for rapid response, and comfort with programmatic unknowns.

- Some partners were disappointed when they invested time in a certain program design or on a particular need area only to have the conditions change. This was an ever-present dynamic in the COVID-19 crisis as we had to, in some cases, plan for the worst without knowing what needs would actually materialize.
- Others felt that disappointment when funding came with geographic limitations, requiring them to depart from their usual fund distribution processes and causing worry that some communities might be left behind.
- Still others would have liked more updates on the panoply of programs in the disaster response space so they could recommend them to constituents and also tout the successes.
- With so many partners and systems involved in pandemic response efforts, it was not possible to get input from every expert or potential source of information. This led to some decisions having to be made without full understanding of systemic needs and dynamics.

Collectively, most partners were very pleased with the level, type, and professionalism of communication. If there were challenges, they were resolved as the program got underway, but there were instances where things were moving quickly and clear communication was not possible. Very often in COVID-19 work, the newness and urgency of the issues and challenges facing the community prevented a full understanding of how the pandemic and community needs would evolve. Risk was an unavoidable reality in developing partnerships, implementing new programs and strategies, and investing philanthropically during this prologued period of community crisis.

Importance of Coordination and Collaboration

Partners recognized the value of having UWSBC act as a collaborator and conduit - in terms of program development, fiscal management, coordination of funders, marketing and communications, and stewardship of collaborative models. Many partners reported they could have executed some programming, but not to the same degree that was possible with a response coordinated across the

County and/or involving many partners and funders, as was the UWSBC approach. These extensive collaborations directly resulted in more people and communities being served - quicker and more efficiently than any one entity could have done on their own. Coordination had already been occurring in some places - particularly across philanthropy - but partners credited this disaster response work as helping to normalize broader collaboration and attracting those not yet at the table. Importantly, many partners found the various coordination efforts to be empowering and strength-based - encouraging everyone to be at their best for the community.

Many partners expressed an interest in seeing collaboration and coordination of efforts, such as those provided by UWSBC, continue, particularly since our community's most vulnerable will experience challenges for some time to come. Information sharing likely will be a cornerstone strategy in how we approach collective healing in the future. Please see the White Paper on United Way of Santa Barbara County's 2020 COVID-19 Crisis Response for a program -by-program analysis and recommendations for how to continue strengthening programs and strategies during the long-term recovery that lies ahead.

Long-Term Needs

During focused interviews, we also asked partners what they saw as our community's most significant long-term needs. There were many common themes, including:

- mental health and trauma
 - need for mental healthcare and trauma recovery and supportive services for children and adults
- learning loss, educational gaps, worsened academic disparities
 - need for ongoing learning enrichment programming
 - need for extensive social-emotional support
 - need for outdoor and physical activities
- housing crisis and homelessness risk
 - need for associated Legal Aid/mediation and social service supports to prevent evictions
- economic distress, including food insecurity, household destabilization
 - multi-pronged approach to help households achieve stability/basic human needs support, especially for those who do not qualify for existing rental assistance programs

Lessons to Take Forward

Our community is facing unprecedented levels of need across sectors that require our ongoing attention. Many partners offered insight into how we best approach our work going forward. Some considerations:

- Partners across sectors and funders have different levels of comfort with rapid response v. long-term investments and strategies. While we have enjoyed rapid deployment of resources, few of us can remain in the crisis response posture in the long-term. Most of us need to shift to longer-term planning and a return to a more normal and manageable workload.
 - When should we make that shift?
 - How can we help ensure that rapid response investments result in long-term impact?
 - How will philanthropy shift and what will they prioritize as we move into the long-term recovery phase of the pandemic?
- How do we balance crisis response needs with our core work? Many partners articulated an impression that UWSBC had shifted away from its core work to focus on COVID-19 crisis response. In reality some shifts were made but a commitment to core programming remains and many UWSBC-led crisis response initiatives aligned with the core programming and

functions of the organization. Additionally, response and recovery in times of community crisis have actually become a primary focus area for UWSBC as is described in the organization's new strategic plan available here: www.unitedwaysb.org/reports. That said, it is very much the case that UWSBC and many other partners took on new and expanded responsibilities and programs to help respond to the pandemic. Some partners expressed concern about their own organization's ability to strike a healthy balance in the future.

- Will core functions continue after the pandemic if there are no resources left or if the priorities of funders shift to other areas?
- Will some funders focus on short-term and others on long-term? Is there a way to mitigate risk?
- How can philanthropy plan together to ensure not just a meeting of the most pressing needs of people, but also a more stable nonprofit sector in the longer-term?
- Need may not mean investment. Recent collaboration has streamlined the 'pitch to investment' process, but we cannot assume that just because a sector needs resources, funders will have the ability to fulfill it.
 - Relationship building must continue.
 - Each sector should evaluate how to carry forward some of the efficiencies honed during this time of crisis.
 - Prioritization of critical needs going forward will be a difficult but necessary task.

UWSBC is grateful for so many collaborative partners and their willingness to share insight and wisdom. The proven commitment of so many leaders and organizations to working together, building relationships and understanding, and coordinating efforts across sectors gives us confidence about future efforts to address pressing community needs together and to emerge from this current crisis more resilient and united as a community through the power of partnership.

Great program - I hope it continues and can take on more people in need.

- Property manager

Creating opportunities for funders to come together - who want to focus on specific issues - saves us a lot of time. United Way organizing a broader nonprofit response is helpful.

- Philanthropic partner

The speed with which they were able to get the service infrastructure up and running was most impactful...It's a lesson for me in the importance of engaging with nonprofit partners.

- Government partner

We're really grateful that we were seen as a partner and support for the community at this time...It has felt great. We are supporting one another and I appreciate that they are here to support the youth and families.

- Nonprofit partner

It was an incredibly seamless and positive experience of deploying quite a bit of money in a short period of time. United Way was so gracious to both house and offer their expertise.

- Philanthropic partner

What I love about the staff is that they are really good listeners to what our local needs are. From Steve down to his whole staff, particularly Melinda, they are excellent listeners and work really hard to find resources to support our particular needs. It's a very personalized approach.

- School partner

When I think back to 2020, it brings me to tears thinking about the sheer and consistent outpouring of support, resources, appreciation, acknowledgment, professionalism, and a lot of can-do attitudes.

-Nonprofit partner

To know we have the support of our community built a foundation of trust between our staff and families...I will never forget. I have undying appreciation and love for what the United Way has done.

- Nonprofit partner

We would not have been able to support as many youth as we have without United Way reaching out and developing this funding opportunity. We've been able to prevent a few suicides...we wouldn't have been able to stay open without United Way.

- Nonprofit partner