

Fall 2020

Community In Action

A newsletter for friends of the Opportunity Council



Message to our readers

Thank you for helping us navigate the unknown

Typically, we send you two Opportunity Council newsletters a year to share updates about how the programs and services you support are making an impact in our community.

This has certainly not been a typical year.

Last winter we had no idea how quickly our world, and our work, would change as result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We did not yet know that schools would send students home, some businesses would be ordered to close, or that families would struggle to pay rent or provide daily meals due to loss of income. As these events began to unfold, we focused on how to adapt our services and provide vital new services for our communities.

This is our first and only newsletter of 2020. It features stories of change, resilience, and even growth during this unprecedented time.

And more than ever, this issue comes to you with gratitude for your ongoing support that is making an impact for so many people in our communities.

COVID Impacts

Thanks to a strong foundation of community support, staff innovation, and practical adjustments, the Opportunity Council tackled the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since early this spring, stakeholders throughout our state's northwest counties have come together to roll up their sleeves and get to work in meeting community needs in new and innovative ways.

Switching to phone, video and mail services when the doors closed

When Covid-19 hit, the OC had to close its doors to all walk-in traffic. Housing and Employment case managers, who primarily serve clients in their home or in the office, quickly pivoted to remote engagement models and maintained services to ensure clients were healthy and safe. Phone and video systems were instituted quickly and helped provide updates and education in a rapidly changing environment.

Cont'd on pg. 11



Since last Spring, volunteers have supported older and disabled Chore clients plus isolated residents by delivering nearly 1,000 boxes of food weekly.

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Your support helps us meet the challenges

By Greg Winter, Executive Director



With your help, this year the Opportunity Council rapidly transformed existing, and added new, services to address critical needs of communities in our region: housing stability, child care, food security, early learning, access to care, financial stability, and racial equity. In the following pages you will learn about only a sampling of how our responses to the pandemic are making a real difference

in people's lives. And that cannot happen without the compassion, dedication and professionalism of our staff and volunteers that you help support.

I've had the privilege over the last few weeks to collect stories during visits with staff throughout our organization: from our East Whatcom service center and Head Start classrooms in Kendall to our Island County Service Center in Oak Harbor; from our Building Performance Center in Bellingham to our Quality Child Care Team in Everett, and many other sites where Opportunity Council staff and volunteers continue responding to the emergency needs of our communities, while also building new services and facilities for a promising future.

These stories form a tapestry that, on one side, depicts a prideful portrait of people rising to meet almost insurmountable challenges, and on the other side, a courageous, hopeful vision of a more united community.

Let me share with you a sample of what I'm hearing:

"If we got through this, we can get through anything"

"We're still making really healthy good food and getting it to members of the community who need it"

"I'm proud of our community as a whole"

"We get to help so many people who haven't received help from us before"

"We rise to the occasion every single day"

"I'm grateful to be able to help"

"Knowing that I can be there for them, makes me feel like I'm doing something right"

"We're still getting people housed"

"It's been a good opportunity to see the heart of our people"

"We showed our clients that we aren't walking away"

"It's just so rewarding"

"The pivot happened so fast, and people were so amazing"

"It feels good to have purpose"

"We're going to continue going forward and keep trying to find the neediest families"

"We haven't slowed down; we just keep moving"

"We hit the ground running"

I hope you, our supporter, donor, partner, will take a moment to accept my gratitude for helping us meet these challenges and, importantly, for fueling the courage of hope in our staff. Your gifts – financial, volunteerism, wisdom – demonstrate, in a time of great division, that we can still come together in unity to accomplish great, unimaginable feats.



Greg Winter interviews staff around the agency to collect stories about the work they do, and the impact of Covid-19 this year.

Into the woods

By Dennis D'Amelio

When a few Opportunity Council programs slowed during Covid-19, some staff experienced working in other departments. Dennis D'Amelio temporarily relocated from working as a Weatherization project coordinator to assisting the agency's Homeless Outreach Team. This is his experience and perspective.

Many of us are struggling due to the Covid-19 virus, but perhaps none more than people who are homeless and unsheltered. These community members routinely struggle to meet basic human needs. Unfortunately, many of these services have gone away during the crisis. Drop-in centers and access to food, showers and shelter are hard to find. This makes the work of the OC Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) more important than ever.

This outreach team goes out on the streets and passes out food and basic hygiene needs, including hand sanitizer and masks. The team goes into the woods seeking out homeless camps, passing out supplies and information about where to find food, showers or other resources.

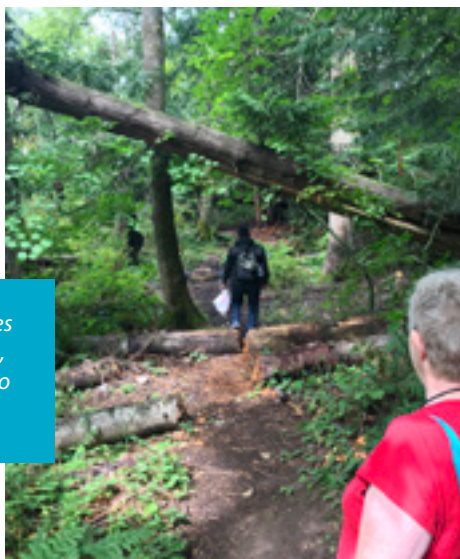
The group walks into the woods along muddy paths shouting, "Outreach, outreach. We have food." People emerge from tarp shelters and look with mistrust until they realize it's HOT. When they realize who it is they smile and some of the mistrust disappears.

The team has built many relationships and this is key to delivering these important services. You can see the connection. HOT member Theresa Meurs will reach into one of her many pockets and hand out a laundry voucher or an address. She will listen and make a note and then follow-up.

The team asks each person how they are doing, what they need. One person refuses the food and says they have enough right now. Another takes an extra bag to give to a neighbor who is away at the moment.

There is no judgement so the people living on the edge do not feel judged. The team accepts whatever comes and soon leaves. Then it's time to move to the next camp or the next parking lot.

The next day they do it all again.



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Opportunity Council's Homeless Outreach Team does street outreach, including going to homeless camps, passing out supplies and information about where to find food and resources.

Making the Census count

Washington's response is second in the nation

For more than two years, local communities prepared for the 2020 Census.

Opportunity Council has been involved in training community partners in San Juan, Island and Skagit counties leading up to this event. In Whatcom County, a countywide group including the Opportunity Council has been working to ensure every person counts.

That work paid off with most regions of the county in 2020 surpassing 2010 census self-response rates, which will help ensure accurate funding allocations for programs like Head Start, Energy Assistance, and Rental Assistance.

The Opportunity Council used innovative methods like cellular-equipped tablets to create Mobile Questionnaire

Assistance Centers (MQAs) to reach traditionally under-counted populations including non-native English speakers. By working with partners including the

Bellingham Food Bank and Nooksack Tribe to set up MQA's at community gathering spots, creating accessible hubs that overcame access barriers and encouraged participation.

Despite the challenges that a pandemic imposed on the 2020 Census count, the work of dedicated community members and advocates helped contribute to Washington state becoming second in the nation for self-response.



Opening a window in a world shutdown

When Covid-19 and social distancing requirements hit the community last Spring, Opportunity Council (OC) offices closed to in-person meetings. Staff had to quickly figure out how to continue providing services and information when their customers could no longer come into the building.

"People couldn't just show up at the Opportunity Council and talk to someone," said Jeff Judkins, OC Community Resource Center coordinator in Bellingham.

OC staff switched from staffing a reception desk and in-person meetings to answering phones and one program set up a new "window service." Staff also tracked how other local services were adapting to the pandemic so they could provide up-to-date-information for the community.

"Initially, a lot of people called and asked us where the food bank is today," Judkins said, referring to the Bellingham

Food Bank's shift to deliver food at drive-through locations instead of people going to their building.

The team also experienced changes in who they serve. Many people calling for help had never used OC services before.

"A lot of people who call are in a panic, this is the first time they've not been able to pay rent," Jeff said.

Despite the challenges, Jeff and his team are quick to focus on the client successes. For Jeff, that success happens when he is able to provide "action steps" for a client and answer their questions with helpful information.

"For quite a few people, it helps in a way they needed in that moment," Jeff said. "That's when I can leave them with a little more hope."

Building a better tomorrow

Last winter the Opportunity Council had four construction projects underway.

When Covid-19 hit, some projects were nearly done, including “building 2’ at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center in Kendall which was waiting for an occupancy permit. Other projects were just getting started, including the “Recovery House” project in Bellingham, a new partnership with a licensed behavioral health agency Lifeline Connections. And the new Early Learning and Family Services commercial kitchen was waiting for permits to start renovations.

Remarkably, the OC was able to move forward with these projects, and more, with only minimal delays.

Teaming up with the Lummi Nation

A new 24-unit cottage style community is in rapid development thanks to an exciting partnership with the Lhaq'temish Foundation and the Lummi Nation.

Healthy Homes in Friday Harbor

With a new roof, improved insulation, and better accessibility on the way, the Harborview Apartments will continue to be a source of sustainable affordable housing on San Juan Island.



Greg Winter and Jon Martin visit the commercial kitchen site during construction last summer. The required construction upgrades were completed in September so that OC staff can prepare nutritious meals and snacks for children and families in OC preschool programs throughout Whatcom County.

Kitchen for Kids

Whatcom County preschoolers and their families are now getting delicious and nutritious meals from the new Early Learning and Family Services Kitchen that opened in October.

Food for Families Everywhere

Ensuring everyone can eat no matter where they live got a little easier thanks to opening the new building at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center, that is home to the Foothills Food Bank.

Revvig up Recovery House

Scheduled to be operational early next year, the Whatcom Recovery House location is being transformed into a supportive housing and treatment facility for participants in therapeutic court programs.

Volunteers provide food drive-up delivery service at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center in Kendall. The Foothills Food Bank is utilizing a new building at the Center for food storage and access for people in this remote rural location.



New venture strives to address child care shortage

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, communities throughout Northwest Washington were among the most deeply affected by the chronic shortage of infant/toddler, preschool and before/after-school care options for working parents. The depths of the pandemic quickly brought increased risks of losing some child care businesses as enrollment at child care centers decreased, some by 75% or more. Those that remained open saw revenue decrease and costs increase as lower staff-to-child ratio and additional sanitizing and social distance requirements were mandated.

Fortunately, in partnership with the Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, Opportunity Council’s Early Learning & Family Services Department (ELAFS) was busy establishing the Northwest Center for Child Care Retention & Expansion to address our historical supply shortage of child care options.

Housed in the Chamber’s downtown Bellingham offices, the Center’s staff was ramping up to provide technical assistance, business coaching, feasibility studies, planning support and grants to existing and would-be providers of child care. The team deftly shifted gears and became laser-focused on stabilizing the existing market and helping providers cope with having the older siblings of customers –some with special needs--on site due to school closures.

Through financial support of the WA Department of Commerce, North Sound Accountable Communities of Health, Mount Baker Foundation, Chuckanut Health Foundation, Whatcom Community Foundation United Way of Whatcom, local governments’ CARES Act funding and the Whidbey Island Foundation, the new Center was able to provide stabilization and re-opening mini-grants to retain child care services needed to support essential workers and other members of the labor force. Some local businesses, keenly aware of their workforce’s needs, have also been donating to the Center.



OC supports quality child care services in multiple ways, including opening a new Center for Child Care Retention & Expansion in August that focuses on helping parents have more care options for their children.

“The Center has one very big goal,” said Guy Occhiogrosso, the Chamber President/CEO, “to help parents, especially those comprising local companies’ workforces, have more quality care options for their children, whether it’s near their home or place of employment.”

Even though the landscape is even more challenging to childcare providers than expected, thanks to the ingenuity of our partners and supporters, the Center is well on its way with its multi-faceted approach designed to ensure the local child care market does not contract further, and with other new services and partners, will expand in the future.

As one local provider of child care services to essential workers stated,

“I am so appreciative for the financial support during these unprecedented times. This helps my program continue to provide childcare for essential workers. Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!”

Opportunity Council has also stepped up directly for parents, expanding its Quality Child Care Division’s program of emergency child care vouchers for households being destabilized by unanticipated child care costs due to school closures.

Maple Alley Update

From dine-in to delivery

Maple Alley Inn, a hot meals program, is not able to serve meals to large gatherings during the Covid-19 pandemic. So instead, staff are preparing, packaging and delivering individual meals to people who are isolated and living on extremely limited incomes. This includes people living in quarantine or in housing with little or no ability to cook and prepare meals.

"We're developing new systems to prepare and package main course meals. It's satisfying to be able to do what we love to do, which is feeding people healthy, nutritious food."

Anne Poulson, Maple Alley Inn coordinator



Jessica Meyer, Maple Alley Inn Assistant, prepares and packages meals. Instead of hosting and serving meals for large groups during COVID, the program delivers meals to people in COVID isolation or in supportive housing programs.

Chore during Covid-19

A helping hand to help each other

Thank you for sustaining home-based support for people who are older or disabled.

The Chore Program volunteers provide home-based services that help people who are older or disabled remain independent in their own homes. One common task is addressing food access, i.e. taking people grocery shopping.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and required social distancing, this person-to-person service is no longer possible. Instead, working in partnership with the local food bank, our staff recruited volunteers to deliver food boxes to some of the most vulnerable residents.

While more resources are needed to meet all the needs, here's what residents have to say about this service delivered to their front porch:

"Without the chore program, I would be stranded with no food"

"I am a senior who was recently diagnosed with cancer. I am at extremely high risk if I were to develop Covid-19. The Chore program assists me by bringing me groceries when I need them most"

"I am 89 years old. Volunteers bring me food every week and I am so thankful"

Residents receiving Chore Services

When kids can't come to preschool, preschool goes to them

When OC early learning preschool classrooms closed last Spring due to the Covid-19 pandemic, staff continued to support enrolled families by using our school buses to deliver boxes of food and early learning supplies.

In partnership with Bellingham School District, Bellingham Food Bank, and Ferndale Food Bank, staff are delivering hundreds of boxes of food to families who cannot get out to food banks or school distribution sites.

In addition to food resources, staff are providing educational packets so parents can continue to support their child(ren)'s individualized plan and delivering health and safety/hygiene materials to the neediest of families, including diapers/pull-ups, disinfectants, toilet paper, and baby wipes.

Some food boxes were customized for families living in hotel rooms with minimal cooking abilities. Families said they were thankful for meals their children recognized, that were easy for parents to prep, and that were healthy.



This preschool student shares a drawing of her family that she did for her "All about Me" booklet. Educational packets with materials like this were delivered to homes weekly and families were invited to share their children's work.

"Feeling so blessed! Our son will be very happy to see his new snacks when he wakes up from his nap. We are so grateful for this program that we are a part of and all of the love and support we receive. We are so overwhelmingly thankful for all of you! I know our son won't remember a lot of this right now, but the love and support you guys pour over him will go with him the rest of his life."

One of the more hopeful sights this past year was OC staff filling a fleet of yellow school buses and sending them down the road packed with food, early learning supplies, and basic necessities for families enrolled in preschool programs. In partnership with the Bellingham School District and Bellingham and Ferndale Food Banks, staff loaded the busses with food, diapers and wipes, hygiene supplies, and educational supplies—delivering basic needs and much needed hope to hundreds of families unable to get to food banks or school distribution sites.



On the road to a brighter future

Program grads work to 'X-it' poverty

Four families graduated in July from "Project X-it," an 18-month program at the Opportunity Council focused on increasing financial skills and earning cash incentives.

OC staff and sponsors celebrated with a "Publisher's Clearinghouse" award van approach to socially-distanced door-to-door delivery of certificates of completion, large checks that paid out the families' accumulated incentives and a gift bag.

Families in the Project X-it program worked on strategies to exit poverty, including family designed goals such as budgeting, education, family safety, employment and addressing past debt. Both parents and children actively participated in education and goal setting through this program.

"In addition to building financial skills for both generations, we coach our families through an individualized plan that includes group learning and one-to-one opportunities,"

said David Webster, director of Early Learning and Family Services at the Opportunity Council.

"Each family's journey is supported by a trained community mentor who helps problem-solve, guide, encourage and link them to resources to succeed in school and in life," he added. "Like for many of us, it comes down to having skills, community, and increased fiscal resources to make our way," Webster summarized. "This program provides all three."

As families completed steps toward their goals, they receive deposits into an Individual Savings Accounts for adult(s) and Child Savings Account for enrolled children.

This year's graduating families earned a combined total of \$10,685 in incentivized goal completion. The financial incentives are made possible with a grant through WECU Education First grant and individual donations to the program.

Volunteers offer Medicare, health insurance information at OC

In February Opportunity Council expanded its list of services by becoming a Statewide Health Insurance Benefits Advisors (SHIBA) sponsor to help people in Whatcom County with Medicare and health insurance options.

This service is offered by the Washington State Office of Insurance Commissioner and serves people of all ages. Trained volunteer advisors provide free, impartial and confidential counseling and education on Medicare, health care programs and prescription drug access, fraud and abuse, and more.

"Incorporating the SHIBA program into Opportunity Council's broad scope of services is a good fit and enriches

our organization's capacity to meet our mission," said Greg Winter, Opportunity Council executive director.

Formerly a program of Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement, this volunteer-driven program found a home with the Opportunity Council thanks to donor support that provides the infrastructure and training in-depth programs.

The SHIBA program is adapting to Covid-19 by providing advising sessions over the phone and by Zoom and holding online information sessions for the general public.

Supporter imagination leads to innovative action

Thanks to community innovation, usual fundraising events were transformed into new experiences offering community connection, much needed fun, and critical funding to mobilize volunteers and provide vital services.

Springing into Action

Never the kind to back down from a challenge, this spring you found new ways to support your neighbors after the cancellation of two beloved events: the Dorothy Place Luncheon and Dine Out for Maple Alley Inn. With unfaltering support and social distancing adaptations, Maple Alley Inn has continued to thrive even after the event cancellation, while dedicated Dorothy Place supporters reached out to one another, encouraging each other to give: “let’s not let not having a luncheon stop us all from making donations” wrote one table host—a testament to the connection and generosity that make the event a success year over year.

Linking up for Little Ones

Each year, the Annual Golf Fore Good tournament provides vital funds to support children and families served by the OC’s Early Learning and Family Services. The funds cover unforeseen costs faced by the families of young children with developmental disabilities—ensuring these children get the care and support they deserve.

With the traditional tournament out of the question, local golf courses stepped up to make sure these families didn’t fall through the cracks. Thanks to an idea from Phil Gaggero at Lake Padden Golf Course, the tournament became a social distanced event that gave a much-appreciated excuse for golfers to hit the links.

Held over three days in September, golfers at Lake Padden Golf Course, Shuksan Golf Club, North Bellingham Golf Club, and the Sudden Valley Golf and Country Club were asked to add a \$5 (or more) donation to their greens fee. Thanks to the promotional efforts of Cascade Radio Group, generous golfers and event sponsors Peoples Bank, Phillips

66, IMCO, Heritage Bank, HMA Healthcare Management Administrators, Cigna Health, HUB, Northwest Fence, North Coast Credit Union, Buri Funston Mumford & Furlong, PLLC, Smart Association, Russ Wildenberg at Sun Life Financial, more than \$11,000 were raised to support the children and families of Northwest Washington.

From Beerfest to Trivia Fest

Given that more than 300 folks attend each year’s Oktoberfest fundraiser, the traditional Whatcom Volunteer Center fundraiser was out of the question this fall. Instead, the event transformed into an online trivia contest. Thanks to the scrappy efforts of the event committee, willing sponsors, and 50+ participants, Oktoberfest Trivia raised more than \$4,000 to mobilize volunteers all across Whatcom County.

Hosted by World’s Best Trivia and with event sponsorship from Puget Sound Energy, Heritage Bank, Phillips 66, Larson Gross, and Haggen Food and Pharmacy, the event was a raucous evening of laughter, costumes and useless information shared with co-workers, friends and family over Zoom. Funds raised go directly to fund the infrastructure and technological support the lean, mean Volunteer Center of Whatcom County team leverages into mobilizing thousands of priceless volunteer hours.

*Thank you to all our donors.
You truly help make a difference.*

Covid-19 Impacts

Cont'd from first page

Staff participated in trainings to provide high quality remote case management.

Energy Assistance staff in Bellingham and Oak Harbor quickly changed in-person appointments to phone appointments, and added systems for mailing and dropping off required documentation.

"Quick changes meant we could meet "social distancing" requirements and more important, make sure our friends and neighbors still have access to they help they need."

Lorena Shah,
Community Services Manager

Delivering food to those who can't get out

Working with volunteers and the Bellingham Food Bank, we're supporting our older and disabled Chore clients plus isolated residents who cannot go pick up the food. Every Friday, a remarkable group of community members delivers nearly 1,000 boxes of food. Volunteers shared what this means to people when they get a delivery:

"Mostly people who call in to get deliveries are desperate and not sure where to turn. The relief in their voice when they find out that food is coming is a wonderful thing to hear, at least we can take some pressure off this one area crucial of their lives."

Food box delivery volunteer

Camp finds a way to reach kids during pandemic

This was the year many youth and families missed out on summer camps. But thanks community support, "Kids Days of Summer" delivered hope, learning, and fun to 550 youth in East Whatcom. Every week, staff and volunteers packed activity kits that included Mindport crafts, journals, mini garden science kits and other activities.

"They gave my children something to look forward to each week, thank you for providing them."

Kids Days of Summer parent

Helping Veterans and families

The impact of Covid-19 can be hardest on those who are already struggling to meet their basic needs. In Island County, staff are finding new ways to ensure our community members get the support they need. When Veterans

couldn't come into the office, staff started doing street outreach. When families in shelters couldn't pick up lunches from school, staff delivered lunches to them.

And when staff learned from the Boys and Girls Club in Oak Harbor that some families with children under the age of 12 were not getting meals at home, they figured out how to provide bags of food to go home each weekend for each child.

"We included flyers in the bags about other resources we offer and continue to provide information to the broader community so families can successfully access housing, food and energy assistance programs."

Lisa Clark, OC Island County director

Building racial equity into our response

OC is partnering closely with organizations that serve and advocate for people of color and communities impacted most severely by COVID-19. We're extending our outreach with help from Community to Community, Lummi Nation, Nooksack Tribe, to name a few. For example, the Promotores Program at Sea Mar Community Health Center provides a vital community connection to our farm worker families. We're working with this group to support these working families with eviction prevention financial assistance, food resources, including a grocery store gift card, and hand sanitizer.

"Thank you very much for your great commitment to the community!"

Marcela L Suarez Diaz, Promotores program manager

Supporting child care providers during a pandemic

Child Care Aware coaches heard from a family child care provider in Snohomish County that she and other providers feel very supported by their coaches, and especially during this pandemic. She said the weekly phone check-ins and the emergency supply deliveries have been particularly helpful with morale. Regardless of whether they need supplies, the gestures of staff reaching out and showing they care was very meaningful to these providers.

"Please let the other coaches know as well that we all really appreciate you all."

Child care provider

Opportunity Council programs include: Community Resource Center • Homeless Housing • Dorothy Place • Marjie's House • Homeless Prevention • Rental Assistance • Child Care Aware • Nutrition • Basic Food Education & Outreach • Maple Alley Inn • Energy Assistance • Weatherization Home Repair Loan Program • Early Support for Infants and Toddlers • Emergency Child Care Vouchers • Early Achievers • School Backpack Drives • Head Start • Early Head Start • Early Childhood Education Assistance Program • Building Performance Center • The Energy Project • Conservation Education • Community Energy Challenge • Housing Development • 22 North • Financial Literacy and Renter Education (F.L.A.R.E.) • Whatcom Asset Building Coalition • Employment Case Management • Project X-it • Veteran Services



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Heidi Call staffs the front desk at the Island County Opportunity Council office in Oak Harbor. After more than 20 years in the Health Department building, the OC Island County service center relocated in May to a new office on Barrington Ave in Oak Harbor. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, in-person appointments are not yet allowed in the new space.

**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**

