

Spring 2021

Community In Action

A newsletter for friends of the Opportunity Council



More rent help available for Northwest households

As part of the federal economic relief package, more than \$21 million dollars is now available to help Whatcom, Island and San Juan residents with their rent and utility bills.

"We're pleased the funds from this relief package are available to help people with housing needs and look forward to partnering with local government agencies to provide this assistance in our community," said Greg Winter, OC executive director. Winter added the agency is expanding its workforce to deliver this assistance.

More information about rental assistance:

- Available through the Opportunity Council for residents in Whatcom, Island, and San Juan Counties (for Skagit, Snohomish and all other Washington Counties, visit wapartnership.org)
- For more information on how to apply, visit www.oppc.org. Applicants are encouraged to have household income information available to confirm eligibility
- Both renters and landlords are eligible to request help with current or past-due rent
- New appointments available at the beginning of each month through the end of the year or as funds allow

Not just a life raft for individual households, Rental Assistance is a critical community safety net, aiding in the prevention of homelessness, reduction in foreclosure risk and strengthening the economy. To find out more about the program and how to apply, visit oppc.org.

With no place else to go this fall and winter, more than 165 families with children were provided safe haven at local motels—over three times the number of families needing such help a year ago.

This need for shelter increased dramatically during the pandemic, as families lost both income and, due to social distancing requirements, the option of staying with friends and family.

"I wouldn't be where I am right now, if I hadn't been given the opportunity to be a part of this program," said one mother. "I was put into a situation where I was staying in my car with my 3 children and had nowhere to turn. I was referred to the Opportunity Council's motel assistance program. I went from completely hopeless to having a safe place for me and my kids while I found housing. Having a warm place to stay warm and be safe made moving forward so much easier."

With no place else to go, sheltering at a motel offers a level of stability for families (especially critical for those with school-age children navigating remote learning). The families then also work with a case manager to find permanent housing. Funding for the motel stay program has been provided by Whatcom County, the City of Bellingham, the Resilience Fund of the Whatcom Community Foundation, the Mount Baker Foundation, and private donors.

Cont'd on pg. 6

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

On Grief, Gratitude and Grit

By Greg Winter, Executive Director



To say that it's been a long, tough year is obviously an understatement. And it's been particularly hard for many of the people we serve.

This winter we surveyed over 600 of our clients, asking "How has COVID-19 affected your household?"

The most common impact has been on employment and finances. People shared they had been laid off, or their hours were

reduced, or that it has been harder to find work. Household budgets have been strained during the pandemic, with families falling further and further behind on rent and bills while some expenses have gone up.

Many people told us they are concerned about the impacts on their children, including students struggling with the online format of school, the challenges associated with a lack of child care, and worries about their children's mental and physical health.

Social isolation is taking a toll on mental and emotional health. People who are separated from family and friends are unable to rely on each other for support.

All of this has contributed to anxiety, depression, and loneliness, as shared in these comments:

My family rarely leaves the house now. I'm immunocompromised so we don't see our family and friends, to protect me. It's very sad and confining.

Having kids home from school. All bills have gone up- power, food, overages on internet. Kids behavior problems. Have lost extended family due to covid-19. My anxiety is sky high.

Still, some of the comments provide stories of hope and of gratitude:

Husband disabled, retired and I being on oxygen in home with no way to travel. We are blessed by all the services that are available to help us continue to be a secure solid family. The food delivery every week, the phone calls returned for housing or bills. The pouring outreach of all of you are what is keeping us all alive and gives us the hope needed that all will be ok, in time. We are blessed to have you in our family.

Thank you.

I am very grateful for what I have!!! Was homeless, [Opportunity Council's Housing and Essential Needs program] helped me get an apartment. I am very grateful.

Reading the hundreds of stories like this, I am struck by the magnitude of challenges people are struggling to overcome. I am also inspired by their resilience and determination to get through this.

And I appreciate the many ways our community has come through to support each other. That's where you come in.

Yes, it's been a monumentally difficult time, but it's also been an unprecedented period of generous donor support. Your ongoing support is making a huge difference in people's lives.

For that, I am immensely grateful.

Exciting changes at the helm in Island County

Melissa Frasc-Brown has been promoted as the director of the Opportunity Council's Island County service center. She began her new role on April 16, when previous director, Lisa Clark, stepped down to provide administrative and technical support.

Clark announced in February that she is stepping back from her director position and transitioning to an advisory role to support the agency's work in the community.

Frasch-Brown has been employed with the Opportunity Council's Island County service center for six years, most recently as the Shelter/Housing Case Manager Lead overseeing staff and housing contracts.

experience to this director position," Clark said. "She is

"Melissa is a recognized leader and brings great skills and she is willing to step into the position. I have great confidence in Melissa, and I know the staff does as well. She knows the issues, the systems, and is a strong advocate of our community."

Frasch-Brown brings 14 years of social service experience to this position, specifically working with homeless and low-



Melissa Frasc-Brown and Lisa Clark

income families and youth. Prior to coming to the Opportunity Council, Frasc-Brown oversaw state contracts for foster care placement, licensing, budgets and worked as a program manager at a Domestic Violence Shelter in Virginia.

"I look forward to using my skills to support our agency, our team and our community and continue to advocate for the things I care deeply about," Frasc-Brown said.

The Opportunity Council is a community action agency governed by a volunteer board of directors equally representing the private, public and low-income sectors of Island, San Juan and Whatcom counties. Services include housing, food resources, energy assistance, weatherization, early learning programs, child care resources and more.

Looking back with Lisa Clark

Lisa Clark first joined the Opportunity Council in October of 1997. We asked her to share her thoughts on what she's seen change over the course of her extraordinary tenure.

What are the biggest changes you have seen during your time as director?

Growth in programs and depth of services to clients all across the agency. When I started in Island County there was a half-time person and me. The only programs available for clients were the energy assistance program, a somewhat functional Information and Referral system, and a \$200 a month allocation for rental assistance.

What has been the best thing about your job?

The best thing about my job is the staff. Supporting them allows clients to get the best we have to offer. For those who support me...they will always be fond memories to treasure.

What else do you want to share?

Being a part of this agency has been a highlight of my life. Leaving will be bittersweet and I see great potential for the days and years ahead. I will be a part of the agency for a few more months to be a support for Melissa and the rest of the staff as we transition to new leadership. When I finally close the door on this chapter another door has opened -- finally getting to be more of a hands-on grandmother.

Child Care Investments Support Providers, Strengthen Community

A new OC program is making a difference by sustaining, strengthening, and expanding child care providers across Whatcom, Island, San Juan, Skagit, and Snohomish counties.

Since its inception last summer, the Center for Retention & Expansion of Child Care NW (C-RECC NW) has distributed 148 grants to child care providers throughout all five counties. These grants total over \$1.2 million and are possible with support of private and public funding to help stabilize the child care market through the pandemic.

“Even though the landscape is even more challenging to child care providers than expected, thanks to our partners and supporters we’re working to ensure the local child care market does not contract further, and can expand in the future,” said Abigail Tankersley, child care business development manager.

C-RECC staff members Tankersley and Kenda Sipma, child care recruitment and expansion manager, support providers with multiple aspects of the business and help find solutions tailored to their needs. They work alongside the OC’s Quality Child Care Division’s Early Learning Coaches who work directly with child care providers.



Abigail Tankersley



Kenda Sipma

C-RECC NW was created through a partnership between Opportunity Council and the Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce. Supporting partners include foundations, WA State Dept. of Commerce, Whatcom County, City of Bellingham, corporate donations, Northsound Accountable Communities of Health and federal dollars, including the CARES act.

“Thank you so much for this funding, which will increase the safety of the children we serve and our staff. ... safety supply costs have dramatically increased...we could not cover this without the generosity of donations and grants.”

- Child Care Center Provider, Whatcom County

Solar Projects Shine Across Community

Three OC departments, Housing Development, Home Improvement, and The Energy Project, joined together to help secure funding for two community solar projects.

At the [East Whatcom Regional Resource Center](#), the OC will install solar arrays on both buildings and will redirect a portion of the dollars previously used to pay for electricity into a fund dedicated to Foothills Food Bank to better address food security for low-income residents of the local area.

[Lummi Nation](#) will use the funds to install solar arrays on up to five large buildings and will develop a fund managed by the Laq’Temish Foundation that will collect a portion of

dollars previously used to pay for electric utility bills. These funds will be directed into an escrow account and distributed to eligible low-income PSE customers or low-income service providers serving low-income PSE customers on an annual basis for the duration of the project.

“I am very excited to see these two innovative projects moving forward in Whatcom County, as they represent a pathway for those benefits to be directed to under-served households,” said Shawn Collins, Energy Project director.

The Gift of Giving Back

Last year volunteers contributed over 12,000 hours to Opportunity Council programs and services. One of the Chore program volunteers, Kathleen O'Connor, has provided transportation for Veterans (prior to COVID) and food resources to help people (during COVID). She recently responded to a brief questionnaire.

When did you decide to start volunteering and what attracted you to this cause or program?

In the summer of 2018, I retired and came back to the area. I am a retired pastor and I knew someone in my church who volunteered with Chore, and thought it was a great idea! I started by taking people to essential medical appointments.

What do your volunteer activities involve?

Currently, I volunteer with the (Opportunity Council) Volunteer Chore Program assisting seniors with grocery shopping. I shop for them and drop off their groceries on their porch. Every Friday I deliver a route for the COVID19 Foodbank deliveries. I deliver food boxes to around 9 households throughout Bellingham. On Saturdays I do foothills Foodbank and I do Food rescue, where you go to assigned stores and pull items before they go bad, and deliver 6-8 carts of bakery items and deliver to the East Whatcom Resource Center in Kendall. They take those items and deliver them throughout Eastern Whatcom County. I also volunteers through church.

Why do you choose to volunteer and what motivates you to stay involved?

I am retired with lots of time, and am aware of community needs. Someone needs to do it, so I do it! I am excited that I finally have time to take action.

Of what contribution or achievement are you most proud?

Before Covid, I took a lot of veterans to Seattle to essential medical appointments. We became friends for the day, and I got a sense of how lonely they were and grateful they were to have friendship. They told me stories about their military service. I was happy to be a companion to them at that time and support them through hard times.

With the Foodbank COVID19 deliveries, it is great to feel less helpless and be able to assist how I can throughout this pandemic. It makes me feel less overwhelmed with everything going on, and makes me feel better to make a difference.

What's surprised you about volunteering?

That I had to learn that you don't always hear thank you, but it's still worth it.

What do you wish other people knew about volunteering?

That you both contribute in ways that are meaningful and satisfying, as well as build your own sense of self-worth and value in the world. If we all work together, we can make a huge difference. It's daily small miracles that add up to something major.

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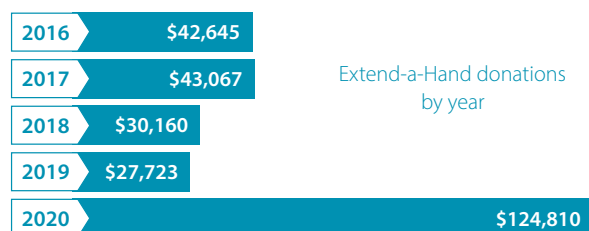
Community Extends Unprecedented Generosity

While COVID-19 wrought havoc over the winter months and into the new year, extraordinary community support from people like you made it possible for so many to get through a turbulent season. Over the holiday season, our uncertain times were met with unprecedented generosity. You and your community made it possible for the Opportunity Council to ensure food, shelter, and basic services were available whenever anyone in our community needed help.

The 2020 Extend-a-Hand campaign, an annual fundraising campaign organized and promoted by the Bellingham Herald for four decades, was an astonishing grassroots success. Hundreds of individuals and families—from stalwart donors to 3rd graders generously giving their Christmas money—came together to give over \$125,000. Matched by an anonymous Whatcom County donor and the Resilience Fund of the Whatcom Community Foundation, nearly \$250,000 were raised to support the Opportunity Council’s emergency shelter services and provide prescription medications through Unity Care NW.

DONATIONS

Extend-a-Hand donors set an astonishing record that was matched by an anonymous donor and the Resilience Fund of Whatcom Community Foundation to support OC housing assistance and Unity Care NW prescription programs.



For a complete list of Opportunity Council programs and services, visit www.oppco.org.

Thank you.

In the midst of an extraordinarily challenging year, you are giving your neighbors a sense of security and well-being.

Cont’d from pg. 1

“For my family it has been such a blessing to know we have a warm, safe place to stay while we search for permanent housing, as well as an easy way for my son to continue online school and be successful with it. Without the hotel we would be sleeping in our car and as a mother that is a very scary thing to have to do with your children.”

The motel stay program has proved a vital lifeline for many families yet has limited funding. Current funding for the motel stay program is expected to run out by mid-2021.



Bob, a member of the Homeless Outreach Team, checks in on a homeless neighbor early one spring morning.

Community Foundations Help Meet Essential Needs

“Keep people housed. Keep people working. Help people through emergency.”

All too often we see residents facing emergency needs when no existing assistance is available. This could be a senior living on fixed income who needs a water heater replaced. Or a family that moves out of shelter to a permanent housing situation but they do not have a bed or any furniture and household goods.

Whidbey Island Community Foundation and Goosefoot Foundation recognized these unfunded needs and teamed up to launch an Essential Needs campaign that will support families through a partnership with Opportunity Council’s Island County Service Center.

This fundraising campaign will run through July 15 with a goal of raising \$100,000. The goal is getting a big head start with seed gifts from the Goosefoot Community Fund (\$25,000) and Whidbey Community Foundation’s COVID-19 Community Resilience Fund (\$25,000).

This funding will fill gaps for Whidbey Island households that aren’t met through existing funding streams, such as assistance for utilities, rent, support to maintain employment i.e., broken car, child care and other one-time extraordinary expenses.

“We’re grateful to live in a community where people not only recognize when people are in need, they step up to help,” said Lisa Clark, Island County Opportunity Council.

Recovery House Homeward Bound

On April 27th Lifeline Connections and Opportunity Council held “Making the House a Home” a virtual fundraising event to celebrate and raise support for Recovery House, a joint venture to add much needed transitional housing for people striving to overcome opioid addiction and other forms of chemical dependency. Opportunity Council is developing this housing facility and partnering with Lifeline Connections, a nonprofit, behavioral health treatment provider.

The house, set to open later this summer, will be home to 16 residents for an average stay of six months and provide stable housing and counseling services for individuals with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorder issues. Treatment will include additional services like employment counseling, food security, legal support, and wrap-around care to address co-occurring mental health and primary health conditions.

Photo Courtesy: TONKIN architecture



New Upgrades for San Juan Apartments

The Harborview Apartment rehab project in Friday Harbor, San Juan Island, is moving toward completion with a new roof, improved insulation, and recent exterior painting. This project ensures these apartments will continue to be a source of sustainable affordable housing on San Juan Island.

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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**Visit us online for more event
information & updates,
www.opppo.org**

Preschoolers, parents, find support during COVID closures

*"Lo que a mí me gusto es a pesar
de que se cerró la escuela, las
maestras siempre estuvieron
pendiente de los niños llamaban
todas las semanas para ver cómo
estaban los niños."*

*What I liked is even though the
school was closed, the teachers
were always thinking about the
children and called them every
week to see how they were doing.*

- Head Start Parent

Event Calendar

June 24

Board of Directors Meeting

July 26

Board of Directors Meeting

August 6

**Save the date! Golf FORE!
Good Tournament**

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Watch for Dine Out updates coming this fall!!



**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**