

# COVID-19 Response Project Report

Presented to Cook Family Foundation

By Nonprofit Network



*Strengthening Nonprofit  
Governance & Management*  
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## Introduction

Shiawassee County's nonprofit organizations have long provided the necessary framework to support community needs, often filling gaps in services that would otherwise be unavailable. Nonprofit organizations offer everything from respite for families taking care of elderly parents; camp for youth with disabilities; to historical exhibits preserving the rich history of the railroad industry. During the past year, this framework was tested as never before.

Philanthropic organizations also recognized that something needed to be done to respond to the challenges that the pandemic thrust upon our community. In early 2020, the United Way provided the Shiawassee County Emergency Preparedness Office with \$48,768 and helped establish a community hotline to respond to immediate needs. The Cook Family Foundation donated an additional \$15,000 to this relief fund.

During the next several months, numerous individual and business donors stepped up to provide assistance to both individuals in need and the nonprofit organizations that serve Shiawassee County residents. The United Way received support from companies like Meijer, Huntington Bank, Cargill, DTE and many individuals to assist Shiawassee residents at the onset of the pandemic and throughout the next year and into 2021.

As organizations struggled through a period of mandatory shut-downs, the Cook Family Foundation provided over \$43,000 in emergency grants to several nonprofits to keep their doors open. At the end of the year the Foundation made another \$90,000 in grants to help community groups set themselves up for continued operation into 2021. The Shiawassee Community Foundation granted an additional \$23,350 (\$10,000 of this coming from a grant from Consumers Energy Foundation)

The nonprofit community rose to the challenge by reaching out to one another, governmental entities, state legislators and the private sector; identifying needs and resources; and quickly pivoting to deliver services with little or no interruption. One individual summed it up by saying, "In nursing you are expected to use your intuitive knowledge, critical thinking and to trust your gut feeling, research it of course, but don't sit back in the sidelines, to do something, if something needs to be done."

The Cook Family Foundation realized much could be learned by how Shiawassee area nonprofits responded to the COVID crisis to sustain their organizations and assist the community. To that end, Nonprofit Network was commissioned to provide a report highlighting the role nonprofits played in meeting community needs, including what might be transferable to assist other nonprofits in maintaining a "bold" mindset post-COVID.

Sharon Castle, Nonprofit Network Capacity Building Consultant, conducted a series of conversations, emails and interviews with several nonprofit leaders who are partners in the Cook Family Foundation Nonprofit Capacity Building Program focusing on how nonprofits: adapted, collaborated (with other nonprofits, private entities, community partners and funders)

and maintained resilience; pivoted and utilized assets (connections, facilities...) to respond to community needs and; leadership's response (board and staff) including "risk" tolerance (staffing levels, innovative programs, financial challenges...). In addition to the report, participating nonprofits received an Executive Summary including identified strengths and challenges as well as conclusions and recommendations as to what was learned from the experience and how the knowledge can be applied now and for future growth.

Interviews with six nonprofit leaders including Laura Archer, Executive Director, YMCA; Lynn Brenckle, Executive Director, ARC Mid-Michigan; Piper Brewer, Executive Director, Shiawassee Arts Council; Helen Howard, RN, BSN, Executive Director, Respite Volunteers Shiawassee; Emily Marrah, Relationship Specialist, United Way of Genesee County and Mary Warner-Stone, Executive Director, Durand Union Station were conducted during January and February 2021 as well as a subsequent participant feedback and conversations to identify ways in which to utilize the report's findings and identify next steps.

While the organizations represented a broad cross-section of the nonprofit community, the interviews presented one overarching theme: the ability to "let go of what we do" and "do what needs to be done." From that mind-set, Shiawassee area nonprofits were able to identify fractures unveiled by the pandemic; reach out to and collaborate with private and public sector colleagues; and significantly alter programming and funding streams in response to the changing environment.

Many thanks to the nonprofit leaders contributing to this report by sharing their experiences, knowledge, and insights as well as collaborating entities mentioned during interviews. Also, thanks to the Cook Family Foundation for their unwavering support, rapid response to the changing needs during the pandemic and remaining a stalwart partner by truly fulfilling their purpose of serving as both a resource to the community and a catalyst for positive community change.

## Findings:

**Adaptability and collaboration were essential** – Shiawassee area nonprofits responded to the COVID-19 crisis by showing adaptability and the courage to press on in the face of uncertainty. This mind-set began immediately with nonprofit leaders identifying the need to provide face masks as personal protection equipment (PPE) to keep not only their clients safe but other vulnerable populations as well. The Durand Union Station became the hub for making masks by calling upon their robust volunteer community. Other organizations like Respite Volunteers Shiawassee provided lists and contact information of organizations in need of masks and other items and provided the information to the United Way and the office of State Representative Ben Frederick who developed spreadsheets to aid in distribution of resources.

- **Administrative** – Pre-pandemic, organizational policies centered around the assumption that business would be conducted at a physical office. When staff and board could no longer congregate in an office, organizations had to adjust policies to reflect “working from home” scenarios. Organizations like Arc Mid-Michigan realized the importance of this and set about documenting organizational processes and procedures.
- **Program and Services** – Several organizations had to cease, suspend or severely curtail activities. For others “all programs went virtual” while still others, like the Shiawassee Family YMCA and Shiawassee Arts Council offered limited capacity in-person opportunities following established safety protocols when small gatherings were allowed. Other organizations stepped in to coordinate program and service delivery like the United Way of Genesee – Serving Genesee and Shiawassee Counties successful effort to call upon the manufacturing sector to secure a front loader and driver to pick up and deliver 300 30lb boxes of pantry items to seniors through Capital Area Community Services.
- **Fundraising** - The inability for nonprofits to raise revenue was greatly impacted as special events were canceled and funding sources found themselves reevaluating grant guidelines. Organizations adapted by utilizing technology to reach donors with social media appeals; direct mail appeals; personal phone calls to long-time supporters; applying for COVID-19 related foundation grants; and applying for governmental programs like the Payroll Protection Program, Michigan Restart Grant and Workshare.
- **Relationship Building** – The importance of relationships was highlighted during the pandemic. Trust was a key factor and Executive Directors were quick to reach out to colleagues with whom they already had personal connections to share fears, discuss ideas and, often, make alternative plans. Once these initial conversations took place, Executive Director’s began maneuvering outside of their usual lanes and found themselves forging new partnerships in order to match needs to resources and deliver programs and services.

**Use of technology was critical** – While most organizations were already utilizing technology, nonprofit leaders began offering virtual programming and services to clients; utilizing meeting platforms like Zoom or Google Meetings for board and staff meetings, donor visits as well as volunteer orientation and trainings; completing day-to-day administrative tasks and developing a greater on-line presence for marketing goods and services.

Utilizing technology to conduct business was heightened as people were not able to gather or do so on a small scale. For instance, the Shiawassee Arts Council moved their newly installed exhibit online and realized the importance of an online marketplace. The United Way offered the Genesee and Shiawassee Serves platform, which had largely been utilized to share event information to broadcast needs to more than 6,000 volunteers. DUSI developed weekly podcasts as a forum to discuss timely topics. The YMCA partnered with a YMCA in Pennsylvania to offer virtual programming.

**Identification of critical needs was necessary** – Nonprofits reached out to one-another to identify weaknesses, challenges and inequities brought to light during the pandemic. In addition to PPE needs, transportation and food insecurity were identified as the two most critical needs.

- **Transportation** – With the closure of the Shiawassee Area Transportation Agency and lack of services like Uber and Lyft, many of the community's most vulnerable citizens were unable to have access to food and medical supplies and were, oftentimes, isolated from day-to-day contact provided by pre-pandemic programs and services. The Arc Mid-Michigan, with the assistance of the United Way and the Greater Lansing Food Bank, bought and delivered food, medical supplies and personal protective equipment to their clients.
- **Food Insecurity:** Loss of jobs, lack of transportation and inability to gather left many with limited access to food and nonprofits stepped up. When school buildings had to close, the Shiawassee Family YMCA provided the physical space for the Summer Food Support Program (SFSP) and Owosso Public Schools provided the volunteers. Recognizing a need beyond what the SFSP could fulfill, the YMCA reached out to several donors and hosted food distributions in their central location and established a Mobile Food Pantry that continues to operate monthly with the assistance of Owosso Rotary volunteers and is working on the development of a food assistance program with the collaboration of nonprofits and local restaurateurs.

**Communication was key** – The ability to communicate is critical during times of crisis and nonprofits developed communication systems and processes to buoy one another, stay abreast of needs and resources, and deliver critical services and programs. Several individuals and organizations did not receive key communications due to limited technology, lack of contact information or oversight caused by lack of formal communication structures. These vulnerabilities should be addressed.

- **Internal** – Nonprofit leaders set-up regular calls and virtual meetings with their staff and many reached out to their boards on a regular basis to keep them abreast. It should be noted that Executive Directors shared the “loneliness” of dealing with the pandemic pressures and those whose board members reached out to them to “just touch base” or offering to “complete PPP loan applications” were extremely appreciative and those whose board members did not wish they had.
- **External** – Nonprofit staff kept in touch with their clients and other stakeholders. Respite Volunteers Shiawassee, for instance, made phone calls, sent emails, wrote notes, and set up virtual visits with clients; the United Way established a crisis hot-line; and nonprofit staff reached out to colleagues and checked in regularly to share information and support one-another. They also kept in contact with entities like the County Sheriff’s office, Shiawassee County Emergency Operations Committee, Shiawassee Health Department, Shiawassee Economic Development Partnership, Shiawassee Regional Chamber of Commerce along with funders like Capital Region Community Foundation, Consumers Energy Foundation, Cook Family Foundation and Shiawassee Community Foundation to discuss ever-changing needs.

## Looking Ahead:

The pandemic brought an abrupt halt to nonprofit services in Shiawassee County, and all organizations have been challenged to move forward. While the community is fortunate that no nonprofit has failed, several have yet to resume operations or be fully open to the public.

Participants shared that the pandemic forced them into new ways of working and required organizational restructuring. Despite challenges, several leaders were “surprised to end 2020 in a stronger position” than believed at the onset of the crisis. No doubt, the unprecedented level of federal assistance to maintain payroll enabled many nonprofits to survive a difficult year.

In 2020, Shiawassee nonprofit leaders developed an adaptive, collaborative and innovative mindset in order to survive. The continuation of this attitude and a willingness to act on the lessons learned will help both nonprofits meet their mission, better serve their stakeholders, and strengthen the community. One nonprofit leader stated that those who helped respond to the Flint water crisis and those who faced the 2019 tornado in Shiawassee County were better equipped to react to the challenges wrought by the pandemic.

It is certain that Shiawassee County communities will face additional crises in the future, though when, of what type, or how severe is yet unknown. It is imperative that we all learn from the nonprofit experiences of the past year and build upon the hard-earned accomplishments of the past year. Following are an initial set of recommendations for both nonprofits and the larger community:

### External Recommendations

- Assemble a crisis action team made up of nonprofit leaders to meet minimally on a semi-annual basis to monitor potential roadblocks and gaps for delivery of programs and services. The team could be mobilized to meet as necessary in case of a crisis.
- Nurture and maintain relationships developed during the crisis and identify potential additional collaborative opportunities to assist in filling the gaps exposed or amplified during the pandemic.
- Identify a crisis communication process for contacting nonprofits (phone/text chain, email blast...) with critical information. To assist in preparing for quick dissemination of information during a crisis the following should be maintained:
  - Updated list with contact information for all organizations serving vulnerable populations (assisted living, nursing home, home care agencies...)
  - Updated listing with contact information of key nonprofits and governmental and quasi-governmental agencies and their strengths.
  - Develop a list of pantries including distribution times and resources (baby formula, diapers, personal care items...).
- Maintain mobile food pantries and develop a blueprint for scaled up operations should the need for increased capacity arise.



- In response to transportation challenges amplified during the pandemic, develop a plan for service delivery in the more rural parts of the county, especially in areas that are designated as Food Deserts.
- Identify Wi-Fi hubs and educate the community as to their presence so residents will know where they can gain access. Longer-term, advocate for broader internet bandwidth in rural areas.

### Internal Recommendations

- Nurture and maintain relationships developed during the crisis and identify potential additional collaborative opportunities to fulfill your organization’s mission.
- Document internal communication plans for maintaining regular contact with staff and board. The frequency of communication could be adjusted as necessary in the event of a crisis.
- Review and update your strategic plan to reflect ongoing strategies developed during the pandemic.
- Consider creating a one-year Adaptive Plan, with measurable goals, that can be adapted to the constant changes of a crisis setting.
- Evaluate and increase cash reserves to weather a six-month to one-year financial crisis.
- Consider the following mix and develop a plan to diversify revenue streams to decrease reliance on any one area:
  - Fees for goods and/or services
  - Individual donations and major gifts
  - Bequests
  - Corporate contributions
  - Foundation grants
  - Government grants and contracts
  - Interest from investments
- Develop staff a succession plan during “normal” times should there be a need to reduce staff or shift roles.
- Develop a board succession plan.
- Develop a board recruitment plan to include gaps uncovered or amplified during the crisis.
- Document organizational processes and procedures to maintain continuity with the loss of or change in staff or their roles.
- Consider offering work at home or a combination of work at home and office options for staff making it easier to conduct work virtually.
- If working remotely, develop a plan/policy for data security, especially for sensitive data (client data...).

- Join social media platforms and designate someone to monitor community pages.
- Offer the option of virtual board meetings (or designate a number of meetings to be conducted virtually). This could cast a wider net (geographically...) when recruiting talent as well as limiting travel for time-strapped board members. Consider one or two virtual meetings annually to maintain the ability to conduct business in this environment.
- Offer virtual recruitment, orientation and training opportunities for volunteers. By offering access, a wider net could be cast (geographically, individuals with disabilities...) when recruiting.
- Offer virtual programs and services where appropriate making it easier to continue delivery of programs and services in a future crisis.
- When developing new programs or services consider the potential for conducting it in a virtual format.
- Identify ways to utilize virtual platforms for innovative programs and/or delivery of programs and services.

**COVID-19 Crisis Response Project  
Interview Questions**

1. Looking back, what might you have wished you had already had in place that would have helped you navigate the crisis?
2. What community weaknesses/challenges/inequities did the crisis bring to light?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. How did your organization respond?
3. How did the crisis affect your funding?
  - a. What new funding sources did you pursue?
    - i. What was/were the outcome/outcomes?
    - ii. How might you alter your fundraising based on the crisis?
    - iii. How might you alter revenue streams based on the crisis?
4. On a scale of 1 – 5, how would you rate your board’s response?
  - a. Financially
  - b. Staffing
  - c. Other
5. Knowing what you now know, what would be a positive...impactful board response?
  - a. Financially
  - b. Staffing
  - c. Other
6. How might you recruit board members differently and/or what strengths, levels of diversity, experience... Would you like board members to bring to the organization?
7. What, if any, other organizations did you reach out to? For what? And what was the outcome?
8. How might you work with these organizations in the future?
9. How did your programs, services...change to respond to the crisis?
  - a. How, and if so, did you utilize technology?
10. How might those changes/technology impact how you move forward to deliver programs, services...?
11. Looking forward, what should you be doing now to place the organization in a stronger place to respond to a potential future crisis?
12. How did the crisis affect your thoughts about succession planning?
  - a. Staff
  - b. Board
13. How might your plans for 2021 have been different if the crisis hadn’t happened?
  - a. Program, projects, services...
  - b. Board training
  - c. Funding streams