June 3, 2020

**COVID-19 CHECK-IN CALL FOLLOW UP REPORT**

Between May 5 and May 20, CHEER outreach staff checked in with 49 community members who participate in CHEER programs, such as the Healthy Food Access Program, health insurance enrollment through the Affordable Care Act, and the Empowerment and Leadership Development Programs in the New Hampshire Estates community of Long Branch and on Maple Avenue area north of Philadelphia in Takoma Park. These calls were friendly follow-up calls to those made at the end of March and early April that lasted up to 30 minutes with people with whom CHEER has established reciprocal relationships so that program participants could speak honestly and freely.

CHEER staff asked five questions: How are you doing? How did the service or referral provided earlier go for you? Are you utilizing a new resource or service? What are your most important current needs? Have you been able to pay your rent, or will you need help paying rent in the future?

**Question Responses**

**How are you doing?**

76% reported that they were good, better, calm, or some other positive response. 24% expressed a negative response such as worried, stressed, anxious, tired, or some other negative sense of well being. 24% is an improvement over the responses received in the first check-in calls over a month ago when 43% provided a negative response.

**How did the service or referral provided earlier go for you?**

Approximately one-third of the respondents (31%) reported using referrals CHEER had made. Most of these were to food distribution sources, but they also included referrals to unemployment, food stamps, and personal protective equipment. 73% reported positive experiences. Challenges were experienced in pursuing unemployment benefits or in a few cases where produce provided was spoiled.

**Are you utilizing a new resource or service?**

Over a third of respondents (37%) said that they were using new resources or services. These were mostly food distribution sources, but they also included financial assistance such as unemployment benefits, stimulus money, and food stamps.

**What are your most important current needs?**

The most often mentioned need was for food. Almost half (49%) of respondents listed this as a need and 44% of them listed it as one of their three highest priority needs. The second most-often mentioned need was employment (27%). Following this is Financial assistance (10%) and rental assistance (10%). The combination of employment and/or financial and rental assistance were each listed as one of the top three priority needs among 26% of all respondents. Less often mentioned needs included “time for self” (6%), medical care (6%), transportation (6%), and help with school for a child (2%). Though “time for self” and medical care were listed less often, they were listed as one of the top three needs among respondents at 11% and 7%, respectively.

**Have you been able to pay your rent, or will you need help paying rent in the future?**

The vast majority of respondents (91%) reported that they were able to pay their rent. However, 33% said they believed they were going to need help to pay their rent in the future.

The conversations that CHEER staff had with program participants also yielded some important insights and nuanced findings that are valuable. A summary of these findings is listed below.

**Check-in call follow up report ELD program (May 7-May 14)**

**Who We Interviewed**

**Long Branch Community**

* 14 New Hampshire Estates ES/Oak View ES parents, who were interviewed for the first round of checking calls at the end of March
* All are mothers, most with more than one child; there are single parents; two of them are pregnant and the due day in both cases is soon (May & August)
* 13 of them are part of the Parent Leaders Group CONEXO

**Takoma Park Community**

* 12 parents from the Ethiopian Community; they all live in the 20912 zip code.
* All are mothers, most with more than one child
* 7 of them are part of the Maple Tree Group

**Long Branch Healthy Access Program**

* 14 participants who live mostly in Long Branch, but may also live in Takoma Park or other parts of Silver Spring and have diabetes

**Health Insurance Enrollment Program**

* 10 participants who accessed health insurance through the Affordable Care Act through CHEER; some live in Long Branch and are Spanish speakers, however some may live in the greater Takoma Park Silver Spring area.

**What We Did—The Interview Process**

* Due to the friendly social relationship between CHEER and the community, we were able to have substantial conversations; community members understand that it is a reciprocal effort between them and CHEER to help the community at large.
* We called them by phone to ask a set of 5 questions as a follow up of the first time we contacted them
* At each conversation, we:
  + Explained the purpose of the call
  + Used a friendly approach as an informal talk rather than an interrogation session
  + Shared information according to their expressed need
  + Got valuable information (feedback) about resources that were referred
  + Collected amazing stories about collaboration and solidarity between community members
  + Told them we would be in touch ensuring they can contact us in case they need us

**What We Learned**

**Regarding their emotional and physical state**

* Most of them are still trying to keep a positive attitude and optimism
* All of them recognize that their stress level sometimes is insufferable, to the point that a few of them got physically sick with cold-like symptoms. They trust traditional medicine better than western medicine. Fortunately, they are doing much better now.
* Three of them are still working. They feel lucky because, besides the little (but needed) money they can make, it’s a way of keeping their mind busy with other things different from house shores, unpaid bills, and online schooling.
* Most have been very involved with teachers in NHEES and OVES, which is helping them feel confident about themselves as the new role they are playing as tutor/mentor for their children.
* Sadly, few of them feel hopeless about their situation since they cannot go back to work and the little money they saved is running out quickly.
* Most of them belong to a faith group organization and used to attend a local church. They have been attending online services which also helps in terms of emotional support
* Most of them are not involved in other groups or organizations (besides Linkages to Learning and church).
* Most of them are part of the WhatsApp group as CONEXO members. They enjoy sending encouraging messages, funny messages, greetings and important information about resources in the community .

**Regarding housing issues**

* All of them are renters (apartment building or townhouse).
* All of them are very concerned about the high cost of their rent that will be even higher soon.
* Some of them weren’t aware that by not receiving their payment receipt or any proof of rent payment, their tenant rights were violated. After our conversation, they started demanding it from the Apartment Manager and, at least, taking pictures of their checks or money order.
* None of them were threatened with eviction, although some are being harassed with notifications of late payment fees to be charged immediately or “reminders” that they are in debt.
* Most of them were able to make the April rent payment. But, don’t know if they will be able to make future rent payments. One of them hasn't made any payment since April.

**Regarding employment and financial issues**

* Three of them are still working from home as well as their husbands (although half or less hours).
* We have two critical cases since they are single parents and there isn’t any income coming soon.
* Most of them couldn’t apply for any financial assistance program or unemployment due to the lack of required status to qualify.
* Even though the EARP Financial Assistance is already receiving applications from undocumented individuals, due to the very low level of income required to qualify (50% of FPL) none of the cases identified as the most needed, would get the assistance.
* In many cases, their husbands are considered “essential workers” giving them the chance to continue working. At the same time, they fear for their well being and their families since, in most cases, workplaces are too dangerous of getting infected with the COVID-19 virus.

**Regarding online school issues**

* We recognize that online teaching is a human endeavor. Parents realized how much teachers have been doing in order to continue educating their students and to keep the motivation up regardless of the circumstances.
* All of them are so appreciative of the supplemental material they could receive from the teachers in order to provide their children with stronger learning experiences.
* At the beginning of the transition from regular school to online school, many people struggled to connect with the teachers - the platform, signal problems, lack of equipment, etc. However, it was a hard lesson learned because now, all of them know better about the online school system and other important skills such as self-advocacy.
* Others are struggling with discipline and trying to set up a work routine for the children. It’s even harder when they have children of different ages.

**Observations**

* Conversations generally lasted 20-30 minutes.
* They seemed very comfortable talking with us about themselves and their family situation.
* They all seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their stories, to have someone listen to them and show that someone cares about them
* Most of them have been sharing the information or resources they received with neighbors or relatives.
* Several of them are dealing with challenging situations. Nevertheless, they have been generous offering help in the form of carpools, support calls between them, visiting at least from a distance the ones who seem more depressed
* Most of them said they have been through very difficult, often traumatic, experiences in their home countries and/or here. Therefore, they have a better understanding of individuals in difficult situations and are in a better position to help them any way possible.

**Summary of Second Round Follow up call on checking Covid-19**

**Maple Avenue Residents**

The following summary is done based on ten people's responses in the second round follow-up calls.

* During the first round of check-in calls, I referred four to five people to Manna Food Distribution. Two of them did not follow-up because they heard a rumor that some of the people who were giving away the groceries at the distribution center had COVID-19. Hence, they are hesitant to avoid risky situations. The others did not go to the food distribution as they thought it was near Maple Avenue. Also, single parents are uncomfortable to take their children to a public service center, and they do not have other family members to take care of their children.
* All active Maple Tree Group participants are doing well; at least one adult is working in their home. They are ok at least to cover rent and grocery expenses.
* Some Maple residents got their Stimulus Benefit Check. They were relieved that it helped cover their basic expenses. Others are waiting for it.
* Many Maple residents people need information about the rent deferral process from any government or non-government office (with translation service). Some people are not comfortable starting a discussion with their apartment owners before having good knowledge about the rent deferral program. It could be either through conference discussion or flyer distribution.
* Some parents have difficulty logging into zoom meetings for online school. According to them, technical issue was the most frustrating part to deal with the learning process. Their children sometimes cannot attend their class consistently because of technical issues. Some parents wondered and are interested in a troubleshooting computer class for a short period if it can be given by a sponsor, or community welfare service organization to overcome similar issues in the future.

As general information:

* I heard from most of the Ethiopian community in Maple Avenue neighborhoods are having difficulty with the Unemployment Benefits application process. The online application system is rejecting their application file.
* Tenants are not receiving positive communication and treatment from their owners in the last month. For example, tenants could not get clear information on a payment deferral process from their owners. Moreover, tenants from one Maple Avenue high rise Apartment got a written letter for a late payment fee after the tenant tried to discuss with the apartment managers about deferral payment. She only received a referral number to dial to the city community center of Takoma Park. However, no one answered.
* In addition, another tenant at a different Takoma Park property said that after she discussed with the owner of the apartment, she was automatically charged for rent. Many people are complaining about access to their banks due to high call volumes. Bank of America was particularly mentioned.
* Due to the COVID-19 crisis, most adults have extra time while they are staying home. Many Maple Avenue adult residents, especially mothers, are interested in taking a free online English language conversation class, or any other discussion forum in their language. This will give a much-needed break from the virus issues. Most of them said that they are highly exposed to the media and listen to repeated news about COVID-19, and their mind is suffering from worries.

Note: Bruce Baker, Vanesa Pinto, Enku Taye, Lucia Zegarra Karla Castro, Azeb Kidane and Dolores Badillo contributed to this report.