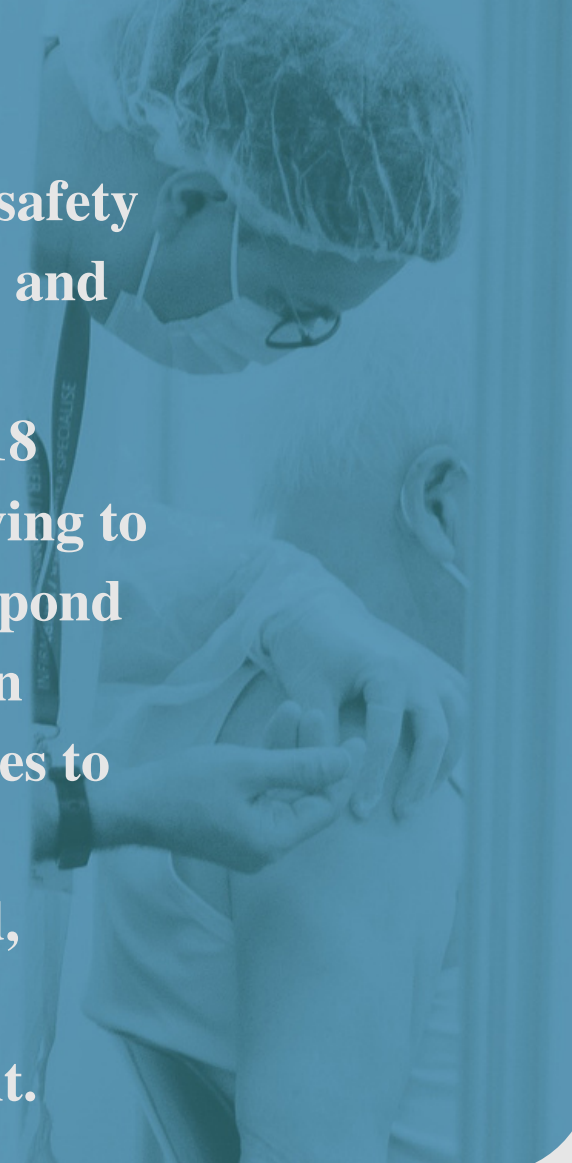
A person wearing a white face mask and black gloves is handling several cardboard boxes. The boxes are labeled 'CALIFORNIA STRAWBERRIES' and 'PRODUCT OF U.S.A.'. The person is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and white sneakers. The background is a blurred image of a person with dreadlocks wearing a patterned headwrap.

In March 2020, our entire world changed in just a matter of days. Here in Arlington, those working on the front lines of essential health and human services moved quickly to remap ways to support our most vulnerable.

SAFETY NET ARLINGTON

rising together to meet historic needs
for our community

September 2021



Amid constantly changing information and guidance, safety net nonprofit organizations and government agencies have remained in this mode for 18 months and counting - striving to sustain core operations, respond to emerging needs, maintain safety, and find the resources to do so along the way.

Working to offset sustained, extreme hardship, not one stopped serving at any point.

Managing unexpected situations is the norm for safety net leaders responsible for essential and/or emergency services. They are our community's first responders and last line of defense. Knowing this, these organizations form teams of mission-driven staff and volunteers, hone operations to ensure continuity of care, and adapt to change readily to deliver their missions. However, no one was prepared for a pandemic of this magnitude or duration. One that has suspended leaders in constant alert and worry, required continuous re-engineering, and stripped our routine methods of communicating and connecting internally and externally.

Today, these organizations are still very much in pandemic response mode, actively supporting clients and staff to be protected from the virus and access continued emergency assistance.

This report focuses on the **collective** pandemic response of these Safety Net organizations.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

"The one word I think of for the safety net nonprofits over the past year is resilience."

Saul Reyes
BU-GATA

Arlington has a strong network of nonprofits that are direct providers of the most basic necessities for a stable life: housing and shelter; health and mental health services; food; and emergency and employment assistance.

Through decades of building relationships, these nonprofits have a deep, shared knowledge of our community's needs. Each day, during a pandemic or in typical times, they form a social safety net that ensures individual needs are met via tailored services from providers they trust and who understand them as people.

Anne Vor der Bruegge of Arlington Community Foundation convenes the leaders of these nonprofits who meet as peers under the name ***Safety Net Arlington***.

Safety Net Arlington believes there is value in the nonprofits speaking from one voice when it comes to County budget and policy or emerging community opportunities and challenges.

In 2016, the Arlington County Department of Human Services (DHS) invited the Community Foundation and over 20 nonprofits to join them in improving the effectiveness of the public-private safety net by lifting bureaucratic hurdles for people already burdened with life challenges. Using the Bridges Out of Poverty framework, the Community Foundation, DHS, and these

nonprofits committed to a relationship-based approach in working with each other and participants.

In 2018, Bridges Out of Poverty partners launched a pilot program to test these improvements to Arlington's safety net system with a targeted set of households by offering streamlined opportunities for adequate housing and child care, increased income, healthcare, and educational and employment advancement. The ultimate goal of these multi-year efforts has been to improve the conditions and economic mobility of Arlington's lowest income residents who find it difficult to live and thrive in this increasingly expensive community.


The united efforts among these public-private partners involved unprecedented collaboration and positioned us well for what was to come in early 2020. During this pandemic, the Safety Net Arlington partners collectively have stepped up to fill gaps, serve as on-the-ground informers, and shape policy and funding decisions that are responsive to the ongoing economic and health crises.

This report is sponsored by Arlington Community Foundation and Washington Forrest Foundation, both of whom are committed to these nonprofits, to the larger public-private safety net, and to Arlington being a place where all residents are valued and can thrive.

The report reflects highlights and experiences of 21 nonprofits who have partnered closely and convened frequently to address the historic challenges of 2020-2021.

It has been a period of heroic efforts by Arlington DHS, Arlington Public School's (APS) staff, the Collaborative for a Hunger Free Arlington, the faith community, PTAs, the APS Advisory Committee on Immigrants and Refugees, Virginia Hospital Center, Neighborhood Health, Volunteer Arlington, restaurant owners ... and many more than could be named.

While we recognize the critical contributions of the above organizations, this report does not attempt to represent their full experiences and perspectives.



"I must say—in my 35 years of working to address the needs of Arlington residents, I have never seen the nonprofits, elected officials, government officials, and community members come together so immediately and effectively to address this crisis."

Debby Taylor
National Capital Treatment & Recovery

Rather, the Foundations believe there is a need to capture things achieved, learned, and witnessed across these Safety Net Arlington nonprofits who have been on this years-long journey together with support from DHS and the larger community.

This report is authored by Caroline Jones, who herself has been a long-time Arlington safety net nonprofit leader, leading Doorways, numerous community initiatives, and during the first year of the pandemic, the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing's Resident Services. Now as a consultant, Caroline interviewed 21 Safety Net Arlington nonprofit leaders, and Arlington DHS Director Anita Friedman who has actively participated in Safety Net Arlington meetings throughout the pandemic.

The interviews cover the period of March 2020 to June 2021. We include quantitative data where possible, yet with the pandemic still in motion, these are offered as snapshots, not summations, of pandemic response and needs. While there is undoubtedly hope that comes with readily accessible vaccinations and the freedoms these bring, high concerns remain regarding the uncertainties for what is still to come and the continued impacts that compounded hardship and trauma will have on our neighbors.

With many uncertainties still looming, this report aims to document this period of tremendous collaboration, flexibility, and resilience demonstrated by these organizations and the people they serve. We also bring forward some lessons learned thus far in hopes of guiding how we as a community support our neighbors as they recover and rebuild.


Who is served by Safety Net Arlington organizations?

The residents served by the safety net nonprofits are primarily individuals and families living in or near poverty conditions while trying to remain in their Arlington community. First and foremost, however, they share all of our common humanity and potential. Their lack of resources is not due to personal failures, but rather a result of policies that have failed them.

The federal poverty level is a relic set in the 1960s based on food costs only. It does not consider other costs such as housing, child care, and healthcare. Policy makers agree that in the absence of an updated federal poverty line, we need to adopt a measure that reflects local living costs.

The 2021 area median income (AMI) for a household of four in Arlington is \$129,000. Arlington Community Foundation, affordable housing advocates, and others use 30% AMI, or \$38,700 for a family of four, as an indicator of poverty. This is roughly 150% of the federal poverty level. About 11% of Arlington's population lives below this level -- 10,000 households or nearly 25,000 individuals.

They are continually being displaced from our increasingly expensive County. They represent a varied population with a range of strengths and challenges.



"I'm always surprised by what we seem to be comfortable with as a nation. It costs more to keep people in poverty than to pay them a living wage. One company gives out food stamp applications as part of their new employee onboarding process."

Malinda Langford
Northern Virginia Family Service

While high-wage jobs comprise a significant share of the County's economic growth, workers in lower-wage jobs form the backbone of its economy.

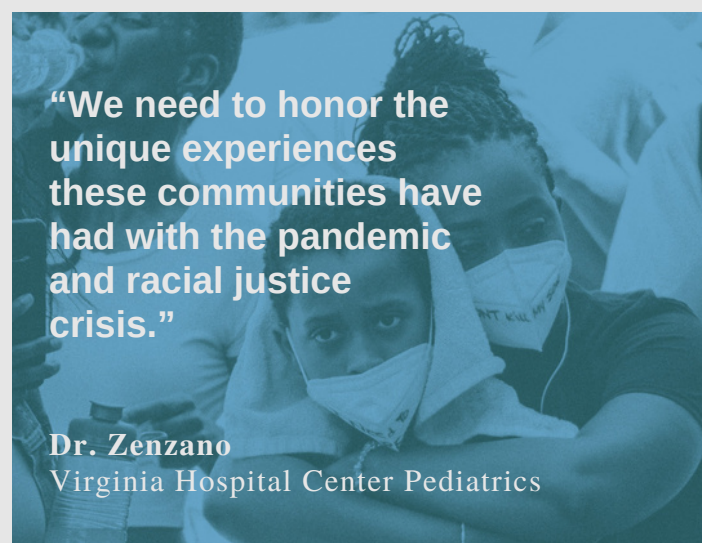
Childcare workers, hospital aides, office cleaners, construction workers, and food service employees – our essential workers – are a vital part of our economic success and diverse community fabric. Many work multiple jobs, and to afford housing, they double and triple up with other families in apartments. Also among those living in or near poverty in Arlington are people on fixed incomes, such as aging baby boomers, persons with disabilities, and veterans.

Building emergency savings and affording non-essentials such as internet are out of reach for many of these households whose incomes thinly stretch to afford basic needs month-to-month. Just one emergency can lead to eviction or job loss.

In the midst of such need, however, we must not lose sight of their resourcefulness and positive contributions to our community.

A health and economic crisis compounded by systemic racism and inequities

It is not coincidental that our safety net nonprofits serve disproportionate numbers of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and immigrant communities. This disproportionate representation is seen across food insecurity, homelessness, barriers to workforce, education, and healthcare access, and tragically, poorer health and mortality outcomes.



Like every town in our nation, Arlington is facing racial disparities that must be addressed at their core. There are causal links in our policies, systems, and outcomes.

Furthermore, the highly publicized murders of several Black Americans called us to intensify actions toward racial justice and equity—with introspection, humility, and listening.

Safety net staff, many of whom are BIPOC, supported clients voicing their intense emotional burdens, mistrust, and fears so understandably reinvigorated by these murders.

The past 18 months have been a historic time of challenge: a protracted pandemic, a tense political environment, and a national time of reckoning with centuries of racial injustice and oppression. Concurrently, it has shed light on new ways of valuing and partnering to help thousands in our community remain informed, fed, housed, healthy, educated, safe, and much more.

Throughout this report, the undeniable impacts of centuries of failed policies and systemic racism are evident. While these impacts are witnessed daily by safety net providers, the past year magnified the cruelty, injustice, and uneven suffering racism causes for BIPOC individuals and communities.

While no single report could aptly capture the vast inequities that exist across our human and social services systems, it is incumbent and imperative that we better amplify the drivers behind alarming and growing disparities, and position racism as the root cause behind tremendous suffering for thousands of our neighbors.

In June 2021, Arlington County published a paper† on how the County government responded to key areas of need throughout the pandemic and the pandemic’s impact on preexisting racial and ethnic disparities. We encourage readers to [check out the full paper](#) to see the valiant efforts by the County. Data from this paper is marked with an asterisk (*) when used in this report.

†Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Preexisting Racial and Ethnic Disparities, and Results of an Integrated Safety Net Response in Arlington County, Virginia

MEET THE SAFETY NET NONPROFITS

While no organization fits neatly into a single area, they are categorized below for the purposes of this report. To learn more about each organization, please find their focus areas and contact information in [the Appendix](#).

Food Security

Arlington Food Assistance Center

Housing and Homelessness Services & Eviction Prevention

AHC, Inc
Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing
Arlington Thrive
Bridges to Independence
Doorways
PathForward
Wesley Housing

Health Clinics & Recovery Services

Arlington Free Clinic
Arm & Arm
National Capital Treatment & Recovery
Virginia Hospital Center Pediatrics

Services for Specific Populations

BU-GATA
Just Neighbors
Shirlington Employment & Education Center

Formerly Incarcerated Support & Transition Services

Friends of Guest House
OAR of Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church

Education and Achievement

Aspire!
Edu-Futuro
Northern Virginia Family Service
Virginia Cooperative Extension

EARLY DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC

“Our clients needed us, and we needed one another. The collective brainpower of the safety net was essential.”

Betsy Frantz
PathForward

In typical times, safety net nonprofits and County partners are intricately linked. Together, they meet vast, complex, and intersecting needs for a wide range of people, making communication and care coordination central in their missions' success. In this highly atypical time, the need to know what one another was seeing and doing was even more essential.

Just days following the Shutdown Order, Safety Net Arlington and DHS Director Anita Friedman convened to share operational updates, client needs, and priorities. The Director appreciatively iterated to all on the call, “You are the safety net, and people are counting on you all.” She committed the support of her department, a promise she upheld many times over in the 18 months and counting to follow.

In response to quickly accelerating needs early in the pandemic, the Director shared the County's plan to deploy emergency assistance funds through three nonprofits based on their capacity to scale, experience as county contractors, and above all, mission alignment with areas of critical need. These included: Arlington Food Assistance Center (food security), Arlington Thrive (emergency assistance/eviction prevention), and Arlington Free Clinic (healthcare).

Everyone agreed that meeting on an accelerated weekly basis, far above those quarterly

scheduled, was critical in working together and remaining abreast of emerging needs, changes in services, and resources. Interviews with safety net leaders resoundingly highlighted their appreciation for and utility of these meetings. Arlington Free Clinic's Nancy White recalled, “We were in it together, bringing our strengths and challenges to the table, sharing protocols and lessons learned, and joining with one another as comrades leading in a time of tremendous uncertainty and demand.”

Throughout this 18-month period, the leadership and support from Arlington Community Foundation served as a bedrock undergirding Safety Net Arlington: lending administrative resources, serving as a trusted intermediary, resourcing responses to needs, and bringing people together to address issues and move barriers.

“I gained a lot of strength from these meetings...the work we'd done before in Bridges Out of Poverty was bearing fruit—with common goals and determination to get help to people in ways that worked for them...I was able to receive ground-level, reliable information from nonprofits and take it directly to the County Board and Manager and formulate requests for [assistance].”

Anita Friedman
DHS Director

Snapshot of needs and challenges

Early in the pandemic, the rate of information change was dizzying. Keeping staff, clients, and volunteers safe while ensuring essential services flowed required daily huddles, briefings, and change in protocols. With each change in our knowledge of the virus, nonprofits reset and adapted. As emergency resources began to flow from private and public sources, methods shifted in how to help residents apply, access, and qualify for things such as food, housing, unemployment, internet, and COVID-related care.

Nonprofits quickly shift course to keep services flowing

Working from a range of starting points, nonprofits quickly set up platforms to support operations and service delivery that could be done remotely. However, as nonprofits knew well, many of their clients were not readily able to connect to digitally-based systems. Concurrent to pursuing these platforms was the need for more basic approaches such as phone hotline/call-in numbers, door-to-door written communications, or texting. For those serving seniors and persons with high-risk health or other conditions, proactive outreach calls began within hours of the Governor's shutdown. These became an ongoing practice that continues at the time of this report.

A crucial aspect of Arlington's safety net is community outreach. These "grassroot/on-the-ground" organizations - Arm & Arm, BU-GATA,

Shirlington Employment and Education Center, and PathForward (formerly A-SPAN) - serve as connectors for some of our hardest-to-reach neighbors. Many had not learned of the virus, the shutdown, or means to access necessary protections or resources. These organizations moved quickly to lead community outreach and education using existing and novel methods.



Northern Virginia Family Service converted resources to provide virtual support and connections for families otherwise isolated

For several, the buildings where their offices were located (churches, community centers, schools) closed due to COVID safety, leaving little access to supplies and natural access points where constituents knew to find assistance.

These organizations quickly worked to form robust outreach efforts and to "work without walls and go to where our folks were...even if that meant the bus stop," as one safety net leader described, to ensure access to information and resources.

Organizations serving clients requiring frequent, in-person, or 24-hour access to support faced unique challenges. These include organizations serving adults and children residing in shelters, seniors and others depending on home-based assistance, patients with appointments for sick care, people receiving residentially-based treatment and/or transitional care, those in risk situations including sexual and domestic violence, and those food insecure or lacking essential resources.

Shelter providers - Bridges to Independence, Doorways, PathForward, and New Hope Housing, with significant partnership from Arlington DHS Housing and Economic Independence Divisions - acted quickly to adapt the space they had, and/or set up hotel spaces where clients and families could be sheltered with social distancing.

Similarly, residentially-based programs including Friends of Guest House and National Capital Treatment & Recovery quickly assessed their physical layout options and lowered capacities to ensure resident safety.

Leaders of these two organizations both used the word “heartbreaking” when recalling how difficult it was to reduce capacity knowing the need was so great.


For organizations that offer emergency services and/or basic needs assistance - Thrive, Arlington Food Assistance Center, the Free Clinic, Virginia Hospital Center Pediatrics, OAR of Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church, and Doorways Sexual and Domestic Violence Hotline - operational resets were also massive and urgent, including overhauling operations in a matter of days to allow for contact-free, socially-distanced, and safe provision of care and resources.

Thanks to their extraordinary teams, each of these organizations quickly shifted to ensure services flowed uninterrupted.

Assessing personnel resources was particularly challenging early in the pandemic.

Volunteers are key to nonprofits' mission delivery and success. While over time many were able to resume service, most nonprofits initially suspended volunteering. Determining among staff who could complete essential services in-person versus those needing to work remotely also posed challenges for many organizations.

For nonprofits preparing to scale missions with support from emergency funds, hiring additional support quickly was essential. For every nonprofit, amid the chaos, and independent of titles, some things simply had to keep going.



“Our Executive Director took on office volunteer tasks to ensure that the time-sensitive immigration applications were submitted on time. This ensured protections for survivors of domestic violence and immigration and asylum proceedings continued forward.”

Stephanie Barnes
Just Neighbors

CARRYING OUT SAFETY NET MISSIONS IN A SUSTAINED TIME OF CRISIS

Highlights of needs, responses, impact, and insights gained

For many receiving safety net services or experiencing the sudden loss of income brought on by the pandemic, safety net nonprofits' staff served as lifelines.

With less access to community and informal social supports due to building closures and distancing guidance, these connections early on and throughout the pandemic served to inform and ground people suddenly feeling alone in a dire situation.

"When I reached one senior resident, he said, 'I'm so glad you called! You're the first human voice I've heard in 10 days!'"

Venus Burgess
APAH

While government agencies worked quickly to establish scaled emergency funding and other resources, Arlington Community Foundation and Washington Forrest Foundation's Prompt Response Fund and generous community donations of cash and gift cards jump started nonprofits in getting help to our neighbors. Arlington County and State and Federal agencies released emergency funding to keep people safe and supported. Safety net nonprofits served as critical conduits and trusted stewards in deploying these life-saving resources to thousands of Arlington households.

Community members creatively and meaningfully gave their best knowing neighbors were struggling. For every person that made masks, collected essential items, donated gift cards, meals, and cash, and much more, Safety Net Arlington organizations greatly appreciate all that was given and conveyed to their staff and participants. As one interviewee recalls, "We were never alone in all we were doing for people."



Girl Scouts collecting coats for Bridges to Independence

The following section offers a deeper look at specific areas of need and the complementary ways the safety net nonprofits rose to meet them. Individually and collectively, it is clear that our safety net providers made an indelible mark in our community's history in helping many through this time of crisis. In time, and when we are fully beyond this pandemic, their full and unique stories will be told.

Snapshot of needs and challenges

The urgency to meet every basic need far more extensively and for extraordinarily extensive periods was a massive, all-hands-on-deck effort.

On the economic front, the immediate and prolonged loss of income (particularly for food service, personal care, and healthcare workers) created deep financial hardship for thousands of Arlington households and drove a sharp rise in need for most safety net nonprofits.

Closures of school and child care led to further challenges for parents whose jobs could not be performed remotely. Among two-parent households, one parent often took on schooling and caring for children while the other searched for available jobs, even if it meant leaving the area to do so.

Digital access barriers, or “the digital divide,” magnified as the world suddenly shifted to virtually-based communication, processes, and working, exacerbating limitations for remote work and learning.

Across these challenges, the rates of COVID infection and mortality among Black and Latinx people and seniors living in congregate settings imposed tangible and terrifying consequences on these households and communities. Many feared leaving their homes, leading to intense isolation and mental health challenges for seniors, parents, and children.

CULTURALLY SPECIFIC

responses and supports

“They is *me*...my staff and I know how hard it is to be an immigrant in this country. We have experienced much of what they are going through...we were not going to stop and leave them without support.”

Jorge Figueredo
Edu-Futuro

For Black Americans, trust in “systems” that promise assistance and protection was further weakened by the tragic murders in Summer 2020. For people who have immigrated or whose parents have immigrated to this country, years of anti-immigrant policies and political posturing have eroded trust in seeking public and private forms of assistance. The pandemic affected Black and Latinx communities disproportionately on every measure: economically, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This time in our history called upon the strength and abilities of everyone. BIPOC leaders and staff stepped up to support our community through these challenging circumstances.

Safety net staff with lived experience and connections in the community, as well as BIPOC nonprofit leaders and those focused on immigrant communities, have been uniquely suited as champions and advocates throughout this difficult time.

In addition to delivering their vital services, they have advocated for policy and regulatory flexibility and helped residents apply, access, and qualify for necessities such as food, housing, unemployment, internet, and COVID-related care, all while very personally living the magnifying crises of the pandemic and social injustices. Many of the specific contributions these workers, leaders, and their organizations have made appear in the following sections, yet noting their unique efforts and the insights gained from them is important in telling the story of how Safety Net Arlington rose in many ways to see our community through and forward.

Insights

Despite the high level of reliance placed on nonprofits offering culturally specific services and those led by BIPOC individuals, many were not funded for the additional duties they took on.

With the support of these organizations and leaders, we made strides in better engaging and understanding community needs in areas of food security, rent relief, community engagement, school reopening, and health and COVID testing and vaccines.

Significant work still lies ahead for us as a safety net, human services system, and community to create equitable living conditions for all Arlingtonians. Inclusion of wider voices and leader perspectives is essential to inform and lead our actions.

FOOD SECURITY

and essential needs

“Hunger is not just today, or tomorrow, or this month. We stand to address long-term hunger.”

Charlie Meng
Arlington Food Assistance Center

Food insecurity has long been a problem in Arlington and is a need that has starkly deepened during the pandemic. Given the sudden loss of income and limited savings available on a low income, food insecurity and extremely low cash on hand became immediate and lasting issues in the pandemic.

Eventually stimulus checks and unemployment benefits helped some, yet many did not receive these benefits due to ineligibility, or unsuccessful/stymied applications.

Meeting the volume, depth, and range of food and other essential needs over the duration of this period required multiple community, nonprofit, and County efforts to collectively reach the thousands of individuals and families going without.

Households supported by the safety net nonprofits are diverse in every way: age, culture, faith, race, dietary/health needs, to name a few. The vast range of needs included groceries, infant care, senior medical supplies, car repairs for safe travel to work, and digital devices for work/school.

In typical times, most nonprofits provide modest, donated supplies for their clients. However, COVID safety protocols and bandwidth to marshal the depth of resources needed called for new strategies. In response, nonprofits re-routed budget resources (staff travel, trainings, events) and sought private cash and gift card donations directed to emergency assistance funds for clients.

Nearly all nonprofits reported giving significantly more funds directly to clients throughout the pandemic and *being flexible* regarding how they could be used.



AFAC set up temporary off-site distribution centers to meet growing need

County-wide, scaled responses

Arlington County's efforts to address food insecurity included directing emergency local and Federal CARES funds to Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC), providing \$400,000 toward grocery gift cards to nonprofit participants, establishing the Cooperative for a Hunger Free Arlington to coordinate and supplement food resources, and expanding eligibility for Supplemental Needs Assistance Program (SNAP).

AFAC, Arlington's primary nonprofit food assistance resource, rapidly and remarkably shifted every level of their operations to provide more food for more people. Implementing emergency resources aimed to curb COVID-induced food insecurity, AFAC increased grocery distribution sites, expanded food options, and began home deliveries for homebound and quarantining households. AFAC's extraordinary staff, volunteers, and operational strengths continue to safely respond to varying levels of elevated need.

Arlington Public Schools operated free "grab-and-go" school meals at 21 schools and, later, several other community locations. PTAs operated food pantries at multiple schools.

Indicators of growing needs and disparities

- AFAC quickly saw a 45% increase in the number of households referred. Between March-September 2020, they served an average 8,184 persons per month.*
- The September 2020 County's SNAP (food stamps) enrollment increased by 22% above the September 2019 level.*
- There was evidence of growing distrust of government assistance among Latinx communities observed with September 2020 SNAP beneficiaries (15% Latinx households) compared to trust in nonprofit assistance (55% of AFAC participants).*
- Requests for the County's Meals on Wheels home deliveries to seniors increased 136% March-September 2020.*



Shirlington Employment & Education Center distributing meals purchased from local Latino restaurants to day laborers throughout Arlington

Safety net nonprofits step up to support the effort to meet basic needs

Arlington Community Foundation piloted grocery gift card programs to reach households experiencing high food insecurity including over 400 households served by APAH and AHC (affordable housing providers).

Building on this, Arlington County and the Community Foundation funded seven organizations to extend sustained grocery assistance for 500 families over a 6-month period.

Arlington Free Clinic, OAR of Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church, Aspire!, BU-GATA, Virginia Hospital Center Pediatrics, and additional hospital and County health clinics distributed these cards monthly to households.

Nearly all the safety net nonprofits went beyond their missions to support food security needs

BU-GATA secured grocery gift cards to Glebe Market, a Latinx grocery store offering culturally specific food options at an affordable cost for residents in need.

Shirlington Employment and Education Center, which supports immigrant day laborers and entrepreneurs, developed a partnership with local Latinx restaurant owners, and with funding from Washington Forrest and Arlington Community Foundations, offered a year-long meal program to help clients and local businesses impacted by the pandemic.

Several nonprofits joined forces with Volunteer Arlington, Cooperative for a Hunger Free Arlington, local restaurants, farmer's markets, and businesses to provide meals helping thousands of households offset food insecurity.

OAR of Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church significantly increased cash distributions to participants from roughly \$80,000 per year to over \$250,000.

Just Neighbors secured a small cash assistance fund to support clients to complete medical exams, purchase groceries, and meet other needs.

Cooperative for Hunger Free Arlington, Volunteer Arlington, AFAC, and DHS set up extensive home deliveries for groceries and meals for quarantining/homebound/seniors.

Key insights and changes in practice made along the way

To reduce barriers to food access, AFAC extended referral periods, expanded partnerships with nonprofit and County agencies, and expanded options and distribution locations. AFAC's home delivery program, launched for COVID-positive households, will continue to serve clients who can't easily access their facilities and do not have a support system.

Building on pre-COVID efforts and those of Cooperative for a Hunger Free Arlington, DHS created a new position to improve coordination of ongoing food security efforts across the community.

Wider eligibility criteria and lowered restrictions for use of food security benefits including SNAP and the Schools' Free & Reduced Meals Program were essential for households who lost employment and/or lacked child care.

APS expanded bus deliveries of Free & Reduced Meals to more community locations in Fall 2020, seven months into the pandemic. While appreciated by families, this scaled and low-barrier response came far later than seen in surrounding jurisdictions. An earlier start would have benefitted food security efforts as many families struggled to get to food sites.

Gift cards and unconditional cash assistance—initially started by some nonprofits out of need for quickly getting assistance to households presenting varying needs, proved to be highly effective, empowering, and liberating for both clients and nonprofit organizations.

HOUSING STABILITY

"With unemployment becoming an immediate issue at the start of the pandemic, many families faced housing instability in numbers we hadn't seen before."

Sam Kelly
Bridges to Independence

Housing costs quickly fell out of reach for many households laid off, terminated, or unable to work due to the pandemic. In March 2020 alone, the County tripled its emergency eviction prevention funds.* The County's centralized emergency assistance call number became flooded with callers in dire circumstances, unable to afford rent for consecutive months. For persons experiencing homelessness, fear of getting sick caused many to avoid seeking shelter.

The County reported a 91% increase in unsheltered homelessness between February and May 2020.* Doorways reported greater hesitancy among Sexual and Domestic Hotline callers to leave dangerous situations.

County-wide, scaled responses

Several Safety Net Arlington nonprofits play a leading role helping individuals and families experiencing homelessness or struggling to remain in stable and affordable housing. Working closely within the public-private partnership of Arlington's Continuum of Care and from a shared philosophy of Housing First,

concerted efforts were made to keep people housed, and for those experiencing homelessness, to quickly move them to housing of their own. Ensuring people had safe places to live was more paramount than ever to ensure their safety and our community's ability to curb virus transmission.

Arlington County used Federal, State and local dollars to scale up resources for emergency rent assistance to prevent mass evictions, increase ongoing rent subsidies, and adapt and operate homeless services in accordance with COVID guidelines: safe distancing, moving congregate shelters to hotel settings, deep cleaning, and quarantining protocols.

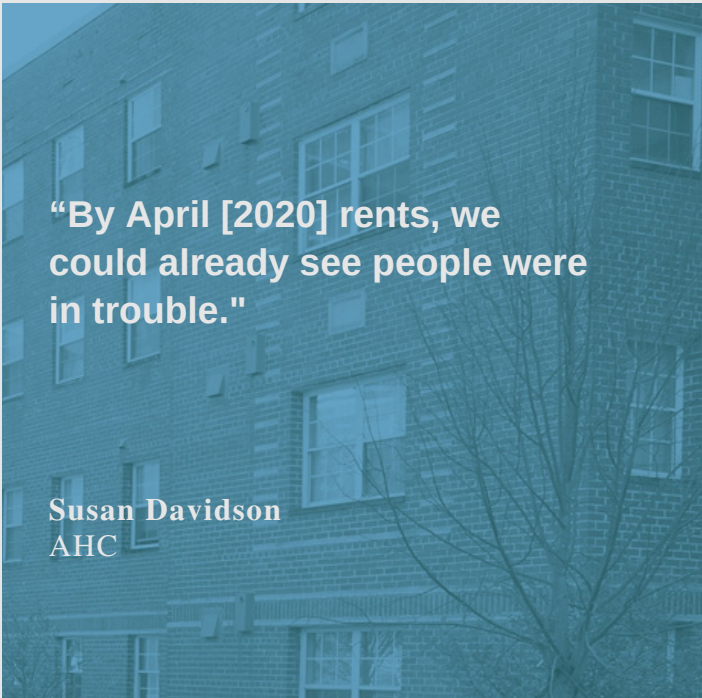


Arlington County and safety net nonprofits moved some shelter residents to motels to ensure safe distancing

Arlington Thrive, which provides emergency assistance funds to persons facing imminent eviction as well as other emergent needs, stepped up to serve as a vital intermediary to help administer Federal CARES Act and County emergency assistance checks to thousands in need. This signified a major growth point for Thrive. They quickly scaled up operations, bilingual case management staffing, and extended and created 30+ partnerships to reach more people than ever. Their direct efforts and close collaboration with DHS prevented eviction for thousands.

Affordable housing providers - AHC, Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH), and Wesley Housing - continuously adapted policies to support residents and expanded and intensified resident services including senior wellness calls, benefit application/navigation assistance, family/child supports, food security, and emergency assistance funding. Each led substantial efforts to assist their residents in securing rental assistance.

Shelter providers - Bridges to Independence, Doorways, and PathForward - have continuously provided emergency shelter and supportive services uninterrupted throughout the pandemic. Doing so requires constant adaptations, extensive operational shifts and expenses, 24-hour staffing, and ongoing donation drives to meet resident needs. Doorways Domestic Violence Shelter, the smallest shelter in the County, secured private emergency funding to rent motel rooms for families and survivors. Others maximized every inch of their facilities, converting dining and programming areas into living quarters.



"By April [2020] rents, we could already see people were in trouble."

Susan Davidson
AHC

Indicators of growing needs

- Between July 2020 and June 2021, Arlington residents received approximately \$19.4 million in Federal, State, and local rent relief. While crucial, frequent changes in funding streams, eligibility and application requirements, and digital access barriers required extensive outreach and navigation assistance to connect people in need to these resources.
- Arlington County DHS and Thrive partnered to disperse \$6.4 million in rent relief funds (July 2020-June 2021) in response to nearly 4,000 requests for assistance, a 6-fold increase above 2019 levels.*
- By November/December 2020, prior to the onset of the State Rent and Mortgage Relief Program, affordable housing providers APAH, AHC, and Wesley Housing projected rent collection shortfalls exceeding \$3 million per organization.

Safety net nonprofits step up to support the effort to prevent eviction

Thrive, DHS, APAH, AHC, and Wesley Housing added temporary and permanent staff in an effort to reach and support thousands of residents in need of rent relief as funds became available and ahead of eviction moratoriums ending.

Virginia Cooperative Extension, BU-GATA, and others created informational blasts, videos, and other mediums in English and Spanish clarifying moratoriums and how to access rent relief.

Edu-Futuro and Shirlington Employment & Education Center went beyond missions to redirect and/or hire bilingual staff to support immigrant households in navigating and securing rental assistance.

And to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness

Doorways Domestic Violence Shelter provided shelter and supportive services for more survivors of domestic violence (operating at a capacity 140% above prior years), continued to operate the County's Sexual and Domestic Violence Hotline 24/7 uninterrupted, and expedited pathways to housing for youth and families residing in their Family Home Shelter.

Bridges to Independence partnered with local and State funders to fully cover the cost of rent for their in-shelter families who had transitioned

to subsidized housing post-shelter throughout the pandemic period and hired a Housing Locator to expedite family moves from shelter to housing.

PathForward moved food service to pre-packaged, daily delivered meals (necessary, yet at greater operating expense) and began a Mobile Medical Unit to extend care to persons unsheltered or in transitional living situations.

Key insights and changes in practice along the way

County Housing Grants and other rent subsidy programs went beyond shallow, short-term assistance to fully address the financial gaps for households without means to pay their pre-COVID income-determined portion, helping hundreds of households to remain housed despite job loss.

Housing Grants and other rental relief programs did not penalize working households whose hours were reduced or jobs lost. This empathic and realistic approach allowed households to direct limited resources to other essential needs and for parents without child care to care for children.

Involvement of trusted, culturally-affirming staff and agencies trained in reaching populations most marginalized led to greater inclusion of these communities in emergency housing relief.

County and nonprofit collaboration was strengthened by the clear and urgent goal of keeping people housed and safe. This allowed for enhanced trust, creativity, and flexibility in solving problems and reducing barriers to assistance.

HEALTH, WELLNESS, AND SAFETY

"Our patients and community need us more than ever to navigate through COVID, keep health conditions under control, and open doors to access basic needs."

Nancy White
Arlington Free Clinic

Health disparities show up in all communities because of factors such as race and ethnicity, income levels, and varied access to nutritious food, affordable housing, and healthcare.

More than six percent of Arlington residents — about 11,000 — do not have access to health insurance.

Pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, these individuals rely on Arlington's key safety net health providers including Virginia Hospital Center, Neighborhood Health, Arlington Public Health Department and Health Clinics, the Arlington Free Clinic, and Virginia Hospital Center Pediatrics (VHC Pediatrics).

These organizations use the medical home model to offer comprehensive and culturally appropriate primary care and specialized care to children and adults so they are less reliant on expensive emergency room and urgent care centers, or get no care at all.

County-wide, scaled responses

Together, with support from Federal, State, local, and private funding, these organizations worked tirelessly to keep our community informed, cared for, and safe. Daily briefings, sharing supplies and PPE, and real-time updates of emerging COVID-related needs and protocols were crucial in the provision of care across the County.

These partners worked with other nonprofits and the County to set up multiple COVID testing and vaccination sites. They also delivered ongoing guidance and communications for public safety and virus protection, and designed and implemented extensive community outreach using trusted community messengers and other strategies.



Arlington Free Clinic interpreters working remotely to continue serving patients during the pandemic

The Complete Vaccination Committee brought leaders and community members across sectors and backgrounds to develop communications strategies to educate and successfully widen access for all to receive vaccines.

VHC Pediatrics continued in-person infant wellness checks consistently throughout the pandemic while also providing sick and COVID-specific care via a combination of virtual and in-person services. Early in the pandemic, they experienced an 80% drop in infant wellness check appointments due to families fearing risk of COVID exposure.

Arlington Free Clinic took on post-discharge support for Virginia Hospital Center for uninsured COVID-positive individuals, COVID testing, vaccine clinics, public messaging, and expertise sharing. Additionally, they created a new telehealth program that has provided over 4,500 telehealth visits to date, in addition to seeing patients for onsite care as needed.



Arlington Free Clinic staff triaging patients

Indicators of growing needs

- Nonprofits reported hundreds of clients needing to return to frontline work in roles with high COVID-exposure risk (construction, healthcare, personal care/elder care, transportation/ride share drivers).
- Black and Latinx individuals were more likely to contract COVID-19 and be hospitalized than White and Asian individuals.*
- Non-Latinx Black individuals account for only 8.7% of Arlington's population, but they accounted for 22.8% of Arlington's COVID-19 deaths.*
- The Free Clinic and VHC Pediatrics and several nonprofits observe alarmingly high rates of mental health needs among patients resulting from sustained stress and other pandemic impacts. Adolescents present with particularly higher rates of suicidal thoughts and self-harm behaviors compared to pre-pandemic times. The County reported an increase in serious mental health challenges, particularly suicidal attempts, thoughts, and self-harm in 2020 among the general public (157% increase in suicide attempts between January and June 2020 compared to same period in 2019).*

Safety net nonprofits and County step up to provide health and safety resources

Arlington Free Clinic, VHC Pediatrics, and PathForward joined the County's COVID testing and vaccine rollout efforts to bring wider access to low-income, uninsured, and homeless populations.

Nonprofits serving immigrant communities and BIPOC nonprofit leaders rallied together with County leaders and the Complete Vaccination Committee to support production of videos to foster accurate information sharing regarding vaccines: Arm & Arm, Bridges to Independence, BU-GATA, Edu-Futuro, and more.

The County rented two motels to temporarily house 91 people needing safe quarantine space, meals, and supportive services. This was especially helpful for people living in congregate or overcrowded settings.

PathForward shared their staff nurse with all shelters and the County's two hotels in provision of COVID testing, health protocols, education, advice, and later, vaccines.

Key insights and changes in practice along the way

Public-private partnerships shined in our community's response to the health-related impacts of the pandemic. From hospitals to clinics, and Public Health Department to County Manager Communications and community-efforts (nonprofit and volunteer), their collective efforts effectively led to accurate information and support reaching diverse populations.

Mental health needs increased in the pandemic. Current service capacity is insufficient and nears crisis-level shortage, particularly for adolescents and those grieving COVID-related loss.

In addition to health responders, many frontline nonprofit staff served as emergency responders for clients experiencing significant mental and physical health crises and COVID-related emergencies. Ensuring they have time to heal and recover from the past 18 months is essential to support them as people and professionals.

Telehealth is a valuable addition. While not ideal for every patient, the clinics discovered ways this modality lowered barriers for many individuals and families to receive care.

PEOPLE IN TRANSITION

addiction recovery and formerly incarcerated populations

"It's hard to give someone an elbow tap when they really need a hug. Virtual therapy for someone who is isolated and incarcerated just doesn't work."

Kari Galloway
Friends of Guest House

People currently incarcerated, exiting incarceration, living in "next-step" settings, and those receiving substance addiction treatment and outreach services represent a varied group of people in transition.

Their stories include resilience, determination, and joy working through times of transition: human beings with tremendous talent, potential, and connection. Yet the pandemic-imposed realities and policy decisions impeded progress for many of them.

Primary responders

National Capital Treatment & Recovery, Arm & Arm, and OAR of Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church support persons working to recover from substance abuse and addiction. Together, these nonprofits offer varied access points and treatment approaches for our community. Arm & Arm, Friends of Guest House, and OAR support persons who are incarcerated and those

transitioning from incarceration, as well as their families. Each nonprofit provides supportive services for individuals and their families. Friends of Guest House is a residential program, while OAR and Arm & Arm are community-based.

In accordance with CDC guidelines, some nonprofits have had to reduce capacity, including National Capital Treatment & Recovery's acute substance abuse treatment centers and Friends of Guest House, which provides next-step transitional housing for formerly incarcerated women.

Additionally, some next-step residential treatment programs closed for new admissions leaving many people exiting "first-step" intensive services without a vital progression point.

Without post-acute care, people were at high risk for returning to former behaviors and/or living in situations not conducive for their recovery or needs.



National Capital Treatment & Recovery administering vaccines for patients

Indicators of growing needs

- The County and these safety net nonprofits reported rates of substance abuse, addiction, and overdose increased during the past year by as much as 44% in nonfatal opioid overdoses.*
- While rates of relapse and overdoses were higher for clients unable to access next-step treatment, National Capital Treatment & Recovery saw a 20% reduction in relapse for patients who were able to continue into follow-up care, highlighting the importance of continued care.
- Friends of Guest House and National Capital Treatment & Recovery absorbed significant operating expenses for deep cleaning and other protocols necessary for keeping residents and staff safe.
- Each organization noted higher rates of COVID infection and mortality among their participants than what other safety net partners experienced.

Safety net nonprofits step up to support people in transition amid challenging circumstances

Access to PPE, social distancing, and COVID-testing and treatment proved difficult for these service populations. With contact limited and virtual services not permitted in prison settings, service provision proved challenging.

OAR responded to participants' COVID-related employment challenges and financial and emotional hardships by dramatically shifting their approach to direct cash assistance and greater focus on participant connection.

Arm & Arm expanded community outreach vastly, meeting clients at bus stops, park benches, and anywhere needed to get information out about COVID safety and vaccinations, as well as engaging participants in peer mentoring and trauma-informed recovery services.

Key insights and changes in practice along the way

Persons incarcerated and those experiencing substance addiction during the pandemic face significant traumas of isolation, high exposure to COVID, and helplessness. Informed care, empowerment, and compassion are essential as we support them in moving forward.

Strides toward more restorative versus punitive approaches—and to prevent incarceration where feasible—began during the pandemic and need to continue across the judicial system.

Staff in these organizations experience significant job-related stress elevated by the social justice crises and pandemic-related impacts on clients. New and culturally-informed practices are needed to better support these staff and leaders.



EMERGENCY CHILD CARE

and remote learning support for
low-income working families

**“Instead of taking the kids on
fieldtrips, we bought cleaning
products.”**

Courtney Reeve
Aspire!

The closure of schools, along with limited extended day programming, school-based meals and snacks, and specialized resources for children with special needs, added tremendously to the hardships of many families. Households with parents needing to work out of the home, experiencing severe COVID-induced financial hardship, and those with unreliable internet access faced cascading challenges.

Low-income parents—many considered essential workers—had to choose to forego working or leave their children at home unsupervised.

Older children in these families often needed to tend to younger siblings, preventing focus on their own learning. As months passed, the cumulative effects of these challenges widened the academic opportunity and achievement gaps across multiple age groups. A fall 2020 APS survey indicated that despite intense fears of COVID, nearly half of the parents of 3,507 elementary aged students receiving Free & Reduced Meals wished for their children to return to school via the hybrid option (full return was not a survey option).

The pandemic exacerbated our nation’s inadequate child care system. In April 2020, Governor Northam urged communities to look to schools and community centers to serve as emergency child care locations for children ages 3-12 years to help essential workers return to their jobs. The State offered waivers, funding, and expedited licensing for providers of school-aged child care.

With the start of the 2020-21 school year, several nearby local governments and school systems worked together to stand up in-person learning and child care for families with high needs, including households facing severe financial hardship. To do so, they used school facilities or other community spaces that allowed for social distancing and had pre-existing design, furnishings, and supplies suited for children.

Yet despite extensive advocacy by Safety Net Arlington leaders and others, APS did not opt to take this step as broadly. Citing limitations of available facility space, staffing, and financial resources, APS instead offered roughly 50 slots for children considered “at risk:” students experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or children of APS staff returning to work. These “Instructional Learning Supports” began in late fall 2020. By January 2021, the number of openings using the same eligibility criteria had increased to around 180. However, they remained only partially filled.

Despite low enrollment, APS did not consider options to expand this resource to low-income families referred by safety net nonprofits. By Spring 2021, with the return to hybrid schedules, the program reduced to one location, serving a small number of children.

To address this gap in emergency school-aged child care, Aspire! and other nonprofits stepped in to create full- and partial-day school-aged care. Despite beginning the application for special operating licenses in summer 2020, each organization met significant delays and setbacks due to restrictions in local code and lack of access to space needed. Eventually, several were able to open, yet did so at capacities well below need levels, as evidenced by waitlists that in Aspire!'s case was triple their capacity.

Highlights of efforts to support access to child care and learning supports for low-income families

APS and the County partnered to provide free basic internet access through the "Comcast Essentials Program" to low-income students. APS social workers joined with safety net nonprofits and communities to support families. This included extensive family outreach and support with COVID-related resources, digital resources and devices, and mental health support. Wendy Carria, APS Supervisor of Social Workers, attended Safety Net Arlington meetings, keeping nonprofits abreast of APS's free meals distributions and other COVID-related supports for students and families.

Aspire! tripled their service hours above 2019 and extended programming in multiple mediums based on safety. They offered virtual, then hybrid, summer programming and full-day, in-person supervised care for APS students in remote learning starting in the fall of 2020.

Edu-Futuro stood up virtual programming for K-12th graders and families from immigrant communities to ensure continued academic success. They reached more families via virtual programming, created new services geared to address COVID-related needs, and expanded their Emerging Leaders Program, offering increased scholarships for high school graduates attending college.

Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS) converted its Early Head Start and Healthy Families home-based programs to monthly home deliveries of essential items (including 44,000 diapers), grocery gift cards, and donated items. By phone or virtually, they offered child developmental assessments, parenting supports, and critical connections for families otherwise isolated. NVFS's center-based Head Start programs initially closed, yet reopened in Fall 2020, offering prioritized slots for nearly 100 high-need infants and children.

NVFS, Aspire!, and Edu-Futuro worked to address the digital divide issues impacting children's learning. Each partnered with private and/or public partners to bring devices and digital skill supports to families.

Affordable housing and shelter nonprofit providers implemented virtual programming, tutoring, a learning pod, and other learning supports for students in apartments or shelters. They partnered with NVFS to secure slots in Head Start for families experiencing homelessness and expanded youth-programming to address teen isolation. Virginia Cooperative Extension also led virtual youth programming.

Key insights

Lack of affordable supervised care for school-aged children in remote learning is both an educational equity and employment equity issue.

Unlike other areas of scaled-up public response to need where flexibility, adaptation of resources, and shared goals were brought to bear, we did not see this essential spirit of collaboration to address school-aged child care.

It is critical to approach low-income households holistically. Housing stability is tied to employment, which is dependent on child care.

While nonprofits stood up small-scale options for care and learning supports, they did not reach anywhere near all those in need. They experienced extensive licensing and permitting barriers resulting from local policies that did not account for the urgency or mirror the State's emergency accommodations. Engaging in continuity planning now is key for our preparation and success in navigating this ongoing pandemic and future crises.



NVFS delivering diapers and other home essentials



Edu-Futuro staff with students, their parents, and NOVA Annandale faculty at an Emerging Leaders camp in July 2021

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONAL AND WORKFORCE IMPACTS

“We give our staff a fork and a knife to battle a tsunami, and somehow they get through...to be there for our clients. They created miracles everyday.”

Diana Ortiz
Doorways

Every leader interviewed voiced that the past 18 months have been among the hardest of their long careers in human services, with some serving over four decades. Yet at the same time, it was one during which they were overwhelmingly inspired and found hope and pride in what they and their teams, volunteers, and boards accomplished for people in crisis.

Supporting staff

Unquestionably, staff working in safety net nonprofits have been in overdrive for 18+ months experiencing unparalleled work-related stress. Like the rest of us, they too concurrently navigated their personal challenges of child care, fear of infection, grief and loss, and more.

Across the board, nonprofit leaders worked to extend support and gratitude to their teams. Some were able to provide additional pay via bonuses, hazard pay, or salary increases. Some gave “no questions asked” mental health and wellness days off. Most provided gift cards, self-care experiences, and specialized trainings to their teams. There was variety in what leaders had the resources to afford. However, each described the will to appropriately recognize and relieve their teams.

Several leaders, particularly those in organizations that operate 24/7, voiced significant concern about their teams from whom they had to expect so much.

They reported seeing signs of burnout and fatigue from the “year of drinking through the firehose daily” as one leader put it.

Collectively, it is clear these organizations deserve time and investment in caring for their frontline and remote team members who have been caring for so many for the past year and a half.



Arlington Free Clinic staff exhausted but still smiling

The leaders themselves need time for self-care as well. The weekly Safety Net Arlington meetings served not only as strategic discussions on meeting real-time needs, but also offered a safe space for these leaders to support each other in a time of making decisions against many unknowns. This was a space to not have the answers and to be overwhelmed with others whom they admired and served alongside. For this author and many nonprofit leaders, these meetings have been among the most helpful resources in this pandemic period.



Bridges to Independence staff

Hiring and retention for front-line in person positions has proven challenging for providers of shelter and residential care. Some vacancies remain open as people prefer jobs that offer at least some remote-work options and seek jobs with fewer potential virus exposure risks.

Nationally, a historic number of women have exited the workforce since the pandemic began. Nearly all leaders noted the significant strain evident on these professionals as they attempted to provide time-sensitive services while caring for young children.

This applied to staff working remotely with no child care supports and those struggling to find safe child care options to report in person. Undoubtedly, the national shift in family work preferences resulting from pandemic stressors and realizations are an area of trepidation watch among many nonprofit leaders.

Many voiced eagerness to learn and discover more ways to create work-life fit for their

employees and recognize failing to do so could lead to significant workforce turnover.

Finally, yet critically, many organizations pointed to “running starts” that helped their organizations be prepared for rising to the challenges of this period. Nonprofits who had made pre-pandemic infrastructure investments in staff training (trauma, resilience, racial equity, change management), data and IT systems, human resources, culture and teamwork, and financial and strategic planning, noted the importance each of these played in their ability to do all they have done.

It is crucial that we keep these less direct, infrastructure investments in mind when supporting our community’s safety net responders.

Financial and resource impacts for organizations

The past year and a half has affected how nonprofits fund their missions. For most larger, long-established organizations, private donors who had long supported them continued to do so, and if possible, gave more. They also gave the nonprofits more flexibility to direct their funds where it was most needed.

Some donors, however, decided to shift their giving due to their personal financial impacts, uncertainty brought by the pandemic, or wanting to redirect their giving to other compelling causes such as the highly contentious election.

Organizations with longer-standing or more flexible government and foundation funding remained stable, and in most instances, were allowed to pivot funds to pandemic priorities.

Similarly, those with missions in areas of large-scale fundamental needs such as healthcare (Arlington Free Clinic), food security (Arlington Food Assistance Center), and eviction prevention/emergency assistance (Arlington Thrive) received multiple waves of COVID-specific emergency funding and private philanthropy. Notably, these organizations stepped up and scaled operations to both meet larger needs and to administer significant one-time and time-limited emergency funding.

Arlington Free Clinic, AFAC, and Arlington Thrive unquestionably deserve to be acknowledged for the vital roles and extraordinary responsibilities of service and administration they carried during this time.

Smaller nonprofits are typically more reliant on single fundraisers, smaller grants, individual contributions, and contracts with other organizations to provide distinct services. Impressively and honorably, each of these nonprofits took varying approaches to quickly adapt and put their expertise and resources into action to address the intensive needs within their service population, and as possible, the wider community.

Many of these organizations benefitted from small grants from local foundations, Arlington Community Foundation's Prompt Response Fund, and committed long-time donors. However, nearly all faced significant financial difficulty as the months wore on and need remained high. Some reported spending down the rainy day reserves they had spent years building up. Others faced staff reductions or pay freezes.

"We ran on heart...and decided to be on this journey with our participants—side by side in the unknown of what is to come."

Elizabeth Jones Valderrama
OAR of Arlington, Alexandria
and Falls Church

For these leaders, it was particularly difficult to experience these financial challenges knowing their participants were counting on them for help. Every one of them resiliently reset, made difficult decisions, and opted to direct what they had to their participants. **Every single one.**

For the majority, the July 2021-June 2022 fiscal year brings uncertainty and challenge in planning both expenses and resources.

Many did not meet funder expectations in targets set pre-pandemic (group services, in-person programming, prevention services). Others, due to reduced capacity imposed by COVID-restrictions or fewer people reaching out for help due to COVID-fears, received lower reimbursements from government contracts based on numbers served. For those that received high levels of one-time, COVID-specific funding, finding their new normal remains unclear.

MOVING FORWARD FROM HERE AS A COMMUNITY

"People have gone through so much, but they keep going and caring for each other."

Kelvin Manurs
Arm & Arm

Supporting our clients: bracing ourselves for a long recovery

As safety net leaders reflected on this time in history, each spoke to their clients' astounding resilience, strength, tenacity, and commitment to caring for their families and community. Parents facing enormous financial and health stress showed incredible resolve in ensuring their children's well-being.

AHC and Edu-Futuro shared stories of parents working multiple jobs to keep their high school seniors on the path to higher education, with some now heading to Yale, Tufts, and University of Virginia. Additionally, clients of safety net organizations played key roles to support our community through this time of crisis as essential workers, senior and child care providers, and community builders helping neighbors, as just a few examples.

As leaders look forward for their clients, they are both hopeful and worried. Hopeful for them to return to work and school, yet worried that the pandemic's impacts will be long-lasting for many.

Some leaders voiced concern that due to specific services needing to pause, being less utilized due to pandemic circumstances, or offered remotely rather than in person, they are now seeing clients presenting with severe or advanced needs.

VHC Pediatrics and Arlington Free Clinic saw temporary drops in well-care and preventative visits, and addiction care was significantly blunted by capacity limits in acute and next-step care.

Doorways reported a lower number of calls to their Sexual and Domestic Violence Hotline for fear of COVID exposure or other competing household stressors. One significant stressor is the isolation-imposed lack of alone time or privacy suffered by victims, making it difficult to safely contact a hotline. For some populations, full provision of care relies on physical observation and interaction, not easily performed via telehealth. These safety net leaders anticipate client situations may have worsened due to missed windows for early intervention and care, as evidenced by the needs seen in recent months.

Additionally, several leaders are concerned for the extensive emotional toll that the pandemic has had on their clients that "will not magically go away when masks come off and vaccines are completed."

Leaders described “unbelievable amounts of loss, grief, and sorrow” among their clients, with some losing more than 10 relatives and friends to COVID-19.

Others had family members hospitalized for weeks or months, unable to visit, parenting alone, and losing essential household income due to illness and quarantine. These hardships, coupled with financial stress and family strain from isolating in small spaces, have been evident for every age group.

Safety net leaders stressed the need for compassionate, trauma-informed mental health and grief services for these neighbors.

Partnering with households deeply affected by the harshest realities of this pandemic as they grieve and heal will be essential to our community’s recovery.

In just a tiny example, Aspire! shared seeing children in their day program uncontrollably crying as they were afraid to be away from their parents, showing high levels of anxiety, and having difficulty concentrating on school tasks.

Over time, and with extensive support from their parents and staff, Aspire!’s leader shared seeing these children “sounding like kids, laughing, and enjoying playing with friends”.

Susan Davidson, AHC’s Director of Resident Services shared, “These are the families and households always on the edge. Job loss hit extremely hard, and their savings are long gone. The level of need is exponentially greater than it ever was and will be for a long time as they recover and rebuild.” Many amassed substantial debt to family, friends, and credit companies. For many, the uncertainty and delays that came in accessing emergency funds and around renewal of eviction moratoriums led to panicked borrowing to pay rent or other household bills.

Saul Reyes, BU-GATA’s Executive Director, is among many leaders who are concerned by the high level of formal and informal debt from which many households must now dig out. Arlington Thrive’s Executive Director, Andrew Schneider, and many others believe flexible and significant resources are vital for these households to recover. Charlie Meng, AFAC’s Executive Director, strongly feels that doing so is critical to prevent accelerated and additional loss of cultural and economic diversity in Arlington.

What can community members and businesses do?

The Arlington community is a caring one, as evidenced across this report and by numerous acts of kindness, generosity, and courage not captured here. As we move forward in what will hopefully be recovery and rebuilding phases of these crises, safety net leaders shared thoughts on how the community can help.

- Ask first what is most needed or helpful for different populations and the nonprofits that serve them. As these nonprofits continue to respond to these crises and rebuilding efforts, the need for donations and volunteers may fluctuate along with staff capacity to absorb or marshal large-scale offerings.
- Join nonprofits in efforts to promote racial justice, inclusion, and belonging. Support them in their evolved approaches regarding how they talk about needs, their clients, and ways to help that most empower and respect individuals' current realities.
- Each nonprofit's needs and mission delivery is unique. Contact individual organizations referenced in the appendix to learn more about getting involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CLOSING

Along this 18-month journey, safety net organizations have risen to meet innumerable challenges with the single purpose of ensuring people were safe and supported. In doing so, many found new ways of serving, partnering, and seeing possibilities.

When there are no limits in the needs coming at you, there can be no limits in how you find solutions to meet them.

Together with private and public partners, each tapped their unique strengths to come together for our community. In doing so, both nonprofits and County agencies needed to create new strategies in response to a more vivid view of long-standing inequities, challenges, and entrenched issues.

All at once, our entire human service system was called to clarity in seeing new pathways to tackle huge issues with human lives at the center of all we do. In the power of the collective, real progress was made.

With respect to the gift of hindsight, and grace to the realities of an intensely novel and challenging time, the Safety Net Arlington leaders hope to move forward with these new insights as we together shape our “new normal” and path ahead.

"The potential for even greater collaboration and partnership is bright if we continue to apply the lessons learned during the crises and pandemic."

Andrew Schneider
Arlington Thrive

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

and accelerating progress

1. An equity mindset backed up by action

While going in the right direction, prior equity initiatives have not gone far enough. We need to take a critical look at our safety net, its “traditions” of how we do things, and the ways we decide for people what is helpful to them. The current human services system, like every system in the nation, is built upon White, middle-upper class principles and on assumptions about people who are poor or in crisis, rather than grounded in the realities of their experiences. Specific recommendations for progress include:

- “Move beyond data requests and PowerPoint slides” to take tangible actions to move equity and racial justice forward for all people in Arlington.
- Center our actions not on who is loudest, but on those most impacted. Resist defaulting to what is “easy” or what we’ve “always done”. Develop new strategies that include and center those historically left in the margins.
- Acknowledge the value of organizations serving and/or led by BIPOC individuals, and ensure their funding is commensurate with the important role they play in creating an equitable Arlington.
- Build on steps being taken by County and nonprofits, such as disaggregating data and changes in hiring, promoting and valuing staff of color, to better understand and address who is most burdened or missed by current policies and practices.

2. Sustain wide and substantial access to resources

The devastation experienced by many of our neighbors will not be remedied by short-term or one-time emergency resources. In this sustained period of urgency and volume of needs, our human services institutions found new ways to help people stabilize rather than fall further into crisis. Federal, State, and County agencies widened eligibility criteria, raised caps and increased amounts of assistance, and quickly set up massive anti-poverty resources to avert humanitarian crises (eviction moratoriums, stimulus funds, etc.). While deeply beneficial in keeping many afloat, thousands of Arlington households are still without work or have not regained pre-COVID household income.

Moving forward, we can use flexible and empowering strategies for people and the programs that support them, and work from a shared vision for maximizing trust, personal agency, and mobility out of poverty.

As this report highlights, private funders embraced flexible funding to nonprofits and to the individuals they serve.

Through these resources, countless examples were witnessed in how effective less prescriptive funding to nonprofits and unconditional cash to individuals can be. These local demonstrations mirror the evidence in promising practices such as Wealth Transfer and Guaranteed Income for movement out of poverty.

Safety net nonprofits recommend steps including:

- Continue to extend flexible, unconditional resources, lowering application burdens for clients and nonprofits.
- Reset reporting and data collection to reduce excessive administrative burdens on nonprofits.
- Support continued emergency responses until all in our community have recovered and rebuilt.

3. Invest in nonprofit sustainability and infrastructure

Like every essential business, safety net nonprofits play critical roles in our community's well-being and safety. Each of these 21 organizations was called upon to continue serving throughout this crisis, and to find the resources to do so.

For decades, nonprofits have been expected to operate on thin margins with extremely low reserves or contingency budgets. Yet their missions require they serve uninterrupted, regardless of the unexpected.

We cannot rely on them without valuing the “non-direct” expenses that sustain their ability to plan, prepare, and respond whenever needed.

Additionally, as this report notes, these organizations much deserve support in their recovery and rebuilding after a period of sustained operating beyond their pre-COVID capacities.

Public and private financial support is key in ensuring that these organizations have well-trained and supported staff and volunteers, strong operating systems, human resources and financial practices, and healthy cultures that allow human service professionals to be at their best as they support people experiencing significant hardship and trauma.

4. Build on successful public-private partnerships

Together, with historic levels of resources from government agencies and philanthropic organizations, nonprofits and the County kept thousands in Arlington fed, housed, sheltered, healthy, and safe. There are countless examples of positive outcomes when nonprofits join forces and leverage their respective strengths. Safety net nonprofits call on the public sector to:

- Critically evaluate and transform existing County funding processes, contracts, and reporting systems for nonprofits toward greater inclusion and meaningful impact.
- Explore promising strategies used by communities outside of Arlington. Safety net nonprofits working across jurisdictions can lend helpful insights in these efforts.
- Treat nonprofits as partners in meeting shared goals. While contractual relationships require clear boundaries and expectations, nonprofits work best from a place of shared value of respective strengths and trust.
- Involve nonprofits in the design of spending plans for public dollars, including special funding received from the federal government. This includes co-planning for all aspects of our human service system, maximizing the value of nonprofits' trusted relationships in the community to help households overcoming hardship recover.



5. Improve collaboration between APS and County on cross-cutting issues

While many things went surprisingly well considering the circumstances of unrelenting crisis, some responses exposed existing cracks in some institutional relationships.

Missed opportunities for County and Arlington Public Schools' leaders to combine resources to address large-scale needs around food distribution and school-aged child care and learning supports magnified the need for shared goals, common vision, and partnership across these institutions.

This divide between these entities has persisted for decades in Arlington.

With needs on the scale of this past year, nonprofits and community groups alone could not scale up the level of response needed.

Safety net nonprofits would like to see accountability and structures whereby County and Schools decision-makers work together to jointly own cross-cutting issues, approach them holistically, and bring more flexible thinking.

Employment, housing stability, child care, food security, academic success, and health are all inextricably bound together. Lacking a coordinated effort by these entities on some fronts, many households were unable to return to work, prolonging and magnifying their hardship.

Moving forward, Safety Net Arlington eagerly stands by to bring our expertise, relationships, and deep perspective on the needs of our community. Working collaboratively with shared goals and resources has repeatedly led to significant progress for our community.

As one leader reflected on prior collective successes, and this report shows,

“Everything we’ve done well, we’ve done **together.”**

APPENDIX

AHC Inc.

Contact: Susan Davidson, Director of Resident Services: susan.davidson@ahcinc.org

Website: www.ahcinc.org

AHC develops affordable housing and helps communities thrive in the Northern Virginia, Washington DC and Baltimore region. We provide a wide array of educational programs and social services in our community centers to help residents build more stable and successful lives.

Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC)

Contact: Charles Meng, CEO: charles.meng@afac.org

Website: www.afac.org

AFAC feeds our neighbors in need by providing dignified access to nutritious supplemental groceries.

Arlington Free Clinic

Contact: Alicia Nieves, Director of Development and Communications:

anieves@arlingtonfreeclinic.org

Website: www.arlingtonfreeclinic.org

Arlington Free Clinic provides free, high-quality healthcare to low-income, uninsured Arlington County adults through the generosity of donors and volunteers.

Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH)

Contact: Carmen Romero, President and CEO: cromero@apah.org

Website: www.apah.org

APAH develops, preserves, and owns quality, affordable places to live; promotes stability and opportunity for their residents; and advocates with the people and communities they serve.

Arlington Thrive

Contact: Andrew Schneider, Executive Director: schneider@arlingtonthrive.org

Website: www.arlingtonthrive.org

As the financial safety net for Arlington County, Arlington Thrive provides immediate financial support and case management for rental assistance to avoid eviction, medical assistance to prevent illness, utility assistance, and other unforeseen expenses to help families avoid financial catastrophe in moments of personal crisis.

Arm & Arm

Contact: Kelvin Manurs, Executive Director: kelvinmanurs@armandarm.org

Website: www.armandarm.org

Arm & Arm provides peer-to-peer behavioral health services (support, training, and mentoring) for individuals re-entering their communities following incarceration, the military, homelessness, substance abuse recovery, and/or mental health challenges.

Aspire! Afterschool Learning

Contact: Paula Fynboh, Executive Director:
paula@aspireafterschool.org

Website: www.aspireafterschool.org

Aspire! Afterschool helps young people most at risk of the opportunity gap fulfill their potential through afterschool and summer learning programs that support and connect families, schools, and communities.

Bridges to Independence

Contact: Christina Armstrong, Chief
Philanthropic Partnerships Officer:
carmstrong@bridges2.org

Website: www.bridges2.org

Bridges to Independence is focused on ending systemic poverty. We operate Arlington's largest emergency family shelter, provide rental subsidies for housing, and supportive services such as workforce development, financial empowerment, and youth development.

BU-GATA

Contact: Saul Reyes, Executive Director:
saul.reyes@bu-gata.org

Website: www.bu-gata.org

BU-GATA is a community-based organization that serves Arlington youth and adults through education and leadership development programs focused on education, housing attainment, and civic engagement in low-income immigrant communities.

Doorways

Contact: Diana Ortiz, President and CEO:
dortiz@doorwaysva.org

Website: www.doorwaysva.org

Doorways provides emergency shelter, comprehensive services, and supportive housing for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as youth and families experiencing homelessness. As Arlington's only provider of services for survivors of intimate partner violence, Doorways 24/7 response includes a hotline, safehouse, hospital accompaniment, trauma-focused counseling, and mobile and court advocacy services.

Edu-Futuro

Contact: Jorge Figueredo, Executive Director:
jorge@edu-futuro.org

Website: www.edu-futuro.org

Edu-Futuro is focused on education as a critical catalyst for positive, permanent change in immigrant and Latino families. We empower immigrant and underserved youth and families throughout Northern Virginia through mentorship, education, leadership development, parent engagement, individual case management, and workforce development.

Friends of Guest House

Contact: Kari Galloway, Executive Director:
director@friendsofguesthouse.org

Website: www.friendsofguesthouse.org

Friends of Guest House houses formerly incarcerated women and provides the structure, supervision, and assistance they need to move beyond who they were to become who they want to be.

Just Neighbors

Contact: Stephanie Barnes, Operations Director:
stephanie@justneighbors.org

Website: www.justneighbors.org

Just Neighbors provides high-quality immigration legal services to low-income immigrants, asylees and refugees in DC, Maryland, and Virginia. We build community among clients, staff, volunteers and the larger society through education, advocacy, and volunteerism.

National Capital Treatment and Recovery

(formerly Phoenix House Mid-Atlantic)

Contact: Debby Taylor, President and CEO:
Dtaylor@natcaptreatment.org

Website: www.natcaptreatment.org

National Capital Treatment & Recovery provides high quality, evidence-based treatment to individuals suffering from substance use disorder through a full continuum of residential and outpatient programs for men, women and young adults, regardless of their financial resources.

Northern Virginia Family Service

Contact: Andrea Eck, Executive Vice President of Programs: aeck@nvfs.org

Website: www.nvfs.org

Northern Virginia Family Service administers programs in early childhood education, multicultural mental health, immigration legal support, workforce development, child abuse prevention, gang prevention, family reunification, foster care, housing, homelessness, health access and anti hunger services.

OAR of Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church

Contact: Elizabeth Jones Valderrama, Executive Director: ejonesvalderrama@oaronline.org

Website: www.oaronline.org

OAR works to confront and dismantle racism in individuals, the legal system, and across all systems. We journey with individuals of all genders returning to the community from incarceration and support their families in the homecoming process. And we offer alternative sentencing options through community service to youth and adults so they can avoid incarceration and remain a part of helping the community thrive.

PathForward (formerly A-SPAN)

Contact: Betsy Frantz, President and CEO:
bfrantz@pathforwardva.org

Website: www.pathforwardva.org

PathForward takes homeless adults from streets to stability by offering a full continuum of compassionate care including street outreach, shelter, re-housing, day programs, nursing services, and meals. We operate Arlington's Homeless Services Center, where all clients can access services at one central location year round.

Virginia Cooperative Extension

Contact: Aisha Salazar, Associate Extension

Agent: asalazar@vt.edu

Website: www.ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is part of the engagement mission of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. VCE offers learning experiences that improve economic, environmental, and social well-being.

Virginia Hospital Center Pediatrics

Contact: Michelle Altman, Patient Care Director:

maltman@virginiahospitalcenter.com

Website:

www.virginiahospitalcenter.com/medical-services/pediatrics/

VHC Pediatrics provides quality, affordable, culturally sensitive health care for low-income children up to 18 years old living in Arlington County.

Shirlington Employment & Education Center (SEEC)

Contact: Andres Tobar, Executive Director:

andrestobar45@gmail.com

Website: www.seecjobs.org

SEEC assists day laborers to find temporary employment with local residents and trains immigrant women in Green Housecleaning and Business Development.

Wesley Housing

Contact: Shelley Murphy, President and CEO:

smurphy@whdc.org

Website: www.wesleyhousing.org

Wesley Housing builds up the lives of our most vulnerable community members by creating and operating healthy, supportive, stable, affordable housing communities.

