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Thank you for the opportunity to share a view of the COVID Pandemic from the lens of our most at risk neighbors and families. As you know, Community Action Agencies have always been the door that opens for those struggling with economic security and distress. ***This pandemic has ripped off any band-aid of economic security for those on the edge.*** It exposes the true fault lines of our socio-economic system – one that enables such disparity between those with adequate resources, and those without. While the doors to our offices are currently closed to protect community health and safety – our critical services continue and are expanding exponentially as the need for our programs deepens. As described below, we are working with regional partners to strengthen our response, and are beginning to assess our “recovery” needs even as we continue our “response” activities.

1) Capstone’s Immediate Response: New models of service delivery; homeless re-housing; food security.

As the COVID-19 crisis approached, Capstone made critical decisions to maintain our services in a safe delivery model. Our Head Start program moved from a center-based delivery model to a home visiting model with continual and consistent remote engagement for all families, including twice weekly teacher calls, meal and activity-pack deliveries, in addition to social worker and mental health counselor connection.

As part of the state (OEO) Homeless Response Team, Capstone teamed up with area partners to support our regional shelter – Good Samaritan Haven – which needed additional space to reduce shelter density. Within three days area partners worked to re-house area shelter guests into motels. Capstone repurposed Community Kitchen Academy into a regional production food hub, working with area partners to prepare 3-meals per day for 270 hotel guests which were subsequently distributed to 7 area motels through an extraordinary team of volunteers (23,288 meals delivered, 682 volunteer hours to date). [See attached WNOC-RRCC Reports]

2) Building Regional Collaborations through Incident Command System

Understanding the critical role of partnerships and teamwork, we quickly collaborated with partners to establish a regional response utilizing the Incident Command System. Simply put, ***we have broken down the silos between service agencies in our regions to act as one nimble coordinated entity to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Vermonters.*** In Washington County, the partnerships grew out of the THRIVE Accountable Community for Health, affiliated with the Central Vermont Medical Center. The Washington Northern Orange County Regional Response Command Center (WNOC – RRCC) has been meeting twice daily since March 23rd, and has been successfully responding to immediate needs – from food and medical assistance to

homeless residents, to acquiring and distributing masks hand sanitizers and establishing and staffing a regional Call Center. [See WNOC-RRCC Organizational Report]

In Lamoille County a similar effort is now underway, Lamoille Area Health & Human Services Response Command Center, which includes leadership from a wide array of community organizations. Capstone has established a Lamoille Community Fund, raised funds to purchase phones and hot spots for students dislocated by lack of technology, and distributed food and essential supplies from the Capstone Morrisville office. [See LAH2s-RCC Report and Organizational Chart]

In Orange County, Capstone has also worked with area partners, including: White River Valley Community Response Team, Randolph Area Mutual Aid Network (RAMEN) and the Upper Valley Homeless Response, as well as smaller municipal response efforts (in Rochester/ Hancock/ Granville/ Stockbridge/ Bradford) where we help play a coordination and communications role, when asked. We have also set up a Community Fund to distribute disaster relief for those with acute economic hardship.

3) Support State Response for Mass Feeding and Homeless Response Plans

In addition to mounting the local response for vulnerable Vermonters, we have been proactively working with our state partners to plan for the statewide response to food insecurity. We worked with the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) to develop a Mass Feeding Plan to help address food security issues in six key areas: (1) Homeless in Hotel/Motels; (2) COVID positive homeless in safe isolation and recovery; (3) Agency of Education school meal distribution and summer planning; (4) Vermont Food Bank and Food Shelves; (5) Senior Centers and Meals on Wheels – expansion efforts; (6) General Food Insecurity Growth. We meet three times per week with a team from SEOC & AHS to plan, implement and assess growing needs. **We are very concerned about the future funding for these critical humanitarian needs which we anticipate will grow as the economic hardship continues.**

We are also working with the State DCF/ Office of Economic Opportunity to begin to plan for the eventual reduction of GA/ Emergency Sheltering at the area motels.

4) Looking Ahead: From Health Emergency to Economic Disruption

We all know it is impossible to predict the future, but we will continue to proceed as we have to date:

plan for the worst, and hope for the best. I anticipate our stay-at-home orders will continue throughout the summer. And what was once seen as a health crisis, will quickly unravel as an economic crisis and potential humanitarian crisis – unless we are prepared to fill in the gaps and address the neediest among us.

In the immediate response CAPs and area partners have addressed the most acute needs for housing and food insecurity. The state has supported the infrastructure, but ***we need to be assured of continued funding for food and housing into the future.***

Pressure for our services will mount with an extended economic disruption and I want to emphasize that the CAP Economic Programs you all advocated for in our FY21 - MBDP and Financial Empowerment -- are needed now more than ever.

There simply are not enough SBA counselors to help the small, lower income clients who are trying to maintain their businesses or start a business. Due to the recession, many people actually start their own businesses because finding work is more difficult. Now more than ever we need to support our micro business programs. We need our 5 statewide MBDP counselors NOW and in the coming years.

- 30%-80% increase in client outreach to our MBDP counselors
- Small businesses typically start during recessions, so we need to keep our counselors in place to meet the demand
- Many of our clients are 1 person businesses, and they don't have lawyers or finance people to help them understand the complexities of the new loans or the future of their business in these uncertain times. They need our counselors to help guide them and support them and make them feel like someone is there to help them.

In addition, our Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program which does not receive state funds, is at great risk, and is critical to low income residents and small businesses. Our phone lines are overloaded with requests for help.

Micro Business Development Program:

CVOEO saw **30% increase in client meetings and a 50% increase in service hours from the previous year during this time period** (March 17-April 17)

Capstone: Washington County: **79% caseload increase from previous year** (March 23-April 20th). Lamoille County 15 new businesses assisted (15 times more than last year, when there was no similar program.)

BROC: Last year, BROC saw 95 clients for the whole year—in one month they have seen 30! BROC has seen an increase in participants both new and past coming forward with anxiety over navigating through Covid-19, and reports the new clients calling are all trying to save their existing business and triage personal finances.

NEKCA: Last year NEKCA met with a total of 88 clients—more than a third have met with her in one month—some of these clients are ones she hasn't heard from in a long time. **NEKCA's top priority for recovery will be to hire financial counsellors.**

SEVCA: Prior to COVID, Denise had two workshops with potential new clients who were interested in starting businesses—and then COVID happened.

5) Building Opportunity out of Crisis

This is a moment of crisis, and also a time of innovation and opportunity for new models and transformational change. I personally experienced the truth of Building Back Stronger post

Irene – on so many levels – from the community of Waterbury forging out of despair with new commitment to rebuilding our library, town office and historical society that had been gridlocked for decades, to the state Agency of Transportation working collaboratively with the Agency of Natural Resources around culvert-sizing and fluvial geomorphology.

This is our moment for big change. We must look for the opportunities within the crisis. For example, is the current moment of housing GA Recipients in area motels – while providing food, health and mental health supports -- a seed for a future strategy for addressing those with housing insecurity? Is our awareness of acute food insecurity and the extraordinary role of our schools, and the use of their buses in addressing food access an opportunity for a future with greater commitment to multi-purpose of our schools and transportation resources?

Beyond the chaos and despair I see daily moments of hope:

- This morning I heard that a woman in Lamoille who has been spending her winter living in a storage container, is moving into secure housing!
- I learned about a Head Start mother who is surviving and thriving through her isolation because her Head Start program is providing her family food, books, educational activities, a phone for daily contact and a computer for access. She expect to achieve a life dream – a GED!
- And every day an army of volunteers have been mobilizing (through rain, snow and even hail) to deliver delicious home-cooked healthy meals to homeless people now safely housed in area motels.

These are the beautiful things that are happening within the darkness that also surrounds us.

Thank you for caring for those who need us most – before and during this time of stress. Thank you for listening, and for allowing me to be their voice. I will end my testimony with my favorite quote of the week. It comes from my tea bag (!)

*Live light, Travel light
Spread the light
Be the Light*

Respectfully submitted,

Sue Minter