

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and brought to light many of the ills of our social safety net. Food and housing insecurity were already rampant in Monroe County prior to the pandemic. In Monroe County, 2018 data from Common Ground Health show a 30% rate of food insecurity in a focus area of eight high-poverty ZIP codes in the city with particularly high concentrations of African Americans and Latinos, 19% in other parts of the city, and 9% in the Monroe County suburbs. The same report notes that 25% of those living in the Urban Finger Lakes Region were housing insecure, compared to 8% of those in the suburbs, and 12% of those in rural areas.

Surveys since March 2020 have shown impacts of the pandemic on housing and food insecurity nationally. In late April 2020, two nationally representative surveys were administered to analyze the impacts of COVID, including the impacts on respondents' mental health, food security, and job security. These surveys found that 22.7% of households reported not having sufficient resources to buy more food when the food they purchased didn't last. The Survey of Mothers with Young Children found that 40.9% of mothers with children ages 12 and under reported household food insecurity since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To compare these numbers to those before the pandemic, in 2018 11.1% of households were food insecure, and 15.1% of mothers with children 12 and under reported food insecurity.

The United States Census Bureau has been surveying Americans weekly about their household experiences during COVID-19 pandemic using the Household Pulse Survey. In the survey administered the week of August 19th they report that 23.3% (+/- 7.7%) of New Yorkers are living in households where eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is somewhat likely. They also report that 9.0% (+/- 2.6%) of New Yorkers that week are not current on rent or mortgage payments, or who have slight/no confidence that their household can pay next month's mortgage on time.

Even the preliminary data on how the pandemic is impacting our community is alarming and should motivate us to action. These statistics exist in a climate of insufficient governmental response, and an existing patchwork of non-governmental agencies struggling to respond to vast need. A radical and community driven model to address community needs has emerged as an effective way to approach the rapidly changing climate of a pandemic world.

COMMUNITY PARTNER

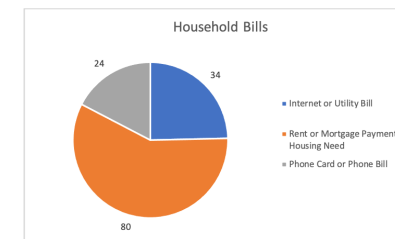
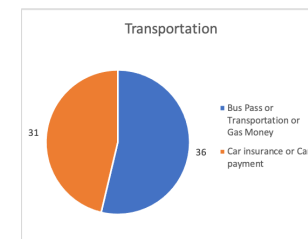
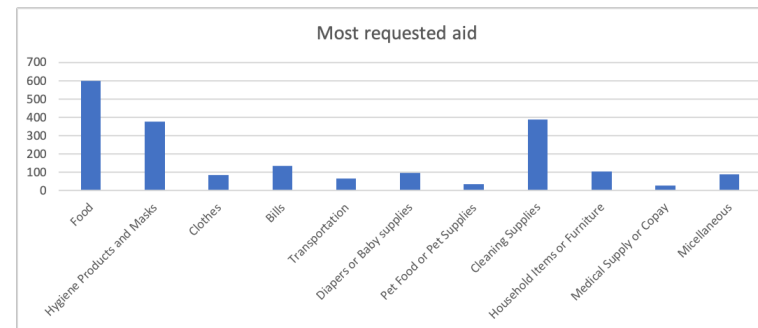
The community groups that have emerged from this crisis often offer aid that supplements but does not replace the aid that individuals receive from government or long-standing NGOs, and the aid they offer tends to be quicker and more individualized. Mutual aid is not a new idea, but only during the current pandemic did it enter the mainstream. Loosely defined, mutual aid is people helping each other, and uniting in a common struggle. The Rochester Mutual Aid Network came together in these circumstances, as a group of individuals from different organizations interested in helping the community sustain itself. It is a cooperative network in which members of the community who could offer aid, directly connected with those who needed aid. It is supported by many long-standing Rochester organizations, who have a shared aim of creating community solidarity that is driven by community needs.

COMMUNITY HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

This project aimed to review the data collected by RMAN concerning types of requests and requestee feedback to identify any trends or takeaways to help RMAN better tailor its work to the needs of the community as well as use this information to apply for funding and grants to continue doing this work long-term.

From 04/10/2020 to 10/04/2020 RMAN received 1011 requests and grew from a dozen members to over one hundred members. Requests have come from 25 zip-codes, with several in neighboring counties. The zip-codes with the top five highest numbers of requests are in order 14621, 14620, 14609, 14611, and 14605.

For the first few months RMAN fully or partially funded requests for rental assistance in addition to connecting requesters to organizations in the city that work in the housing space, such as City-Wide Tenant Union. Over the summer, RMAN transitioned away from funding these requests to only connecting requesters to organizations who do organizing and political work that creates long term solutions to addressing this crisis. RMAN also initially helped fund utility bills, and transitioned away from doing this as government funding increased for this need. RMAN transitioned to connecting more requesters with a Metro Justice committee that organizes politically to combat high utility bills. RMAN is now also starting to slowly transition away from independently sourcing food from retailers and towards partnering with organizations with long histories of food aid, such as Food Link, who are now in a better position to provide this type of aid as they have scaled up output over the past nine months. Another great example of this partnership has been RMAN's work with Flower City Pickers, a group which provides dozens of our requesters with fresh farm produce weekly with the help of our volunteers drivers



CONCLUSIONS

There is clearly both a need for community driven mutual aid efforts, and a desire from folks to participate in this more democratic and non-hierarchical model of aid. The efforts of this organization will doubtless continue over 2021, but in order to do so RMAN must adapt in response to both the needs of the community and also gaps left behind by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Targeted supply drives for hygiene items, food items that mainstream food banks can't provide and SNAP money won't cover, and connecting more folks to organizations fighting for long-term solutions are the paths forward for this group and others like it.

IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

RMAN is a collaborative effort run by individuals affiliated with many different Rochester organizations, and will continue to improve and expand in 2021. It continues to build new connections both with other mutual aid groups in the city, other organizations providing aid, and organizations working to abolish the systems of power that have created the suffering we see today in Rochester.

RESOURCES

https://www.hamiltonproject.org/blog/the_covid_19_crisis_has_already_left_too_many_children_hungry_in_america

<https://www.commongroundhealth.org/data/insights?charts=Social%20Determinants>

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/05/06/the-covid-19-crisis-has-already-left-too-many-children-hungry-in-america/>

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e8769b34812765cff8111f7/t/5eaaf8da80320e177b4b53df/1588263150276/covid_topline_national_WK1.pdf

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html#phase1>