Nonprofits innovate as pandemic poses existential threat to industry

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A young Hartford resident receives a gift card and care package courtesy of the COMPASS Youth Collaborative, a city-based nonprofit.

By Liese Klein
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Forget about figuring out Zoom settings or juggling Google Classroom assignments: The young people served by Hartford's COMPASS Youth Collaborative (CYC) are worried about their families getting enough food, staying safe, paying rent and washing their clothes as the coronavirus pandemic changes daily living in Connecticut and across the country.

Jacquelyn Santiago, CEO, COMPASS Youth Collaborative

"We know that these kids are struggling with things that are out of their control," said CYC CEO Jacquelyn Santiago. She listed challenges facing her kids including poverty, health issues, violence, family instability and lack of educational resources.

"Now that we have Covid-19, we are still dealing with those issues, but we've added yet another layer of trauma and another layer of feeling like they're abandoned."

The nonprofit has responded to the crisis by quickly adapting its services to available communication channels. Case-management services normally provided in schools now take the form of phone check-ins and counseling. Homework help that CYC staff members normally offer in Hartford Public Schools classrooms now takes place online, often on computers the nonprofit has helped to distribute to families in need.

Sondra Lintelmann Dellaripa, Harvest Development Group

Most urgently, young people are getting direct help to pay for food and necessities with gift cards dropped off at their homes by CYC employees.

All industries are being impacted by the coronavirus, but nonprofits may have the most at stake, since many deliver critical services within the community but also operate on thin budgets.

Greater Hartford nonprofits are searching for counseling and financial lifelines as revenue sources dry up amid the broader economic downturn.

How long the partial shut down of the state's economy lasts will likely determine the fate of many tax-exempt organizations.

In the meantime, in order to navigate these difficult times, nonprofits must adapt quickly to the changing circumstances, much like CYC has done, said Sondra Lintelmann-Dellaripa of the Harvest Development Group, a Middletown-based nonprofit consulting firm.

CYC employees prepare laptops for Hartford students learning from home amid COVID-19.

"You're an organization that's running into the storm," Lintelmann-Dellaripa said of nonprofits that provide basic human services. "You continue to reach out, you expand on your communication, you let people know what you're doing. The trust that you've built in your community, you now can get them to engage with you and support you."

Meher Shulman, Associate Director, Nonprofit Support Program, Hartford Foundation

Nonprofits that aren't directly involved in essential services need to work to stay relevant right now, Lintelmann-Dellaripa added. For example, a science museum can offer daily videos or postings that directly relate to home-schooling.

"If you can't find a way to be relevant in this, the last thing you want to do is just start ignoring what's happening and continuing on. See tions around you," she added.

In one case, an art therapy group in Connecticut has started developing programs for front-line responders, allowing it to contribute to anti-virus efforts and stay active.

"You're opening up a new community that maybe never knew you before," Lintelmann-Dellaripa said. "When all this passes, now they have an appreciation for you. Now they're part of your community.

"Nonprofits need to just take a deep breath — don't look beyond the end of April right now," she added. "Focus on either being needed, being relevant or being supportive. If you run through those three scenarios and you still come up blank, then you need to think about what is our purpose and why are we actually doing this."

Heads above water

As a sector, local nonprofits are struggling to respond to the ever-shifting challenges presented by the coronavirus and the resulting disruptions, said Meher Shulman, associate director of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's nonprofit support program.

"The sense we get right now is that boards and staff of nonprofits are just trying to keep their heads above water and do crisis management," Shulman said. "Most nonprofits are small and scrappy, but most of them don't have cash reserves so they don't really have a cushion when things go awry."

John Horak, Director, TANGO

The Hartford Foundation is trying to help with more flexibility in grant-making in addition to setting up a virus relief fund that allocated $1 million on April 6 in its first round to 13 agencies. In addition, nonprofits are being offered counseling and support as they deal with funding cuts and program challenges.

One silver lining, Shulman said, is that national surveys have found a slight bump in individual giving to some organizations since the crisis hit.

"People want to help at this time and realize that nonprofits are in greater need than they have been ... and maybe they're increasing their donations," she said.

However, individual and corporate donors can't save Connecticut's nonprofit sector in its current weakened condition if the crisis worsens, said John Horak, director of TANGO, a nonprofit education and consulting firm with offices in Farmington.

"We're in survival mode for the next 60 to 90 days," Horak said.

Without a cash infusion from the state, many Connecticut nonprofits will soon face financial collapse.

"If there's ever a rainy-day emergency I think this is one," Horak said. "Give these organizations breathing space."

TANGO is offering emergency consulting to nonprofits seeking to lower costs and access business resources to improve revenue, said CEO and Founder Rollin Schuster.

"These nonprofits in good times are financially strapped," Schuster said, adding that he sees agencies in the caregiver and mental health fields at highest risk due to labor concerns. "It's hard to find employees in good times, it's hard to keep employees. You layer a health risk onto that, ... it's a challenge."

Shifting landscape

Employment issues during the crisis are creating a "tsunami" of calls to the Hartford office of Pro Bono Partnership, which provides legal assistance to nonprofits, according to Priya Morganstern, director of the group's Connecticut program. In some cases, laying off employees in the short term might make sense so they can claim unemployment, but those same workers may lose health insurance.

Rollin Schuster, CEO and Founder, TANGO

"There are a lot of strategic decisions that need to be made by our clients," Morganstern said.

Many nonprofits are also seeking help with getting out of contracts for fundraisers and galas, with thousands of dollars held in deposits by hotels and other vendors that could be used for more basic needs.

Others need help with altering the terms of grants as the virus impacts program offerings.

"We're trying to help our clients figure that out with their funders," Morganstern said. "Generally, we try to see if funders are willing to let nonprofits convert that money to general operating support," Morganstern said.

The Pro Bono Partnership has also been helping nonprofits navigate the wilds of the federal Paycheck Protection Program, which provides loans to small enterprises and certain nonprofits, and may serve as a capital lifeline over the next few months.

Volunteers at law firms throughout the region have maintained their commitment to help nonprofits through Pro Bono Partnership in recent weeks, Morganstern said.

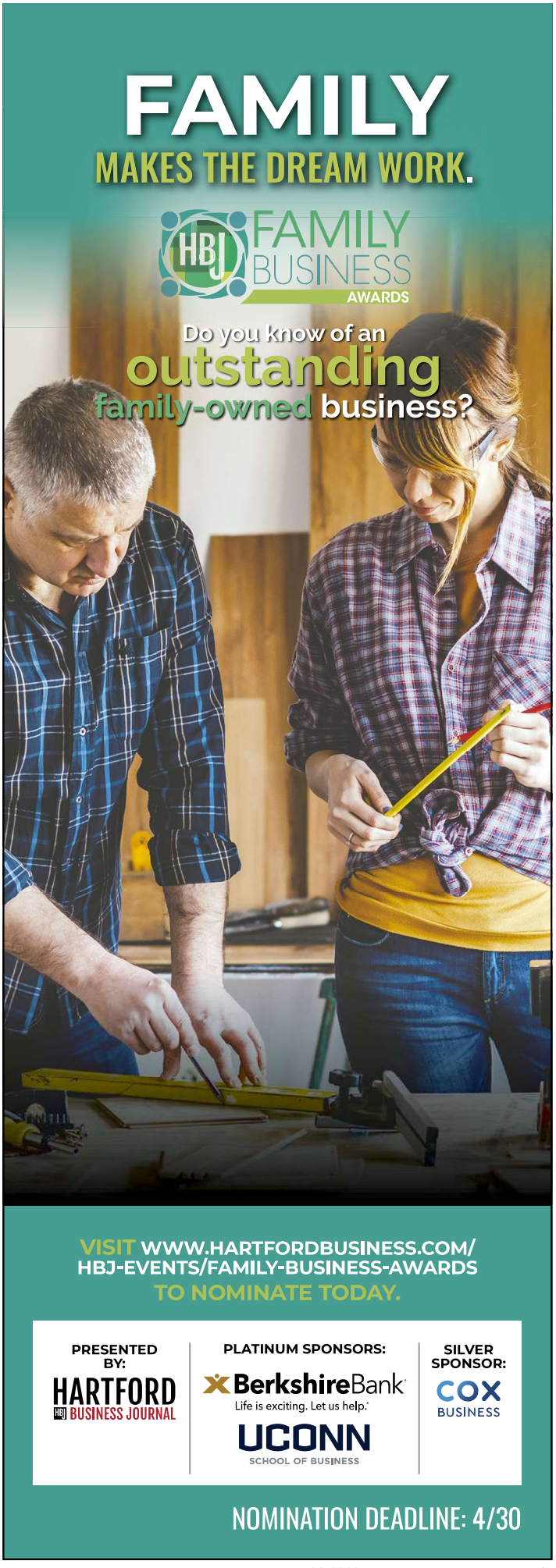
"They are still stepping up to the plate to help our clients," she said. "It's so gratifying and moving to see the support that we have from the volunteers."

Leadership in crisis

As head of COMPASS Youth Collaborative, Santiago said she is dealing with concern for both her clients and staff. The nonprofit's 50 employees face a shortage of protective gear as they make community visits, in addition to the challenges of stress and burnout.

"It's an interesting time to be a leader," Santiago said. She's urgently investigating federal and state relief programs while keeping an eye on her workers' mental and physical health.

With a lean $3 million annual budget, Santiago has had to call on the agency's funders for additional cash to keep her staff employed and supply necessary safety equipment. With help from the Hartford Foundation, United Way and Dalio Philanthropies, COMPASS is making do — for now.

Priya Morganstern, Director, CT Pro Bono Partnership

"The greatest motivator is that we know that we are the ones doing the work that no one can do or would want to do," Santiago said. "We address some very difficult situations. There are few agencies that do this work with these kids, and if they don't have us, who do they have?"