

Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell COVID-19 Response

"Years of research in child development have identified eight essential requirements for kids to become happy, successful adults," according to Harley Rotbart, MD, a nationally-renowned parenting expert and vice chair emeritus of Pediatrics at Children's Colorado.ⁱ

These basic needs are: 1) Security, including food; 2) Stability from family and community; 3) Consistency; 4) Emotional Support 5) Love; 6) Education; 7) Positive role models; and 8) Structure. For the low-income children and teens served by our Boys & Girls Club, most – if not all – of these needs have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis.

These young people already live in households that experience a disproportionate amount of stress due to food insecurity and uncertainty with regards to finances. This stress, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis due to job losses and reduced wages, holds the potential for negative outcomes long beyond the immediate crisis situation. Increased poverty is often associated with increased rates of family conflict, child neglect and abuse, and domestic violence.ⁱⁱ These circumstances, called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), can lead to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, although our doors are temporarily closed to our Club members, our staff are doing everything possible to address the basic needs of our youth and their families. Our unique position as the largest youth serving agency in the city of Lowell and our extensive partnerships allow us serve many of the families and youth who are most vulnerable during this crisis. The trust our community and member families have in our Boys & Girls Club leadership and staff allows us to help those who need us most.

Steps the Club has taken to date to reduce the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on our Club members and families:

- Addressing food insecurity through our Healthy Meals program – The Club immediately began offering “Grab and Go” meals to replace our standard dinner served each weekday at the Club. Upon hearing from families that one meal a day was not enough, and that weekend meals were a concern, we began serving 2 meals per person per day, and providing family care packages with food that families can prepare at home on Fridays. Additionally, we opened our meal service to all youth in Lowell, engaging our partners within the community to help spread the word. We are currently serving over 450 meals per day and we are mission focused to continue to meet this need as it continues to grow.
- Offering stability and positive role models – Many of our Club members tell us that the Club is the place where they feel safest. Knowing this, our Club staff began outreach to our members to check in and let them know the Club is still here for them. This outreach, which takes place via email and phone calls, has allowed us to gather information about their greatest concerns, and guide them to the resources the Club and other agencies are providing to help them

during this difficult time. Our goal is that each Club member received a phone call once per week from one of our staff members throughout the duration of the school closures.

- Providing consistent, caring messages - Our staff has been regularly posting video messages and activity ideas to social media outlets. These messages let the Club members know we miss them, are thinking about them, and care about them. The hope is that these connections with the staff that our young people rely on for positive adult interaction will minimize the distance they feel from these adults. During the past few weeks, more and more Club members have followed us on social media and tuning into these messages.
- Meaningful program engagement from a distance – Boys & Girls Club programming is designed to supplement the education students receive at school, but also to provide a place for connection, exploring new interests and building new skills. While we are closed, our Club is providing programming options virtually, such as group meetings using Zoom, activity challenges and craft instructions via YouTube and other social media, and other ideas for things to do while at home on our web site. Additionally, as many of our members may not have supplies for crafting, building and experimenting at home, we are sending activity kits with basic supplies home with meals on Fridays.

The Need

The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell is funded primarily through individuals, corporations and private foundations, and we are grateful for the commitment of our community to our youth. Even though our doors are closed for the time being, some expenses are increasing, as the labor, food costs, and packaging supplies associated with providing 2 “Grab and Go” meals each day has gone up and providing care packages and activity kits are an added service that we do not normally incur. When our program staff are not busy helping to prep, package and hand out meals, they are creating virtual content, calling Club members and families, and posting social media content to meet our member’s needs.

Monetary donations as well as in-kind donations of items from our supply drive list will help ensure that the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell can continue to be a resource to our community’s most vulnerable youth and families during this most difficult time.

ⁱ “What every child needs: The eight things kids need to thrive.” Children’s Hospital Colorado.
<https://www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/parenting/parenting-articles/what-children-need/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/what-coronavirus-will-do-kids/608608/>

ⁱⁱ What the Economic Downturn Means for Children, Youth and Families.” American Psychological Association.
<https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/economy>

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences.”
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/aces/fastfact.html>