

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF GREATER LOWELL

WORKERS STILL SUPPORT FAMILIES AMID PANDEMIC



PHOTOS COURTESY BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF GREATER LOWELL

Greater Lowell Boys & Girls Club staff members Sally Thayer, left, and Devonna Williams stand near tables full of bagged meals set for kids to grab and go.

Providing meals, care packages and virtual support

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LOWELL » The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell has been closed due to the threat of coronavirus since March 23 and will remain closed until Lowell Public Schools reopen.

Gov. Charlie Baker has suggested schools across the state could open back up by May 4. Joe Hungler, the local Boys & Girls Club executive director, called it an optimistic timeline.

"The more people social distance and follow the other directives like hand washing, the sooner we can all get back together," Hungler said.

In the meantime, most of the club's staff continues to work.

According to Hungler, the local Boys & Girls Club is preparing, packaging and handing out two "grab and go meals" per child each day, Hungler said. That equates to nearly 500 meals per day. Before the coronavirus pandemic took hold, that number was just under 300.

"While we do receive a reimbursement from the (Department of Education) of about 85% of the food cost for these meals, additional staff time, paper products and increased



Greater Lowell Boys & Girls Club staff Kara Danas and Luis Casiano have 'grab and go' meals ready for kids outside the club for pickup.

number of meals will add to our expenses for this program while the club is closed and offering grab and go meals," Hungler said.

The club is also distributing activity kits and family care packages on Fridays. The goal is to distribute 100 each week.

According to Hungler, the activity kits are created through donated supplies and individual donations. They cost approx-

imately \$5 per kit outside of the donated supplies.

"The first week we scrounged for what we had around the club, then we did art supplies," Hungler said. "This week will focus on literacy: reading, writing, drawing. We will have an act of kindness challenge to write letters to nurses, seniors in transitional living, etc."

Food and other items in the

family care packages are also handed out and sourced through the Merrimack Valley Food Bank and individual donations, according to Hungler. Each bag costs about \$20.

Hungler said he has heard stories passed his way of multiple youth crying when hearing the Boys & Girls Club would be closing its doors during the pandemic.

FAMILIES » 6A

Families

FROM PAGE 3A

“Our members often talk about the club as a safe haven and they talk about our staff as adults who they can trust to help them with problems,” Hungler said. “As everyone’s anxiety rises during the pandemic, it is hard to lose those folks that you trust the most.”

To combat the gap, club staff are creating and posting virtual content, connecting with members and

families by phone and email, and hosting online meetings and learning opportunities for teens. Virtual programming and connections take place on social media channels, Zoom and on the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell website.

According to Hungler, mentoring is taking place by phone with parental permission.

The goal is for each Club member to receive a phone call from a staff member once a week.

Hungler referenced the Boys & Girls Clubs of

America’s marketing campaign, “Whatever It Takes to Build Great Futures.”

“During times like this, hope matters more than ever,” Hungler said. “Hope for a better future is a big part of what the club provides during normal times. It is easy to lose hope during a crisis and it is our role to be there for our members to let them know we can get through this.” Those interested in helping the club can visit their website at lbgc.org.

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