The Warriors Among Us

Eastern Bank Foundation’s annual Community Advocacy Awards celebrate and recognize local community leaders and their teams who give meaning to themselves to address vital needs. During COVID-19, and in other times of great need, it’s our nonprofit sector that picks us up and moves us forward. In 2021, many organizations answered the call in extraordinary ways to make a difference in the lives of our neighbors. We’re proud to recognize a number of leaders who have been at the forefront of addressing inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. Read more about these COVID-19 Warriors.

INCREASING FOOD ACCESS

Racial inequities in food insecurity and gaps in food access are growing, alarmingly. The Greater Boston Food Bank says one in four adults in Massachusetts were experiencing food insecurity at the start of this year. Among Massachusetts residents, 58 percent of Latinx adults, 49 percent of Black adults, 46 percent of Asian adults, 24 percent of White adults and 42 percent of adults with children experience food insecurity. The New Hampshire Food Bank estimates that one in seven Granite Staters do not know where their next meal will come from, with an additional 55,000 people now food insecure as a result of the pandemic.

Merrimack Valley Food Bank, led by Executive Director Amy Foss, is one of four food banks in Massachusetts serving food pantries, shelters and meal programs that in turn, serve individuals and families. Throughout the pandemic, the Merrimack Valley Food Bank never stopped its services and immediately adjusted its distribution model. It delivered food to COVID-19 positive residents unable to leave home due to quarantining and isolation requirements, and continued to operate seasonal food distribution programs, deepening its community partnerships in the process. In 2021, it stepped up again and nourished 40% more people with nearly 5 million pounds of food and 3.8 million meals.

Healthy Waltham, led by Executive Director Myriam Michel, scaled up rapidly to meet the overwhelming demand for its services, serving 1,000 families almost weekly – an over 900 percent increase – and offering delivery services to vulnerable seniors. In 2021, it distributed more than 1.3 million pounds of food to over 35,000 families, and became a trusted and relied upon partner for vulnerable families and service organizations in Waltham and beyond.

Gather New Hampshire, led by Executive Director Deb Anthony, has served Seacoast residents facing hunger for 200 years. When COVID-19 struck, Gather innovated its programming to meet its community needs, serving over three times as many meals per week with more than 50% fewer volunteers. Gather introduced initiatives such as mobile markets to deliver food to different towns and an online ordering system for people who were uncomfortable using the agency’s food pantry.

EASING CHILD CARE SCARCITY

The pandemic has also laid bare the flaws in our child education and care ecosystem. Since COVID-19, 13% of licensed child care programs in Boston alone shut down. Though there are systemic changes needed to revamp the child care system, organizations like the Old Colony Y, a bedrock of support in the South Shore, mobilized food, housing, child care, and health support to families, first responders, essential personnel and vulnerable populations during the pandemic. Led by President & CEO Vincent J. Marturano, it distributed nearly 5,000 meals per week, and housed 60 families experiencing homelessness. Its team provided emergency child care for hundreds of children, collaborated with schools to develop remote learning centers, and continued

serving vaccine clinics in vulnerable communities, including Brockton, Chelsea, Lowell, Dorchester, Mattapan and Roslindale. Door-to-door canvassing, phone banking and relational organizing drove GYTvaX’s campaign-style approach. It vaccinated more than 8,000 people, with over 80% representing communities of color.

ADDRESSING VACCINATION INEQUITIES

To address disparities surrounding the vaccine, organizations took different approaches to getting communities vaccinated. They focused on getting accurate and culturally competent information into our communities through vaccine education, and providing access in pop-up clinics at churches, civic centers and elsewhere to help people get the vaccine.

Cape Abilities, led by Interim President & CEO Kim McElholm, provides enriching, high quality services through educational, community and employment resources to empower people of all abilities to live meaningful lives. It was on the forefront of providing vaccine access equitably, partnering with local organizations to operate smaller clinics on Cape Cod. Cape Abilities vaccinated community members through multiple COVID-19 vaccination clinics and a partnership with Whole Health Pharmacy.

SUPPORTING BUSINESSES OF COLOR

In Massachusetts, the annual unmet demand for capital among entrepreneurs of color is at least $574 million, and COVID-19 required many of these businesses to pivot quickly. Solutions were created to ensure technical assistance, capital and other resources assisted these businesses.

Black Economic Council of Massachusetts (BECMA), led by President and CEO Segun Idowu, successfully advocated for direct resources to Black businesses to ensure their survival and stability during the pandemic, lobbied the Commonwealth to increase spending with Black businesses, and equitably distribute grants to minority firms, and developed a blueprint for dismantling systemic racism in Massachusetts. Along with other Coalition for an Equitable Economy partners, BECMA advanced a small business ecosystem centered around shared leadership and equitable access to capital, business networks, education, technical support and other resources for Black, Latinx, immigrant and low income small business owners in Massachusetts.

Small Business Strong, the development of which was led by Yvonne Garcia in addition to her role as Chief of Staff to the Chairman and CEO of State Street Corporation where she is also Global Head of Communications, helped Massachusetts small businesses in urgent need of resources from the devastating impact of the pandemic and especially those most affected women and businesses of color. Free resources were provided to businesses, including access to functional spécialists and business advisers for personalized advice, an online database for information on financing, accessing public grants, digital transformation and more, and on-demand COVID-19 Rapid Antigen tests. These last 18 months have shown us there is nothing greater than the human spirit to build communities for everyone to prosper. We have seen organizations come together in support of their communities and people in need, pivoting their working models to address unprecedented emergency demand for their services. As Thanksgiving approaches let’s give thanks to all our frontline workers and to all our COVID-19 Warriors. Please join us in celebrating Eastern’s 2021 Community Advocacy Award Honorees.

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