

Ames's Own CARES Act

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Whose job is it to care for those without food and housing?

Our nation and our society have competing answers: Either the individual is or all of us or some combination of the two are. According to the so-called American Dream, hard work is guaranteed to pay off for whomever invests the time and the energy. Many of us, though, know that some of the hungriest and the least-housed people in our community are among the hardest working. Holding three part-time jobs at minimum wage is exhausting and insufficient for a "living wage" but often that is the only option for people who have not had the opportunity of a good education, the unearned advantage of whiteness, or being born in this country.

Sometimes our elected representatives, and the local, state, and federal agencies we charge them to run, offer assistance through subsidized housing, food benefits, and Medicaid. Sometimes all of those get cut. And sometimes our representatives exclude by design. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act has sent many of us a check from the national treasury. It excluded undocumented immigrants and their children, even if those immigrants pay taxes in support of our collective well-being.

Which leaves the rest of us.

When French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he marveled at America's propensity for creating clubs and social groups, be they religious, secular, related to labor, or for fun. In community organizing, such groups are described as mediating institutions: institutions that help their individual members endure, interpret, and celebrate the ups and downs of daily lives. More often than not this leads to doing the same for the communities in which the institutions function. Consider the Ames First United Methodist church starting, and the First Christian church now hosting Food at First, our local food pantry and free meal service. Consider the Ames Ecumenical Housing, founded in the early 1900s by 15 area churches, which maintains 110 apartments for low-income residents of Ames.

Though the last twenty years have seen a substantial decline in such institutions (just ask any Christian pastor or chair of a fraternal organization), they remain an essential part of our social safety net. Even when hobbled by reduced participation and funding, they remain vital compliments and correctives to America's dreams and government. Take, for example, the Covid-19 Emergency Fund for Story County Immigrants.

At the end of March, I saw that United Way of Story County was beginning to serve as a clearinghouse for COVID-19 community resources, including financial assistance for people losing their jobs due to coronavirus closures. I let Anneke Mundel, their community impact director, know that they could list my church's (Ames United Church of Christ) emergency fund

as an option. By the first of April, like-minded institutions had not only joined together through United Way but went public with our decision to specifically address the financial crisis of immigrants in our county because the CARES Act does not care for them. The fund is now comprised of leadership from St. Cecilia Catholic, the Ames Interfaith Refugee Alliance, the Ames Sanctuary Interfaith Partners, AMOS-Ames, Ames United Church of Christ, ACCESS, Bethesda Lutheran Church, Bridges International, Good Neighbor Emergency Assistance, St. Thomas Catholic, as well as United Way. A subset of that leadership processes applications with families, meeting via conference calls weekly to allocate funds, which are sent out by St. Cecilia. As of June 4, the group had received \$72,560 in donations from the community and distributed \$56,224 to the landlords and utilities for 70 households (through 154 separate payments) in our community. (The majority of this work is being done by St. Cecilia member Nancy Heideman, whose heart and energies know no limits.)

If you would like to get involved with the fund as a donor or a coordinator, contact us at story.immigrants.fund@gmail.com. To apply for financial support, go to uwstory.org/covid-19-resources and scroll down to "Help for Immigrants."

What our government has chosen to not do with our tax dollars, our mediating institutions have done with financial gifts above and beyond what we all pay for our nation's welfare. Because those of us on the ground, those of us who intentionally gather with people outside of our families and coworkers, those of us who know how it feels to be held in a net when the seas get rough, also know that when one part of our nation is drowning, all of us are.

If de Tocqueville visited Ames today, I would be proud to point not only to our mediating institutions, but their insistence that acts of care must cover all.

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