Bucks County residents helped

57,837

Bucks County Opportunity Council
2019-2020 ANNUAL REPORT
MISSION STATEMENT

Reduce poverty and partner with our community to promote economic self-sufficiency.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Bucks County Opportunity Council began this year full of plans and promise, and well on its way to accomplishing the ambitious goals set out in our Five-Year Strategic Plan. Never during those arduous planning sessions did we anticipate the COVID-19 crisis, and what would be needed to respond quickly to meet the needs of Bucks County families.

I am proud of our staff and the partners we have in place that switched gears quickly to focus on helping the sheer numbers of those seeking our help—many for the first time in their lives. It is a testament to their skills, resourcefulness, creativity, and most especially their commitment to helping those in need in Bucks County. The first few weeks were exhausting—but we were #BCOC Proud.

Many of the skills we often work to instill in our clients—overcoming obstacles, adaptability, hard work and determination—we needed to model ourselves. There was a lot of creative problem-solving!

In the past few years, hundreds of community partners have attended our “Poverty Simulation” program to experience first-hand how those in need face challenges and confusion as they seek out resources to survive. Ironically, that experience became the new reality for many in our shared community when a loss of a job meant unfamiliar paperwork, no income, and little information on finding resources. They turned to BCOC in record numbers, as outlined in this Annual Report.

My hope is that the pandemic has changed people’s views of poverty. I believe that people don’t choose to be in poverty. Poverty is a lack of resources. As noted author and speaker John A. Powell of UC-Berkley has stated many times: “The world we live in equally distributes talent, but does not equally distribute opportunity.”

Creating opportunity, advocating policy changes to help those in poverty, strengthening our community—this is Community Action. We will work to keep issues of poverty, homelessness, and hunger in front of our political leaders and community.

I can assure you that, long after the challenges of this pandemic are over, we will be here.

Erin A. Lukoss,
CEO/Executive Director
When COVID-19 hit, BCOC responded!

The Food Program

BCOC staff, community partners, donors and our dedicated volunteers worked to literally put food on the table for a record number of new families when COVID-19 hit. Food boxes delivered, pounds weighed, and other statistics only begin to tell the story of families whose lives have been uprooted.

The Food Program provides public and privately donated food to over 60 food pantries and distribution sites throughout Bucks County. In addition, as the lead food agency in the County, BCOC administers The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) for seniors.

Our Fresh Connect Program, which distributed fresh fruits and vegetables weekly in Bristol, Ottsville and Warminster, morphed into emergency food distribution centers as we worked to accommodate new families in line each week. Our weekly visits grew from 400 pre-COVID, to 1,200 families by June 30. We met the need with the help of many generous donations.

Fresh Connect is a collaboration of BCOC, Philabundance, Rolling Harvest Food Rescue and St. Mary Medical Center, with generous funding from the United Way of Bucks County.

In May, 2020, BCOC launched the emergency food box delivery program in response to COVID-19, to ensure that those who are home-bound, disabled or elderly, and unable to leave their homes to go to a food pantry or Fresh Connect, received contact-free delivery. Emergency food boxes are packed by volunteers at the HELP Center, using donated food that was given through food drives. Volunteers use their own vehicles to deliver emergency food boxes to 40-50 homes each week.
OUR COVID-19 RESPONSE BEGAN IN MARCH:

Bi-monthly food drives were run from BCOC’s Doylestown office, and the community stepped up with generosity beyond our expectations, donating over 26,000 pounds of food. In addition, 21,000 pounds of food were collected by Neshaminy Warwick Presbyterian Church and 10,000 pounds by Doylestown Borough.

- BCOC purchased thousands of pounds of shelf-stable food and paired it with donated food to create 2,500 emergency boxes.
- The National Guard delivered 23 pallets of FEMA meals to Bucks County, and BCOC re-distributed it through established channels and to Street Outreach and homeless volunteer organizations.
- There were 4,519 visits to our monthly distribution of fresh produce to Central Bucks School District and Centennial School Districts, filling a gap in high-need areas of the County.
- At-home food distribution to seniors, those with disabilities and others unable to leave their homes, because of quarantine, for example, served 372 families.
- A total of 4,768 food boxes were delivered to income eligible seniors through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program. CSFP works to improve the health of low-income seniors at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA foods. The Sheriff’s Office and National Guard Civil Air Patrol helped distribute the food in the early weeks of the pandemic.

THE HELP CENTER INCREASING OUR CAPACITY TO DISTRIBUTE FOOD

BCOC, in partnership with St. Mary Medical Center and the United Way of Bucks County, with support from Penn Community Bank, launched the HELP Center, a new, 8,000 square foot space for a healthy eating and living initiative. The opening of the new center on April 27 was expedited when the COVID-19 outbreak began. The HELP Center has improved the coordination of hunger relief efforts in Bucks County. In the early days of COVID-19, thousands of emergency food boxes were assembled there with help from the National Guard Civil Air Patrol.

The new site, located in Bristol Borough, improves BCOC’s capacity to provide food and other necessities to residents county-wide. Items are distributed through food pantries, Fresh Connect free mobile farm markets, and existing distribution points. The HELP Center increases our food storage volume, enabling us to get more food onto the tables of families who need it.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Our Emergency Services Program was inundated with calls from people looking for financial assistance and guidance, especially when COVID-19 hit and many lost their jobs. BCOC staff and coaches offered emotional support, financial assistance, and guidance to other available resources. Working with the Family Service Association, BCOC helped 15 families move out of the Bucks County Homeless Shelter to reduce its capacity during the pandemic. Other BCOC emergency services provided throughout the year included:

- 2163 Food store gift cards
- 27 Laptops
- 448 RENTAL ASSISTANCE
- 60 households
- TEMPORARY LODGING
- 152 households
- PERMANENT HOUSING PLACEMENTS
- 183 households
- TRANSPORTATION ASSISTANCE
- 230 households
- UTILITY PAYMENTS
PROFILE OF 2019 GRADUATES
ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY PROGRAM

The Economic Self-Sufficiency Program (ES) assists low income families to move from poverty to economic independence by helping them create an action plan that often (83% of the time) includes acquiring additional education/training that leads to higher-paying jobs and a career path. Each ES client has the one-on-one guidance of a coach that supports their efforts, holds them accountable for progress, and steers them toward additional resources to help them reach their goals.

All ES graduates have jobs that can support their families without government assistance, healthcare, safe and affordable housing, reliable transportation, and a balanced household budget.

GRADUATES
15 graduates
37 people /12 children
345 grads since 1997

AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME AT ENROLLMENT
$21,151

- NINE received welfare and/or a housing subsidy, an additional THREE were eligible for subsidies but not receiving them;
- SIX were unemployed, and NINE worked for less than a family-sustaining wage.

AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME AT GRADUATION
$55,133
an increase of $33,982

32 months AVERAGE TIME ON PROGRAM

EMPLOYMENT
3 improved employment
12 found new employment

EMPLOYMENT
- Accounting Assistant
- Advertising Account Manager
- Administrative Case Aide
- Esthetician
- Insurance Sales and Notary
- IT Consultant
- Lead Detail Specialist
- Market Development Manager
- Nurse Aide
- Pharmacy Tech and Deli Clerk
- Practical Nurse
- Professional Organizer
- Program Manager
- Registered Nurse
- Social Worker
Among the new graduates of BCOC’s ES Program are, (left to right) Brian, Lydia, Ginette, Emily, Evangeline, Kevin and Susan.
The use of volunteers was suspended for a brief time last spring during the onset of COVID-19, but with recommended safety protocols established, volunteers stepped back up in a big way. A large number of volunteers assist within the Food Program, especially Fresh Connect, but others work in VITA (helping to prepare income tax paperwork for low to moderate income clients), on our Board of Directors, and with special events and projects.

When COVID-19 hit, volunteers helped pack emergency food boxes at our new HELP Center, and volunteers use their own vehicles to deliver 40-50 emergency food boxes to the homebound each week.

Lack of public transportation in Bucks County makes it difficult for those on very limited incomes to get to work, school or medical appointments. For many of our Economic Self-Sufficiency clients, a car is the difference between poverty and the path to independence, opening up doors to opportunity. Jessica was among the 9 BCOC clients this year who received a used car in good, working condition through the Wheelz2Work Program, bringing the total number of cars donated to 60. Each donated car is inspected to be in good working order. Special thanks to BBack Car Care in Doylestown for lending their skills to support the program.

WE COULDN’T DO IT WITHOUT YOU!

VOLUNTEERS

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WEATHERIZATION PROGRAM

The weatherization program is fully operational again after a brief hiatus because of COVID-19, when it was not possible to enter people’s homes under safety guidelines to inspect for program eligibility and participation. Despite the setback, in 2019-20 FY, 259 households were assisted with home repairs and energy conservation projects that reduced the utility costs for people on fixed and low-incomes.

WEATHERIZATION PROGRAM

2,846
VOLUNTEERS

113,152
HOURS OF SERVICE

WEATHERIZATION PROGRAM

The weatherization program is fully operational again after a brief hiatus because of COVID-19, when it was not possible to enter people’s homes under safety guidelines to inspect for program eligibility and participation. Despite the setback, in 2019-20 FY, 259 households were assisted with home repairs and energy conservation projects that reduced the utility costs for people on fixed and low-incomes.
RECORD NUMBER OF LOW-INCOME TAXPAYERS ASSISTED DESPITE COVID-19 QUARANTINE

VITA PROGRAM

Despite the pandemic forcing the VITA Program to curtail face-to-face appointments, the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program exceeded its goal for the 2019 tax year. Even though the physical sites closed four weeks early, the volunteers assisted low-income people to prepare and file their returns, using non-traditional, contact-free means, and through My Free Taxes.

In total this fiscal year, clients received $1,141,549 in refunds, in addition to over $676,345 in tax credits. The average gross income of the clients was $23,355. VITA continued to help clients beyond the FY this year because of IRS extensions.

Over the last 16 years, BCOC volunteers have helped over 13,000 families save over $25 million in refunds, tax credits and fees. Money saved stays in the local economy as low income families generally use their refunds on essentials such as food, clothing and school supplies, for example.

Over 50 volunteers make this program possible and new volunteers are always needed. Tax preparers receive training and need to pass an exam each year to be certified. Other volunteers assist in support roles such as greeting visitors and scheduling. The program is sponsored by the IRS, and supported locally by Bucks County Foundation, BB&T, and First National Bank & Trust Co. of Newtown.

1,431 TAX RETURNS PREPARED

$676,345 IN TAX CREDITS

$1,141,549 IN REFUNDS

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TO FIGHT POVERTY

Speaking during a recent Bucks County Supervisor’s meeting, Commissioner Diane Marseglia pointed out that “Pennsylvania is the only state in the East that has not raised its minimum wage.” BCOC staff see the results of that inaction every day as people in our community work minimum wage jobs, sometimes more than one, and still can’t afford to live safely and comfortably in Bucks County, the third wealthiest county in Pennsylvania. Often they are working without sick leave or health benefits.

Among the goals of BCOC are to increase the awareness of poverty in our community and work with partners to reduce its effects. We are grateful to Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick, who along with his staff, attended our “Poverty Simulation” program this year. The Bucks County Women’s Advocacy Coalition and the Episcopal Diocese also experienced the program.

Tammy Schoonover, BCOC’s Chief Program Officer, is a nationally certified “Bridges Out of Poverty” trainer. In total, BCOC held five Poverty Simulations, attended by 285 community members. An additional 132 people attended “Bridges Out of Poverty” workshops, and 45 of them continued to engage through Morning Conversations that followed.

This year, Erin Lukoss, CEO/Executive Director, was invited to join the community-based work group convened by the PA Department of Human Services. She is a member of the Commissioner’s Transition team, Human Services Sub-Committee.

U.S. Senator Bob Casey, PA Secretary of the Department of Human Services Teresa Miller, and State Senator Maria Collett visited Fresh Connect sites to see first-hand what is being done to help provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the food insecure in Bucks County.

In addition, BCOC is the lead agency for the Hunger Nutrition Coalition in Bucks County. Heather Foor, BCOC’s Director of Client Services, convenes HNC hunger relief partners who are working to ensure food security and access to healthy nutritious food for all county residents. HNC also holds an open-to-the-public Hunger Forum and conducts a county-wide Hunger Survey every other year to identify needs and develop solutions.
PILOT PROJECT HELPS THOSE LEAVING THE PRISON SYSTEM TO FIND HOUSING/JOBS

The Housing Opportunities for Re-Entry Participants pilot program (HORP), designed to assist clients, post-incarceration, to establish permanent, stable housing, find employment and/or training, and access various resources, has met with early success.

To date, HORP has been successful in housing seven clients, who are working with Re-Entry Stability Coach, Jaclyn Buchanan, toward self-sufficiency to increase their chances of leaving the prison system behind for good. BCOC partners with Bucks County Probation and Parole Department and the Bucks County Department of Corrections to identify potential clients and assist in their release from the Bucks County Correctional Facility.

Prior to HORP, inmates at BCCF would have to remain in jail for longer periods of time than they were sentenced due to homelessness and lack of support from friends or family.

The program is funded by a grant from PA Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE) of the PA Housing Finance Agency. Additional funding has been secured to continue the program and accept new participants.

Family Service Association of Bucks County partners with BCOC for the program, working with clients who have a history of substance use and/or mental health disorders. The HORP program addresses these issues by engaging the clients in treatment and case management support to obtain and maintain their goals of self-sufficiency.

BEST PILOT PROGRAM ASSISTS FAMILIES FACING EVICTION

The Bucks Eviction Stability for Tenants (BEST) was a 3-month pilot project created to assist vulnerable families and individuals facing eviction in Bucks County by providing free legal services and social services supports to avoid eviction and the housing instability it causes.

The goal of the program was to prevent people from becoming homeless. Collaborative partners of this project included Legal Aid of Southeastern PA, Bucks County Bar Association, Falls Township District Court, United Way of Bucks County, and Bucks County Department of Housing Services.

The program provided financial assistance to prevent eviction and offered the long-term strategy of BCOC’s Economic Self-Sufficiency Program to prevent future instability and to create opportunities for economic independence. BCOC assisted 15 households with eviction prevention funds.

Helping participants find jobs can be challenging since some have limited work history or lack appropriate paperwork. They often need to apply for IDs, birth certificates, and replacement social security cards. Employers may be hesitant to hire people with a criminal record, and landlords may also be hesitant to rent their properties to them. BCOC staff develop relationships with potential landlords to facilitate housing and work on basic needs like transportation, food, and clothing for work. The HORP program is one of second chances and with support these participants are making life changes for good.
**Consolidated Statement of Activities**

**Year Ended June 30, 2020**

**FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT**

**Program Operations 29%**

**Client Financial Assistance 63%**

**Administrative 8%**

**BCOC STAFF**

Jacqueline Akers
Eileen Alibillar
Malik Bennett
Owen Beuerle
Yakini Blandford
Jaclyn Buchanan
Daniele Clemons
Jennifer Couture-Swarner
Rebecca Craven
Joseph Cuozzo
Christine DeGuzman
Melissa Demjanczuk
Dennis Denard
Kathleen Dorrian
April Ettinger
Mary Finch
Erika Flayer
Heather Foer
Phyliss Gotschalk
Sara Jane Hamilton
Patricia Hovis
Kari Howatt
Allen Johnson
Sarah Johnson
Stacy Kaiser
Sharon Klein
Chris Krosner
Erin Lukoss
Jennifer Massinger
Connie McGarvey
Heidi Miller
Amanda Musselman
Angela Nutter
Ashley Pennington
Sharon Reed
Deborah Rosenberg
Gary Ryan
Tammy Schoonover
Faith Sheehan
Kendra Transue
Briana Walsh
Erin Waters
Patricia Wensel
Michal Willkerson
Nicole Yerkes
Elizabeth Zbinden

**OUR FOOD DISTRIBUTION PARTNERS**

**WE COULDN’T DO IT WITHOUT YOU!**

Food Program provides public and privately-donated food to over 60 food pantries and distribution sites throughout Bucks County. As the lead food agency in the county, BCOC administers the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the State Food Purchase program, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program Senior Food Boxes.

**FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT**

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Bucks County Opportunity Council, Inc. is a non-profit organization under section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code. BCOC is committed to provide equal opportunities without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, sexual orientation, national origin, handicap, or disability.