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# Collective Impact in Emergency Response

A Case Study of Milwaukee's COVID-19 Civic Response Team

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# Collective Impact in Emergency Response

## A Case Study of Milwaukee's COVID-19 Civic Response Team

*By Paul Schmitz*

Milwaukee's COVID-19 response has been a remarkable mobilization of resources and organizations to address needs for shelter, food, testing, Internet connection, and more. Necessity has forced such collective efforts in many cities, but Milwaukee's may be unique in the civic architecture that has been built and the system changes being pursued. Among the principal ingredients have been a community foundation committed to practicing community leadership and racial equity; a cradle-to-career initiative pivoting to lend staff capacity and skills at facilitation, data management, and project management; and the relationships and experience the United Way, local government, and other groups brought from previous collective impact efforts. Building on that foundation, the Milwaukee (MKE) Civic Response Team has rapidly met critical needs while holding a line of sight on longer-term systems change.

The experience of Milwaukee's Civic Response provides a window into a city's comprehensive response to the COVID-19 crisis that also offers six lessons for how collective impacts can be most effective in this environment.

- 1.** Collective impact is a useful approach for organizing and aligning a community during an emergency, especially when there is a solid foundation of relationships and skills.
- 2.** Effective partners center themselves on community need rather than their organizations' interests, and the sense of urgency bypasses the petty.
- 3.** Funders closely collaborate with each other and with providers, and use their role beyond dollars to advance the common agenda.
- 4.** Government closely collaborates with private partners, welcoming influence and coordination over their response, regulations, and deployment of resources.
- 5.** The work is centered in racial equity, particularly targeted universalism.
- 6.** While meeting immediate needs, the teams focus on longer-term systems change.

## Urgent Mobilization

It all began with a phone call. As warnings about COVID-19 escalated, Mayor Tom Barrett called Ellen Gilligan, president and CEO of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation (GMF), hoping to enlist foundations as partners to meet expected needs. Together, they identified six urgent areas of need: physical health, mental health, early childhood education, K-12 education, shelter, and food (economic recovery was later added as a seventh).

The foundation's first step was to establish an emergency response fund. "We knew nonprofits were going to face obstacles and disruption at a time when residents who rely on them needed them the most," explains Gilligan. Across the street from GMF's office, the United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County had also been tracking emerging needs, and set up an emergency fund. Their teams quickly got on the phone and decided that the two funds could be complementary instead of competitive. According to United Way's vice president of Community Impact Nicole Angresano, "We can each do things the other can't, so working together we could really make a greater difference by coordinating across the two funds." Within a week, more than \$1.2 million was raised, and other foundations agreed to join forces to coordinate giving. By June 30, the two funds raised nearly \$6 million, and leveraged millions more from donor partners.

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— Nicole Angresano, Vice President of Community Impact, United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County

Gilligan then began building a backbone staff, tapping Ian Bautista, senior director of Civic Engagement, to coordinate the teams on only his fourth day at GMF. Bautista's past experience as executive director of the Clarke Square Neighborhood Initiative on Milwaukee's south side and president of United Neighborhood Centers of America provided him a unique skill set from grass roots to larger systems change that served him well in coordinating across issues, networks, and neighborhoods.

Gilligan next turned to Milwaukee Succeeds, the city's cradle-to-career initiative housed at GMF. Executive Director Danae Davis and her team had just completed a bold new strategic plan, and realized it would be tone deaf to launch it during a crisis when schools were closing and families were stressed and confused. She decided to pause, pivot, and assign her team to support the Civic Response effort. Dave Celata, her deputy director, became Ian's partner, and the other Milwaukee Succeeds staff used tools and skills gained from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Results Count™ process to begin facilitating the Civic Response teams.

One early and fortuitous decision was partnering individuals from philanthropy and the provider field to co-lead many of the Civic Response teams. These philanthropists have been able to mobilize resources from their peers and use their influence to help advance the agenda. The teams are built around the work, often including government agencies, nonprofits,

philanthropy, universities, and others ready to roll up their sleeves and contribute. These are not advisory committees; rather, they drive action and set the agenda for everyone's work back at the office and in the community. Ian and Dave set up a Slack channel to facilitate immediate communication, wrote up charters for the teams, and began scheduling regular Zoom meetings for each. The Slack channel now has 207 partners across seven teams, and is a source for connection and information each team uses to solve problems in real time—groups have posted needs that were filled within minutes by partners and philanthropists.

Every Friday morning, the team leads—and other systems leaders join—a 75-minute call to coordinate the work. The teams have a template for report outs, sharing their priorities, progress, and needs. The calls also foster collective problem-solving across teams. Elected and systems leaders, including the mayor, the secretary of the Department for Children and Family Services, and the superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, often join the calls to coordinate and seek input for their work.

During the first few weeks, the leadership team identified a number of challenges that would guide the agenda: (1) COVID-19 messaging was not reaching many in the community, especially African American and Latinx residents; (2) supply chains for personal protective equipment (PPE), cleaning supplies, and food were broken; (3) many childcare centers could go under; (4) technology gaps and instructional capacity were a huge barrier for children's learning; (5) emergency shelters were almost filled to capacity; and (6) the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 would exacerbate Milwaukee's extreme racial disparities.

Racial equity has been central to the response. In Milwaukee, like so many cities, African Americans and Latinx residents have disproportionately suffered from COVID-19 and economic losses. The GMF committed to a racial equity agenda in 2016, re-committed to it as

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— Ellen Gilligan, President & CEO, Greater Milwaukee Foundation

the North Star of their recent strategic plan, and Gilligan felt that the Civic Response must be targeted at racial inequities. “The federal response has been universal, which means inequitable, so we are targeting resources at those left behind, whose inequities were laid bare and exacerbated by this crisis.” The recent uprising and protests following the

police murder of George Floyd have emphasized even more that the response must focus on addressing institutional and systemic racism.

# Priorities and Progress

During the first three months, the MKE Civic Response Team achieved a great deal both in meeting immediate needs and identifying necessary systems changes. This effort is moving and evolving so quickly that taking stock at any point is akin to what one participant called “taking snapshots from a speeding train.” In sectors known for extensive and cautious planning, the rapid activation and array of accomplishments are impressive.

## Physical Health

The physical health team has focused primarily on the spread of COVID-19 itself: stop the spread, minimize pain and suffering, facilitate recovery, and build community resilience. Like many cities, the early emphasis was ramping up testing, contact tracing, and PPE supplies. Dr. John Meurer, professor of Pediatrics and Community Health at the Medical College of Wisconsin, co-leads the effort with Clare Reardon from the Milwaukee Health Care Partnership, a consortium of health care systems, community health centers, and public health departments that work to provide health care to the most vulnerable. They anchor the teams in local disaggregated data each week, advise grants of public and private resources, help expand testing and care, and produce bilingual and multicultural communication to promote testing and prevention. Some of the biggest wins so far have been supplying PPE to vulnerable populations and health care systems.

Several businesses stepped up to develop hand sanitizer that could be used for shelters, meal programs, child care centers, and health care facilities. One company, the Hydrite Chemical Co., donated six 55-gallon drums of sanitizer, and the United Way purchased containers and coordinated volunteers to fill and distribute them. Another big opportunity came when Rebel Converting, a producer of industrial wipes, offered material that could produce one million face masks. Gina Stilp, executive director of the Zilber Family Foundation and co-chair of the food team, helped organize the logistics of what became #MaskUpMKE, which included a PR campaign, a staging area at the Fiserv Forum donated by the Milwaukee Bucks, a massive volunteer effort coordinated by United Way, and distribution of masks coordinated by the Medical College of Wisconsin. After assembling one million masks, they have upped the campaign to 3.5 million.



The physical health team believes that addressing social determinants of health, such as poverty, housing, and racism, will be key to improving health, and they are concerned about health care coverage for the rising number of unemployed. Going forward, they are focused on increasing PPE, digital access, and telehealth for vulnerable communities; increasing support for community health centers; increasing behavioral health resources; and increasing Medicaid funding and waivers that will enable better and more flexible care. They are also advocating for more support for the county's Unified Emergency Operations Center that coordinates testing, contact tracing, communications, and distribution of eventual vaccines.

## Mental Health

Early efforts of the mental health field were organized around treatment, particularly ensuring Medicaid waivers for telehealth therapy. The team, though, recognized that COVID-19 and its disproportionate health and economic impacts on communities of color were a source for mass anxiety. According to Martina Gollin-Graves, executive director of Mental Health

*“There is a layer of mistrust between the African American community and institutions they simply do not trust hold their best interests.”*

— Frank Cumberbatch,  
Vice President for Engagement, Bader Philanthropies

America Wisconsin and one of the leads, “We started to hear that people were fearing for their lives because they didn’t have access to PPE, testing, or primary care.” Frank Cumberbatch, vice president for Engagement at Bader Philanthropies and the philanthropic lead, adds, “There is a layer of mistrust between the African American community and institutions they

simply do not trust hold their best interests. Information is either not reaching people or they are being overloaded with confusing messages. This results in people being hesitant to go for care they need.”

The team determined that the best way to address this mistrust is to support trusted community organizers to help people access information and resources. They engaged the community leadership program Public Allies, a handful of community organizers, and residents to work on a strategy focused on calming anxiety through clearer messages and more trusted messengers. Gollin-Graves believes that this work needs to be part of every group’s agenda because, as she says, “Mental health is directly affected by the needs the other teams are fulfilling for our most traumatized residents.” There is also awareness that there will be growing levels of trauma during the recovery as a result of increased depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), deaths, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Gollin-Graves adds, “There will also be a need to care for the essential workers who’ve had to sacrifice for the rest of us.”

They have recommended that foundations and local government focus on three specific needs in the next phase. First, expand mobile outreach services through the county, combining services such as fresh food, legal assistance, and health care. Second, partner community organizers with the city’s 140 new community resource navigators, and equip them with technology to collect data to better deploy resources and support. Finally, they will be working to raise the bar on quality mental health services in the community.

## Early Childhood Education

Milwaukee Succeeds already had a well-organized network committed to early childhood education, so Danae Davis was ready to move this work and engaged Daria Hall from the Wisconsin Partnership as her co-lead. In March, Milwaukee lost one-third of its childcare capacity, and was at risk of losing much more. The group recognized three priorities right away: (1) stabilize the sector, especially for children of color from low-income and working families; (2) meet centers' supply needs for PPE; and (3) support mental health needs of children, parents, and provider staff.

A debate emerged early on about whether to focus primarily on supporting higher quality childcare providers or focusing only on quantity of slots in vulnerable communities. Davis explains, "Quality is our long-term strategy, but we needed to quickly shore up the sector for these families." They leveraged emergency response funds along with a national grant to distribute mini-grants to 140 childcare centers in the five zip codes populated by low-income African American and Latinx families. Half of the funds went to in-home childcare and half to center-based childcare. They also distributed PPE including masks, 75 gallons of sanitizer, 1,000 infrared thermometers, 100,000 diapers, and hundreds of cleaning supplies to local centers.

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— Danae Davis, Executive Director, Milwaukee Succeeds

Staff from the city health department and the Wisconsin Department for Children and Families serve on the team, which enabled coordination in developing guidelines and educating providers on the for safe reopening. The team also partnered with SaintA, a foster care and mental health organization, to provide workshops on supporting the mental health needs of children, families, and staff. Now, as they continue to work to ensure access to PPE and mental health care, they have added another priority: supporting childcare providers to "recover and ultimately thrive in providing for children's academic, social, and developmental needs."

## K-12 Education

Across the country, the shift to virtual learning for students has been an immense struggle for students, families, and teachers. The K-12 team has focused on digital access and literacy, instruction and learning, summer learning, and support for parents. Lauren Feaster, chief of staff at Teach for America, and Clintel Hasan of Milwaukee Succeeds, have helped lead the group which is inclusive of public, charters, and choice schools serving Milwaukee children.

The transition to online schooling clearly exposed the digital divide in our nation and neighborhoods. The Milwaukee Public Schools were able to distribute Google Chromebooks to students, but many lacked connectivity. The United Way and Milwaukee Public Library have each

provided Wi-Fi hot spots to families, and are working to get more out before school begins in fall. They also worked with Milwaukee Public Schools to develop and promote a virtual half-day, four-week summer learning academy that will provide a mix of reading, math, and physical activity to students.

While the school district determines its reopening plan, the group is working proactively on several fronts. First, ensuring digital access so every child has a device and Internet access. Second, working with educators to develop high-quality virtual instruction with new platforms, licenses, curriculums, and professional development. Third, ensuring parents have actionable resources to support children's learning and verifying that schools meet expectations. Finally, confirming schools are prepared to reopen safely with sufficient PPE, cleaning supplies, and routines.

## Shelter

On March 12, Rafael Acevedo, who leads the city's HUD-funded Continuum of Care program, was hosting a meeting of their network of 21 shelters, and invited a colleague from the city's health department to share information about COVID-19. As they absorbed the information, the group extended their meeting, realizing they had to act quickly to ensure that people experiencing homelessness—and the staff who serve them—would be safe. The highest priorities would be decompressing shelters (many of which were close to capacity), providing sufficient PPE, and establishing care for infected individuals. The United Way's Nicole Angresano and Jim Mathy from the County Housing Division joined Acevedo to help lead this agenda.



The first opportunity arrived when the Archdiocese of Milwaukee approached Milwaukee County about Clare Hall, a convent that had recently closed. The partners worked quickly to transform it into an additional shelter outfitted to care for symptomatic or COVID-positive individuals. The state enabled 18 National Guard members to support the effort. In just two weeks, they set up beds, laundry facilities, dumpsters, security cameras, and supplies. Transporting people to Clare Hall was a concern, so United Way contracted with a taxi company and paid to put dividers in cabs for safety. In addition, Acevedo leveraged relationships through his

role as a board member of Visit MKE (the convention and visitors bureau) to identify three additional hotels to accept guests experiencing homelessness. “We had to educate the hotel staff, who often held stereotypes. The population is diverse and homeless for many reasons. We were clear about what the hotels were getting into. There could be individuals with addiction or mental health issues. We hired private security, provided three meals a day through the Social Development Commission (the region's community action program), offered medical care, and had professional case managers on call 24 hours a day. It worked really well, and we've had very few cases of COVID-19 among our homeless population.”



Clare Hall and the hotels enabled shelters to reduce their number of guests by up to two-thirds. Milwaukee Rescue Mission alone went from 240 to 78 guests. The impact of decompression became clearer when six employees at one shelter tested positive for COVID-19, and, sadly, one died. The group has also been able to move 73 individuals so far into permanent housing by using federal funds to pay security deposits, one year of rent, and case management for them. “When people leave Clare Hall, we don’t want to drop them off back at the shelters. Permanent housing has been our ultimate goal, and CARES Act dollars and more flexible rules have accelerated our ability to help people get there,” adds Angresano.

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— Nicole Angresano, Vice President of Community Impact, United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County

Prevention is now a big concern with the massive rise in unemployment. After the moratorium on evictions ended on June 1, there were 566 suits filed, a 44% increase over 2019. A consortium of organizations created a Housing Resource Center to coordinate rental assistance, and eviction protection accelerated with new federal, state, and local resources. The team also seeks to maintain and draw upon waivers from HUD that provide more flexibility to rental assistance and permanent housing efforts. In addition, they’ve leveraged philanthropy in new ways. Rather than organize services around the web of funding streams, they prioritized needs, layered existing funding streams on them, and then identified where philanthropy can fill gaps.

## Food

Unlike in the education or housing sectors, there was no organized network among organizations that addressed food security. Gina Stilp, of the Zilber Family Foundation, agreed to step in despite it not being a focus of her foundation. According to Gilligan, “Gina has been remarkable. She had a steep learning curve, quickly got up to speed, and has led real change.” Stilp often leans on her co-lead, Danielle Nabak, the Healthy Communities coordinator for the Foodwise program of Milwaukee County’s University of Wisconsin Extension.

“In two weeks, the food sector had to figure out supply chain, a distribution model, and social distancing,” explains Stilp. The Milwaukee Public Schools was able to pivot quickly to operate 20 meal sites distributing 5,000 meals a day, but public funding sources only covered meals to children and they were not able to provide multiple days of meals at one time. The Boys and Girls Clubs additionally opened five meal sites with support from the Hunger Task Force and Milwaukee Center for Independence, an organization that operates a commercial kitchen that provides job training for individuals who face barriers from disabilities or past criminal convictions. Realizing they were potentially exposing families by asking them to return for daily meals, they transitioned into “grab and go” sites packaging three days of meals, then five, then seven—a total of 21,000 meals each week. Hearing from families that they were traveling to pantries for other staples, the team worked with Feeding America to provide pantry boxes at the Boys and Girls Clubs to enable one-stop visits.

Another innovation emerged when a local restaurant, Tandem, began distributing free meals to neighborhood families in need. The Greater Milwaukee Foundation learned about their voluntary effort, and supported them through an intermediary, and then chef José Andrés' World Central Kitchen gave them a major grant to expand the program. They now coordinate a network of 46 restaurants—primarily owned by women and people of color—who are paid for 1,000 meals a week. In addition, the Zilber Family Foundation helped fund a pilot with Metcalfe Park Community Bridges that hires neighbors to deliver these meals to 150 home-bound and other vulnerable residents each weekend, a program they now seek to expand to other neighborhoods.

The team is aiming for a variety of systems changes. They recommend that the city hire a Food Systems policy director as a permanent position. They are working on a technology platform for inventory management and distribution across organizations. Stilp especially believes food

systems need better consumer feedback.

“We early on mapped food availability in key neighborhoods, but learned from residents about access barriers many of us had not considered.” They have sought waivers from the USDA and other agencies as well as supplemental funding to ensure children, adults, and seniors can access sufficient

meals. They also are advocating for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) to be accepted at farmers' markets and by prepared meal and grocery delivery services.

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— Gina Stilp, Executive Director, Zilber Family Foundation

## Economic Recovery

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation was concerned that small businesses in African American and Latinx neighborhoods would be disproportionately harmed and would not access loans or grants from the federal stimulus. Gilligan saw what happened during the 2008 recession and did not want it repeated. “Unless we focus like a laser on strategies that will advance an equitable economic recovery, the retrenchment could grow and cement racial inequities for another generation.” As the Civic Response began, GMF quickly deployed funds to the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the African American Chamber of Commerce, and the Latino Entrepreneurship Network to support African American and Latinx small businesses who might not pass traditional Small Business Administration (SBA) guidelines or access CARES Act dollars.

The Economic Recovery team was recently formed with leadership from Dr. Jeanette Mitchell of the African American Leadership Alliance of Milwaukee, Nancy Hernandez of the Hispanic Collaborative, and Kristi Luzar, executive director of the Urban Economic Development Association. Together they developed a charter that will focus on five areas: (1) stabilizing small business and economic corridors by retaining and strengthening Hispanic and African American owned enterprises; (2) ensuring African American and Hispanic workers have supports to return to work; (3) verifying that African American and Hispanic residents are connected to trusted

information and resources to purchase and preserve homeownership investment; (4) ensuring that African American and Hispanic residents do not face adverse outcomes related to wealth building or penalties that hinder their financial stability during recovery; and (5) identifying and pursuing key policies that address disparities in economic opportunity, financial stability, and wealth building for African American and Hispanic residents. They are working to target CARES Act dollars toward these priorities, with additional focuses on capital access, technology, and broadband access for small businesses.

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— Ellen Gilligan, President & CEO, Greater Milwaukee Foundation



# Lessons Learned

## 1. Collective impact is a useful approach for organizing and aligning a community during an emergency, especially when there is a solid foundation of relationships and skills.

Collective impact is well suited to emergency response. The basic elements of collective impact—a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activity, continuous communication, and backbone support—are all present in the MKE Civic Response. The initial agenda was more reactive, as groups built on existing relationships and used data to align, act, measure, and improve in rapid cycles. Now they are building longer-term results and strategies for their work. Milwaukee Succeeds staff were able to use their skills and tools honed from backboning their cradle-to-career education initiative. They use Slack and weekly meetings to communicate and share information transparently within and across teams.

Jennifer Blatz, president and CEO of the national Strive Together Network of cradle-to-career initiatives, has seen the same thing in other communities. “Collective impacts have adapted their practices and connections to pivot and meet immediate community needs. In difficult times, people often stay in their silos. The experience with collective impact enabled groups to pull people together and align around a shared vision and data-driven decisions.”

Dave Celata of Milwaukee Succeeds points to how collaborative relationships have paid off. “The Early Childhood group has been meeting for eight years, trying to row in the same direction. In K-12, mental health, physical health, and housing, we could build on a strong foundation. We could not have done this if we had to build seven networks from scratch in two months.” Nicole Angresano agrees: “This is a muscle we have built for years here, and it was natural for us to work this way. People knew how to set aside their interests and put community first.”

The backbone staffing also made a difference. Ian Bautista’s experience, working both at the grass roots and on big system changes, and Celata and his team’s experience with facilitation and project management, paid dividends. The mental health team’s Gollin-Graves praises their facilitator Catina Harwell-Young: “We were slow to get started and then Catina really helped us organize and elevate our work.” The Food Team’s Stilp also appreciates the help: “Without Ian and Dave, we would have fallen apart. They were in constant communication with the team leads, walking beside us and supporting us with tools and resources to keep us driving forward.”

## 2. Effective partners center themselves on the community need rather than their organizations' interests, and the sense of urgency bypasses the petty.

The sense of urgency about meeting critical needs prevented some of the group dynamics that often impede progress. Kathryn Dunn, senior vice president for Community Impact at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, makes clear that the environment necessitated a different way of working: “We could not abide any ‘small p’ politics. We had to take that to task. There was no patience or room for it. If you want to engage, put the community first. People are working in a way that feels different.”

Celata agreed: “We are moving too fast meeting urgent needs for people to focus on the petty. When you are in a crisis, the things that normally bog down collective impact are avoided and people are not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. No one is wordsmithing. They are being much more adaptive.”

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— Dave Celata, Deputy Director, Milwaukee Succeeds

Bautista adds, “We’ve really witnessed a lot of ego-checking. Ninety-five percent of people have collaborated well. There are always some outliers who are focused on empire building or can be stubborn for understandable or less valiant reasons. Normally in a crisis, people take care of their own interests. For the most part, that didn’t happen here. Most people centered the work on urgent community needs, and were willing to pivot and do work that might not align with their interests.”

## 3. Funders closely collaborate with each other and with providers, and use their role beyond dollars to advance the common agenda.

Once the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and the United Way agreed to each hold a response fund, a unique collaboration took hold. “Everyone is usually in their lane and we do some giving side by side. This is different—alignment was accelerated by urgency,” according to Gilligan. GMF and United Way created a Google Doc and began sharing grant requests with each other to consider how best to vet and distribute grants across funders. The Zilber Family Foundation, the city, and other funders also joined in. In addition, GMF has engaged their Donor Advised Funds and others to align and contribute. Angresano explains: “Of course nonprofits ‘sprayed and prayed’ for grants, sending requests to everyone—why wouldn’t they? We could look at these together and figure out the actual need and whether one or all of us should help. We’ve [at United Way] paid grants that came in through GMF and vice versa. The sharing and cross-communication has been lovely.”

The Civic Response teams have also been engaged in grantmaking. The shelter team's Acevedo calls it an unprecedented collaboration. "We've been able to look at requests with them and advise where resources could make the greatest difference and also see if we could

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— Martina Gollin-Graves, Executive Director,  
Mental Health America Wisconsin

use city or CARES Act dollars." The mental health team's Gollin-Graves adds, "GMF shared grant applications with us to vet and prioritize. I love that we were able to weigh in. It demonstrated meaningful trust."

The philanthropic staff co-leading teams have also been able to leverage relationships and resources to accelerate progress. Gollin-Graves

describes the partnership as "truly co-laboring. It is very respectful, and they can get things moving." Because the funders are both collaborating on the teams and collaborating on grant-making, it has allowed them to deploy resources quickly. The Greater Milwaukee Foundation has been operating weekly grant cycles, sharing proposals with the Civic Response teams.

#### 4. Government closely collaborates with private partners, welcoming influence and coordination over their response, regulations, and deployment of resources.

Mayor Barrett sought a partnership with philanthropy not just for funds, but also to coordinate and increase impact. "The mayor had been involved with Milwaukee Succeeds and other community collaboratives. He understood we could be more than a bank. He committed himself and his staff fully to the process," according to Gilligan.

Elected and systems leaders have regularly joined the weekly leadership calls, including the mayor, the common council president, the chief of staff for the Milwaukee Health Department, the superintendent of schools, staff from the county executive's office, staff from the governor's office, the lieutenant governor, the secretary and deputy secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, and representatives from U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin's office. Often when elected leaders join such efforts, they can be either directive or seek cosmetic wins that make good headlines. The public leaders on these calls have solicited ideas and asked how they can help the teams succeed. Bautista was pleased: "The mayor asked us, 'What do you need from the city? What do you need me to use my bully pulpit or advocate to others for?'" Likewise, Senator Baldwin's staff have attended all calls and tracked federal needs.

One great example of the new partnership was when Mayor Barrett and Sharon Robinson, director of the city's Department of Administration, invited the seven teams to advise the city on its use of CARES Act stimulus dollars. On a leadership call, they reviewed the various federal and state funds they would receive. Each team then developed recommendations for CARES Act distributions. The city also engaged the teams to design a program to hire 140

community resource navigators—dislocated or unemployed residents who will be trained to assist their neighbors in accessing services and opportunities.

## 5. The work is centered in racial equity, particularly *targeted universalism*.<sup>1</sup>

There was early agreement across the teams that the agenda and resources must be targeted to African American and Latinx neighborhoods who were disproportionately affected. Importantly, the majority of the Civic Response team leads are African American and Latinx. In addition, a separate group of more than 50 African American leaders began meeting to coordinate further support both from and for their community. Danae Davis expresses the pain many were feeling: “It is shocking to the conscience how disparity looks when it comes time to keep people safe from death, and how many of our systems are failing.”

In their CARES Act recommendations, the teams together called for targeting funding for “Black and Brown residents who have been disproportionately impacted by the exasperation of systemic racism due to COVID-19.” The recent uprising and continued protests put an exclamation point on that work, and the groups are also looking at how philanthropic grants, public resources, and recovery efforts can be targeted even more. Their work on racial equity in the emergency response attracted a special \$1 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and \$450,000 from Arnold Ventures.

## 6. While meeting immediate needs, the teams have also focused on longer-term systems change.

From the beginning, the teams recognized that systems change needed to be on the agenda. The GMF’s Dunn explains, “We have been able to both be responsive to immediate needs and think about systems that need to be busted up and fixed. This was a stress test on many of our systems and they were broken. We don’t want to go back to where we were before COVID-19. As we move past urgent response and shift focus to recovery, we need to change the systems that brought us such inequity.”

In addition to recommending distribution of CARES Act resources, each team also identified legislative, regulatory, and funding proposals for each level of government. The new public policy team housed at United Way coordinates advocacy efforts across the teams, taking a comprehensive rather than siloed approach. For example, the teams have focused collectively on housing security and broadband access, which are seen as critical to health, education, employment, and entrepreneurship. They all see their emergency response tied to the development of systems changes that will prevent and address such needs in the future.

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1. Originally developed by professor and critical race scholar John A. Powell, [targeted universalism](#) is an approach to racial equity that simultaneously aims for a universal goal while also addressing disparities in opportunities among sub-groups.

# What's Next: Sustaining the Civic Response

Impressed by the coordination and impact, Mayor Barrett asked the Civic Response teams to stay together beyond the immediate crisis. The city now has an architecture of seven teams—some new and some building on existing efforts—that are coordinating and integrating work like never before. They anticipate this effort will continue for the next year, and that the utility of such teams may last much longer to rebuild and replace systems that have clearly not served communities of color well. They will also have to clarify how and when philanthropists, pre-existing collective impact efforts, and organizations can migrate back to and update their previous strategies and priorities. Bautista hopes that they continue working so effectively: “We can’t lose that team spirit of trust and communication as we move from crisis response to recovery.”

The first step is establishing logic models and measurable results for each team. Angresano explains, “The irony is that we have not named outcomes. We need to back up from emergency response to what change we will be accountable for long term.” Celata adds, “We need to maintain the sense of urgency which has created a lot of momentum and goodwill. At the same time, we need to step back and ask what have we learned, what will we keep, and what will we change? The status quo was not working well for many, so how can we create something better?” Bautista also thinks the group needs to think more holistically about community health and well-being: “Now that we have built responses for immediate relief, we can take a step up on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. What do communities need to be healthy and stable? Things like arts and community engagement start to come into view.”

Gilligan also believes that while the Civic Response effort has listened well to providers, they need to now go deeper and listen even more to the community, especially the people served. That listening has already altered the priorities of the food and mental health teams. They also will continue coordinating across teams, as economic recovery, for example, will require early childhood education, and early childhood education needs mental health support.

## The Role of the Community Foundation

The GMF recently completed a strategic plan that focuses on racial equity and an increased role as a community leader and convener on priority issues. Gilligan explains, “We have a role to play and a mix of tools and resources we can deploy beyond money. This tested and solidified our approach, showing us how we can be more relevant and impactful.”



They are also learning from the shift to rapid grant cycles. According to Dunn, “We don’t want to rebuild all of the scaffolding that went up over many years in the name of compliance that slows us down and doesn’t necessarily improve grant quality. This forced us to be more nimble, to lean on others for advice, and I believe that our decisions are still very responsible and impactful. We are opening up our first-ever general operating grant cycle. Never did that before. Organizations are suffering, and need help, so we are still being strategic, but trying to be better partners.”

Gilligan sees this effort as unique: “Lots of communities stood up funds. Our collective impact approach is different because we focused on communities of color and aligned public, private, and philanthropy as full partners. I’m proud we took all these relationships and skills and put them together to accelerate the work. We have a real chance at transformative change.”

*“We need to step back and ask what have we learned, what will we keep, and what will we change? The status quo was not working well for many, so how can we create something better?”*

— Ian Bautista, Senior Director for Civic Engagement, Greater Milwaukee Foundation



# Acknowledgments

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I am very grateful to be associated with the Collective Impact Forum, and for my colleagues' support.

## Photo Credits

Cover: Joel Muniz / Unsplash

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Learn more at [www.leadinginsideout.org](http://www.leadinginsideout.org) and [www.collectiveimpactforum.org/users/paulschmitz](http://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/users/paulschmitz).

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The Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, is a resource for people and organizations using the collective impact approach to address large-scale social and environmental problems. We aim to increase the effectiveness and adoption of collective impact by providing practitioners with access to the tools, training opportunities, and peer networks they need to be successful in their work. The Collective Impact Forum includes communities of practice, in-person convenings, and an online community and resource center launched in 2014.

Learn more at [collectiveimpactforum.org](http://collectiveimpactforum.org).



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## Join the Collective Impact Forum

The Collective Impact Forum exists to meet the demands of those who are practicing collective impact in the field. While the rewards of collective impact can be great, the work is often demanding. Those who practice it must keep themselves and their teams motivated and moving forward.

The Collective Impact Forum is the place they can find the tools and training that can help them to be successful. It's an expanding network of like-minded individuals coming together from across sectors to share useful experience and knowledge and thereby accelerating the effectiveness, and further adoption, of the collective impact approach as a whole.

Join us at [collectiveimpactforum.org](https://collectiveimpactforum.org).