

City nonprofits buck the trend by hiring and raising salaries



The coronavirus has caused no shortage of [pain to small businesses](#) and [nonprofits](#) all over the city, but there are some organizations that have offered a glimmer of hope through the darkness.

By offering wage increases and expanding hiring opportunities, two nonprofits are breaking the trend of [cutting jobs and closing](#): Children's Village, a Harlem-based foster care center, and Community Access, a mental health organization across three boroughs.

"We decided early in March, with our trustees, that we needed to do something for our front-line staff," said Dr. Jeremy Kohomban, CEO of Children's Village. "We needed to recognize their willingness and conviction. Many of our staff are caring for children who are at home, not in school, or they are caring for elderly parents and relatives and they still come to work by choice."

Children's Village is a residential treatment organization founded in 1851 that serves 1,500 families in the New York area, working primarily in foster care, juvenile justice and immigration matters.

Kohomban said 1,200 employees, split between medical staff and front-line staff, care for more than 400 foster children living in different residential programs, ones that are structured in such a way that makes social distancing

impossible. Sometimes, he said, there are as many as 12 children in one building.

"These staff members choose to do this work," he said. "They know the risk. They are no different from hospital workers. They are our front-line workers."

When the pandemic caused most city businesses and organizations to temporarily shut down contact, Kohomban worked with Children's Village board of directors and trustees to provide a wage increase for their workers. They decided on a 25% increase to the two-week salary of all workers. He authorized the hiring for 180 positions with an average salary between \$37,000 and \$52,000. These positions include full benefits, long-term care, disability and 401(k) contributions.

"The staff is really excited about it because they feel they are appreciated for actually showing up to work," said Norma Meredith, a registered nurse at Children's Village.

As Kohomban explained it, this is a commitment made by the trustees with money the organization does not have. Because it has more than 500 employees, Children's Village is not eligible for the Paycheck Protection Program funding from the CARES Act. Kohomban is counting on the city, state, or federal government to provide a bailout down the line for an organization such as Children's Village.

“The only way to make sure staff don’t lose their jobs is to get the federal loan,” he said.

But for now, he has no regrets.

“We just felt it was the moral thing to do and the right thing to do,” he said. “It was our recognition that they deserved to get more because of the kind of risk and the risk they willingly took and take.”

Elsewhere in the city, Community Access is providing its mental health professionals with increased incentives and expansion. Community Access, founded in 1974, provides affordable and supportive housing for people living with mental health concerns and histories of homelessness and substance issues. Its professionals help residents with education, job training, health care and crisis services.

The 1,300 units of housing across all three boroughs are an integrated mix of residents with mental health concerns and low-income individuals.

Roughly 380 employees provide psychiatric care, food delivery and, emotional support and monitor health status and medication requirements for the residents, including 900 people with mental health issues, said Cal Hedigan, Community Access CEO.

Once the coronavirus hit the city, Hedigan decided to raise the pay for her current staff and expand operations.

“We need people who are able to come in and work in housing program and provide services to those people living on the street,” she said.

As a nonprofit, Community Access is supplied with a mix of city, state and federal funding. Hedigan worked closely with city contractors and members of the city Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, who fund the bulk of Community Access’ services. She was able to raise the salaries for staff working on-site one and a half times their salary.

“They’re putting themselves at risk by using public transportation and coming into work,” she said. “We want to recognize the sacrifice that they are making and be able to do this.”

Community Access has 75 open positions, the majority of which are full-time roles with an average salary of \$42,000.

“There are still things needed to be done by a person who is at a staffing site,” she said. “We’re able to pay some people incentive pay who are able to come and work in our housing program.”