

# THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

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JUNE 30, 2020

## Coronavirus Diary: What Keeps a Disaster-Preparedness Leader Awake at Night

As told to Nicole Wallace



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Supply chains can't turn on a dime, says Nicolette Louissaint, executive director of Healthcare Ready. Being prepared for a crisis takes planning.

*Nicolette Louissaint is executive director of Healthcare Ready, a nonprofit that was formed after Hurricane Katrina by the American Red Cross. The organization's mission is to help coordinate the efforts of health care companies, governments, and community organizations during disasters.*

*A clinical pharmacologist by training, Louissaint served as a senior adviser to the special coordinator for Ebola at the U.S. State Department before joining the charity five years ago. She talked to the Chronicle about disaster preparedness in the United States and what the last three months have taught her as a nonprofit leader.*

The challenges that the country has run into during the pandemics as it relates to the availability of supplies are actually the result of years and years of underinvestment in preparedness. It's very clear that we've known that a disaster of this magnitude could impact us and that we would need supplies, but we've not invested in the solutions that would allow for there to be 3million extra units of personal protective equipment lying around every year that we could put toward a stockpile.

We've underprepared. Then, the disaster hits, and we expect to have the infrastructure in place that allows us to respond.

The amount of PPE that we've used in the last six months globally, that's more than would be available in two years under normal circumstances. To ask companies to just have a few billion PPE laying around in case of a pandemic is not a sound business model for them. To think about how we do this in partnership would actually be a better model for preparedness, but we've not invested in the preparedness systems that allow for that.

So that's how we got there. It's very much a reflection of how we've chosen to make investments across the system that allows us to be prepared.

### Frayed Safety Net

I'm really concerned about the state of the nonprofit sector as well as the country's state of preparedness. As the executive director of a preparedness-and-response organization, that's what's keeping me awake at night.

While I am hopeful that we will make greater investments in preparedness, I think the reality is that those investments are often short-lived. We often say in disaster planning that we have to avoid the mistake of preparing for the last event. So often after disasters, we end up investing in the resources that help us prepare for the disaster that's behind us, not to prepare for the future threats that may come.

After 9/11, the investments were very focused on avoiding another 9/11. But they didn't necessarily help us to prepare for the other things that could impact us.

I actually feel the same way about nonprofits. Preparedness is often funded through what could be considered the safety net. Nonprofits often serve as a safety net. There's always a scarcity of resources that go toward that kind of a safety-net system. It's not until you actually get to the height of the event and the greatest need that there's recognition that there needs to be investment in the system. Oftentimes, that's too late.

For many nonprofits, the needs have increased tremendously. When you think about what it looks like to come out of Covid, recovery in the wake of the economic crisis and the uprisings that are going on right now, it's going to depend on organizations that can serve as a safety net and support those communities for the long haul. And I'm just not sure that we've all been fully resourced to be able to do that.

### **Damage of Multiple Crises**

While I certainly did not predict that 2020 would look like this, we've been looking at what our risk profile is, what our threats are. I've been really concerned that we've been careening to where the country would have multiple disasters impacting us at the same time, and we knew our system was not prepared for that.

This has been the moment I've been afraid of for years, and it is very painful to watch individuals who I know have been working really hard to make sure that their communities are prepared and resourced really struggle to just keep their physical, mental, and emotional health intact while they're trying to do the most for the least in the midst of all of these things.

I can't help but think that we had the opportunity to invest in preparedness and invest in dismantling some of these systems of oppression and really thinking about how we are creating true resilience in our communities before this.

While this is the fate that we've chosen, it didn't have to be this way.

But this is a moment where we can't let up. There are so many communities that need us right now. There are so many needs that are so great that you have to put your own feelings to the side. Everyone is stretched, and everyone is strained. But you can't take your foot off the gas.

### **Conversations With Grant Makers**

One thing that I have been heartened by is when some of our funders reached out and said, "Hey, do you have time to talk?" They were willing to have a conversation on a Saturday morning or a Friday evening, recognizing that with the churn of the emergency response, the standard hours may not work. That went a long way, because if I had had to give up a daytime hour, I wouldn't have been able to have the conversation.

Those conversations were an opportunity for me to have an open dialogue about what I was seeing, what I was concerned about, what our needs were. Their questions were very open-ended. They were very interested in hearing not just what I wanted money to do, but also what I perceived to be the biggest challenges right now, the biggest challenges that I felt coming.

We're most concerned about who will be willing to invest in recovery for the six-month, 12-month, five-year investment when this is still going to be impacting people, but there may not be funders that are interested in funding it. We were really concerned about asking funders to think about maybe delaying some of their grant making — even to us — until we had a better sense of the need for the midterm and the long term.

They reached out to me proactively. Honestly, I'm so grateful for that because in the midst of a disaster response, you don't stop and think, "Oh my God. I really need to fundraise right now."

### **Leadership Lessons**

Most emergency managers will tell you the hardest disaster responses that you will ever work are the ones where you're impacted yourself or concerned about your loved ones while you're trying to manage the response.

That has been a challenge for me personally and I know for my team as well. I'm originally from Brooklyn, and my family is still in Brooklyn, which has been one of the major hot spots for the Covid outbreak.

My focus has really been taking care of my team. One of the harder things that I've had to learn is to let my team take care of me as well.

Oftentimes nonprofit leaders try to take on the role of shielding their staff from all the bad things and all the stress. What I've had to learn is that if you let them, your staff will often take care of you — in ways that really do help to alleviate the burden.

One of the other things that I've struggled to learn and I'm gradually getting better about is to step away at times — to take that walk or to put the phone down or to disconnect, even if it's just for 15 minutes of being able to really separate from responsibilities and obligations and just be. For me, that's been really, really critical.

*A version of this article appeared in the:*  
JULY 2020 ISSUE

THE CHRONICLE OF  
PHILANTHROPY

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