

Corona Chronicles: Episode #1

Michael Gallagher

INTRO:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more people have fallen on hard times and had to rely on food pantries and government support to be able to keep their homes and stay safe. As the US faces record unemployment, TIME Magazine reports that food banks across the country are facing even more financial challenges, or even shutting down. In today's edition of Columbia Chronicles, Michael Gallagher introduces us to the executive director of a food bank in the upstate that has had to adapt to this pandemic.

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Michael:

I'm here with Caroline Robertson, executive director of Greer relief in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Caroline. Thank you for joining us today. First, what can you tell us about Greer relief and what is this organization all about?

Caroline:

Okay. well, about Greer relief is, we are a 80 plus year old organization. We were founded during the great depression. So, um, um, times like these crisis times are very, very much a part of our beginnings. And we're here for our neighbors. The bottom line is prevention. We want to make sure that our neighbors can continue being our neighbors and make sure that they can still stay in their homes, stay safe, fed and make sure that they continue to stay safe and pay their bills and whatever we can do to help make sure that that happens. We will sit down and talk.

Michael:

COVID-19 has had a significant effect on what you do here in South Carolina. So could you talk a little bit about how that's affected Greer relief?

Caroline:

Well, when we first heard about COVID 19, um, it, it was a little bit of a, Oh, over there kind of a thing, but when it did kind of sink in that that it was something that was going to, be a here and now settlement, you know, one thing, my response was is that this is the time that we need to step up and do more and be more, this is not the time that we close up shop and send people home and say, okay, well the utility companies are not disconnecting you. Okay, well, we'll wait until they do. Or this is the time that landlords are not going to be able to evict you. Well, we'll just wait until they do. This is the time that this is that in between time where we're like crate,

let's use that and let's go ahead and take care of the future problems so that it doesn't become a catastrophe later for you.

Caroline:

So we used that early time to be able to eliminate those needs. That would now be a crisis, a true catastrophe crisis for somebody. We also simplified the process. And then we were able to go to an online application process so that they were able to turn everything in online. So we really went to from a, you had to be here, turn in these days and times to a pretty much, if at midnight on a Sunday, you could turn in all your paperwork. And Monday morning we could pretty much look at it and call and say, okay, Sally, you're ready to go and do a little bit of case management on the back end after that.

Michael:

So research has shown that the number of people, who are food insecure has risen a lot in the recent months, especially among children. So what do you think things look like here in South Carolina compared to other States?

Caroline:

I would agree. Although I will say that I think it's, there's a lot of factors that go into it. One of the greatest challenges I know that we do have in our, in our community is transportation. All of the communities we serve, which even though our name is Greer relief, it's a misnomer. We serve a greater community than Greer. We serve Greer, Taylors, Duncan, Lyman Wellford, and Startex so, a much larger community than just the Greer that is in our name. Um, however none of them have public transportation. So if, if you do not have a vehicle or access to a vehicle, you do not have a way to get to a grocery store. So I do agree that, that, you know, the challenge is still there and great. And our numbers did reflect that, that there was still a lot of food insecurity.

Caroline:

We saw a lot of new people and our food was flying off the shelves. We were very challenged to keep food on the shelves. So we also were challenged as well in trying to keep our food stocked. Cause we felt the same pinch in trying to get food on the shelves as anybody else, because we weren't able to go to the grocery store and really stock up for the same reason that everybody else, there were limits as to what was even available. As far as supply, we've been relying on just the generosity of the community to fill the food pantry. But food insecurity is still great. We're still seeing new people we're still helping, but the blessing is that we have actually increased, even though we're still challenged we're we have increased the availability and cut down on the amount, on the number of times in between. So we went from assisting once every three months to once a month now. So if you need help, you can come as often as once a month,

Michael:

how are you and Greer relief planning to move forward from this? And are there any plans to sort of slowly bring things back to normal?

Caroline:

ah, normal... I dream of normal! Um, well I'm calling it the next chapter, cause I hate that "new normal" word, that phrasing, but, um, we are next week we are doing what we're calling a soft open. Um, no, psh, no bells and alarms, but we are going to open the doors on Monday morning and just see what happens. And, we've got the little social distancing bubbles in the lobby. We're going to have limited chairs, um, only for those that are not, you know, walked here or just really physically not able to stand or, or wait outside for whatever reason we're trying, going to try to get back to something, um, a sort of an open, um, we are keeping some things, so we've, we've already had a, "Hey, we've learned a lot. What can we keep?" And so we're keeping that online application.

Caroline:

We're keeping that email verification of, we're keeping the online and our, the phone and, video case management. Again, I said, transportation is a challenge here. If they don't have a good working vehicle, there's no reason whatsoever not to try to at least continue that type of thing moving forward for that reason. And so we're, we're going to try to move with that moving forward, same thing with food. So that it's a little more speedier, but still do the back door methods so that people aren't pulling everything through the front. So still trying to deal a little bit more of a social distance scene through the back. Um, so we're, we're exploring what that looks like in the next chapter.

Michael:

So based on what you've seen here in Greer and in South Carolina, what can our listeners do in their own communities to try to lighten the load on their own relief services, where they live?

Caroline:

Well, they can ask questions, just like you're doing and just like you've done and show up, what can I do to help? What do you, what do you need to do to help? Is there a way for me to plug in and do it? Don't just say the words, but actually act them out because doing is the most important thing. Lead by example,

Michael:

Thank you so much for interviewing with us today. For Corona Chronicles. I'm Michael Gallagher.

Corona Chronicles provides in-depth coverage of news and issues in our community and is designed to serve the public interest. It's produced through a partnership between USC's Honors College the School of Journalism and Mass Communications and the Garnet Media Group.