

OC LEADER BOARD

Opinion, Analysis, Insight

Questions and Answers for OC Philanthropy in the Times of COVID



By Shelley Hoss
President, Orange County Community Foundation

One fateful year ago, our world was altered in ways we couldn't have imagined.

From economic fallout and job losses to food insecurity and homelessness, the pandemic has tested our world, our country, and our community in ways unseen in more than a century.

Through it all, Orange County has risen to the challenge. Nonprofits moved critical services online, and individuals and businesses gave generously to help our most vulnerable neighbors.

A collective effort between the **Orange County Community Foundation (OCCF)** and local funders rapidly deployed nearly \$4.8 million to 180 Orange County organizations serving on the front lines of need through the OC Community Resilience Fund.

The impacts of the pandemic have been widespread, but at its core, COVID-19 was, and continues to be, a public health crisis—and one that disproportionately affects our most vulnerable communities.

Nationally, 5.4 million U.S. workers lost health insurance in the early months of the pandemic as health needs were skyrocketing. At the local level, many nonprofit health clinics reported a decline in patients seeking preventative services or other necessary treatments.

Nearly 60% of OC COVID-19 cases and deaths were borne by our Latino communities—nearly double their 35% share of our population, according to an August report from the Resilience Fund.

Given these realities, much of the philanthropic response to the pandemic has focused on addressing urgent health needs. The Resilience Fund awarded grants to 22 community clinics and 19 health-focused nonprofits to help them navigate a growing demand for services.

To fully understand the pandemic's impact on community health in Orange County, I asked colleagues what they learned in the past year and their ideas on how to improve the well-being of our community.

What did we learn about community health in Orange County throughout this pandemic?

Cathleen Otero, OCCF's vice president of donor relations and programs, co-chairs OC Grantmakers' Health Funders Partnership: COVID-19 exposed and exacerbated longstanding barriers to community health, including economic disparities, housing, working conditions and access to health insurance.

We were also reminded of the role of community health centers and nonprofits as trusted messengers who bridge the outreach, education, and access gaps for critical health services.

Jason Lacsamana, director of programs and partnerships for **St. Joseph Community Partnership Fund**: We've seen how this pandemic rendered unequal impacts among those in our community, laying inequities bare.

When community health is prioritized, through both new and existing collaboratives and strategies (nonprofit, public/private and innovation), we've seen positive outcomes in our commu-

nity's wellness, safety and economy.

How do we strengthen community health, especially for our most vulnerable?



Susan Lew, M.S.,
Board Co-Chair
National Asian American Community Foundation

Susan Lew, M.S., board co-chair of the **National Asian American Community Foundation**: The pandemic and subsequent vaccine rollout has shown us that the most vulnerable in our communities get left behind when well-intentioned systems are designed by teams lacking diversity. Having a diverse team reduces blind spots, which makes for a better product/output.

For example: During the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, people aged 75+ needed to be vaccinated first.

It's clear that the systems for vaccine appointments were designed by teams that lacked experience with older adults and non-native English speakers.

If the design teams had been more diverse, they would have known that an English-language, smartphone app-based system would be nearly impossible to navigate for many older adults, especially those with language challenges. Lack of diversity directly resulted in delays vaccinating our community's most vulnerable.

What role can philanthropy play to ensure community health and wellbeing going forward?

Cathleen: Philanthropy can invest in prevention-oriented approaches. This means focusing on the root causes that create health disparities.

Jason: We must intentionally co-design efforts with communities who haven't traditionally been involved with the decision making, especially minority and immigrant communities. We must balance crisis response with longer-term infrastructure investments for prevention and community capacity building, with equity as both the strategy and the end goal.

Susan: The best thing that those of us in philanthropy can do is focus on the lessons learned.

This pandemic has been the ultimate test of community health. What worked, and what didn't?

The staff at local nonprofit organizations know the answers firsthand. Trust their expertise. Support them with funding for operations and acknowledge the full cost of programs. When nonprofits thrive, the vulnerable communities they serve benefit, and we all benefit. These are the truths of community health.

After a year of tremendous challenges and hardship, that truth is our path forward. If we invest wisely in health equity, build infrastructure for preventative solutions, and support organizations addressing the well-being of our

most vulnerable residents, our community's safety, economy and prosperity will all flourish.

Editor's Note: Shelley Hoss is CEO and president of the Orange County Community Foundation, which ranked No. 2 on the Business Journal's annual list of nonprofits with \$120.9 million in revenue for the year ended June 30, 2020.



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