CJP’s Coronavirus Emergency Fund

When the COVID-19 pandemic first took hold in March 2020, CJP — along with other nonprofits and local communal institutions — shifted focus to support the Greater Boston community through this unprecedented time of need. We immediately launched the CJP Coronavirus Emergency Fund (CEF) with the singular goal of supporting vulnerable families and individuals facing hardship due to the pandemic.

Over the past two years, the fund raised $3 MM+ and leveraged additional money from across CJP and individual donors to help those in need. The success of the fund shows CJP’s value to our community, especially in times of crisis. Our role as a convener allowed us to quickly engage expert volunteer leadership, leverage existing relationships and communication pathways, and efficiently provide aid to trusted community partners, ultimately supporting thousands of vulnerable and newly vulnerable people.

A history of helping those in need

CJP has a long history of creating emergency funds to respond to both local challenges and global crises — in Israel, Ethiopia, Cuba, Argentina, and beyond. In recent years, we’ve partnered with secular and religious organizations to raise funds for broad community issues.

For example, our Legal Aid Fund for Immigrants in 2017 was a partnership between CJP and Catholic Charities to support refugees and immigrants on a path to citizenship; and our Fund for Afghan Immigrants and Refugees in 2021 allowed CJP to work with Catholic Charities, Jewish Vocational Service, and the Jewish Community Relations Council to welcome and resettle those fleeing Afghanistan in Boston.

For more than 125 years, caring for the most vulnerable has been at the core of CJP’s mission. Our emergency funds allow CJP to do what we do best — help others in a time of need — while giving our donors the chance to respond to relevant and urgent crises through a trusted partner in alignment with their Jewish values. The emergency funds have also helped CJP broaden its donor base by attracting more people to give — both from within and outside of Greater Boston’s Jewish community.

With the CJP Coronavirus Emergency Fund, we took on a more hands-on role. In the past, we worked with partners to distribute the funds raised, but for the CEF, CJP managed the entire process — from raising funds to distributing the grants. We share this briefing on the CJP Coronavirus Emergency Fund and its successes to hopefully help other organizations run emergency funds in the future.
Keys to the fund’s success

We can trace the success of the fund to four key areas:

**COMMITTING RESOURCES:**

We actively solicited gifts from spring 2020 through winter 2021 and raised money through multiple channels, including development officers, email communications, and social media. Gifts ranged from $5–$100,000 and included a $600,000 match from Jewish Federations of North America. We also pulled funding from other parts of CJP whenever possible, including resources from existing department budgets that were designated to help the vulnerable. By asking widely and thinking creatively, we were able to get more relief funds into the community.

**RECRUITING A TASK FORCE:**

We recruited six trusted community leaders to be part of a task force. They helped us review and approve recommended grants that could most effectively respond and adapt to the ever-changing COVID-19-related needs throughout the local and global community — while staying true to the fund’s intentions. The task force met weekly through much of 2020 and continued meeting regularly through June 2022. Task force members also played a key role in helping us think strategically, challenge assumptions, and provide oversight and accountability, especially while moving quickly. Their perspectives helped guide CJP professionals and created more diversity of thought, ultimately making our grantmaking and impact stronger.

**LEVERAGING STAFF ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION:**

To help understand where relief was needed most, we relied heavily on the CJP professionals who serve as relationship managers and are in constant communication with our partners. These trusted relationships were in place well before the coronavirus began and proved essential support in the chaotic early months of the pandemic. We were able to swiftly understand the needs of the community without creating a cumbersome process for organizations. This not only meant we could move quicker, but we also saved time and work for our community partners.

**GETTING FUNDS OUT QUICKLY:**

We increased the impact of the fund by moving rapidly and actively working to avoid bureaucratic slowdowns. We developed a consistent process, guidelines, and communication that allowed CJP to respond to communal needs while also aligning with fund parameters and donor intentions. When grants were approved, we worked to get the funds out the door within days. We also allowed our partners to move speedily by requiring only basic reporting. Throughout the pandemic, CJP was able to quickly get funds to where they were needed most.

Impact of the fund

Grants from the fund were concentrated in three major areas:

- **$1.8 MM** to address food insecurity, social isolation, and direct client needs
- **$764,000** to care for older adults
- **$553,000** to partner cities and overseas communities

As mentioned above, we made an intentional choice to require minimal reporting out of respect for the pressure and staff capacity challenges our partners were facing. However, we received thank you notes, recipient quotes, and other testimonials that speak to the impact of the fund.
Here are two compelling testimonials of the fund’s Holiday in a Box program, a creative, COVID-era solution that provided hot holiday meals to seniors and other vulnerable and isolated community members to help them meaningfully celebrate the Jewish holidays.

“I am sooooo grateful to be remembered. I live at Golda Meir House, and we wait with bated breath for our CJP Holiday in a Box because it’s a special and elaborate celebration of our Jewishness. You make a big difference. Thank you so much.”

“I would like to thank CJP for their donation of Holiday in a Box. I live at Shillman House in Framingham... the amount of food is incredible. It certainly isn’t a replacement for being with family, but it is so nice to know that CJP was thinking of all of us. Thank you.”

The fund also provided resources for partners that served the community in person by purchasing personal protective equipment and tests. A staff member at one of the childcare centers that received CJP funding said:

“Thank you!! Your support brought tears to my eyes. I was just saying I wish I had the ability to buy more tests. Our center has been hit so hard with COVID, and we do participate in the weekly testing through the state. It’s just not enough, and it has not helped us to keep our center COVID-free. It has been a terrible two weeks for our center, but this has been a bright light in my day. I cannot thank you enough for your support during this challenging time. You make a difference!!!”

**Key takeaways for the future**

We all hope that the COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-century event. But as the war in Ukraine has showed us, we never know when our community will be called to respond to a crisis. As we close out our CJP Coronavirus Emergency Fund, we’re focusing on the key takeaways listed below, knowing that not only will they strengthen our work now, but they will prepare us for a crisis in the future.

**INVEST IN THE ONGOING, DAILY WORK OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING.**

We intentionally spend time building connections throughout our community. Establishing deep and trusting relationships with our partners before a crisis will allow us to move quickly when needed.

**BUILD INTERNAL, CROSS-FUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS.**

Throughout the pandemic, professionals from across CJP worked together, each bringing their own skills and expertise to the effort. From soliciting gifts to assessing needs to distributing grants, CJP professionals came together to support our community through the fund. Strong cross-functional teams will help us respond to future needs.

**LEVERAGE OUR TALENTED POOL OF VOLUNTEERS.**

Task force members played a pivotal role in offering advice, guidance, oversight, and accountability. We will continue to build a vibrant and dynamic volunteer pipeline so we can leverage experts from our own community when we need them most.