April 24, 2020

Dear Friend,

Where do we begin? The last month has been a blur as we attempt to meet the most pressing needs of forced migrants in Baltimore. We have been absolutely overwhelmed by the desperate situation of so many of our neighbors and equally encouraged by the response of our many supporters.

In the interest of public health, we suspended our day program on March 16th but continue to provide housing, case management, food, and other material support to existing participants and others in the community. While we understand this is a challenging time for everyone, COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting asylum seekers. They are not eligible for the safety nets that the rest of us rely on to get through this unprecedented health crisis. Many are not yet eligible to work and cannot secure food stamps, Medicaid, or temporary cash assistance. If they did have a work authorization but are now laid off, most are not eligible for unemployment insurance or the federal stimulus check. Children seeking asylum and children
of asylum seekers are no longer attending school or daycare, where many received free breakfast and lunch. While schools continue to provide takeaway meals, this does not include groceries. Imagine what it feels like to have a bagged lunch as the only food in your refrigerator.

Although there are food pantries around the city, AWE is in a unique position to serve culturally appropriate food, in the primary language of the recipient, to forced migrant families across Baltimore. While our food pantry is an integral part of our existing program, we scaled up our operations to increase our food supply and capacity to distribute to those most in need. Our generous donors continue to provide a steady stream of non-perishable items through our Amazon wish list and deliver groceries to our no contact food donation box outside of the office. We also partnered with The Maryland Food Bank, Local Meals, and The Salvation Army to increase our supply of perishable goods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, chicken, eggs, and bread. We promoted our part-time Program Assistant, Lesli, to full-time Food Coordinator and created a team of volunteer delivery drivers.

As a result of these efforts, we successfully hosted two pop-up food pantries that collectively served 268 families made up of 752 adults and 632 children. At the most recent distribution, 86% of families were without an income due to COVID-19. Since March 16th, with the help of our amazing volunteers, we have made 181 no-contact food deliveries to 149 families made up of 498 unique individuals. In 2019, we served an average of 2,616 pounds of food to roughly 75 families each month. In March 2020, we delivered 6,145 pounds of food to 228 families. In the first three weeks of April, we have provided 9,535 pounds of food to 231 families.

In addition to providing nutritious food, we are engaged in a continuous cycle of receiving and distributing cleaning supplies, over-the-counter medication, toilet paper, baby supplies, soap, and other hygiene products. In all of 2019, we distributed 15,075 diapers. To date, in 2020, thanks to ShareBaby and our generous donors, we have distributed 5,100 diapers to those families most in need. Through these essential supply efforts, we can also check in on the recipient’s emotional well-being, children’s progress on distance learning packets, and their access to medical and other critical services.
As the spread of COVID-19 in our community continued, we realized that our day program might not resume for quite some time. Despite connecting participants to online learning resources, virtual story times for children, and other virtual activities – we needed additional measures to maintain the sense of camaraderie and community that is the very fabric of our organization. Over the last few weeks, we created a WhatsApp group with a “question of the day” for participants to share and check-in with one another. Some of our teachers have taken a crash course in Zoom to offer virtual English lessons and conversations daily. Amy Bliss Tenney, music therapist for RICH in Music, facilitates a weekly music therapy class and choir practice online for the AWE community. The music therapy has been particularly exciting for the AWE children. It’s amazing how adaptable (and tech-savvy) our little ones are. Intercultural Counseling Connection continues to meet the mental health needs of the AWE community through phone calls and virtual sessions for therapy. Our newest advocate, Mulu, is hosting a weekly virtual exercise group to keep people moving. Atar and Mulu are hosting weekly cultural orientation sessions that started with a very well attended Zoom meeting on COVID-19, how to protect yourself and your family. While there is a lot of information available about COVID-19, we understand how important it is for information to be delivered in the participant’s native language and by a trusted source, with the opportunity to ask questions.

While the current circumstances are less than ideal, we are adapting. We are committed to continuing this work for as long as we are needed and our regular operations return to “normal.” We are all going to be forever changed by this experience. We've always known this community is unique – not just to our “clients” but to the staff, volunteers, and others that have been touched by this extraordinary place. We look forward to coming together again in the future to appreciate what this community means to all of us.

We invite you to join us in sustaining this mission. We are unsure what the future holds, as the stock market has impacted many of the foundations that fund our work. We anticipate that our regular sources of funding may not recover any time soon. Some of our individual donors have experienced personal hardships, layoffs, and even illness. While we were fortunate enough to receive a loan through the CARES Act Payroll Protection Program, this is not a long term solution.
We invite you to join us in this effort to serve those that most need us during this very difficult time and thank you for your continued support.

In Solidarity,
Your Friends at AWE

Katie Kriss, Lesli Ordoñez, Atar Stav, Mulu Bahre, Sr. Anne Hefner, & Tiffany Nelms

To make a donation online, visit: www.asyleewomen.org. Your donation is tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law.

The CARES Act was signed into law on March 27, 2020 and allows up to $300 charitable donation to be deducted from your AGI, even if you do not itemize your deductions. Consult your tax professional for more information.