

COVID Emergency Grant helps Career Development Project safely operate group homes-Ep 10

Recorded December 4, 2020. [Listen to it here.](#)

- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:05 [music] This is Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation. In May of 2020, Kessler Foundation awarded nearly \$1 million in COVID-19 emergency grant funding for nonprofits faced with the challenges of serving people with disabilities in New Jersey. The recipient organizations were current or former grantees of Kessler Foundation's Employment Grant program. Kessler Foundation provided 37 grants of \$10 thousand to \$40 thousand to help with unanticipated needs and expenses. In this miniseries, we talked with grantees, past and present, who received emergency funding to help offset the cost of both technology and personal protective equipment. The various organizations had to adopt alternative ways of connecting people with one another in keeping staff and clients safe. Today, I'm speaking remotely with Kurt Ohlson, vice president of Property Management for Career Opportunity Development in Egg Harbor City, New Jersey.
- KURT OHLSON: 01:05 Thank you, first of all. Thank Kessler for giving me this opportunity.
- BANKS-SMITH: 01:09 Kurt, can you tell us a little bit about the organization and how it serves those who are challenged?
- OHLSON: 01:15 We're a CARF-accredited service that we provide community housing, comprehensive vocational evaluation services, organizational employment services, and supported living to those with disabilities and disadvantages. We have group homes that are 24/7 operated with supervision. Then we have supported living, where they're in between a group home and a supported living where they're supervised maybe 12 hours a day. And these consumers have either developmental disabilities and/or mental health issues. And we have some with maybe prior addictions. So we do have various programs that serve various disadvantages throughout our community. We also have a workshop. Some people also know them as a sheltered workshop, we don't like to call that anymore. It's a workshop where these individuals can come in and do piecework, and they get paid per job they do. So right now we're doing a big job with candles. And there's a company that's local, it's called The Cheerful Giver, and they will provide us these empty glass candle jars. And they put the wicks in them. And we package them-- or we put them back on the pallet, shrinkwrap them, they go back to the processor, and they put the wax in them, and then they sell them. So we get those throughout the year, all different kinds of holidays. We do mailings. They put the caps on those water testing kits that you get at Home Depot, you pick up. Those little blue caps, they put those on. There's so many various jobs. I can't mention them all that they do in the workshop. So it's very beneficial. And those, of course, individuals, we would like to see eventually move into community employment, which is you are working in the community.
- OHLSON: 03:03 So it's a whole training process along the way to have these consumers develop their skills so they can become independent through employment. And the housing welfare-to-work program, unfortunately, because it is a kind of soup-to-nuts program that we facilitate about finding a job, these participants are on welfare and, in order to get off the program, they need to get a job. So we facilitate everything to writing resumes and cover letters and dressing for success, everything so they can become independent as well. So we're kind of outstretched. We've been doing that for almost

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30 years with the county. Also, one of our biggest programs is our maintenance program. And we clean a good-- about, I would say, 80% of the county buildings in Atlantic County. Those that are familiar with Atlantic County, it's about Egg Harbor Township on west to Hammonton, and we clean about 23-plus sites. We also are at the military base, local 177th there, National Guard base, we're there every everyday cleaning. We're at the Atlantic County Utilities Authority, the wastewater plant, the solid waste plant. We're at state buildings. We're at state police buildings. We're at DMVs, Federal Building that houses Secret Service, and the ATF. And we are out there in the community, cleaning all these buildings. And with that program, we have almost 60 part-time individuals, of which 75% of them have some form of disability. So it's great to see these people are out in the community working. They're making a paycheck. They're becoming independent. They're really feeling some sort of worth, self-worth. With that said, we have individuals that are getting second chances.

OHLSON: 04:56

So it's a great program and I'm very proud of it. And of course, now, with the pandemic, our services have only increased dramatically. We have to go in a lot of times to do-- after a positive COVID test, we go in and we have to disinfect the entire building. So we have foggers, we have misters, and we have all the equipment and the chemical to go in and disinfect an entire building. Everything we do and taking care of the consumers that are in our group homes, this grant, through Kessler, was God-sent. It was so, so wonderful that we were able to take advantage of the generosity of the Kessler Foundation.

BANKS-SMITH: 05:40

Since receiving the emergency grant, how has it helped the organization during the COVID-19 pandemic?

OHLSON: 05:46

As far as where that money went, we have group homes that-- of course, there's over-- within the housing, supported housing, and our group homes, over 200 consumers that we serve throughout the community. We have caseworkers that are out. They take these individuals to doctors' appointments, out shopping. So they're in close contact with them. So we, of course, had to purchase a lot of PPE, and many gloves, many masks, face shields, thermometers, safety signs. It's endless. And it continues to be endless. I'm ordering every week. We have expired that \$40 thousand, of course. And it wasn't very-- it didn't take very long with everything we had to provide. And in one group home, you could go through 4 boxes of gloves a week and 100 masks. And some people don't feel comfortable, they have to have gowns and booties. So our PPE protect us when we go into the buildings. And that was one thing I was talking with Jeanette about, "How many individuals would this money benefit?" And I said, "Over 3,000." She said, "How many people do you serve?" I said, "Well, it's not 3,000. But when we go into these buildings that are state employees, county employees, federal employees, we can now protect them better with all the PPE we have, and we have ability to provide PPE for those individuals with disabilities that are working." Our workshop, they all have to have clean mask every day and gloves and we take their temperature.

OHLSON: 07:30

We were able to get a infrared thermometer that they stand in front - it's like a iPad almost - and it tells you that your temperature, you're okay. If not, you go home. So much chemicals and disinfecting that we had to receive. We have all the group homes do orders through me every week, and that could be \$1,000 to one group home in a

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week with PPE. Just trying to find hand sanitizer in the beginning was-- that was very challenging. So when we could find it, we had to stock up on it. And when they're talking another surge in the next two months, what are we going to do if we're not prepared? So, Kessler, in addition, that helped us prepare for our future. I mean, we are, hopefully, at the point now where we can sustain for six months if we had to, so. But, again, that could change. I mean, it's just it's going out the door every day. As quick as it comes in, it has to go out. I can't express how important that \$40 thousand from the Kessler Foundation was. Can't express our gratitude enough.

BANKS-SMITH: 08:48

Not only is this program, Community Opportunity Development, helping the consumers, but the consumers are helping the community. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today.

OHLSON: 09:00

It was my pleasure, Joan. Thank you for asking me. And, again, our gratitude is beyond words right now.

BANKS-SMITH: 09:07

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