

AS THE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF Children's Aid, Phoebe Boyer has worked to strengthen programs and operations with a keen focus on optimizing the impact on the lives of children, youth and families. Founded in 1853, the New York City-based child welfare nonprofit now serves 50,000 children and families, with an annual budget of \$150 million from state and private funding. Under Ms. Boyer's leadership, Children's Aid was recognized with a 2017 Nonprofit Excellence Award from New York Community Trust for exceptional management practices. She was one of 30 remarkable women featured by City & State magazine in its 2018 Above & Beyond list, and in 2019 she appeared in the publication's Responsible 100, a list of people creating transformative change.

Ms. Boyer came to Children's Aid from a position as executive director of the \$1 billion Robertson

Foundation. She spent more than a decade at that organization, founded by Julian Robertson and his family to take a targeted approach to supporting critical national issues, including education reform. She also served for 12 years as the executive director of another Julian Robertson-founded nonprofit, the Tiger Foundation, which works to break the cycle of poverty in New York City. Ms. Boyer raised more than \$200 million to support the foundation's work.

She holds an MBA from Columbia Business School and is currently an inaugural member of the Pahara Aspen Education Fellowship. She also serves on the board of her alma mater, Wesleyan University.

Ms. Boyer took time to speak to the Brunswick Review about the ongoing mission of Children's Aid. In the COVID-19 pandemic, its longstanding mission of community service is being challenged once more—and once more, the organization is adapting in order to provide necessary leadership.

HELPING the Hardest Hit



“Paycheck-to-paycheck has become no income.” Children's Aid CEO **PHOEBE BOYER** on the havoc COVID-19 has wrought on New York's low-income families—and how companies can spur meaningful recovery. By **PHILIP DELVES BROUGHTON.**

What does Children's Aid do?

Our job is to ensure that children living in poverty succeed and thrive. We focus on education, social and emotional development, health and wellness, and family support, believing those are the four domains that matter the most for any kid. That hasn't changed in 167 years.

We provide a holistic set of services for all the ages and stages of a young person. In our early childhood programs, we have kids who are with us through an extended day and extended year. We don't just provide all their learning, but also 80 percent of the calories they consume each day.

We run a charter school and a very large child welfare program. We run programs for teenagers



helping them with college and career and their pathway to adulthood. We provide a lot of academic supports inside schools. We run two community clinics and six school-based clinics.

We have a homemakers program, started by Eleanor Roosevelt, which helps parents who may have health issues take care of their kids, to prevent them from entering the foster care system, and a prevention program that supports families most at risk of having children taken away.

We have a little over 700 kids in foster homes with us, where we have recruited and trained the foster parents, and programs for kids aging out of foster care. We also have one of the largest programs for medically fragile children.

Phoebe Boyer with volunteers from the Food and Beverage Association of America at the 2018 Community Thanksgiving Dinner held at the Children's Aid Dunlevy Milbank Community Center in Harlem. Left, Ms. Boyer addresses guests at the 2018 Keeping the Promise benefit at the Ziegfeld Ballroom.

The virus comes along, what's the impact?

All the vulnerabilities have been exacerbated. We often say that potential exists on every New York City block, but opportunity does not. The COVID maps are a really good overlay of where opportunity is not. The Bronx, for example, has one of the highest infection rates. COVID has exposed the systemic problems of poor health care, underlying health issues, the stresses and strains of poverty.

Many of our families were already marginalized, vulnerable to hunger, homelessness and job insecurity. Those with jobs were living paycheck to paycheck, without health insurance or sick days.

Paycheck to paycheck has become no income. You lose wages, you lose housing. If you have any

immigration issues, you have landlords threatening to throw you out or call ICE. Social distancing is difficult because multiple families are often sharing one apartment. Families who were already isolated are now even more so. If the only way you are connecting with anyone outside your door is your cellphone and you can't pay that bill, you've lost all connection.

We've been doing needs assessments of our families since COVID, and we found 37 families who've not been outside their apartment for fear of immigration issues and the virus, and have no food. Our kids are living in those environments. So we deliver food. Our charter school pivoted to remote learning, but we have families at that school now trying to do remote education from homeless shelters.

Some of our older foster care kids were in college. The colleges closed and we had to place them into new homes. In some cases, they were given 24 hours to leave their college campus—and go where? We did all of that replacement.

What aren't we seeing?

There is tremendous strain and anxiety behind closed doors. I worry particularly about families where there was already a mental health issue. They may be dealing with the stress of a lost loved one, along with the stress of jobs, housing, isolation.

Schools are mandatory reporters of any abuse. And that's not happening. The reports aren't coming in. There is a risk of more domestic violence, abuse and neglect. That may have a much longer-term consequence for us as a city in very real terms.

To receive stimulus checks, you have to have originally been eligible. You can't have been making wages under the table. You have to have been a taxpayer. We have so many families that are not getting that stimulus check.

What has been the biggest surprise?

We're seeing what it means to be an anchor in a community, to be the trusted resource when people are feeling vulnerable. We've been in some of the communities we work in for decades, if not a century. But that trust element is so profound right now.

Today, as a society, we don't trust government leaders or corporate leaders. If you are among the most vulnerable, you don't really know where to turn. So that trust we have earned over time matters tremendously to them, and to us.

We have a Grab and Go partnership in the Bronx to deliver healthy food to families. We let everyone know we were going to have the food available at a new location across the street from our early

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childhood center—there was a sign that says Children's Aid. But because it was new, very few people came to get the food. We changed back to the original site and the food was gone in an hour. That's the level of fear and uncertainty people are feeling. Folks won't even cross the street if they don't trust you completely.

How has it changed the way you're working?

We're an essential service, so we're making decisions about who among staff are going to be in harm's way and who isn't. I'm coming into our office on 45th Street and Third Avenue every third day, on a rotation with our COO and chief of staff.

If you would have asked me in February, could you see us going remote, I'd have said, that's not how we do things. So, we've had to pivot. We had a crazy period getting devices to our staff, rapid deployment of whatever we could get our hands on. And we're still short.

Our staff, who work in the schools, have been helping teachers and principals and families to do remote learning, to log on, to create an email account. A whole host of things needed to be done really, really fast. We're in touch with everybody, communicating almost constantly.

How do you sustain morale?

One of the hardest things about this is we have this incredible team of people who want to meet the needs of our families and are at the same time feeling their own stress and fear. Everyone responds to that differently. Some days are better than others.

We are doing webinars and sending emails to staff. We set up an internal microsite with every communication we've done, as well as advice from the CDC, the city and the state. We've provided information about stimulus checks. We advised on how to work from home, how to take care of yourself, tips for mental health. Our kids are doing TikTok things; our classroom staff are recording their morning routines—we're sharing those.

We've done a lot to give our people a sense of connectivity. We let them know what we are doing, what clinics are open, how our people have responded. There is this incredible sense of pride in knowing Children's Aid is out there doing its job, even if you as an individual have been asked to stay at home.

We are also striving for transparency and empathy. I don't know the answers to a lot of the questions that people have. So I'm open about that. This is what we know as of this date. This is what we have. People are working on this. We share our thinking.

What has been your most effective internal communication?

In one of our webinars we had our head of facilities go through all of his procedures for each location. People were just so grateful to know what he and his team are doing, and that none of his frontline staff are sick. We're the same reassuring and trusted resource for our staff as for our clients.

What's your greatest need?

Today's greatest need is going to be different from tomorrow's greatest need. Initially it was remote devices—everyone needed them and we couldn't even buy them. Then there's cleaning supplies. We had one of our staff in one of our facilities in the Bronx diagnosed with the virus, so we needed to power clean before anyone could come back, to the tune of \$15,000. We're doing more direct food and diaper delivery.

We are keeping our health clinics open, even though they're not operating at a full clip, because it's a moral imperative to keep our most vulnerable kids healthy without further burdening the hospital system. That would add more illness and more stress to the emergency rooms. Revenues are down because I don't have as many clients, so it's an extra cost. The added expenses are significant.

We've been fortunate in that we've had some emergency support from individuals and private funders. Government has been telling us that they will cover the COVID-related expenses we have incurred while delivering the service we provide on their behalf. However, we have had to deploy resources in very different ways in response to the need, ways that are not necessarily included on our contract.

Longer term, the bigger problem will be the cancellation of government contracts. In New York, what we take for granted as the safety net is actually delivered by nonprofits. The city itself does very little direct service. Homeless organizations are funded to run shelters. Organizations like mine deliver foster care services. The city itself is not actually delivering those services. The city is reimbursing us and monitoring them. But nonprofits actually deliver them.

So now, we're seeing government eliminating the budgets for those programs. The very safety net that's been in place to help families navigate this will be eliminated. That's where we need the help.

Has raising money become easier or harder?

Folks have been extraordinarily generous and supportive. People who know us well, trustees and foundations have provided crisis funds. People turn to us because we are the essential platform in the

Phoebe Boyer celebrates the holidays with families at the annual event hosted by Hogs and Heifers. Every year, hundreds of Harley Davidson motorcycle riders travel to the Children's Aid Dunlevy Milbank Community Center to deliver toys and holiday cheer.



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF CHILDREN'S AID

community. We can deliver what families need right now, be it food, diapers or mental health and medical services. People know our doors are open. The outpouring has been amazing, but it does not nearly cover the costs we are facing.

And as we look forward, fundraising is going to get much harder. Next year looks uncertain if not bleak. The support is going to be needed just as much as it is now, if not more, to help families recover.

How can people help?

In many ways, this comes down to money, and it's also about the tools and technology. We put our operating dollars into programs. But as we are facing this external crisis we are having to transform our internal organization.

We have a lot of private data, for example, and I have an IT team who are fighting the same cybersecurity battles as much larger organizations and businesses. We are trying to figure out how to get a workforce up to speed with this remote situation, with a fraction of the resources of a for-profit company.

So I need people who want to work with us closely to help figure out how to automate what we do in our back office. Because it's not where it should be and I can't afford to pay IBM to come in here. There's lots of expertise out there.

What can companies do?

We need immediate relief—resources to buy PPE, food and testing kits. But we also need to think about that arc of recovery. That's where corporate America can really help us.

Our kids, our future workforce, have had their educations interrupted. They have experienced significant trauma. Their parents need to get back to work. This is really the Recovery Summer.

When I first had this idea, I was thinking we'll be done with COVID-19 by May and then summer it will be back to normal. But it won't be. Summer is usually when we're busiest. This summer has to be about recovery, with this dynamic combination of remote and real experience where possible. Kids need to recover academically, socially and emotionally. If we intervene right now, we will prevent a lot of future costs.

We need to assess where kids are and what supports they need to on-ramp back to school more successfully. That means human contact as well as devices. For a child in poverty, the hardware, with all the greatest software, isn't enough. We could offer one-on-one tutoring, but we need the professional staff to help set that up. We could do online learning

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PHILIP DELVES

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about different careers. We could have the civics instruction that we've been arguing we don't have. We also have to prepare for a resurgence of the virus, in which case we will have to turn remote learning back on very quickly.

It is a real opportunity for us to come together to build in more resiliency. None of this is possible without making sure that nonprofits who provide this programming have the resources.

The issues we are facing are all inter-connected. Once people understand the issues that our kids and families are facing, it's very hard to stand on the sidelines and say I don't want to help. Our Children's Aid kids have grown up to be firefighters, surgeons and entrepreneurs. They're everywhere.

What makes for a great corporate partnership?

The world is looking to corporations in a different way. Employees want to know what their employers are doing. Folks want to buy brands that are engaged. Trying to make sense of the nonprofit sector on all these issues is not the core competency of most employers. They have a job to do in the same way I have a job to do. So it's natural that corporations want a simple solution, a donation of money for instance. But if corporations can partner with us in authentic and real ways—we can accomplish a lot.

I want the financial support, of course, but I also want that engagement in terms of our corporate partners paying attention to the issues and understanding how interconnected they are.

The best partnerships come when companies take the time to understand what our work is and what the needs are, when they think creatively about what they can do and what opportunities we can give our kids. They partner with us in ways that deliver resources but are also sustainable.

Last year, for example, we partnered with Nike to offer a multi-site basketball program. Nike helped renovate one of our facilities and gave us operating support for it. They created an extraordinary basketball program in our community centers. They helped us implement the league, which was 50 percent boys and 50 percent girls. Then their staff clocked in and used their volunteer hours to come to us and help run our clinics. It has been an extraordinary partnership, all just perfectly aligned with what we do.

Our young people are tomorrow's workforce. They are going to take care of us, and our companies and our society. If we invest in them, it's going to pay us all dividends.

Collectively, we have to create more and better opportunities if this city's going to recover. ♦