

ORION Communities

Spring 2021



Unique Community – Behind the Scenes

During the first days of what we initially thought would be a two-week stay-at-home mandate, a half dozen non-profits met to share concerns and approaches to help our neighbors in need. First pandemic and all, we needed to know who was able to continue to provide food, shelter, and resources and how each of us was planning to continue to operate as we were all looking for innovative ways to serve our missions. After the initial meeting, we invited Mayor Peter Urscheler so we could share what we were thinking and to hear Borough plans.

This led the Mayor and Karin Williams from Phoenixville's Office of Emergency Management with Tamela Luce from the Phoenixville Community Health Foundation to organize a two-part weekly meeting, first half with non-profits focused on critical services and the second half open to the larger pool of agencies helping those in need. Thus a new 'hashtag' and stake holders meeting was launched and continues to meet twice a month.

As our Mayor so succinctly put it, *"Phoenixville's nonprofits have a rich history of collaboration, but through #InThisTogetherPXV critical non-profits, like Orion, stepped up, removed boundaries and all worked towards a singular goal; helping stabilize and sustain our neighbors and our community through COVID-19. Their successful efforts will lead to our collective recovery and will be remembered for decades to come."*

We really are in this together and we are so grateful for all the fabulous partnerships working for the benefit of everyone in our community. Whether giving time, talent, treasure or connections to new resources, together we have made a difference for those who are struggling and, together, we will continue to do so – thank you!

Help to Get to Work

Frustrated, a man called looking for help with a new battery for his car. Orion was the fourth agency he called for assistance and he did not want to hear another "sorry, we do not assist with car repairs." To help pay bills, he secured an additional part time job as a dog-walker and groomer. He made enough to pay his cell phone bill, car payment and insurance and some groceries. But if he could not fix his car, he was in danger of losing his primary job and that would just be another added stressor to his growing list.

After an assessment with a Case Manager, the gentleman obtained quotes from three repair shops and reported back. The same day, our team was able to help get his new battery installed. He thanked the staff profusely and sent a card that read "At the time I needed help the most, you stepped in. I can't thank you enough."



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Neighbors helping neighbors!



The outdoor computer, intercom, and Internet café are still open for business!!

"I volunteered at Orion for a couple of years because I was curious to know how Orion supported the community of Phoenixville and the wider area.

What resonates with us is Orion's ability to assess people and help people for different reasons with so many different needs. I like the case management system and how they partner with lots of other organizations to achieve their aims.

I think Orion is unique and solidly managed as regards to resources. I have great confidence in Orion's leadership and their team and the evolution of that team to provide support to the community."



Proud member of
Cc
the Community
Coalition

"Housing First" is the Mantra

The lack of affordable housing is a recognized national crisis. Often families pay 50-80% of their income towards rent (sometimes more!) even though the Federal government recommends a maximum of 30%. While there is a moratorium on evictions, the U.S. now has more than 9.8 million fewer jobs than it did in February 2020 with the greatest loss coming from the lower wage job sectors (Washington Post.com 2/5/2021).



We need to remember that while there is a 'hold on evictions' that hold is not a forgiveness of rent. "15% of Pennsylvania renters — will face eviction, according to an analysis by the nonprofit Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania" (Charlotte Keith, The Inquirer, 12/11/2020).

The reality at the street level demonstrates that not all leases are created equal and people are still being evicted. Orion has experienced a four fold increase in requests for rental assistance. We are also increasingly hearing from landlords asking to help tenants pay their rent so the landlords can pay their own bills.

The need for affordable housing has not gone away during the pandemic, it just may not be the top priority at this moment. We are grateful that in 2017, the Phoenixville Borough created a task force that exists today as The Phoenixville Council for Affordable Housing. The Council continues to advocate for creative new possibilities in town to keep all residents safely housed.

Juggling Too Much

Embarrassed and in shock, this young mother is typically financially stable with her son. She makes a livable wage and resides in a community with a top school district. But she lost her job due to COVID and found herself needing help with past due rent while waiting on government COVID aid. She hopes to move to more affordable housing and doesn't want an eviction to affect her credit score. A friend heard Orion is helping people in her situation, so she reached out.

After an intake, a Case Manager realized no computer access at home was an employment barrier for this mom. In the past, her employer provided one for her type of work. She was grateful to hear that Orion could give her a gently used laptop.



When she came to pick up the laptop, she apologetically asked for a food card to buy her son milk, eggs, and bread. We assured her there was no need to apologize. Orion was able to get her a laptop, food card and a list of local food pantries. Just days later, she gained employment! She called again and said, "I have not worked in so long because I did not have a laptop and I missed having a job. Thank you so much for all that you do for people in hard times."

Unfortunately, this is the reality for many. Rent payments that are fine in good times can be problematic during a pandemic. The loss of a job starts a snowball effect of depleted saving accounts and bills piling up with little to no money to cover basic living essentials. Stress levels are high. This is what neighbors helping neighbors is all about, bridging the gap from instability to stability, wherever we can.

Meet Denise Starr, LMSW - Orion's Case Management Supervisor

Why Social Work? For me, social work is not just any job. It is an inexplicable part of who I am. Social work entails a certain view of human beings and what type of world we want to live in. As a social worker, I respect the autonomy of the person, acknowledge opinions and values, affirm resources, and strengthen self-esteem. Social Work means improving the world we live in by making life easier for others.

Why Orion? It was important for me to work at an organization where its mission is as strong as my personal values. Orion believes in helping our neighbors who are struggling to secure life's basic needs. This is something that I was taught at a very early age from my parents.

At Orion I get to meet wonderful people of all circumstances working together to make our community better for everyone!

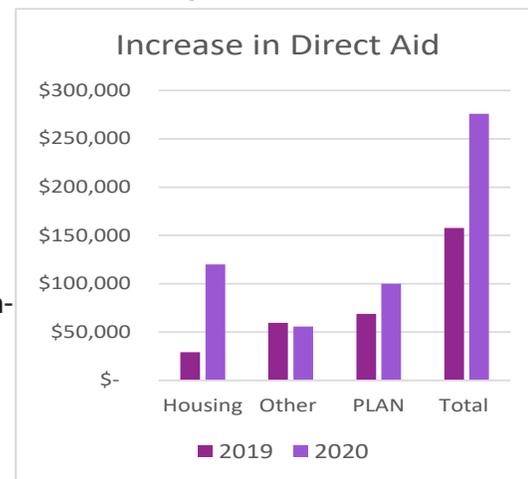


Financial Assistance Needs Grew in 2020....

And so did the contributions! Our Case Managers start by listening to the need and then help connect our neighbors to available resources. For example, when someone needs food in Phoenixville we have PACS and others who provide food daily or weekly Orion gives our neighbors in need the names, locations, times of operation, etc. Same thing with shelters for those who are experiencing homelessness.

But when there's not a good match to available resources, Orion's team has the Community Emergency Fund to help with housing, utilities, transportation, and similar basic needs. We also have PLAN (Provisional Lodging Access Now) to provide hotel stays and security deposits for individuals and families who are moving from homelessness to permanent housing but need interim support to get there.

In 2020, the needs really increased, but so did the donations and grants! We are blessed that there are so many resources in our community! However, when a family doesn't qualify for a partner agency's program or an individual's circumstances have other complicating factors, it is good to know that our friends have been willing to share with our under-resourced neighbors.



April is Volunteer Appreciation Month and We So Appreciate Our Volunteers Help and Kind Words!

"We have been volunteering on and off at Orion starting in 2019. We believe that every human being is created in God's image and deserves to be treated with much dignity and respect. We love Orion Communities for the support and encouragement they provide to the under-served population in our midst.



Although we do not have specific training to deal directly with clients, we do what we can to support the caseworkers and the organization. We are happy to help with organizing supplies and donations, assisting clients pick out winter gear during the coat drive, taking extra donations to agency partners, etc. These may be small things by themselves, but we know that they add up and make a huge difference to the staff."

~ Cat & Skip ~

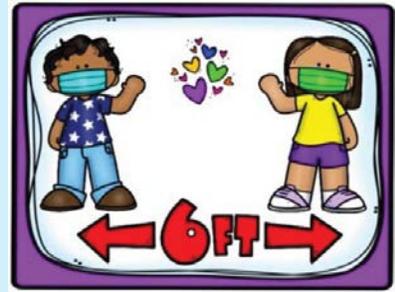


Neighbors helping neighbors!

Isolation Can Hurt

Did you know that loneliness can shorten your life? Loneliness has been estimated to reduce a person's life by 15 years, equivalent in impact to being obese or smoking 15 cigarettes per day according to former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy and others. So call a neighbor, send a note or email to an elder, share virtual hugs while practicing social distancing.....

It's good for you and for your neighbor's health!



237 Bridge Street
Phoenixville, PA 19460



Upcoming event!

Night of Stories & Music

Fabulous Musicians!
Brad Rau
Liz Faranda &
Derek Maninfor

Sunday, March 21, 2021 at 6pm

An evening of fireside chats and wonderful music

Virtual doors open at 5:30 pm, event begins at 6:00

www.OrionHope.org/NOS2021

**Free for all
our neighbors!**

The evening is sponsored by
Bryn Mawr Trust
SEI Diversity
& Orion Communities' Board of Directors

"The Orion staff does the best job of envisioning and inventing such fun and inspiring ways to engage the community and bring awareness of the truly incredible work that you do to help meet the needs of so many."
~ An Orion Friend~