

## The Old Pine Community Center in Philadelphia Responds to COVID-19



*Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much*  
— Helen Keller

I have always believed in the power of community. It is not in all of our differences we “see” one another but it is in our similarities.

As we all have been forced to view our lives and our community differently due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and for many the civil unrest that still continues, we begin to see how similar we all are in our human needs, dreams, and desires. Many of us are reflecting on our past views, our current actions and our future change. For me, I reflect on how I can be a change agent for all people, not allowing myself to be comfortable in “rose tinted glasses” but to look head on at some hard truths, such as food insecurity, systemic racism and poverty. Through this lens, I have become steadfast in my conviction of being a change agent and uniting with others who understand and are not afraid to stand up, speak and more importantly be an active member of our community. It is why I was compelled to serve as the CEO and Executive Director of the Old Pine Community Center and why I continue to stand at the helm.

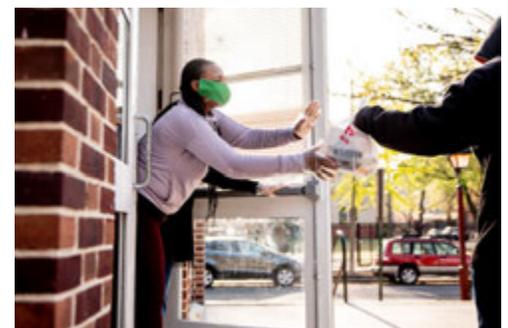


*A sample of healthy food options distributed to those in need by The Old Pine Community Center during the pandemic.*

The Old Pine Community Center is a non-profit organization that has been situated on the corner of 4th and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia, Pa for over 43 years. Our mission is to provide programs and services that enrich the lives of others regardless of race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, nor sexual orientation. For years “The Center” has worked collaboratively with the community, city officials and other participants to create and cultivate programs that meet the needs of an evolving Philadelphia. Today the Center has robust and inclusive programming and services that spread the age spectrum including, but not limited to, two youth programs (after school and summer camp), adult education (GED, Job Readiness), a program for seniors (Saturday for Seniors), community rentals, 12 Step programs, recreation, F.A.C.T. (Food, Aid, Clothing, Training and other services) and Shine programs, open to all people in need, which provide participants nutritious meals, basic necessities and other resources. Additionally, we conduct targeted outreach for vulnerable populations such as Operation Warm Winter (focused on supporting our homeless veterans) and Adopt a School (focused on a commitment of 1-3 years of support to high needs schools). We operate seven days a week from 6:30am-11:30pm and we are committed to our mission and passion of enhancing the lives of those we serve by aiding in their immediate need as well as generational change. At the heart of all of our programs, we have what we refer to as “the human factor” to assure whether young or old, wealthy or impoverished, you feel a sense of hope and belonging when you enter our doors. This is accomplished not only through research, metrics and statistics, but also by listening and interpersonal relationships. The Center has the unique and necessary ability to be malleable to the needs of the community and we have been able to adapt and evolve as needed to be a thriving activist for everyone in our community.

We were most challenged with the recent pandemic, as it hit us all so quickly and without

foresight. Like many, we thought we would have to close our doors. For very obvious safety reasons, Pennsylvania issued a stay at home order, yet as a place that is built on bringing people together, we were uncertain about what the next day would bring. The outlook was bleak, but calls for help continued to pour in. We were at a crossroads; we wanted to be as safe as possible, but we heard our staff fears relative to safety and job security, as well as the cries of those that were most vulnerable. This is where we sat down, listened to those in need and reimagined The Center as a food distribution site. Unsure about how to navigate this new territory, we began to reengineer our FACT program to support the increasing need of the community and expand its services to include needed items that, due to the continuation of the pandemic and severe job loss, had left so many individuals and families in need. We decided we would weather the storm, as it is our mission and goal to be a beacon of hope for all in the community, even during a time in which it seemed impossible. We closely followed CDC recommendations and as of March 2020, The Center looked a lot different! From March-June we saw dramatic increases in our distribution: over 30,000 lbs. of food, a 139% increase for our “to-go” meals, a 174% increase for family support and care packages, and an overall increase of 92% of people served under this program. To support the fast growing need and demand we diligently worked with current partners such as Philabundance who aided us



*An Old Pine Community Center staff member distributes food to the community.*

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Sample of installed vinyl tiles by Mural Arts Philadelphia

in the fight against hunger by helping to make nutritious food accessible to all; and created new partnerships like Mural Arts Philadelphia, who supported and encouraged social distancing during food distribution by installing vinyl tiles designed by local artists, known as "Space Pads." Other new partnerships emerged building our community, such as with Puentes de Salud who serves the Lantix immigrant population through advocacy, education and healthcare. Together we were able to support approximately 70 families each week with fresh and shelf stable food, hygiene products and much needed cleaning supplies, all in an effort to provide the healthiest and safest options possible for every person. We continue to

push forward through this public health crisis and its impact, but we have created our new norm that still aligns with our mission from over 40 years ago. As the world continues to "open up," we will be there on the front lines, working to enhance and help our neighbors and friends and together we will continue to Build Better Communities.

*It is Maya Angelou that said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*