Coping with a killer
NECAC, clients adapt to changes wrought by coronavirus

The coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world has meant life-altering changes for NECAC and its clients. Particularly hard hit have been people who were already struggling to pay their bills, feed their families and meet medical obligations.

Marien White of Lake St. Louis in St. Charles County has been quarantined for three weeks after coming in contact with a person who tested positive for COVID-19. To complicate matters, White has lupus and has been living at a motel for the last six months after the house she was renting was condemned.

“I’m scared to death,” said the 50-year-old insurance agent. “A cold can put me in intensive care at this point.”
A single mother with four children, White is frustrated with the isolation of quarantine. A woman who was used to meeting with clients, visiting with her kids and helping hundreds in her community through outreach efforts and a food pantry now must rely upon family and friends for food and other needs.

“It’s been horrible,” she said. “I’ve been in this one room. I haven’t left. I never thought I’d be in this position. It’s been hard for me to say ‘I need help for this long.’”
Meanwhile, in Shelby County, Claire Harder of Shelbina has had to put aside expectations of a 2020 census job to focus on her health and that of her family. The 27-year-old and her husband, James, who works as a mechanic, have seven children. Harder has heart and lung problems as well as asthma, but the threat goes beyond just the physical.

“It gets a little bit stressful,” Harder said. “The whole thing...
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Survey follows $1 billion for Community Action

NECAC has done a survey on the impact of the COVID-19 virus. The move was made after Congress and President Donald Trump approved $1 billion in new funding for the Community Services Block Grant as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. CSBG is a primary funding source for Community Action.

“This incredible investment in Community Action and support of our network as a critical component of relief and recovery is due to the tireless efforts of David Bradley and his team at the National Community Action Foundation,” said Adrian Fassett, president of the National Community Action Foundation.
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Financially is just beyond measure.”

The Harder children range in age from six to 14. Since Missouri schools have been closed for the rest of the academic year, the kids are home much more. “I’m just trying to stick to a schedule as best I can,” Harder said.

Both families have received help through NECAC. White has gotten rental assistance. The Harders received utility assistance and were part of the SkillUp program, which provides food stamp recipients a chance to gain skills, training or experience that can improve their chances to find better employment. They have advice for others in need.

“Don’t be afraid to reach out,” Harder said. “There are so many places that are willing to help out. You just have to ask for help.”

“NECAC provided peace of mind,” White added. “Even a week of peace was monumental for me.”

As with so many agencies and businesses, NECAC has been impacted by COVID-19.

The 12 County Service Centers are doing business, but doors have been locked to decrease foot traffic. Boxes have been set up outside each facility so clients may drop off required paperwork, and service center employees are communicating with clients much more by telephone and computer.

Weatherization crew members have been put on administrative leave due to concerns about contact with clients, and many employees are working from home. The Family Planning and Women, Infants and Children programs have instituted new protocols and are offering curbside service for many medical needs.

“Our goal is to serve clients while also making sure we take precautions to stop the spread of the virus,” said NECAC President and Chief Executive Officer Don Patrick. “We are an essential provider, and as such we will be here to administer the social services, housing development and community health programs which are vital to serving the disadvantaged. We want to reassure our communities that we are still here to help during this unprecedented pandemic.”

White and Harder are optimistic, but, as with so many others, the view is tempered by timidity that comes with an uncertain outlook.

“I have to believe my situation has to change for the better,” said White, who is starting a new job. “It cannot get worse. The best thing for me has been to reach out to positive groups that can help me.”

“I know it will be over someday, but I’m not sure what version of normal we’re going to get,” Harder added.

Survey results on virus are compiled

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Board of Directors. “This could not have been accomplished without David’s years of dedication to building relationships and connections with legislators from both parties of the House and Senate, representing all political views. This piece of legislation moved quickly from draft to law, but David moved just as quickly to ensure Community Action was included.”

Specific dollar amounts for each agency are not known, but Fassett said “every local Community Action Agency across the country” would be eligible.

The NECAC coronavirus survey was done on the agency website and on Facebook April 3 to 17.

There were 203 respondents across all 12 NECAC counties. About 25 percent were staff members. Questions were asked in three categories — concerns at this time, concerns for you and your family once the outbreak is over and concerns for the community.

Results showed a steady increase in concerns about employment, from just 11.9 percent in the first category to 33.8 percent in the third. Worries about housing/utilities and health/safety were consistently strong throughout. Lower levels of concern were indicated for food/nutrition, mental health and childcare.

“We were pleased to see how people thought we should proceed going forward,” said NECAC County Services Program Director Linda Fritz. “The responses will allow us to decide how best to use any additional funding that’s awarded.”

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Warrenton woman donates face masks

Lynn Rees is maximizing her time by using a hobby to help others during the coronavirus pandemic.

Rees is part of a group of Warrenton women who are making cotton masks for local residents. NECAC is one of the agencies distributing the items.

“Making things simply helps time pass,” Rees said. “It is an extra blessing that what I like to do can help someone else. Whether you know anyone with the virus or not, we want to help people to stay healthy.”

“We’re very appreciative of the donations made by Lynn and her group,” said NECAC Warren County Service Coordinator Desiree Antoniou. “These masks will help many people.”

Joining Rees in the endeavor are Elaine Auch, Judy Burkhart and others. More than 1,000 masks have been made. The women also are accepting donations of money and food for Agape Ministry of Warrenton.

Since her retirement 21 years ago, Rees has made and donated more than 8,000 winter hats that have been given to NECAC and other agencies which serve the disadvantaged.

“I make the hats on a loom, so they look like they are hand knit, but they are not,” Rees said.

In addition, Rees crochets granny square afghans that she’s donated to local agencies and people in need.

Most of the yarn for projects comes through donations. Rees can use any size, color or amount of yarn, which can be donated by calling Antoniou at 636-456-8191.
Gas cards offered to St. Charles County homeless

NECAC recently teamed up with Coordinated Entry of St. Charles County to offer $25 gasoline cards for the homeless during the coronavirus outbreak.

“Since the start of the COVID-19 health emergency, enrollments into Coordinated Entry have increased 40 percent,” said Todd A. Barnes, Executive Director of the Community Council of St. Charles County, which administers Coordinated Entry. “In a collaborative effort among area agencies including NECAC, we are working together on behalf of our neighbors experiencing homelessness.”

“It’s not the fault of the homeless that COVID-19 came along,” said NECAC St. Charles County Service Coordinator Cheryl Clerkley. “This effort will make the job of distributing cards easier. We want to keep it moving.”

Applicants must call the essential community services line 211 and choose option five, then enter their ZIP code and leave a voice message with their contact number. Coordinated Entry staff members who are working from home call back and do an assessment. Once approved, applicants are asked to call NECAC at 636-272-3477. Clerkley or a staff member will make arrangements for a curbside pickup at the NECAC St. Charles County Service Center, 3400 Meadow Pointe Drive in O’Fallon.

The gas cards are funded through local donations, and are especially welcome during the ongoing virus outbreak. Clerkley said many places the homeless usually go, such as libraries, stores and public buildings, are closed.

“They can’t just hang out anymore,” she said. “It’s especially hard for the homeless right now. They don’t have anywhere to go. Some people are sleeping in their cars and need to stay warm during the cold nights. They heat their cars to stay warm. In St. Charles County, you have to have a vehicle to get around.”

Utility assistance application deadline extended to May 31

NECAC continues accepting applications for winter utility assistance after the deadline was extended due to coronavirus.

The cutoff to apply for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) in Missouri normally is March 31, but the state extended it to May 31. NECAC and other non-profits contract with the state to administer the federally-funded program at the local level.

“We know that a lot of people have utility bills that are racking up,” said NECAC County Services Programs Director Linda Fritz. “We hope this extension allows people the resources to pay their utility bills and be able to afford other household needs.”

Missouri families are facing many challenges to cope with the virus outbreak. Job losses, reduced hours of employment and other economic factors have placed a strain on everyone, but particularly those who have difficulty making ends meet.

“Some people and families may not have qualified in the past, but now do because of a loss of employment or other change in their lives,” Fritz said.

LIHEAP can pay part of the energy bills of income-qualifying people. Eligible households could receive a minimum of $47 up to a maximum of $495, depending upon income, household size and type of heating source. Payments are made directly to utility companies.

One other program that’s available is the Energy Crisis Intervention Program (ECIP). It offers assistance of up to $800 to qualifying households of those who have received a utility shut-off notice. Because most companies are not shutting off clients during the pandemic, that program likely will not be used as much.

Clients who seek utility assistance are being reminded that NECAC County Service Centers remain open for business, but the doors are locked to reduce traffic. Applications are being taken on the agency’s website. Other arrangements are made with clients who do not have computer access. Paperwork also can be placed in drop boxes at each service center.

Job skills info available to those who’ve been displaced by virus

NECAC is offering free help to people who’ve lost their jobs due to the coronavirus outbreak.

The classwork includes information about writing a resume, preparing for an interview and standing out among a crowd of applicants. In addition, skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management and use of technology are discussed. Clients may access information electronically or have it mailed to them.
Anderson takes reins in Ralls County

NECAC President and Chief Executive Officer Don Patrick has announced the agency has hired Miranda Anderson of Center as Ralls County Service Coordinator.

Anderson will work with local clients in Ralls County to deliver and coordinate the agency’s self-sufficiency programs.

“We welcome Miranda to the NECAC team,” Patrick said. “She has extensive experience helping those in need and will be of great assistance to those seeking the agency’s help in getting back on their feet.”

“I like working at NECAC because I’m helping people in the communities who need it,” Anderson said.

Anderson is a 2001 graduate of East Forest High School in Marionville, Pa. She received an associate’s degree in business and a bachelor’s in human resources from Ashford University of San Diego.

NECAC earns top HUD rating for 11-county program

NECAC has received a top rating for administering a federally-funded rent-assistance program.

President and Chief Executive Officer Don Patrick said the agency earned a 104 percent rating from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for its performance in administering the Section 8 Housing Rent-Assistance Program in Lewis, Lincoln, Macon, Marion, Monroe, Montgomery, Pike, Ralls, Randolph, Shelby and Warren counties.

The 11 counties make up the Lincoln County Public Housing Agency overseen and administered by NECAC, which also administers the program in St. Charles County where it received a 102 percent rating last year.

NECAC was one of 24 housing agencies in Missouri tested in 15 areas on the Section-Eight Management Assessment Program (SEMAP) monitoring and evaluation system. NECAC received extra credit points to boost the rating above 100 percent. This is the ninth time in 10 years NECAC has received HUD’s superior rating.

The agency has contracted with HUD and LCPHA for more than 40 years to administer the program. NECAC was the motivating force that brought the Section 8 program to Northeast Missouri in the mid-1970s and assisted in forming the LCPHA.

It is governed by a board made up of one county commissioner from each of the 11 counties. NECAC administers more than 2,400 HUD Rental Assistance vouchers in its service area.

“This is HUD’s way of testing and monitoring which housing agencies and authorities are doing a good job of administering the programs in an efficient, effective manner,” Patrick said. “We’re very pleased. This reflects highly on the work quality of the NECAC Housing Rent-Assistance Program Director Dianna Clair and her staff. They are providing services and making sure that tenants are receiving decent, affordable and safe housing, and that landlords are receiving top-quality customer service.”

The Section 8 Housing Rent-Assistance program provides partial rent assistance to qualifying participants. They receive a list of landlords who are part of the program.

A percentage of their monthly rent is forwarded by NECAC directly to the landlord. The remainder is paid by the tenant.

The amount of the rent subsidy depends upon the number of bedrooms in the home, the fair-market rent in a given area and the tenant’s income.