

April 5, 2023

Dear Members of the Fairfax County Consolidated Community Funding Advisory Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the Consolidated Community Funding Pool RFP FY 2025-2026 and the draft categories.

On behalf of Cornerstones, Food For Others, United Community and Western Fairfax Christian Ministries – we offer the following data points and recommendations for your consideration and look forward to continuing the dialogue on the CCFP prior to the next RFP. Our organizations serve as backbone organizations in different regions of Fairfax County, and while there are some differences, we collectively want to share some of our perspectives regarding the approach to the CCFP grants.

We would like to address the following key points that were also noted in our letter dated October 21, 2022:

- There were unintended consequences in the limitations imposed in the definition of “emergency” food and housing assistance, that have led to
  - Gaps remaining in services to community members
  - Barriers to services
  - Confusion between emergency/short term services and services with case management
- The focus on short-term food and housing in RFP II without also including longer-term food and housing solutions prevents
  - Strategic and sustainable solutions as a funded focus of health and human services non-profits providing these services
  - Focus on infrastructure and capacity building
  - Funding for innovative programs and partnerships that are fiscal-year/school-year/calendar-year long

Our recommendations for CCFP FY 25/26 include:

- Working with nonprofit organizations in Fairfax County to define “emergency” situations and “emergency food” with a broader lens
- Considering the challenges faced by residents when there is not funding for stable “emergency food” services in their local community/region and removing barriers that cause these gaps; examining the unintended consequences of the changes made this cycle to mitigate them in the next round
- Looking at the benefits of including all food and housing services in Lane 2 – both those currently considered short-term and those considered long-term so that organizations can cohesively provide services to families in their regions
- Considering how supplemental food programs could be included such as school Power Packs, Free Food Fridge programs, and other programs that provide necessary nutrition to identified populations in need of these programs
- Looking carefully at the definitions, outcomes, and service examples to ensure the expectations align and make sense in coordination (for example in providing immediate food for an emergency at a neighborhood distribution site, does case management make sense or is that part of longer-term support)
- Considering a separation of food and food outcomes where food insecurity is directly addressed from programs that provide gift cards and other monetary solutions

By way of background:

On December 1, 2020, a Joint Board Matter was drafted by Chairman McKay, Supervisor Foust, Supervisor Palchik, and Supervisor Smith regarding the Consolidated Community Funding Pool. The document stated, *“The CCFP is a long-standing funding source to support county residents with programs and services that enhance their lives. A significant portion of these resources provide direct funding for the critical basic needs of housing and food supports. Consistent with the Board’s Health and Human Services committee briefings on November 24, we must continue to consider various funding options to ensure these critical needs are met as we navigate the significant economic impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic. To the extent our residents rely on community-based organizations receiving CCFP funding to support meeting those needs, we must ensure CCFP processes are designed to eliminate potential gaps in service. Therefore, [we move] that the County Executive direct staff to review the CCFP with a specific eye toward the basic needs of housing and food supports...”*

On March 16, 2021, a response was provided to the Board of Supervisors by Chris Leonard, Deputy County Executive. The response included the following, *“Past funding cycle gaps and the impact of COVID-19 have highlighted the need to ensure adequate basic needs are resourced throughout the county. The CCFP is a competitive funding process which regularly sees basic needs of housing and food supports competing for funding with non-basic needs programs and services. Prior funding cycles have utilized a single Request for proposal (RFP) process to facilitate the competitive nature of the CCFP. Appropriately, the CCFP offers no guarantee to any organization to be funded. However, it is not appropriate for areas of the county to be left without any basic needs funding support, and that was an unintentional outcome of the competitive process.”*

We, collectively, look forward to discussing these topics with you and continuing the dialogue towards long-term success for individuals and families in our community who are facing mental health, food, and housing challenges. We encourage CCFAC and Fairfax County to consider and prioritize investments that will lead to sustainable, equitable recovery and infrastructure investments in the capacity of partners on the ground. We are grateful for the prior and current county grants that support our work and look forward to building on this partnership to serve residents of our county.

Respectfully submitted,

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Annie Turner, Executive Director, Food For Others

Alison DeCourcey, President & CEO, United Community

Harmonie Taddeo, Executive Director, Western Fairfax Christian Ministries

## **Addendum 1: Region 1 – United Community**

United Community is a 53-year-old nonprofit offering an array of human services that lift families out of poverty in Region 1 (Mount Vernon/Alexandria in Fairfax County) through a variety of programs that address emergency needs, as well as programs and community-based initiatives that promote self-sufficiency. Two of the highest poverty zip codes in Fairfax County — 22306 and 22309 — are in our service area, and:

- Are identified as “Highly Vulnerable” using Fairfax County’s Vulnerability Index;
- 85% percent of United Community clients reside in these zip codes;
- 30% of all households in those zip codes earn less than \$50,000 annually, or less than 40% of the median household income for the whole of Fairfax County (\$128,374);
- 89% of United Community clients are living at or below the poverty level;
- We serve a multicultural mix of families: 55% are Black and 37% are Hispanic.

In Region 1, the crisis of poverty has reached a crescendo over the past two+ years because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Job loss due to the pandemic has been concentrated in the service and retail industries, jobs held by most individuals served by United Community. Many of these jobs did not return when the epidemic started to subside. Many households we serve continue to barely make ends meet to pay their rents or meeting other basic needs

It is estimated that the number of residents in Fairfax who are food insecure has doubled since the beginning of the pandemic. This creates a situation in which the daily hunger and stress faced by our clients make it nearly impossible for them to take the long-term steps needed to overcome their poverty. At our Food Pantry, we experienced a **267% increase in demand for food the first year of COVID alone**. This is a much higher increase than the doubling that took place in most parts of the county.

CCFP supported four United Community programs in FY22: Early Learning Center, Stepping Stones, and Progreso. The total value of CCFP support to these programs in FY22 was \$583,288, or 16.6% of the total cost of these programs. United Community raised funds from other sources to fully operate these programs.

In the summer of 2020, we launched a Mobile Food Distribution Program at 6 sites in the community thanks to the financial support of United Community donors, partners, Fairfax County’s successful Food Access Program, and local grocers, like Amazon Fresh and Wegmans. These 6 mobile food sites – located in in trailer parks, community centers, and low income-high density apartment complexes – aim to alleviate residents’ barriers of transportation and affordability and ensure community has choices of healthy food in an area commonly known as a food desert.

At Mobile Distributions, we provide 16 pounds per person of largely nutritious food items to those who are food insecure. While the driver of our truck delivering the food is a United Community Food Warehouse employee, the distributions is fully managed by 1 community member – an Opportunity Neighborhood Ambassador who serves as the site’s Food Coordinator, receiving a small stipend. The Coordinator then recruits 4-6 volunteers every week to distribute food to their neighbors on tables set-up next to our trucks. Distributions are scheduled on a consistent basis each week with community members lining up sometimes 2 hours before the distribution begins. Limiting these distributions to serve families only 6 times in a fiscal year and separating our food program support between RFP 1 and 2 is both limiting for families and strategically limiting for United Community as we seek to serve the food insecure in our region.

## **Addendum 2: Region 2 – Food For Others**

Like other food pantries, Food for Others has seen a confluence of factors that make FY23 a challenging year. When we compare year to date numbers (July 1st through March 31<sup>st</sup>) for FY23 vs. FY22, we have seen an increase of 53% for household visits to our warehouse overall including a 30% increase in emergency referral visits. **On several occasions in the last few months, we've had to turn clients away because they have already surpassed the number of times they can come.** Just focusing on Feb 2023 to March 2023, we saw a 17% increase. Additionally, our neighborhood site distributions have seen an increase of 30% this fiscal year compared to last fiscal year, and although we are serving 43 Fairfax County Public Elementary Schools through our Power Pack Program (3,500 students weekly), we have 9 additional schools on our waiting list. The Power Pack Program did not receive funding through the CCFP FY23/FY24 cycle.

We attribute the increase in demand to a few issues. In March 2022, the community experienced an increase in expenses. It is estimated that grocery prices for the general consumer increased 11% between January 2022 and January 2023, while other household expenses such as gas, also experienced large price fluctuations. Coupled with the reduction in SNAP benefits in March 2023, this has had a crippling effect on our community members. For food pantries, there are other factors to consider. At Food for Others, food donations from the community are down 16% over last year which means that we are purchasing more food to cover the gap and our food prices have increased roughly 10% creating a perfect storm of challenges. Additionally, several emergency food distributions that popped up during COVID are now shutting down, further exacerbating the lines at our regular food distributions and for our partners.

Limiting emergency food to serve families only 6 times in a fiscal year and separating our food program support between RFP 1 and 2 is both limiting for families and strategically limiting for Food For Others as we seek to serve the food insecure in Fairfax County.

## **Addendum 3: Region 3 – Cornerstones**

Cornerstones was founded in 1970 to provide support and advocacy for people in need of emergency shelter, food, affordable housing, quality childcare and other human services. Each year we touch the lives of more than 16,000 individuals in the greater Reston/Herndon area – including 4,000+ families and more than 5,000 children.

Cornerstones programs provide:

- **Stability:** Basic needs such as emergency shelter, nutritious food and other financial assistance.
- **Empowerment:** Affordable rental housing, quality affordable childcare, job training and life skills supports, and out-of-school time programs. Operating a nonprofit center that provides office and training space for nonprofit, community and government partners in a “one-stop” neighborhood center known as Connections for Hope Partnership (C4HP).
- **Hope:** Working collectively to address racial and social inequities manifested in our neighborhoods and the disproportionate number of people of color who live in poverty or who need our programs. Opportunity Neighborhoods and community centers facilitate community-informed solutions to these issues and inform our advocacy efforts on behalf of clients.

CCFP funding is critical to providing partial support of five Cornerstones programs: (1) Affordable Rental Housing property and case management services to families in 106 homes; (2) addressing

emergency hunger relief through a food pantry and year-round assistance, (3) serving as a “backbone” for the Connections for Hope Partnership nonprofit center offering case management and services navigation to 8 partner offerings (literacy, immigration, job training, health and dental care; (4) Employment services and soft-skills job training for adults and youth; and (5) out-of-school time programming that supports both youth academic achievement as well as enrichment and leadership building for at-risk youth and parent engagement to support family growth and resiliency.

### **CCFP History and FY23/FY24 Funding**

Consistent with the 2018 CCFP Work Group report and prior reviews of the funding pool, Cornerstones agrees with the recommendation that Fairfax County define essential or emergency services and to prioritize and protect those resources. The application of this recommendation during the COVID-19 pandemic correctly focused the community response on essential food and housing resources and other safety net programs.

However, while Cornerstones has been providing emergency food and housing services for 50+ years, we found the set-aside in the CCFP FY23/FY24 RFP to be very specific in what would be funded, and not responsive to the family need we have documented in our region as one of the main providers of human services.

So, although two of our currently funded CCFP programs directly respond to the essential services/emergency needs category identified in the FY23/FY24 application, we did not apply in that lane. We would have liked to have been part of a conversation to determine whether there was flexibility or whether CCFP could be open to other ways of meeting the emergency need and short-term relief, while also strengthening capacity and infrastructure needed to sustain our community’s long recovery – and the anchor organization role Cornerstones’ plays as a multi-service human services and housing provider in Region 3.

While we may not have understood the intent in the emergency pool, the very real impact for us is that we applied through the general pool and all five of our projects – including three that provide emergency food, housing relief and case management services – received less funding at a time those essential services are needed more, and putting extra pressure on our already stretched resources.

As we have discussed with county staff with regard to the Food Access Program grant, with the current rise of food insecurity affecting many families and sectors of our community, access to local pantry programs that can distribute quality, fresh vegetables and meat, dairy, and pantry staples regularly is an essential lifeline. Purchasing food is not necessarily the only approach. Our experience is that the Region 3 community and source donors are more than generous in response to need for more food and we will use funds to purchase items that we cannot procure. However, the number one need for Cornerstones and cited by pantries in our region is increasing storage space with which to increase their ability to rescue and re-distribute staple and fresh and frozen foods. Repeatedly, we are offered the opportunity to salvage food from local grocers, farmers, and restaurants. Unfortunately, these opportunities are often wasted due to a lack of cooled and uncooled spaces. True to its role as a systems-thinker and convener, Cornerstones is bringing together partners to create a Food Hub serving Region 3 hunger relief partners and thus further leveraging the investment Fairfax County has made for providing emergency food relief. Limiting our efforts with a narrow definition of emergency food and separating our food and program support between RFP 1 and 2 is both limiting for families and strategically limiting for Cornerstones as we seek to serve the food insecure in region 3.

#### **Addendum 4: Region 4 – Western Fairfax Christian Ministries**

As the anchor human services organization in Region 4, Western Fairfax Christian Ministries has been serving community members in western Fairfax for 36 years. Based in Chantilly with fourteen Free Food Fridge locations throughout Region 4, WFCM's vision is of a community that is housed and fed and we provide a variety of services and programs to families in the 8 zip codes we serve towards reaching that vision.

Major improvements in the CCFP RFP process were implemented by providing an online platform for grant submission and separating essential food and housing services from other programs. The concern that we have expressed, during the RFP process and since, is that while we believe that our work is best categorized as emergency food and housing, the definition of emergency and limitations on the provisions of food in lane two are too confining to meet the needs that exist in our community.

WFCM only applied for Lane 2 funding (RFP #3361) for emergency housing and emergency food. For emergency food, the CCFP grant awarded provided funding for 27% of the emergency food program (68% of which is for direct assistance). However, this program covers only 50% of the clients served in our client choice pantry as the remainder are part of longer-term programs where they can receive assistance for up to one-year.

At a time when Fairfax County's ERA program has been providing up to 15 months of rental support to keep families housed it does not seem reasonable to provide only 6 months/times of food in a year with the expectation that the family will be out of their financial instability/food insecurity at the end of that short time-period. This limited definition of emergency services was not outlined in the letters referenced above (Board of Supervisors Board Matter or memorandum from Deputy County Executive Chris Leonard) nor have we found them in any recommendations from the CCFP Process Improvement Work Team.

Reduced wages, rising rent, and inflation are increasing the inability of our clients to meet their rent and utility bills without assistance. With the return of disconnection and eviction notices, the families are facing difficult decisions regarding which bills to pay and which to let lapse while struggling to buy groceries. This shouldn't be a decision point to have only one or the other. We are seeing rising numbers of clients, up 16% comparing March 2022 to March 2023 with the end of supplemental emergency SNAP benefits. We are now serving nearly 2x the number of families every month via our client-choice food pantry than pre-pandemic and in the process of opening a second client choice food pantry location in Centreville to serve more families. In addition, we have added programs to address food insecurity at 14 partner sites. We know the recovery period will be long and that focus on housing/food needs to be heightened from what was originally planned.

Limiting emergency food to serve families only 6 times in a fiscal year and separating our food program support between RFP 1 and 2 is both limiting for families and strategically limiting for WFCM as we seek to serve the food insecure in region 4.