

The People's American Rescue Plan

Developed by Voice of Westmoreland - December 2021

Amended -May 2022

Introduction

This document was created by Voice of Westmoreland (VOW) in collaboration with residents of Westmoreland county. VOW conducted a community survey of nearly 800 residents. Results of surveys conducted by the Westmoreland County commissioners, Catholic Charities and United Way were reviewed and incorporated along with the results of thousands of phone conversations and door to door canvass conversations. Collaborative meetings with non-profit safety net providers who contract to provide human service programs for Westmoreland County were conducted over the past year and also served as a source of information in preparing this document.

The People's American Rescue Plan for Westmoreland County reflects the needs of county residents as expressed by county residents. Most recently, Voice of Westmoreland convened a series of Roundtable discussions focusing on the three issues identified by our survey as priority concerns for local residents: housing, mental health and healthcare. Experts who participated included Dr. Carol Fox from Excelsa Health, Ellen Marsilli from the Blackburn Center, Leigh Carroll from SEIU Healthcare / United Homecare workers, Aaron Moore from Westmoreland Housing Authority, Robin Stelly from Pennsylvania Health Access Network, Tara Gandy, Owner and Therapist at Building Bridges Together and Laurie Barnett Levine from Mental Health America.

Following the expert presentations, 35-40 community participants at each roundtable discussed solutions to stated gaps and challenges to help us develop these proposals for ARPA fund use. Three areas were identified as priority needs for helping our people with COVID Relief: Mental Health Care enhancements, Housing Assistance, and Healthcare (including transportation and food insecurity.)

The Federal guidelines for the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds stipulate involvement of members of the community who were most impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the planning for use of these funds. Voice of Westmoreland (VOW) believes that everyone has a voice, not just the powerful few. We incorporated the ARPA guidelines and our guiding principles to develop this document.

VOW has not crafted this document as a search for funding for our organization, but for the needs of the people of Westmoreland county. The suggestions contained in this document are meant to serve as guidelines to address real-life list needs for our residents. Many of these community needs have existed for decades, but the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and escalated their severity. ARP funds were designated to be used to help those most disproportionately impacted by the effects of the pandemic to recover. These funds are intended to be utilized in a manner comparable to disaster relief following natural disasters like floods and hurricanes. Lives have been devastated by COVID and ARP funds are designed to help repair the damages COVID has caused.

We ask that as a part of the process for developing a spending plan for the \$105 million ARPA funds for Westmoreland County that you develop a **County Community Planning and Advocacy Coalition**. This Coalition would bring members of the safety net providers, county stakeholders, the commissioners and members of those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic (including representatives of VOW) to develop transparent, publicly accountable plans for ARPA use. In doing so, the current safety net programs can be evaluated for care gaps while those involved in the care delivery as well as those who are recipients of services can provide input regarding enhancing existing programs while eliminating programs that no longer meet their needs. This same group can collaborate to create new programs that may facilitate our recovery from the pandemic. ARPA funds are transformational and need to be carefully utilized in ways that center improving life for those most disproportionately impacted by COVID 19.

For Questions, please contact:

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Healthcare

Dedicate at least \$15 million to address Healthcare needs exacerbated by the pandemic.

Voice of Westmoreland believes that everyone deserves affordable, accessible, quality healthcare.

- Transportation is the leading barrier to healthcare access in Westmoreland county.
 - Designate \$1 million for transportation vouchers for medical and mental health appointments for under-resourced areas with rideshare providers (ex: Uber, Lyft); enhance existing county transportation to provide services to outlying areas as a priority.

- Priority communities include: West Newton, Sutersville, Smithton, Jacob’s Creek, Donegal, Ligonier, Bolivar, Arnold, Jeannette and New Kensington.
- Designate \$1 million for CDL training for youth / young adults to address workforce shortage issues.
 - Prioritize those from disproportionately impacted communities.
 - Develop programs with county Technical / Trade Schools partnered with county high schools.
 - Incentivize workforce retention for continued county employment. This program will help address our declining county population.
- Increase access to healthcare with mobile healthcare units bringing medical and mental health care to outlying areas with “place based” care.
 - Consider partnership with Community Health Clinic Mobile Health Clinic. Utilize their existing medical van while infusing funds for increasing their services.
 - Consider partnership with Excela Health using ARPA funding to develop mobile primary care/behavioral health services by providing the “seed” money or start-up money with Excela sustaining the program by income received from insurance and government reimbursement and funding from other public, private and government sources.
- Implement tele-health medicine.
 - Prioritize broadband expansion to rural and disproportionately impacted communities for telemedicine for medical, wellness and behavioral health care. \$1.5 million.
 - The infrastructure Legislation will provide funding to address broadband but there is an urgent need to bring broadband for tele-health to the most impacted communities on an emergent, priority basis.
 - Provide subsidized income based assistance for broadband access to those living in public housing units.
- Address staffing shortages by investing \$1 million for training Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA’s) and RN’s
 - Bonus payments to retain healthcare workers in the county, incentivize workforce training in healthcare by centering on members from disproportionately impacted areas through partnerships with Community College and Trade/Technical schools.
 - Incentivize commitments to work in the county post training.

- Offer training programs to family members to serve as CNA's who could then be hired by home care agencies and receive payment for their services. A program of this kind would help families who struggle to find adequate home care workers and also struggle with being able to afford quitting their job to care for a sick or disabled family member.
- \$1 million for COVID test kits sent to county residents for rapid COVID identification. Rapid Identification of new COVID cases will help with mitigation of the spread and will result in health and economic benefits to the county.
- Establish a flexible financial assistance fund to help those disproportionately impacted by COVID for medical / behavioral health and medication co-pays. Co-pay charges and high deductibles often serve as barriers to care.
- Increase food bank / nutrition programs and create programs to address food desert areas. Outlying, rural areas of the county do not have adequate access to food distribution programs. or grocery stores.
 - Enhancing food bank offerings to provide more fresh fruits and vegetables would increase health and well being. Explore using "mobile grocery" visits to outlying, underserved areas.
 - Incentivize grocery business development in underserved and outlying areas.

Mental Health

Dedicate at least \$25 million to address mental health needs exacerbated by the pandemic.

Voice of Westmoreland believes that everyone deserves access to timely, affordable, quality mental health care.

- Explore the establishment of a 24/7 drop-in crisis center that is welcoming, warm, and homey, staffed by well trained professionals. This unit would be modeled after the "Resolve" crisis center located in Allegheny county.
 - ARP funds could be used as "seed" money with the health care provider seeking state, federal and insurance funding to sustain the program.

- Convene a roundtable of mental health and substance abuse professionals, representatives of the county, social service and non-profit agencies that serve people with mental health and substance abuse needs, and people who are receiving services to develop solutions to gaps in services and training.
 - Goals will include (but not be limited to): identifying gaps in services and recommendations for addressing and funding solutions; creating an easily navigated website with information about and links to all the MH/SA services; developing incentives (including financial) to attract and retain professionals; and, training in anti-racism, cultural competence, and in specific issues, such as those faced by people with chronic physical illness. Through our many conversations with stakeholders and community members, we have developed some initial suggestions for mental health needs. We know that this is a complicated issue and we would like to convene this roundtable in order to more deeply understand the challenges and needs, and develop concrete solutions.
 - We are proposing to include community members and Voice of Westmoreland members as members of the County Behavioral Health Task force/Roundtable groups.
 - Increase funding to enhance behavioral health and substance abuse programs to include enhanced youth early intervention programs and programs to address individuals with dual diagnosis of mental health / substance abuse disorders.

- Establish de-escalation and stabilization units that could prevent the need for hospitalization.
 - De-escalation/stabilization units provide cost savings by eliminating the need for inpatient admissions. Re-establish the “Pathways” unit that was a proven program to prevent rapid readmission and stable transition from inpatient psychiatric admissions back to the community.
 - The human savings of these units are immeasurable as data demonstrates that this type of unit is vital for suicide prevention.

Housing

Dedicate at least \$20 million to address housing needs exacerbated by the pandemic.

Voice of Westmoreland believes that everyone has the right to live a dignified life and the poor conditions in county public housing deserve priority action steps to ensure clean, safe and healthy living conditions for public housing residents.

- Increase the Westmoreland County Housing Authority maintenance budget to assure timely repair, replacement, remediation and upgrades to residential units. Provide funding to develop new handicap accessible units and make improvements to existing units to bring them into compliance with ADA / handicap accessibility standards.
- **Priority funding consideration should be given to address the bed bug, roach, mold and safety issues as well as remediating inadequate heat and air conditioning issues existing in Westmoreland County Public Housing facilities.**
 - **Priority facilities include, but are not limited to: Jeannette Manor, Trafford Manor, Latrobe Manor, Irwin Manor, Arnold Manor, Kensington Manor-Central Towers and Scottdale Manor.**
- Create an Affordable Housing Opportunity Fund to acquire and develop property (potentially including surplus hotels / motels) for use as non-congregate shelters and for permanent affordable housing. The Fund will support municipalities to accelerate acquisition of tax-delinquent or County-controlled properties and sites suitable for the development of affordable and mixed-income housing. The Fund will establish rent-to-own and rehabilitate-to-own programs.
- Create a Home Stabilization Fund to stabilize underserved communities with high rates of abandoned and foreclosed homes, and to assist households in acquiring new homes or keeping their existing homes. The fund will be used to purchase and rehabilitate homes and residential properties. Funds will also provide support to homeowners through educational programs (e.g., finances, home maintenance).
- Provide supplemental funding of the county's HOME Investment Partnership Program to fund reimbursements to localities for their 25% match. Provide directed funds to families and individuals making between 121% and 135% of the county median income.
- Create a \$2 million income based emergency mortgage assistance / emergency home repair / delinquent tax assistance fund for homeowners facing COVID related income loss to prevent foreclosures, transition into needing section 8 housing assistance or homelessness. Consider partnership with non-profit entities like Habitat for Humanity to assist with providing the labor forces for the emergency repairs.

Created by: Diana Steck, Michael Pardus, Bob Mason and Celina Culver; December 2021

Revised by Diana Steck: May 2022