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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Coronavirus Threatens America's Nonprofits

A pandemic makes it difficult to provide vital services and raise needed money.

By Angela Williams

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An Easterseals job coach sorts merchandise with a client in North Augusta, S.C., Dec. 19, 2019.

PHOTO: MICHAEL HOLAHAN/THE AUGUSTA CHRONICLE VIA AP

As policy makers respond to the coronavirus pandemic and its economic effects, they shouldn't forget about America's nonprofits, which are on the front lines of caring for the nation's most vulnerable populations. My organization is a case in point. Easterseals' national network of 68 affiliates provides services to people with disabilities. The closing of early-childhood programs, schools, after-school programs, adult day centers and other facilities threatens both their ability to provide services and the revenue streams that come from those services.

According to a report from the National Council of Nonprofits, 80% of U.S. nonprofit revenue comes from fees for services and government grants or contracts, 14% from private contributions, and 6% from other sources, including investment income. All these sources of money are in danger from the closing of facilities, cancellation of fundraising events, and decline in the stock market.

The image shows a video player interface. On the left, there is a logo for 'POTOMAC WATCH' with a circular image of the White House and the letters 'WSJ' below it. To the right of the logo is the video title: 'The Coronavirus and Shutdown Send the Economy into Recession'. Below the title is a play button icon and a progress bar. The progress bar shows a blue dot at the beginning, indicating the video has just started. To the right of the progress bar, the text '00:00 / 30:11' is displayed, along with a speaker icon. At the bottom of the player is a blue bar with the word 'SUBSCRIBE' in white capital letters and a small downward-pointing chevron icon on the right side.

Nonprofits employ more than 12 million Americans and spend nearly \$2 trillion a year. And the pandemic is creating new challenges for those who provide services. Nursing homes and other elder-care facilities are closing to visitors. Physical therapists and other health professionals who provide services to the elderly aren't able to do their jobs. As schools move to online classes, teachers and occupational therapists are unable to help children master skills needed to develop and thrive.

That's why it's vital that corporate and government leaders support strong partnerships to assure the continued strength and well-being of those who serve our communities.

Here are three priorities for policy makers:

- *Increase flexibility and expand eligibility for small-business loans.* The pandemic has created a significant burden for small businesses—including nonprofit ones—that struggle to pay rent or mortgages while meeting payroll.
- *Mandate reimbursement for medical services within 45 days.* Access to services is critical for millions of Americans who are older or have disabilities. Those services are accessible only if providers are reimbursed in a timely manner. The workforce that serves this population already experiences high rates of turnover as a result of low wages. Now, in states where the demand for care is growing daily, it's at risk of collapsing.
- *Expand access to services and support that keep vulnerable populations at home.* All Americans are being urged to stay home as much as possible to prevent further spread of

infection. Abiding by these recommendations is impossible for many people who depend on various health-care services. The federal and state governments can do more to support services delivered in the home, thereby minimizing the likelihood of institutionalization.

The nonprofit landscape is part of what makes America the greatest nation on Earth. Now's the time to take action to ensure the viability of the nonprofits our communities need.

Ms. Williams is president and CEO of Easterseals.

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