

Housing and food security are the top priority for the United Way in Halifax

Our generosity is helping the United Way meet the community's immediate needs and plan for the coming months.

With a one-per-cent rental vacancy rate, Halifax was facing a housing crisis long before the COVID-19 pandemic, says Sarah White, communications specialist at the United Way of Halifax. A one-bedroom apartment can rent for as much as \$2,000 because demand far outpaces supply.

"Our shelters were already full and then the pandemic hit, and demand increased because people weren't able to couch surf with friends anymore due to physical distancing rules," she says.

Through the Atlantic Compassion Fund, to which Intact allocated \$25,000 from the 2019 [employee campaign](#), the United Way of Halifax has been able to fund programs that support people who are homeless and precariously housed. This includes supporting pop-up shelters, as well as portable washrooms and handwashing stations to help people maintain proper hygiene.

Another priority area was food security. Many of the agencies providing food support — like soup kitchens, community meals or after school programs — needed to find new ways to reach people in need. Many started delivering groceries directly to clients, which was more expensive.

Three-tiered approach

In Halifax, the United Way has taken a three-tiered approach to supporting the community during the pandemic, says Sarah.

First, they funded programs that meet people's basic needs — like helping shelters better serve clients, ensuring people have access to food and medication and providing phone cards and data to help people stay connected.

Second, they're helping partner agencies maintain staffing levels. Many of the agencies and programs lost volunteers and have to pay staff for overtime to provide additional services and extra cleaning.

Third, they're working with partner agencies to plan as the economy opens back up. For example, what supports will be in place for workers who can't access limited daycare spaces due to physical distancing guidelines? How can essential in-person programming resume? And how will they support people in temporary shelter spaces once those spaces close?

Finding the upside

While the pandemic has presented many challenges, it has also provided a great learning experience, says Sarah.

"We're now collaborating with other United Way organizations across the Atlantic region in a way that we weren't before," she says. "We're all working together and telling a similar story. It's interesting to see how similar the needs are in different communities."

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