

From: Lynn United for Change and Lynn Health Task Force  
via email from info@LynnUnited.org

To: Office of Economic and Community Development  
Lynn City Hall, Room 311  
Lynn, MA 01901  
via email to jmarsh@LynnMA.gov

Date: May 29, 2020

Re: **Comment on City of Lynn proposed CDBG-CV budget, ESG budget,  
and equity in COVID-19 response**

To Whom It May Concern:

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on Lynn, which currently has the third highest rate of infection in Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup>

Our city is now deciding how to spend millions of dollars in new aid from the federal government and other sources. Ensuring that these funds – and our city’s disaster response in general – effectively support the people most in need is literally a matter of life and death.

**Moving forward, the City must do more to prioritize equity and to involve those most directly harmed by the pandemic in planning its use of CDBG-CV funds and the next phase of the local COVID-19 response.**

Across the country and the state, people harmed by existing social inequities have been hit the hardest by COVID-19. For example, low-income households are dramatically more likely to be behind on rent or mortgage nationwide.<sup>2</sup> In Massachusetts, Latino and Black people make up 19% of the population but account for 45% of COVID-19 cases.<sup>3</sup>

Lynn is no exception, and the most vulnerable groups in our city are facing some of the worst impacts: many people who are unhoused or live in overcrowded apartments are unable to maintain social distancing; a large number of immigrants in Lynn are unjustly barred from receiving unemployment pay and “stimulus” checks and have no income at all; low-wage and blue collar workers are being forced to work in unsafe conditions; people who do not speak English or do not have computers are having trouble claiming benefits they qualify for; and low-income people of all backgrounds are struggling to access food, pay rent, and meet basic needs.

Many people in our city have responded to this crisis with tremendous individual efforts, either working on their own as volunteers, as staff within existing institutions, or as members of grassroots groups. This important work should be recognized and commended as a testament to the spirit of compassion and solidarity these times call for.

However, there is no substitute for a planned, coordinated response at scale that proactively prioritizes equity, draws on nationally recognized best practices, and involves the most impacted communities in decision-making. We need to strengthen this part of our city’s response in order to make it more effective and to fill gaps that have left some vulnerable people without help they need.

For example, some very dedicated individuals are making extraordinary efforts to provide grocery deliveries for people who are unable to visit foodbanks because they need to maintain isolation after testing positive for COVID-19, because they are medically vulnerable, or because they have young children and lack transportation. However, it is unclear if there is an overall city policy or plan regarding food delivery for people in isolation; there has not been widespread and effective outreach; there may not be enough total capacity to meet existing needs; and some food distribution sites have not taken necessary steps to ensure equitable access (e.g. addressing concerns of undocumented people who may be afraid to provide an address).

The result is that many residents who need assistance do not have access to food they want. **A clearer plan for food access must be developed, with an emphasis on equity. The plan should be fully funded, informed by feedback from people directly impacted by hunger and food insecurity, and based on advice from groups with relevant local experience such as the Lynn Hunger Network.**

In addition, many vulnerable tenants across Massachusetts have been unintentionally excluded from the RAFT program – the state’s largest source of rental-assistance funds – due to an application process that came to rely heavily on a difficult-to-use online form and communication via email. Recent immigrants who do not speak English, people who have little proficiency with computers, people with limited literacy, and others have had tremendous difficulty accessing this program. We appreciate that work to improve accessibility of this program is underway in Lynn and elsewhere, and those efforts must be supported and accelerated.

**It is critical that rental arrearage programs like RAFT, and the rental assistance the City anticipates providing through the CDBG and ESG funds, are made fully accessible to the groups mentioned above, that additional funds are allocated, and that hard work by staff members is informed by input from populations who have had greatest difficulty with the process so far.**

Further, we call on the City and relevant agencies to finalize the CDBG-CV budget – and make other plans related to COVID-19 response – through a process that:

- draws on the advice of experts with advanced training in relevant fields, replicates best practices used in other communities when appropriate, and ensures hiring is based on qualifications and commitment;
- includes people from the most directly impacted segments of our community in decision making (including recent immigrants, low-income residents, people of color, undocumented people, people experiencing homelessness, people with limited English proficiency, people who are unemployed, and essential workers);
- includes leaders of grassroots organizations that serve and are accountable to the most vulnerable segments of our community in decision-making;
- and proactively addresses equity, access, and the amelioration of existing social disparities when designing programs and allocating resources.

**Specifically with regard to housing in the proposed CDBG-CV budget and in further COVID-19 response planning, we call on the City and relevant agencies to:**

- devote a greater proportion of the funds than currently suggested to specifically target low-income tenants who are at risk of becoming homeless, currently unhoused people, and undocumented immigrants facing housing crises;
- support neighborhood stability by requiring landlords who accept rental arrearage funds to commit to not increase rent for at least one year for all units in the property for which they receive funds and to not initiate any “no fault” evictions in the property for at least two years;

- require landlords that directly or indirectly control more than 15 rental units in the city to forgive at least one month of rental arrearage for each two months of arrearage paid by public funds;
- and support long term solutions to our housing crisis by investing some portion of these funds in production or preservation of housing that is affordable permanently or for the long term (e.g. through acquisition of distressed properties).

**In allocating funds and designing and implementing programs with CDBG-CV and other funds, we call on the City and relevant agencies to:**

- ensure that programs and outreach specifically target vulnerable groups including recent immigrants, low-income residents, people of color, undocumented people, people experiencing homelessness, vulnerable workers, and people with limited English proficiency;
- and take affirmative steps to counteract historic and institutional racism and other forms of oppressions, by awarding contracts to groups harmed by historic and current discrimination, involving low-income people, and ensuring implementation of programs is undertaken by staff and/or contractors that will work in culturally appropriate ways.

**Finally, we call on the City and relevant agencies to take steps toward increased transparency and participation by making available on city and agency websites details regarding how funds are allocated and used (including information on which specific agencies, contractors, businesses, etc. receive funds).**

If we do not explicitly address equity as we respond to this pandemic, we will prolong the crisis, exacerbate longstanding injustices, and emerge with an even more divided and unequal city.

Instead, we urge you to prioritize equity as we plan for both short-term crisis management and longer-term recovery. Working together, we can draw on the best of our city's traditions and come out of this moving toward a Lynn that works for all its residents.

**We hope that in order to move toward the goals described above you will quickly convene discussions with grassroots organizations and individuals that represent the most marginalized and hard-hit groups in our city, so that decisions about these funds and further plans ensure resources are used as effectively and equitably as possible.** We look forward to continuing this conversation.

Sincerely,

Celinet Sanchez, Lynn United for Change / Lynn, MA resident  
 Flerida De La Cruz, Lynn United for Change / Lynn, MA resident  
 Goldean Graham, Lynn United for Change / Lynn, MA resident  
 Isaac Simon Hodes, Lynn United for Change / Lynn, MA resident  
 Laura Gallant, Lynn Health Task Force

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mass.gov/doc/confirmed-covid-19-cases-in-ma-by-citytown-january-1-2020-may-20-2020/download>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-website-pages/covid\\_indicators\\_report#datawrapper-chart-zXJT](https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-website-pages/covid_indicators_report#datawrapper-chart-zXJT)

<sup>3</sup> <https://covidtracking.com/race/dashboard#state-ma>