

“Have Faith” Initiative”

The Faith Community’s Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak

Notes from 8/20/20 meeting (via Zoom)

Greg Burris opened the meeting and thanked all for participating on behalf of Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, United Way of the Ozarks, the City of Springfield and Greene County. There were 48 participants on the Zoom call. Greg welcomed all newcomers to the call.

Co-chair of the Have Faith Initiative, Rev. Bob Roberts promoted the upcoming meeting topics of Cold Weather Shelters and Tough Talks. Rev. Roberts introduced Ashley French, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Ozarks and Strafford Mayor, to open the meeting in prayer.

Harold Bengsch, Greene County Commissioner, presented the county report. Harold updated everyone on the CARES Funding and that the review committees have been very busy. He referred those interested to the CARES funding website for updates. (<https://greenecountymo.gov/cares/awards/>) Lastly, Commissioner Bengsch asked everyone to keep teachers in prayer as students return to school.

Jon Mooney, Assistant Director of the Springfield-Greene County Health Department, then spoke about the current caseload in Springfield. The County has recently shifted from focusing on daily numbers to weekly numbers. This will give them trendlines to compare with other counties and cities. Jon stated that we did have a slow down for a while after the masking ordinance, but COVID-19 cases are on the rise again. The Health Department has brought on 11.5 new hires, and they will be dedicated to contact tracing. This will give his team some much-needed rest.

Someone asked about the ideal number of tracers. Jon said one-to-one, but that is not realistic. They are hoping that the 50 they will soon have hired and trained will be enough. Another question was asked relating to the college students returning and when they expect to see those numbers increase. Jon said all the universities and colleges in Springfield did their best to develop protocols and that they are as ready as they can be.

Jon was asked to comment on the fact that half of the COVID-19 deaths have occurred in the last 20 days. Jon stressed that for a community our size, we are faring well compared to other cities. Nursing homes are full of high-risk individuals, and five of yesterday’s deaths were from nursing homes.

Lastly, Jon was asked about the criteria for putting someone in quarantine. He said that anyone that has been within six feet of someone infected for at least 15 minutes, masked or unmasked, would be quarantined. He said that any physical contact with

someone who has COVID-19, no matter how long or short, will require quarantine. Once in quarantine, individuals will be retested at 5 to 7 days. Even if they test negative at that point, the individual will need to complete the 14 days of quarantine.

Cora Scott, Public Information Officer for the City of Springfield, then took the floor and said the City was focusing their messaging efforts around prevention, prevention, and prevention. There are concerns around the college students returning to our community, and that their off-campus activities may increase the spread. The City was recently contacted by bar and restaurant owners to request messaging to share with their patrons. Cora announced that the local network stations are airing their “Stay Strong Springfield” messages.

Cora then combined her report with Linda Merklings of the Coming Together in Faith Committee to announce the Healthcare Heroes Appreciation events. Linda told everyone that the signs are posted at the area hospitals and that the billboards are up in Springfield. Cora said she would welcome social media posts from students modeling good behavior.

Pastor Simmons then introduced Greg Burris, who formally introduced our panelists for our discussion around children/teen issues and COVID-19. The speakers were:

- Laura Farmer, CASA of Southwest Missouri
- Nicole Piper, Director, One Stop for Early Childhood, Council of Churches
- Meleah Spencer, CEO, The Kitchen/Rare Breed

Greg posed the question to all three: How is COVID affecting children thus far and what are your areas of greatest concern at this time?

Laura said her greatest concern is the increase in abuse in our community. In the beginning, there was a drop in abuse hotline calls, but they have now rebounded to normal hotline numbers. There has also been an increased number of children entering foster care, 50 last month (up from 30 normally). They have observed that children are being left at home alone, and that affects their mental health. The severity of trauma is increasing and will continue to be of concern

Meleah expressed concern for the homeless teen population. For those that didn't know, Rare Breed provides showers, food, case management, clothes, and other services. The majority of their population is 16-21 years old. Their facility is open just during the daytime, and they stayed open during the shutdown.

The teens that use Rare Breed don't have access to correct information. They don't watch TV and primarily rely on social media. For example, some teens asked if they would be arrested for walking down the street without a mask. The Rare Breed staff supply a lot of information to debunk rumors. Her concern moving forward is that the cycle of poverty will continue, homelessness will continue, and affordable housing is limited. These young adults have a tough time finding housing, and low-income

housing in Springfield is hard to get. Her teens are working minimum wage jobs and often can't compete with others for low-income options.

Nicole said that One Stop focuses on referrals and training for families. After the basic needs are met, such as food and shelter, One Stop focuses on the social and emotional health of families and children. Strengthened families lead to school success. For children, isolation is a big concern. Other concerns that worry children are related to their safety, their health, and their family's financial state, especially when one parent loses a job.

Her other concerns are:

- Access to mandated reporters is limited.
- Children need routine, and right now, there are lots of changes.
- Masks can scare little ones.
- We have taken away extracurricular activities that help relieve stress. For many older kids, their identity is tied to activities.
- Kids know their parents are stressed.

She concluded by saying families are under stress right now.

Greg then asked our participants if they had a crystal ball to predict what challenges they expect children to experience if the pandemic continues for another 6-12 months.

Meleah spoke about the vaccine, when it is available. Sadly, her teens will be low on the list. She sees the same concerns listed above will continue -- housing, teenage pregnancy, and so much more.

Nicole said for the youngest, their routines are starting and stopping. Children will forget what normal life looks like. Sadly, child abuse and neglect will continue. Lastly, children are being left at home alone and aren't old enough. We must create connectedness with children and model skills on how to remain calm and self-regulate.

Laura said we would continue to see increases in abuse and neglect. There are fears that when children aren't in school surrounded by mandated reporters, they may not be safe. She also said recruiting and training new foster families is harder now and that many children may linger in foster care longer since courts are operating virtually.

Greg then posed the last question. What are ways the faith community can help?

Nicole asked that churches share with what you are doing by completing the survey (<https://forms.gle/hc6LmX4y3uTLkQBz9>). Also, please visit their website to learn more about their services. (www.ccozarks.org/theonestop)

Laura asked churches to train more mandated reporters who can look for signs of abuse/neglect. The training is now delivered virtually. CASA also needs more volunteers. Please help them identify potential volunteers in your churches. To learn more, visit <https://www.essential4kids.org/>.

Meleah closed by asking for three things.

- 1) They need masks. Many of the youth are working in the service industry and prefer the homemade masks vs. the paper ones being supplied.
- 2) The Rare Breed Center always needs cleaning supplies.
- 3) Church groups willing to provide nightly dinners for 50 youth. They need to be individually prepared in brown paper sacks and can be delivered via a no contact drop off.

Rev. Simmons thanked the speakers for their time and the difference they make in the lives of others.

Due to time limitations, Tom Ryan, with the Food and Supply Drive Committee, spoke briefly. He reminded everyone that the Stuff the Truck food drive will be held on September 19 and 20th. Additional information on this project will be forthcoming.

Rev. Roberts closed the meeting in prayer, and we were adjourned.