

Politicians Who Say Black Lives Matter: Put Your Budget Where Your Mouth Is | Opinion

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It has been remarkable to watch our nation's elected officials urgently embrace the language of the Black Lives Matter movement. But their words are not enough for those who are suffering the most right now.

Come to The Bronx today, and you'll find New Yorkers standing in line for eight hours to get a plate of food. Unemployment and crime rates are rising while funding for youth programming has evaporated.

This was already the poorest [congressional district](#) in the country with the highest proportion of Black and Latinx residents. Here, pre-corona, the median income was just \$38,000—less than half of Manhattan's—while asthma rates are eight times higher than the national average.

So it's no coincidence that this is the nation's coronavirus capital—the borough with the [highest rate](#) of cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

There are ground zeros like The Bronx in every city, where our nation's three-fold crisis — health, economic, and racial — overlap. If our leaders and elected officials want to avoid all three spiraling out of control, they should act with what Martin Luther King Jr called the fierce urgency of now.

When these disasters struck, The Bronx did not sit around waiting for help. This is home to the army of New Yorkers who get the job done. These are the people who have made it possible for the rest of us to shelter at home.

To respond quickly to the pandemic, dozens of community leaders, philanthropists, non-profits and the private sector built a [coalition](#) — The Bronx Community Relief Effort (BxCRE)—raising and deploying over \$14 million of private funding in just eight weeks to meet the emergency needs of Bronxites and support the community's longer-term aspirations.

Through its community-based partners, BxCRE has served over 1.5 million meals, in a borough where [one in four](#) residents were suffering food insecurity well before the virus struck.

Students in need received hardware and technical assistance to continue their studies. Families received housing support. Healthcare workers received flexible funding to purchase supplies. Small business owners received critical grants when the city allocated less than 3 per cent of its small business loan program to the borough.

But there comes a point where private funds and collective resolve are no match for the scale and scope of the challenges; when a crisis becomes chronic. We have reached that point in many places just like The Bronx.

There is no shortage of federal cash being spent across the nation. However, too little is being directed too slowly at the most critical areas of need.

Next month, many of the benefits of the CARES Act expire well before the economy recovers. At the same time, \$130 billion has been left unspent in the Paycheck Protection Program, but you would be hard-pressed to find a small business in The Bronx that received federal support.

As the Senate turns to a new round of relief spending, this is the time to be both urgent and thoughtful about investing in recovery, capacity, resiliency and growth.

Our government officials are capable of acting quickly. FEMA normally responds immediately to natural disasters like hurricanes and floods. The natural disaster of Covid-19 is no different. The lack of visible damage to buildings does not make the suffering any less real or less urgent. FEMA funds should be used now to reduce food and housing insecurities in The Bronx and elsewhere.

In the first wave of this pandemic, our public and private sector leaders mobilized together to obtain personal protective equipment and medical supplies for our hospitals. Now our elected officials need to address the economic and social upheaval the coronavirus has left in its wake.

To do so, they must first recognize that there is already a humanitarian crisis in our cities. This cannot be ignored any more than the start of a pandemic.

Second, they need to work with the grassroots networks that already exist and have a track record of success: there is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Third, they need to unlock the public funds already committed to the pandemic response, streamlining the process to target the areas with the greatest challenges.

Fourth, they need to expand funding for emergency food aid including SNAP, extend employer tax credits for furloughed employees so they can continue to receive healthcare benefits, and increase investment in federal programs that support childcare and rental assistance.

Finally, these interwoven crises require bold and innovative solutions, such as a national network of new community foundations similar to those in Cleveland, Boston and Seattle.

These foundations support local organizations meeting local needs in comprehensive ways, bringing together public, private and non-profit leaders to cut across traditional political lines and spending programs. A community foundation would be game-changing for The Bronx and communities like it. There should be federal funding to support them.

The bottom line is that you cannot talk about systemic injustice without changing the system.

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