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CONSENT CALENDAR

October 27, 2020

To: Honorable Members of the City Council
 From: Vice Mayor Sophie Hahn (Author), Mayor Jesse Arreguin (Co-Sponsor),
 and Councilmember Kate Harrison
 Subject: Support for Berkeley Mutual Aid

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the City Manager and to the November FY2020 AAO budget adjustment process to identify existing resources, or propose a new allocation of funds, to provide emergency financial support to Berkeley Mutual Aid (BMA) to allow the organization to continue its highly valued programs and services addressing the needs of Berkeley residents sheltering-in- place during the COVID-19 health emergency. Support required for BMA to continue providing critical services to the community is \$3,000 per month, starting as soon as possible and continuing until 3 months after the COVID-19 emergency order is lifted.

SUMMARY

The outbreak of COVID-19, and subsequent orders by the Health Officer imposing measures to control its spread, have created heightened needs across Berkeley, as well as a groundswell of neighbors who want to help. Since mid-March, Berkeley Mutual Aid has been serving residents of Berkeley who are at high risk for COVID-19 by matching them with volunteers who can meet their basic needs, including providing essential supplies (e.g., food, toiletries, prescriptions) and navigating social services. To ensure that BMA can continue this work, and potentially become a long-term volunteer coordination partner for the City, this measure refers to the City Manager to identify and allocate, or recommend to the City Council, funds to support BMA so the organization can hire a coordinator to manage the important and growing responsibilities of the organization.

BACKGROUND

Since mid-March, [Berkeley Mutual Aid \(BMA\)](#) has been serving residents of Berkeley who are at high risk for COVID-19 by matching them with volunteers who can meet their basic needs. This includes pairing lower-risk neighbors with higher-risk neighbors who need essential supplies (e.g., food, toiletries, prescriptions), help navigating social services, or connecting to overcome social isolation. BMA estimates that it has facilitated more than 15,000 volunteer hours of neighbors pitching in to help some of Berkeley's most vulnerable and impacted residents stay safe and well.

In addition, BMA has expanded to help meet a broader community need for food aid, personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies, financial assistance, emotional support, and navigation of various social services. The organization has partnered the City's Office of Emergency Services (OES), Senior Centers, the Berkeley Health Department, and other mutual aid groups and NGOs that are working to support the Berkeley community. In addition, BMA works to expand access to other support systems, for example, with volunteers who pick up the City's Tuesday Grab 'n Go lunches and deliver them to seniors at their homes. BMA's work serves members of the public in every zip code throughout Berkeley, and provides a vital hub to help ensure all volunteer and community efforts are successful.

In September, BMA celebrated six-months since volunteers first took action to create the concept, launch a website and rapidly deploy their "matching" services. Over time, the number of volunteers and community members-in-need has significantly increased, and the organization has taken on additional roles and mandates. BMA's all-volunteer board members, who have worked long hours to make all of these benefits for the community possible, need the support of a paid coordinator so the organization can continue meeting Berkeley residents' needs in what is becoming a long-term pandemic.

Providing financial support to BMA will help the City by: (1) intaking, matching, and managing volunteers providing mutual aid and members of the public in need of help; (2) obtaining food, supplies and materials and coordinating donations for Berkeley residents who most need them; and (3) building a sustainable, community-centered organization that can serve in other emergencies, such as wildfires and earthquakes, and provide ongoing community volunteer opportunities, matching, coordination and management, and support for vulnerable residents.

BMA has risen to the challenge of the COVID-19 emergency in providing mutual aid to Berkeley residents who need it. As the organization approaches the limits of what an all-volunteer board can achieve, the City should provide financial support for BMA so the organization can continue to provide mutual aid during the current COVID-19 and for the long term.

FISCAL IMPACTS

Cost: \$36,000 annually. Savings: The ability to mobilize volunteers in a coordinated, organized manner through Berkeley Mutual Aid means less vulnerable citizens going without the help and support they need. Assigning volunteers to help with basic needs like grocery shopping, picking up prescriptions, etc. - at no cost to the resident - reduces exposure for vulnerable individuals who are able to shelter in place more consistently, thereby reducing disease transmission and potential severe cases - for the City and our hospitals to manage. In addition, managing a large influx of generous volunteers is a function the City is not fully able to handle at this time, so Berkeley Mutual Aid provides a meaningful service in a time of crisis that might otherwise be a burden or cost for the City. The cost associated with helping to make this organization viable over the long term of the COVID-19 crisis, especially in light of the many months the organization has

already operated with all volunteer labor (7+), is very small in light of the many benefits to the community and reductions in potential costs to our public health system and City.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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ATTACHMENT

1. Fact Sheet: Berkeley Mutual Aid (BMA)

Fact Sheet: [Berkeley Mutual Aid \(BMA\)](#)

August 2020

Berkeley Mutual Aid (BMA) is a volunteer, community-based effort that started in response to the COVID shelter-in-place mandates in March 2020. BMA is currently a project of the Berkeley Disaster Preparedness Neighborhood Network, a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to supporting our community in preparation for various disasters.

We exist to provide a platform and infrastructure for neighbors to help neighbors. Our focus is on “Solidarity, not Charity,” recognizing the contributions of everyone in the network. We believe that building a stronger social safety net benefits everyone in the community, and we plan to sustain BMA’s community-building services beyond the COVID crisis that brought it into being.

Our primary work involves pairing volunteers who feel a deep desire to help with a buddy who may be more at risk, or more in need. These matches provide ongoing connections and potentially lifesaving support that people can rely on in the safest way possible. Our [Safety Protocols](#) are constantly reviewed and updated by medical professionals. Our community is updated to any significant changes.

While we started solely as a matching platform, we’ve accomplished so much more in five months. From March to August, we estimate BMA has directly organized more than 15,000 hours of volunteer labor to provide a range of support, including:

1. **Matching people with a healthy volunteer “buddy”**(more than 475 matches to date, representing approximately 8,500 volunteer hours) to ensure basic needs are met on an ongoing basis, including grocery shopping and picking up prescriptions or other essentials. We support people who are elderly, have significant health risks, are facing financial hardship, or are caring for people with these risks. Just over a fourth of our requesters have self-identified as needing financial assistance. We try to provide emergency financial help for those who cannot afford the essentials. Some of these pairs have been to help low-income families struggling to pay for food, and we estimate that these have provided at least \$10,000 in food assistance.
2. **Creating connectedness and collective resilience**(100 “chat buddy” matches to date, representing about 3,200 volunteer hours) at a time when comfort and connection are especially critical to our wellbeing. For people who indicate they are feeling isolated and lonely through shelter-in-place, a social “buddy” will check in weekly and make sure each neighbor is okay. We have also welcomed over 50 participants to supportive virtual gatherings that help create collective resilience and connection and offered space for self-care activities like improv and meditation.
3. **Help navigating social assistance programs**(more than 50 people helped, representing nearly 3,000 volunteer hours)—food, unemployment, childcare—through referrals, introductions, and follow-up. COVID is forcing many people to confront new and evolving challenges, financially, emotionally, and logistically. This is especially hard for folks without digital access, a challenge faced by approximately 15% of requesters in our network.
4. **Case management assistance** led by a team of neighbors with social work, psychology, and crisis counseling skills, for people whose needs are especially complex in terms of behavioral health, mental health, financial needs, physical health, and/or housing. Our case managers do not act in a professional capacity but as caring neighbors who can contribute a high level of expertise for people who need it.
5. **Addressing the most pressing supply-chain challenges**. We are helping get PPE to hospitals, masks and hand sanitizer to the elderly, first aid supplies to protesters, and food donations to elderly and low-income people, both directly and through partnerships with other organizations. This includes donating more than \$3,000 worth of supplies to Berkeley’s Meals on Wheels, providing over \$1,000 in direct emergency food/supplies assistance, distributing fresh-picked fruit to local food aid organizations, and distributing hundreds of fabric masks and hand sanitizer to at-risk populations.

Our Approach

BMA conducts outreach and builds our network through flyers, [online signups](#), phone (510-519-6770), partnership with The City of Berkeley, other local nonprofits (including Meals on Wheels, Women's Daytime Drop-in Center, Senior Centers, Berkeley Aging Services Division, J-Sei, Berkeley Mental Health, 2-1-1 Alameda County, Alameda County Social Services, and others), and the members of BMA. Outreach and our intake, matching, and case management team is bilingual in Spanish and English. We are developing a team to expand those systems to include Mandarin and Cantonese.

Although, as the name implies, BMA's focus is on Berkeley, we understand that disasters pay no attention to municipal boundaries, so our support extends beyond to include Albany, El Cerrito, Kensington, Emeryville, Oakland, and Richmond.

We also work with other mutual aid organizations to support each other, including East Bay Resilience Hub, NorCal Resiliency Network, Halcyon Help, South Berkeley Mutual Aid, Oakland at Risk, Hayward Helping Hands, El Cerrito Mutual Aid, and others. We also connect with an international collective of mutual aid groups, sharing ideas and resources. We recently led a session on [Mutual Aid for Seniors](#), and our notes on the subject were widely shared. Every two weeks, BMA's steering team meets with a representative of Berkeley's Office of Emergency Services and the Berkeley Health Department to exchange information.

By phone and email, BMA volunteers field a range of public questions ranging from "Where can I get a mask?" to "Is there help for me to avoid eviction?" BMA is constantly researching to find resources and information that speak to the needs expressed by the community.

BMA also promotes the outreach efforts of [Berkeley Disaster Prep Neighborhood Network](#) to get individuals and communities to better prepare for other disasters during this pandemic. So far, efforts have included Zoom sessions on [improvising leadership in disaster response](#) and surviving COVID-19. A future session on mental health in a pandemic is already planned. BMA encourages volunteers to serve as evacuation buddies in case of a wildfire, ensuring that seniors who may otherwise miss a lifesaving evacuation alert will be more connected and informed.

Communications

The BMA community stays informed and connected via a weekly [newsletter](#) that goes out to more than 800 recipients. The BMA newsletter includes calls to action, resources, and suggestions for ways that people can volunteer beyond its own mutual aid network. Resources are also kept timely and up to date on the BMA [Community Resources](#) page.

New Initiatives

BMA has taken on initiatives to make sure that everyone in Berkeley has access to masks and hand sanitizer, beginning with its most vulnerable populations. Its [Need a Mask | Make a Mask](#) program connects those who need masks with those who have the skills to create them. BMA uses the same infrastructure to distribute hand sanitizer to individuals and groups as well, working with UC Berkeley students who have been making gallons in their labs.

BMA has also developed exciting initiatives such as the Community [Gleaning Project](#), which engages volunteers to pick fruit from trees at homes that have bounty beyond what they can use themselves, and redistribute it to people in need through Strawberry Creek Park Coalition (serving unhoused people), Meals on Wheels, and the Berkeley Food Pantry. In this project BMA will be able to give free, fresh, healthy, and locally sourced food to people in need, while ensuring that the process takes place in accordance with strict anti-infection safety protocols. The first pilot pick, in mid-August, delivered approximately 60 pounds of fruit.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare fundamental gaps in the social safety net in the United States, forcing impossible choices for many, and creating new stressors for people already struggling on the edge. Through mutual aid and solidarity, Berkeley Mutual Aid strives to shine a light in this dark moment, showing ourselves and each other that there is enough for everyone and that by working together, we can get through this. We are building a stronger, safer, and more connected community. We protect us!

