Moab’s nonprofit network adapts

by Rachel Fixsen Moab Sun News
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The Moab Valley Multicultural Center is open for people to seek help with unemployment, housing, language services and more. While their office is closed to walk-ins, a phone on their front porch connects to a staff member. [Maggie McGuire / Moab Sun News].

Moab’s nonprofits are dedicated to a variety of causes: healthcare, education, culture, the environment, affordable housing, and more.
While some have had to shutter to comply with current public health measures, many local nonprofits provide essential services to the community and have adapted to physical distancing while still addressing community needs.

**Moab Valley Multicultural Center**

While MVMC specializes in language and interpretive services for Moab community members whose first language is not English, that’s not where their services end.

“We are open for everyone... anyone who is in need of any support,” said Liz Donkersloot, Housing Resource Coordinator for the MVMC.

Anyone, regardless of language, who needs help with housing, food assistance, healthcare, child care, or legal aid can approach the MVMC. For those who do need language services, MVMC staff can help someone understand a doctor’s visit, sign a child up for school, translating a rental or childcare contract, or helping to navigate the legal system.

If the organization can’t give direct aid, they can refer clients to other agencies or nonprofits who can.

“Probably unemployment right now is the biggest concern for everyone,” said Donkersloot, asked about the most prevalent needs arising from the coronavirus shut-downs. “Housing is a follow-up concern,” she added.

State and federal relief packages offer opportunities for expanded unemployment benefits or rent deferrals for individuals and may contain grants or loans for organizations that provide social services, but sorting out how to qualify and apply for those benefits will take some time.

“Things have been changing so rapidly,” said Donkersloot. “Our office is doing the best that we can to keep on top of those things to have the proper information.”

Normally the MVMC building is open to walk-in clients, but right now they are staging a telephone on their front porch so people can call the staff from outside the front door. Most of the seven full-time employees are working from home.

“It’s definitely a change and not as awesome without all being in the same place, but we’ve managed to make it feel like we’re working as a team,” Donkersloot said.
The staff use Google hangouts to stay in contact throughout the day.

MVMC has had to cancel some programming for the time being, including two after-school programs for kids.

However, an in-person Spanish language class has been adapted into an online course. Those interested can visit the MVMC Facebook page to learn more and sign up.

**Seekhaven Family Crisis and Resource Center**

Seekhaven provides shelter and other resources for victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse.

“There’s been a lot of changes that have happened in the last couple weeks to accommodate the social distancing measures,” said Luke Wojciechowski, director of programs at Seekhaven. “We’ve had to cut our shelter capacity basically in half to minimize potential exposure.”

In lieu of shelter at Seekhaven, the organization is offering to house clients in hotel rooms temporarily to escape a dangerous situation, though Wojciechowski said staff can’t offer the same level of care as they can to clients staying onsite.

Like MVMC, Seekhaven’s staff is largely working from home. Clients are asked to get in touch by phone, email or via Facebook unless it is an emergency that requires an in-person visit.

One particular concern Seekhaven is considering while trying to go digital is the importance of their client’s confidentiality.

“There’s a lot of video conferencing software out there that’s not really designed with privacy in mind,” said Wojciechowski.

Keeping information and cases confidential maintains both the dignity and sometimes the safety of the client; it is also required by federal law.

Wojciechowski said that in cities across the country, stricter social distancing measures have corresponded to an increase in domestic violence reports. Heightened stress due to job loss or
financial worries correlates to a more volatile atmosphere at home. Though Seekhaven hasn’t observed that trend locally so far, they are prepared for it.

“There is an expectation that we will see an increase,” Wojciechowski said. He emphasized that though procedures have changed, the shelter is still there for those in need.

“We are worried that people might think Seekhaven is closed,” Wojciechowski said. “We are making ourselves available, we do not want people to stay in dangerous situations if they do not need to.”

**Housing Authority of Southeast Utah**

The Housing Authority of Southeast Utah (HASU) is a nonprofit that oversees federal affordable housing programs at the local level, administering a variety of programs to help area residents rent, buy or build quality places to live.

Jenna Whetzel is the program manager at HASU. While Executive Director Ben Riley is working from home, Whetzel is working in the office, where she is training a new employee while keeping a six-foot distance. The new staff member was hired on just as the social distancing orders were being issued.

“We had one week in the office together before we decided we needed to separate,” Whetzel said.

HASU programs are carrying on as normal. HASU staff are busier with “income change processing,” as tenants lose their jobs or have their work hours cut because of restrictions or the dragging economy. For most of HASU’s tenants, rent is calculated at 30% of the occupant’s income. If that income is $0, then they owe $0 in rent.

Whetzel said HASU is working closely with the Grand County COVID-19 Task Force and the Moab Valley Multicultural Center to make sure everyone has access to updated information. HASU and the MVMC often work together in referring clients to the appropriate service.

The organization is entirely funded through federal programs, so they don’t have to worry about fundraising locally.
“We’re trying to help the community any way we can,” said Whetzel. “We’re working with a lot of other agencies to provide resources to help residents in need navigate all the help available to them.”

Both Donkersloot and Wojciechowski also highlighted the ongoing cooperation between local organizations.

“We’re strengthening community relationships to make sure everyone’s on the same page and delivering similar messages,” said Wojciechowski of the staff at Seekhaven.

“Moab has a really incredible network of nonprofits and it’s grown a lot in the last couple of years, communication-wise,” said Donkersloot. “We don’t want to compete, but we do want to make sure everything is covered.”

Critical services provided with COVID-19 safety measures

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– Liz Donkersloot