

Volunteer Spotlight - Jen Orcutt

Acton-Boxborough United Way's Outreach Committee Chair



Jen Orcutt has been supporting A-B United Way for more than 15 years in a variety of roles, including as a former Board member, and for the last four years as Chair of our Outreach Committee.

When the pandemic hit, Jen and the Outreach Committee's more than 18 volunteers stepped forward to assess vital community needs, and help formulate and implement an action plan to create a strong community support network, and to make sure money from A-B United Way's COVID-19 Impact Fund was distributed to the residents who needed it most.

"In normal times, Outreach would engage the community through events such as our annual Day of Caring or through speaker series events on topics ranging from anxiety to caring for elders," said Orcutt. "COVID-19 pushed us to nimbly and quickly adjust. We decided to focus on addressing the most basic needs, namely food and shelter for all of our residents."

Under Jen's leadership, volunteers agreed to serve as liaisons with more than 30 direct service agencies such as MinuteMan Arc, Mt. Calvary Community Supper and Neighbor Brigade, that serve residents in Acton and Boxborough. The agencies, which were having to adapt to the pandemic by developing virtual service offerings, welcomed the support. In addition, a member of Outreach participates in the town's weekly food security task force meetings, to stay current with changing needs.

"We see our role as connecting people with resources," said Orcutt. "Inter-agency coordination and collaboration is critical to avoid duplication." One of Outreach's newest volunteers, Carol Buysse, was instrumental in creating a Google spreadsheet to capture information from all public and private service providers to keep everyone on the same page, and by doing so, they've been able to help flag problems, and share resources. "For example, when the food pantries in Acton and Maynard needed more volunteers, we connected them with the local Neighbor Brigade volunteer service." Critical updates are also shared with town social workers, AB Schools, and the Mass2-1-1 hotline and website.

By strengthening inter-agency coordination, Outreach was able to identify critical gaps and unusual service needs. "One of the food pantries was looking for money to purchase a freezer to store extra food. We surveyed local organizations to see if any had extra freezer and fridge space," said Orcutt. "Faith communities and other groups responded, and we figured it out. The answer isn't always just writing a check, it's finding ways to be resourceful."

Orcutt added that there is no alternative for certain needs, “and that includes rent and utility bills.” She pointed to a New York Times article that said if your annual household income is \$200,000 or more, it would take about two months to save enough to cover four weeks of expenses. If income is between \$70,000 and \$99,999, you can save that much in seven to eight months. But for an average household of more than two people making a total of \$50,000 to \$69,999, you would need more than two years to save one month's worth of expenses. “From a financial standpoint, the pandemic is exponentially impacting those who make the least,” said Orcutt. “It’s devastating.”

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A-B United Way’s COVID-19 Impact Fund was designed to help Acton and Boxborough residents by providing \$1,000 grants per household to pay critical past-due bills. Orcutt explained that while that amount may seem like a drop in the bucket, it is one part of a multi-pronged approach to helping residents. Working with the Acton and Boxborough town social workers, families get additional support, including recommendations on opportunities for short-term employment, fuel assistance, and applying for the pandemic unemployment fund. “By distributing funds in partnership with these social workers, we are part of a larger, critically important equation,” said Orcutt.

By developing a channel to distribute funds directly to residents, the Outreach Committee is helping A-B United Way do work not typically done by United Way organizations. Traditionally, regional United Ways provide funding solely through grants to direct service agencies. Outreach has been leveraging their expertise to create a simple but reliable [set of criteria](#) that will make obtaining COVID-19 Impact Funds through town social workers seamless. “We don’t want to put an additional toll on social workers, who are already swamped,” said Orcutt.

The next challenge is spreading the word to people who need the funds. “People who need funds the most often don’t have access to resources for multiple reasons: no internet, not realizing they qualify, no advocates in their corner, a language barrier, etc.,” said Orcutt. “Please help spread the word about the immediate availability of funding to any A-B resident who may need it.” A-B United Way’s [COVID-19 Resources flyer](#) provides a listing of vital free support services.

A-B United Way is proud of Jen Orcutt and the amazing Outreach Committee. Outreach volunteers represent a variety of professions, including experienced social workers, IT experts, health and human service professionals, marketing consultants, former teachers, and many others who bring a variety of local and global perspectives to the table. Orcutt herself is a licensed social worker in the Framingham public school system, where she has worked for the past 26 years. If you are interested in joining the Committee, reach out to abuw@abuw.org.

“I am deeply grateful for all board members and volunteers who embrace a ‘can-do’ spirit as they invest their time, energy, and talents to lift up our community,” said Griet Dehandschutter, Executive Director of A-B United Way. “Jen and her team are a great example of the tremendous impact volunteers have when they come together to fight for the health, education, and financial stability of every resident. Their efforts are helping neighbors in need today, and laying the groundwork for stronger collaboration between agencies and the public and private sector, beyond COVID-19.”

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