

# U.S. sex workers, poor and elderly find coronavirus support in community groups

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Community groups are providing shelter for sex workers whose source of income has been ravaged by the outbreak

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By Andrea Shalal

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Reuters) - From Louisville, Kentucky to Washington, D.C., local communities across the United States are mobilizing to meet the needs of the poor, elderly and others who are particularly vulnerable during the coronavirus outbreak.

In southeast Washington, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the U.S. capital, the local chapter of Black Lives Matter on Sunday distributed hand sanitizer and other toiletries that are in short supply.

No Justice No Pride, a group that provides housing and services to sex workers of color in the DC area, is scrambling to cover a sharp jump in housing needs, said organizing director Emmelia Talarico.

Sex workers who rely on out-of-town visitors for income - and often, a place to sleep, are more vulnerable now because of widespread cancellations of events and conferences, she said.

"We were at capacity before this virus hit and we are now getting a lot more requests," she said. The group, which typically provides short-term housing for up to 50 people a night and long-term housing for around 18 people, is looking to raise funds to fund short-term hotel stays for sex workers.

Globally nearly 175,000 people have been infected and more than 6,700 have died, according to Johns Hopkins University. The new coronavirus has spread rapidly across the United States, which has reported more than 3,800 cases and over 70 deaths.

The outbreak has put a spotlight on cracks in U.S. systems, community organizers say. They point to children who get meals from now-closed schools, elderly people who are at higher risk of infection but need assistance and those who generally lack access to medical care.

"One 74-year-old woman needed her heart medicine by Monday but the buses aren't running, so she's stuck," said Erin Hinson, who began a volunteer website in Louisville, Kentucky. "Now we have someone getting her prescription and groceries, and he'll keep in touch with her over the next three weeks."

In just three days, Hinson's site attracted some 700 people willing to pick up groceries or medicine for at-risk neighbors.

People from Idaho, Florida and Michigan have reached out to set up their own websites, she said.

Former public health official Jim Huang launched a similar initiative in Maryland, where people can offer or request help through an online form.

"There's a lot of harm that can come to individuals and households if ... they are relying on city resources that have been shut down," Huang said. "People die because they can't get their medicine, or because they can't get food."

New York's Citymeals on Wheels, a non-governmental group, delivered 45,000 emergency meals to the elderly in the wake of the outbreak. The group had 200,000 more stocked in the event of senior centers closing, which they did on Sunday evening.

Talarico fears sex workers will face bigger problems if the pandemic worsens, as it has in Italy, with limited hospital beds and ventilators.

"The people who typically fall through the cracks are the ones who are also being left behind here," she said. "When doctors are choosing who lives and who dies, a 50-year old trans woman with HIV is not going to be the first person they prioritize." (Reporting by Andrea Shalal in Washington; Additional reporting by Maria Caspani in New York; Editing by Lauren Tara LaCapra and Grant McCool)

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