

Chair's Commentary from a Youth Interest Perspective on the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis




Our annual report covers 2019 before COVID-19 came to Loudoun County. Nevertheless, due to the mass effects on all our lives, we felt it critical to at least provide what limited, mostly anecdotal information we have to keep the Board of Supervisors apprised of the pulse of our youth in the wake of this pandemic.

"I miss my friends," is perhaps the most common outcry of our youth population. Without regularly scheduled activities, school, organized sports, clubs, religious services, closed meeting places, and so on, with a stay at home order for all our protection, our youth has abruptly gone from many contacts to immediate family only. "I miss my teachers, I miss school," is a close second among the younger kids but at the high school level, it is a mix. Many teens have had their primary source of their stress vanish while others feel short-changed a graduation, a prom, a performance, a sports season, or an academic honor. The growing trend outcry, however, is "I'm so bored." Their structured, sometimes over programmed lives, have come to a grinding halt and they now have lots of time.


There is no doubt this pandemic will have a lasting psychological effect on all of us but the biggest impact will be on "Generation C." Unlike the millennials, Gen C has had to become more resilient, rapidly adapting to having their world turned upside-down. Taking a cue from their Gen-X parents, once they have gotten past their world, they have reached out to others, looking how they can help. It could start with helping around the house with simple chores to something as advanced as care for a quarantined parent (CDC's guidelines include using the youngest capable adult to handle any required interaction of the isolated person in the home). They keep track of their friends, advising them not to go out unless necessary. Social media has become a platform for connecting with friends instead of a tool for cyberbullying. They have much more interaction with their parents and siblings than ever before. They are adjusting to their new normal.

But not every child in Loudoun has been able to take any positive experience away from this pandemic. Children in at-risk environments prior to the stay at home order have only gone from bad to worse. When a child's safe space isn't at home, they are in greater danger. Lower income families, caregivers who have lost their jobs,



Talking to Kids About COVID-19

Don't tell them they shouldn't be worried. Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling.



homeless, or those reliant on social programs are being squeezed which creates a potential for a host of worse scenarios. Some gaps can be filled. The Loudoun Hunger Relief remains open by appointment only for pickup. We reached out to the Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter Child Advocacy Center. The fact remains there is insufficient data. They are seeing a rate of need drop off akin to what they would see in the summer. However, they suspect like the summer, concerns are under-reported because school staff are no longer in session to report what they see. Instead, they have seen domestic violence cases increase as the stresses of losing a job or being on a stay at home order increases the pressure. Mental Health professionals have adapted to video sessions, but it is just a lot easier for some to fall through the cracks.

The Loudoun School Board's quick action to close schools is likely the reason we have fared much better than the majority of the state. Fairfax quickly followed suit and this put pressure to move to telework sooner than the majority of the country. This effectively acted like the stay at home order much earlier than the actual Virginia State order nearly 2 weeks later. It was also positive they were able to keep school lunches going for those in need. The next decision point for the county will be weighing the unpopular decision to continue to stay at home as surrounding counties (and arguably the nation) are pressured to re-open too soon and risk a second wave or simply an early start to a 2020-2021 flu season.

With the wave of boredom sweeping across our teenage population, vacations canceled, and continued stay at-home for some time, the BOS can put into place a campaign of volunteering opportunities our youth would embrace. They are reachable through social media platform outlets like Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok. There are a host of needs that could be accomplished safely without risk of further spreading the virus, and you have an army of youth ready for action. With our annual report, we would like to update you on some important longer term developments for Loudoun youth. These developments effect their connectedness, risk and protective factors and health over years and not months.

Sincerely,
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