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Use CARES Act funding for after school, summer programs that parents depend on

Sue Bloom, Marisa Fink and Beth Unverzagt Guest Opinion

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It recently became clear that most Oregon students will stay home this fall and participate in Comprehensive Distance Learning.

This reality has many implications for families across the state, many of whom depend upon schools as a safe place to send their kids during the day while parents go to work. But with schools closed, parents are forced to make impossible decisions.

Since March, nonprofits that provide “out-of-school” programming like Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs have stepped up to provide a safe space for some of Oregon’s most vulnerable children, providing academic support, social-emotional skill building and basic necessities.

Oregon coronavirus updates, August 14: 323 new COVID-19 cases, 2 more deaths

These programs bridge the gap between school and home and have expanded their services during this crisis, providing free food and meal delivery as well as online, at-home educational, recreational and prevention programming for youth and parents.

Perhaps most importantly, these programs have filled the gap created by the closure of in-person learning at schools and offered emergency childcare, allowing parents to return to work.

As we look ahead to this fall and reduced time in the classroom, we know this will disproportionately affect the youth we serve, unless we are able to increase our programming and capacity to fill the gap.

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The state and federal government have allocated relief funds to industries, communities and individuals who are struggling through this crisis. But those who are providing critical services for Oregon's most vulnerable children and families have been forgotten.

Programs like Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCAs have increased their operating hours and decreased their child-to-staff ratio to safely provide vital services during this crisis, all while struggling from a decline in revenue due to canceled events, reduced program fees and withdrawn grants.

The services these organizations provide is more important now than ever. As the state provides relief funding for industries that have been severely impacted by COVID-19, they must also provide for those who need our support the most to fulfill their basic needs.

The Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Funds in the CARES Act can be used to strengthen after school and summer programs. On behalf of the 176,601 students we serve in 18 counties, more than half of whom are low-income, we are asking the governor to allocate CARES act funding to these nonprofit programs to allow us to deliver supplemental education programs and emergency childcare during the 2020-2021 school year.

Youth service programs and facilities are critical to the support communities need to recover from the economic and social impacts of COVID-19. We know that 44% of children in Oregon are living in low-income households and 23% are food insecure.

We must ensure that the families most impacted by this crisis can keep their children safe and provided for. Please ensure that our nonprofits are able to continue to fill the gap created by school closures so that all youth across Oregon have access and opportunity to reach their full potential.

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