

Tina Leone:

Cheers everyone, and welcome to Ballston Connect. We're here to connect you to all things about Ballston. I'm your host, Tina Leone, the CEO of the Ballston Business Improvement District. Well, we all continue to adapt our lives under the temporary stay at home order. We hope all of you and your families are safe and healthy. For us, we've adjusted our interviews to record remotely. So again, please forgive the lower sound quality perhaps and maybe some of those background noises. My dog for instance, is probably going to be barking. We look forward to returning to our recording space at Industrious Ballston Exchange as soon as it's safe to do so. Well, everyone in our community is experiencing a change to the normal routines, but there are some of us who are now unfortunately at even greater risk and that's due to the fact that we must remain home for the overall health and safety of our community. Even here in Arlington, we have people who are in dangerous home situations and individuals who are facing homelessness and they've been coping with immense uncertainty in already dire situations.

Tina Leone:

So this is a little bit more of a heavy topic for us today, but it needs to be discussed. And we have a community that we need to help out. Nationally, there's been a scramble to serve these most vulnerable populations within the US and to keep them safe. But who are the groups that are taking on this challenge on a daily basis right here in Arlington and how can we as a community help in their missions? Today we will discuss how Covid-19 has impacted some of our local nonprofits and their clients as we talk with Maureen Divine-Ahl, the interim president and CEO of Doorways for Women and Families and Sam Kelly, the CEO of Bridges To Independence. Maureen and Sam, thank you so much for being with us today. We know how very busy you both must be. Thank you.

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah, thanks for having us.

Sam Kelly:

Thank you for having us.

Tina Leone:

Welcome. Well, let's start first with introducing you and your nonprofits. Our listeners may not know, realize who you are, what you do and how much you do for our communities. So Maureen, let's start with Doorways. What's your mission and what services do you offer? You've been working in the community for a while now?

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. So doorways has been working in the Arlington community for more than 40 years at this point in time. We have a few different parts of our mission, but the underpinning things that we work on are really homelessness prevention and services for survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault. So we operate two shelters here in town. Our family home which is meant to be a longer term transition housing. We also have a safe house that is for emergency shelter for folks escaping domestic violence or sexual assault. And then we also have some longer term rapid rehousing programs. And our home start program, we do some financial counseling across all of our clientele through our FIT program. And then we also have our revived counseling center that is meant to serve members of the community in more of a counseling role, survivors and more of a counseling role.

Tina Leone:

Perfect. And Sam, so like Doorways, Bridges To Independence has been around for several decades, correct? And you're involved in many programs as well. So tell us about what you do and who are your clients here in our community.

Sam Kelly:

Absolutely. So Bridges To Independence has been here in the Arlington community for 35 years. Actually, we're celebrating our 35th year this year and we're very excited.

Tina Leone:

Oh, congratulations.

Sam Kelly:

Thank you so much. It's been a long road, but we're glad we're still standing and we're here. Very much like Doorways, we do provide housing prevention services to families who are in need. In addition to that, we also provide a robust youth development program in which we're working to prevent the next generation of youth or adults from becoming homeless. And we also have a robust employment services program as well, where we're working with families who, if they're not employed, our goal is to one, get them employed. But also get them to a living wage employment so that they are more sustainable in their lives and in their futures. Our number one goal and mission is to move our families towards independent living and any situation that that may look like for them.

Tina Leone:

Excellent. We seem to have quite a few nonprofits who work in this realm of homelessness, sheltering, et cetera. Can one of you or both of you describe how you work together or how you work maybe some of the other nonprofits. Does APA get The Orange Partnership for affordable housing. Does that play into it? How do you guys work together or do you work together?

Maureen Divine-...:

Well, I'm happy to jump in just because my viewpoint on this serving in the interim role. I was new to Doorways and a little bit of the Arlington community and I can say that there is collaboration between the Arlington nonprofits almost like nowhere I've ever seen before. And the pandemic has really brought that to the surface. I was blown away how quickly I was invited to calls with other safety net providers here in town, joining us up with representatives from the County so that we were getting real quick information about what was going on and what our resources were. And then Sam and I have been on some other calls where a few other CEOs with similar needs or interests got together to compare notes. So I can't speak to as much about how it's been for years and years. Although my experience has been extremely collaborative during this time. So I have to imagine it's built on years of collaboration.

Sam Kelly:

Absolutely. I mean Arlington has done a fantastic job of bringing all of the safety net nonprofits together in the interest of ensuring that the majority of the community's needs are met. And as you stated earlier, APA absolutely plays an essential role into our work because they are the affordable housing providers. And if it weren't for them, that would make our jobs with Bridges and Doorways a lot more

tenuous, to say the least. But APA is a major player in the work that we're doing as is another group, Wesley Housing who provide-

Tina Leone:

Yes, heard of them too.

Sam Kelly:

Absolutely. And we can't forget about AHC as well, the Arlington Housing Corporation. They are essential to the work that we've done over the years as well. So it's great to have all of these housing providers, healthcare providers, homeless services providers, amongst a variety of other resources in the community to come together to really figure out how to tackle and address some of the most immediate needs of the community.

Tina Leone:

Well, and you both have been working in your organization, but working in this realm for many years. I mean absolute professionals at what you do. But what we see nationally with the whole pandemic is that a lot of communities have not been prepared, obviously. I mean, its been a great rush to try to protect people in these vulnerable populations, specifically those in potentially dangerous home situations and those suffering from homelessness. Can we talk about the impact that you seen with Covid-19 pandemic here in our community? I mean Maureen, we know that last month there was quite an increase in the calls to domestic abuse and crisis hotlines. Has Arlington specifically said anything like that? Has there been a spike here in Arlington as well?

Maureen Divine-...:

Thankfully we have been pleasantly surprised because we were tracking all of those stories right down to, I think the earliest report that I saw was a report coming from China that during the month of February, calls to their crisis lines tripled. And when we realized things were arriving here, I reached out to my staff and I said, "Okay, if we're looking at the rest of the world then let's buckle up." But thankfully we have not seen that here, I cautiously say yet. We're doing everything though to keep an eye on it. Last week we convened with the Arlington County Police Department to cross-check our numbers to make sure something wasn't getting lost between potential domestic calls happening on their side of the house and actually making it over to our services.

Maureen Divine-...:

But they right now are pleasantly surprised as well to see that their volume is down for now. We are calling upon all of our experience and expertise of our staff including our chief programs officer who was part of a response team after Hurricane Katrina. So she is calling on her disaster relief experience and trying to predict why that could be. Is it because people don't know that we're here? Is it because staying home feels safer than the unknown of shelter right now? And we just don't know. All that's to say we're ready.

Tina Leone:

You're ready. And well that's good I guess for now that's good news. That's great news actually. What factors would you say that lead to the increase in domestic violence? Or what is it about the stay at home order or people being together? What happens that maybe this is increased? We saw that

increase in China for example. I'm asking you to speculate but you probably have solid evidence what that might be.

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. I mean the discussions that we had early on in our planning. I say we're ready because we've played this out. It's close quarters, it's increased financial pressures, it's loss of childcare, it's really those things. Loss of revenue and income that add increased pressures to things. A lot of times these aren't new issues for families or domestic violence aren't new issues, but maybe they've been somewhere where they're manageable. And now just with asking folks to stay home or be home or potentially be out of work or without childcare, just really accelerates the stressors that are root causes.

Tina Leone:

Yeah. I mean just I can see that just from those of us who aren't in those situations, the stress level has gone way up. I can imagine what it must be like for a family in that situation.

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. Some of the early reports we saw internationally also just had to do with forms of domestic violence can also be mental and emotionally rooted. We were seeing people who were afraid of getting sick. That if their partner started coughing or had a fever, that they were going to throw them out of the house because they fear of exposure, which is another form of abuse that can lead to homelessness. So those are some of the things that we were seeing internationally. But again, thankfully we haven't seen them here in the community of Arlington yet.

Tina Leone:

Let's hope we don't see much of it at all. But that was great to know that you are well-prepared. Sam, I was also shocked to learn that 70% of the homeless adults in Arlington and Alexandria are actually employed. And now with the situation that we have, people not being able to go to work and many of whom maybe aren't able to collect unemployment insurance. I mean, what's it been like for you and what's been the strategy you to continue helping those who are either homeless or facing homeless at this point?

Sam Kelly:

So for us, what we're seeing right now is about 85% of our families who were working are now unemployed or they're seeing extremely reduced hours. And so that just really complicates our efforts with being able to move them out of shelter and get them qualified for housing. So what we're doing like everyone else is just our best to connect them to the mainstream resources that are out there such as the unemployment insurance. But in addition to that, we're continuing to run the majority of our employment programs virtually as best we can. We were fortunately situated in a way that we're able to do trainings and our staff is able to do a lot of work remotely as we invested some years ago into the equipment to do so not knowing that we'd ever have a need to use it.

Tina Leone:

Wow. And that was great foresight.

Sam Kelly:

Yeah. And fortunately we haven't had to decrease our efforts in terms of how we serve our families. It's just being able to serve them in a different way. We're finding though with this employment situation because of the way or because of the skills or the lack of skills that many of our families have, we're finding that employment will be a waiting game for most once a lot of these restrictions are lifted. We believe we'll be able to connect them with employment, but for the time being, it's with the resources that they do have due to some of the laws that were signed into legislation. Our families are receiving a lot of those resources. We're encouraging them to hang on to them and to spend wisely and allow Bridges to shoulder most of the weight for any immediate needs such as food, such as costs for transportation or any other immediate needs that they might have.

Tina Leone:

For most of your clients, has it been hard for you? I mean much of your interactions might be personal or one-on-one or face-to-face. Has it been difficult for you to make that transition to service them over the phone or video conferencing? Is that something that even some of your clients are able to do? I mean not everybody has a computer or internet access. I mean I'm sure you probably providing that maybe in your shelters. But tell us how you've been able to adjust to assist your clients.

Sam Kelly:

Well, for our clients, for those who are in shelter, we have full internet access there and we have couple workstations and computers in a room that we've designated specifically for that training purpose. So we do have 24-hour staff who's there to assist or help them situated so that they're not missing any trainings or that they're not missing any calls. I think our biggest challenge has been reaching those who are already connected to housing or that are in housing in the community that we're serving through our next step housing or rapid rehousing programs. And that's about 35 families that are out there and not all of them, you're right, have internet access in their homes or desktop computers in their homes. But we do the best that we can by connecting them with whatever software applications they have on their phones to try to reach them and to get information to them in the most feasible manner.

Tina Leone:

That's perfect, yeah. It's made it to challenge for everyone as far as being connected, staying connected. What else? For the both of you, are there any other challenges that you're facing right now as a result of the pandemic that maybe we wouldn't even think of? I mean, what else are you experiencing right now in your organization Maureen?

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah, I mean I think one of our biggest challenges right now is trying to predict the unpredictable. And I say that to say that the first few weeks felt like we all snapped into a similar emergency response mode. It was about getting protective gear for our staff. It was about understanding what to do if a client did present with symptoms. What was the protocol for either sheltering in place or getting them to another facility.

Maureen Divine-...:

It felt like the first three weeks and it felt like that's really what everybody in homelessness prevention was working on. And then we layered in a survivor lens that we bring to everything. Now that things are a little more stabilized, I think we're trying to look out on the horizon and start to understand what the ripple effects of this will be for our clients and how to prepare for and be ready for those. And so that

can be trying to predict rent insecurity and how long it might last for some of our clients. It can be trying to predict, what if our clients are asked to go back to work. But now that we know that schools are back out for the rest of the year, how could we be prepared to address that or serve in that way?

Maureen Divine-...:

And I think the other part is really just keeping our ear to the ground, continuing to keep our ear to the ground on what other providers are doing locally and even nationally to a certain extent. So that we can learn from that and adapt our practices. And what are the resources that are out there? I think that's the other challenging piece and I hope Sam would agree. It's great to see the outpouring of help from so many corners of the globe, but at the same time it's a little bit like a fire hose in your inbox of where things are and who's eligible and how to access them that we're trying to understand both for our organization. But then also for the clients that we serve so that we can properly counsel them on how to connect to the resources that they need.

Tina Leone:

Yes. And we can delve into that in a second, but I do want to ask Sam if he's got similar challenges that you just described. Sam?

Sam Kelly:

Yeah. Those are our exact challenges. I think we're all trying to figure them out together. We're taking a really hard look at what will the fallout be once this has passed and children are back in school and parents are back to work. For those who are unemployed for significant amounts of time or without income for significant amounts of time, what's going to happen to them? And we're looking at really trying to make a hard push during this difficult time of really trying to move families who are currently in our shelter system out into their own apartments in the community. So our work on that effort still continues with an extra push because we believe that one, our families will feel safer and more secure if they are in their apartments or in homes of their own. And so we're trying to make room as well for a new wave of folks who may need our services. So we're doing a lot of evaluating one, of our clients and we're trying to ensure that we ourselves are prepared to handle any additional push in services that families may need.

Maureen Divine-...:

One thing I wanted to add to that based on what you guys were talking about with technology, I think the other challenge is now we're starting to try and figure out have client priorities changed or have the challenges that we usually consider to be the highest priority challenges to solve. Is that list changing at all? And I think technology is one of those things where I have asked my staff to think creatively and innovatively about this time and of how we can be of service.

Maureen Divine-...:

And someone in my FIT Counseling program came back and said, "Technology has always been a barrier but it's been one that we've been able to overcome because we invite them to come in, in person." And she very actually pointed out that a lot of the resources that are out there now require logging into a website or having a phone or having a strong internet connection for your kids to go to school. So she created this great little assessment that we're going to work through with our clients to start to understand should making sure that each of our families have technology and access to technology

suddenly become a higher priority thing that we're addressing. If we think about the fact that social distancing might last a while or versions of it might be with us for quite a while.

Tina Leone:

Yeah. That's absolutely... I think we're all preparing ourselves for that new normal, whatever that's going to be. We're not going to be coming back to work in the same way or coming back to our lives the same way. As far as accessing those resources that the government has made available on the individual contribution that the government's made, et cetera. Have your clients been able to access that or maybe they didn't file their tax return electronically or were there ways that you were able to help them tap into that or become aware that they have some funds that might be coming to them to help them out?

Sam Kelly:

Yes. All of our families who were, I guess eligible to receive iford of refund or benefit are starting to receive those and realize those. Now we've had some that have already received theirs and we believe that there are others that are on the way. I think the challenge that we have is really connecting with our folks to understand one, what those amounts are just so that we can help to get them situated as it relates to if they're and to prioritizing their responsibilities. We don't want them to go out and essentially just spend these funds on items that they don't necessarily need or that can be provided for them through the generosity of the community. But yes, folks who are starting to see those refunds now.

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. And I mean I would add the same thing for us. I think we're working through client by client. Our clients are all in different places. We have some who are in shelter with us who get most of their basic needs provided by us. And then we have folks that we're associated with in our counseling center but live out in the community on their own. So it's really an individualized approach at this point in time to understand again what your barriers are. If you didn't file electronically, if you've moved recently. All of those things and trying to work through and address those things with each individual.

Tina Leone:

Wow. Financial literacy is a really important thing to teach and I know Bridges To Independence, Sam, I know you have this amazing Lemonade Stand initiative with your summer youth program. We love that. I think you ever participated with us. I think we had you at at our farmer's market.

Sam Kelly:

That's right.

Tina Leone:

Which now is in a whole another world. I mean, this is great for teaching kids financial literacy and decision making and life skills. So is this Covid-19 going to be impacting that program as well this summer do you think or is there a pivot on that?

Sam Kelly:

Well, I'm certain that there will be a pivot at some point. We haven't figured out what that pivot might be. There's just so much uncertainty as to things will open up and then when they do, is it safe to be in the way that we usually would be. So I'm certain that we will pivot in one direction or the other. I'm just not sure which direction that will be.

Tina Leone:

Well definitely keep us posted on that because we want to continue to support you on that program for sure.

Sam Kelly:

Thank you.

Tina Leone:

I will look forward to seeing what you come up with.

Sam Kelly:

You got it.

Tina Leone:

It's unfortunate that we have people in our community that are in these situations and needs such assistance. But it's also great news that we have your organizations here as resources. Maureen, for those people out there listening, what recommendations would you give to someone who might be in an abusive situation right now?

Maureen Divine-...:

I'm so glad you asked that because that's one big reason that I'm so glad that we are being asked the question so frequently now whether or not we're seeing cases increase. And I'm delighted to be able to say, no, but then the follow on to that is we are ready if and when it does happen. And we also really want the community to know that if home is not a safe place for you right now, that you do have options. And that even if it feels safer to stay than the unknown of what may be awaiting you on the other side, our shelters are ready to go, our staff are working, we have plenty of food and toilet paper. Our folks are taken care of and so we want the community to know that if staying home is a dangerous situation for you, we are here and ready to help.

Maureen Divine-...:

And the way to get started on that is to call our 24-hour domestic and sexual violence hotline. And the number for that is (703) 237-0881. And again that's a 24-hour staffed hotline. It's staffed by professionals who are trained in addressing domestic and sexual violence issues. And so even if you just need someone to talk to, calling that number doesn't mean you're calling to get out, but it's a lifeline to talk and explore options.

Tina Leone:

Maureen, and to follow up with that, even though we're not seeing much of each other in person right now, are there some things that friends and families can look for as warning signs that maybe their loved one or one of their friends needs help?



Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. Again, you struck the nail on the head that the challenge about this is it's hard to see when you're behind this digital wall what could potentially be going on. But there are telltale signs of restricting access to finances, restricting access to other resources right now or withholding resources from members of the family. The health-based things that we talked about a little bit before as far as if someone is being told by their partner that they need to leave if they get sick in an abusive way. That is a form of abuse as well. I think the way we're looking at this is that it's probably going to be in the minority that necessarily new instances of domestic or sexual assault happen during this time.

Maureen Divine-...:

What I would say for people is if you have had concerns about friends or family members before, now is the time to stay connected with them, to check in, to ask those questions about how you're doing and how things are going in the household and make sure that folks know that they have you as a resource to connect with is really the best you can do.

Maureen Divine-...:

Unfortunately, sometimes I think it's also important to understand though that when people are in these settings, it can be hard to talk about for fear of being overheard. It's really a delicate and challenging situation. Like I said, we're pushing out our hotline as much as possible. If you have someone that you're concerned about, you can even call the hotline and ask for how you think you can be a friend and we can help you through that as well.

Tina Leone:

That's terrific to know. And Sam, how can people access your services right now? What's the process for being assisted by your organization?

Sam Kelly:

Sure. So if there's someone out there who is in need of shelter stay due to homelessness or displacement, the first step would be to call the department of human services and that number is (703) 228-1010. And there's someone who will essentially take your information and they will point you in the right direction.

Tina Leone:

Terrific. Finally, I mean Arlington's really big on volunteering and I know that there are still people looking for ways to help and volunteer during this time even though we're more stay at home. I mean there's essential volunteering needs that I think you might probably be able to have. I mean, what can people do to help you with your missions and what would you say your organization's need most right now, Maureen?

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. It's funny, it seems like our needs have changed a little bit everyday depending on what we wake up to. But I would point folks to, we have an Amazon wishlist up online. So if shopping is your particular flavor of volunteering, we have a lot of basic needs that we're meeting for our client through the generosity of our community right now.

Maureen Divine-...:

And then we are also interested in anybody who wants to make a donation. Now you can do that online on our website, which is [doorwaysva.org](http://doorwaysva.org) and I say that because flexible funding right now is really the biggest resource that we need just because we are trying to predict the unpredictable and be able to meet our clients where they are as quickly as possible. So I'll start with those two and then I think we're waiting to see the wave of what might come, but last week we did open the door for donations of cloth masks because we would like to have those available for staff and clients.

Maureen Divine-...:

That's a great way to volunteer and then I think to be quite honest with you, we're trying to figure out how we can get some of our volunteer programming back online. In the early days we hit pause on a lot because most of our traditional volunteering is helping us cover the shelters and in person roles. Now that we're figuring out we're going to be here for a while, our volunteer coordinator who is wonderful and talented, is now tasked with thinking about how we can potentially get a little more creative about volunteering these coming months.

Tina Leone:

You're up again, Sam. How can we learn more about how we can help Bridges Independence?

Sam Kelly:

There are a few ways. One would be by becoming an advocate by just following us on social media and subscribing to all of our newsletters to get the latest news and happening within us. Like Doorways, we also have an Amazon Smile wishlist. You can feel free to find it on our website. That's at [bridges2.org](http://bridges2.org) or if you still want to volunteer, there are virtual volunteer opportunities that we have available. To want to find out more about what they are, you can email [volunteer@bridges2.org](mailto:volunteer@bridges2.org) to learn about our anti-boredom bundles that we have community members making for our youth. Also, if you're getting out to exercise, you can also use that same email [volunteer@bridges2.org](mailto:volunteer@bridges2.org) to learn how to start your own virtual volunteer race. We have had a couple of volunteer members who are still out exercising and they decided to do virtual races.

Sam Kelly:

People are being really creative on our behalf. But also of course as mentioned earlier, this is our 35th year anniversary. And unfortunately due to all of the happenings, we had to postpone our anniversary celebration. So if you can, willing and/or able to, you can make a donation in the amount of \$35 \$350 in honor of our anniversary or whatever you're able to do if you can and/or willing. And those are just a few things. But once things get back to normal, we expect our volunteer cohort to be back in full effect with our youth. We do anticipate if things come back online pretty soon that we will have our Lemonade Stand. Matter of fact, I'm hoping it and I'm just going to speak it through the air that we're going to be able to do the Lemonade Stand because so many of our kids really depend on that entire experience and we would love to be able to deliver that for them. So there will be many, many volunteer opportunities associated with that as well. There you go.

Tina Leone:

Oh, terrific. Well finally, let's repeat again how we can learn more about you and how can we get in touch with you, Maureen?

Maureen Divine-...:

Yeah. We are at [doorwaysva.org](http://doorwaysva.org) so that's [d.o.o.r.w.a.y.s.v.a.org](http://d.o.o.r.w.a.y.s.v.a.org) and you'll find links to all of our social and our newsletter and everything you could want there. One more time our 24-hour domestic and sexual violence hotline is (703) 237-0881.

Tina Leone:

Terrific. And Sam remind us how we can get in touch with you.

Sam Kelly:

Absolutely. At [bridges2.org](http://bridges2.org). You can reach us by phone. It's (703) 525-7177 extension zero someone's always there to take your call.

Tina Leone:

Fantastic. Well thank you both for doing such an amazing job of supporting our community. And I want to encourage all of our listeners to volunteer, donate support any way you can. Doorways for Women and Families and Bridges To Independence, both amazing organizations that are really making Arlington a much better place to be. Volunteer, just an all around great community. So thank you Maureen and Sam for joining us today.

Sam Kelly:

Thank you.

Maureen Divine-...:

Thanks for having us.

Tina Leone:

Alrighty then it's last call for this show. Remember to stay in touch with us, follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. And of course, sign up for our e-news at our new website at [ballstonva.org](http://ballstonva.org). I'm Tina Leone and I hope you'll join us next time to learn more about Ballston and connect with more of the amazing people in our community. And remember, life is full of Ballston. Bye-bye.