Saving Chelsea: A hotbed of coronavirus has become a hotbed of giving, too

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Gladys Vega’s office at the Chelsea Collaborative does not normally resemble a food pantry. But normal times ended in Chelsea roughly six weeks ago.

“We probably have 2,000 people lined up, and I’m giving out food in an hour,” she said when I talked to her Thursday afternoon.
In a state that has become a hot spot of the coronavirus, **hard-hit Chelsea might be its white-hot center.** But the frightening prevalence of COVID-19 is only part of the reason her nonprofit has become such a popular spot.

The city’s status as home to a large population of undocumented immigrants has taken on new meaning in recent weeks. The people Vega advocates for are being shut out of other means of assistance, such as stimulus checks — one more way the pandemic has deepened the divide between haves and have-nots.

“They don’t have income,” Vega said. “And now they are not able to pay bills or buy food."

Vega is giving out not just donated food, but diapers and other supplies as well. For this, she has relied upon a network of donors cultivated over many years.

That’s where her friend Bob Hildreth came in.

Hildreth is a wealthy philanthropist, having made many millions in finance. After walking away from that he founded a nonprofit in Lynn to help poor families, especially immigrant families, save up to send their children to college by matching their savings.
It’s one of many ways he’s spread his philanthropy around the region. When hundreds of immigrants were arrested in a New Bedford sweatshop, Hildreth arranged legal representation for them. He’s been active in Chelsea affairs in one way or another for years.

So when he heard Vega needed money in a hurry, he quickly wrote a $50,000 check. Shortly after, he wrote another check, telling Vega to spend it on whatever she thought she needed, no strings attached.

“He told me to spread it around,” Vega said. “He basically said, ‘I trust your judgment.’ “

Hildreth told me he thinks this is a critical time for philanthropists to do as much as possible to help those the federal government won’t.

“I don’t think my fellow philanthropists are acting fast enough,” Hildreth said. “When you need food and drink you need it within a week. I think this requires an extraordinary effort to get money to grass-roots organizations in [cities like] Lynn and Lawrence so we can keep people alive. I hope the private sector will step up and do what the government isn’t doing.”

He laments that aid is bypassing many of the communities with the greatest need, a policy he described as stupid.

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The tragedy in Chelsea has mobilized donors large and small, Vega said. A produce collaborative has contributed food. A group of women in Cambridge have made regular deliveries of diapers and baby formula. Local bodegas that may not survive the lockdown are donating to the food supply.

“I’ve been so blessed,” Vega said. "Two weeks ago I was crying because I had no food and I had a list of 200 people looking for food. Today we delivered 65 boxes of 25 pounds of
food for people with COVID who can’t come out of the house. We call ahead and leave it outside.

Especially striking has been the philanthropy of Chelsea residents with relatively little to give. “A man on Social Security gave me $10,” Vega said. A woman I don’t know gave me her stimulus check. She said, ‘You don’t know me, but I want to help.’ It’s been the most beautiful show of poor people helping poor people.”

By Vega’s reckoning, Chelsea’s recovery will be a long haul. The city had been turning around, but that’s been stopped in its tracks. As of last week, Chelsea had the highest per capita number of coronavirus cases in Massachusetts.

“The coronavirus in one month has taken five years of progress,” she said. “This is a war zone right now.”

Still, she and her staff keep performing their daily triage operation, with no plans to slow down. She said she’s getting about two to three hours of sleep a night. For now, that’s enough.

“You see the line and it gives you energy,” she said. “You don’t have time to think about pain. You just continue to go.”

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