



Big Brothers Big Sisters.

OF FAMILY SERVICES OF WESTCHESTER

April 2020 Program Update

Dear Friends:

I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones safe and well.

Many of you have been asking how to help, so we thought it important to let you know what's going on at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Family Services of Westchester and the particular challenges we are facing at the moment.

Our most important mission in these challenging times is to keep our children safe and supported. In normal times, that can be challenging, as many of our caregivers have mental and physical health challenges of their own, as well as food and shelter instability. In COVID-19 times, this means we must double our efforts to communicate with our families and ensure they are being supported to our fullest extent possible. Of course, our work is not possible without the dedication and support of our Bigs and generous donors. We are so thrilled that our Bigs have doubled their efforts, too, in order to find creative ways to engage their Littles and keep in touch.

Below are some of the challenges of these times and the actions we have been taking or hope to take to make sure our children continue on their path to achieving their full potential.

- 1) **Food:** Our Littles, ranging from 7–17, may not be highest risk age group, but many of their caretakers are grandparents or older foster parents. The majority of Littles in our program qualify for free school meals and receive SNAP benefits. Without access to school resources, and with caretakers who are ill or lack transportation, our staff has been spending considerable time helping our Littles and families keep hunger at bay by coordinating resources and deliveries.
- 2) **Academic challenges:** Most of our matched children live in households lacking computers and internet connectivity. Often, our children work on shared smartphones, falling behind in their schoolwork. This also makes connecting socially with (and receiving academic help from) their Bigs, very challenging. Thanks to some very generous donors and our amazing Advisory Council, we are working hard to ensure our 200 families have a laptop device at home and providing them where necessary. These are a lifeline for our children, for online classes and to keep our matches connected, offering support through life's challenges.

College preparation and summer internships: In recent years, our program achieved extraordinary success ensuring our Littles graduate from high school and receive scholarships to colleges or post-secondary vocational programs. Now entering its fourth year, this is where we put our high school seniors on the path to high school graduation and post-secondary success. We are committed to running this summer's

program (even if we have to do so virtually) and have been fortunate that a generous funder is again committed to supporting this important program. However, the clock is ticking and with more funding, more teens can be served.

3) **Disruptions to BBBS recruiting and revenue sources:** The issues outlined above are not only affecting our existing matches. We also have a current waitlist of over 70 children hoping to be matched, and over 20 children who normally participate in school-site-based after-school mentoring programs. We have a pressing need to keep our 70+ waitlist and 20+ site-based children and their mentors connected. We would use grant funding to support and create online programming and events, such as virtual bowling, virtual museum tours, etc. Additionally, COVID-19 has severely challenged our recruiting and training. In an effort to adapt, we changed our website, allowing people to complete online mentorship applications, interview, and train via Zoom. More outreach is needed for volunteers. Good, old-fashioned direct mail, through our used clothing donation program has proven to be the most effective method of recruitment; however, our clothing pickups are suspended during this crisis. With additional financial resources, we would use paid advertising and direct mail postcards to recruit mentors who could immediately connect with our unmatched children.

4) **Clothing program expansion:** We hope to amend our clothing donation business by placing drop-off bins and conducting clothing drives at places of worship and schools, benefiting all organizations financially. If any of you know of such a location, I would love to hear from you. Ideally, we would use funding to hire an intern to begin procuring bin locations, and reaching out to potential partners.

Hopefully, this update will provide you with answers to your questions. Though we have made the decision to cancel our spring event, "Bowl for Kids Sake", we will be participating in the Giving Tuesday initiative on May 5. However, feel free to use the donation button below, should you like to make a gift in support of our needs as outlined above even sooner!

In Good Health,

Val Brown

Executive Director, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Family Services of Westchester

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