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## More than 500 have stepped up for pandemic community service

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By **DONOVAN HARRELL**

The Office of Community and Governmental Relations is working hard to provide service opportunities despite the COVID-19 pandemic. And the Pitt community is responding.

At the April 21 Senate Community Relations Committee meeting, Jamie Ducar, director of community engagement, said that more than 500 Pitt students, staff and faculty have participated in the Pitt Pandemic Service Initiative since it officially launched March 31.

The initiative is made up of three parts: donation and facility requests; expanded staff, faculty and student service opportunities; and partnerships to address remaining issues after the pandemic.

The idea began when Community and Governmental Relations representatives met with Senior Vice Chancellor Kathy Humphrey to draw up new engagement opportunities once it became clear that Pitt was transitioning to a remote environment because of the pandemic.

Associate Vice Chancellor for Community Engagement Lina Dostilio said this initiative came during a time when Humphrey and David DeJong, vice chancellor of Human Resources, were looking into ways to strengthen Pitt's community engagement commitments. As part of the plan, staff can request up to eight hours per week from their work schedule to volunteer.

The initiative offers a slew of volunteer opportunities for the Pitt community, including providing IT support and reaching out with care and connection calls.

The University is partnering with multiple community organizations, including Meals on Wheels, the Community Empowerment Association, the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center and United Way.

One highlight is a partnership with the Beyond the Laptops Campaign to help refurbish thousands of laptops for families in Pittsburgh Public Schools.

"We know that many families and individuals need computer support," Dostilio said. "Whether that's setting up a laptop, getting online, utilizing different applications, browsers, email software, we know that people need IT support."

Volunteers also can join an IT Help Desk, Dostilio said, which is available for individuals, families and community organizations. So far, around 200 volunteers are participating.

Dostilio said her department reached out to ask community organizations about the best ways for Pitt to contribute. For instance, Pitt is partnering with the Neighborhood Resilience Project, which helps provide services to neighborhoods lacking medical support, to supply food and factual information about COVID-19.

"I think in times of crisis, our better natures reveal themselves, and people immediately want to help," Dostilio said. "Sometimes we can overload the systems that are working directly with people who are most affected by the crisis. We knew that it was important for us, with our partners at PittServes, to reach out to partner organizations with whom we've had long-standing relationships."

Dostilio said these partnerships will continue beyond the pandemic.

"This is not an on/off light switch," Dostilio said. "People who have experienced the greatest disruption to their lives, the loss of basic support services, the need for technological assistance, for food assistance — that's going to continue even after people feel like we've reopened our economy or have returned to in-person work environments."

Additionally, the University has a committee focused on streamlining and facilitating donations. So far, the committee has coordinated donations of personal protective equipment for volunteers offering in-person services to communities. In-person volunteers have limited or no contact with recipients and each uses protective equipment, Dostilio said.

The Community Engagement Centers in Homewood and the Hill District have hosted virtual town halls on Facebook for Pittsburgh residents looking for more information about the pandemic and will continue to do so every month.

"There's really some powerful work that's being done in a convening and connecting space for people," Dostilio said at the April 21 Senate Community and Governmental Relations Committee.

She said the Pitt community overall has done a great job in supporting its surrounding neighborhoods during the pandemic.

"We really are a University of the community," Dostilio said. "I would say that the University of Pittsburgh has really found its core DNA of being a community-engaged institution. And we're uniquely suited to do this kind of partnered work in this time of crisis, and I am inspired and proud of the University of Pittsburgh."

For a full list of activities, visit [community.pitt.edu](https://community.pitt.edu).

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