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Reflections on Being Oppression-Adjacent in the Time of COVID

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We have personally been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic since early March, when it cascaded through our neighborhoods and upended our daily lives, and we have seen first-hand what is widely and correctly observed: the devastation of the pandemic both illuminates and exacerbates deep disparities in our society. Most notable among these are the wide gaps in wellbeing and opportunity on the basis of race, immigration status, class, neighborhood, and other factors. People of color, immigrants, poor people, and other marginalized groups have been hit hardest by the virus itself, as well as by its broader impacts.

Here, in New York City, which for the first few months was the US epicenter of the virus, the Tale of Two Cities (Kohomban, 2014) plays on. While many are social distancing and working from home, working-class people of color are most likely to be required to work in-person, often in positions that do not provide the luxury of social distance. Many continue to depend on subways and buses for transportation to essential front-line jobs, but are still compensated at non-essential wages (Kohomban & Collins, 2017). They go home to dense, intentionally segregated neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2020) with low-quality housing, high rates of intentionally concentrated pollution (Kilani, 2019), and a lack of convenient access to health care, groceries, and other necessary services. In fact, as the reality of COVID first spread through the city, many of these essential workers watched as those with time and money emptied out the stores of sanitizer, wipes and groceries, leaving little for them when their turn to purchase finally came (WCBS, 2020). All of these factors add up to one horrifying outcome: COVID is killing Black and Latino people at twice the rate of whites and Asians (Oppel, 2020).

When we talk to our colleagues in the charitable sector, the conversation frequently turns to the ways this current crisis lays bare structural inequities that have grown steadily worse with time. However, most of us have not seriously reflected on how charities exist within, and sometimes

perpetuate, that same ecosystem. While we have acknowledged our role (Quinones et al., 2020) in the history of child welfare – which contributed to today’s overrepresentation of poor people of color in foster care, jails and homeless shelters – it is tempting to place that responsibility in the past, and believe we have been reformed. We are still coming to grips with the fact that even today, we work in an oppression-adjacent industry.

When we describe ourselves as oppression-adjacent, we mean that a large portion of our programs today are made necessary by ongoing oppression, in the form of structural racism, segregation, poverty, disinvestment and social exclusion. They exist because the government has delegated much of the essential work of ensuring human wellbeing and opportunity to the charitable sector, which operates at lower cost and with greater precarity than the public safety nets that exist in most of the developed world and even in some emerging economies. And as these services have grown to fuel our institutions, in our advocacy we run the risk of substituting the interests of our institutions for the true needs and preferences of the people and communities we are privileged to serve.

In a just society, demand for some of our core services would be drastically reduced, and those that remain would look very different than they do now. If we do not have the courage to look toward that just world, and imagine its contours and details through our programs wherever possible, then we only prop up the oppression of today. Of course, imagination on its own is not enough. To the extent that the not-for-profit human services sector can serve as an innovation laboratory for government, providing proof of concept of new programs and approaches, we hope that these efforts may lead the government to adopt strategies that are more high-touch, community-driven, further upstream, less coercive and more focused on meeting the needs and preferences of those directly impacted.

There is nothing like a crisis to throw these dynamics into sharp focus. In our strategic plan here at The Children’s Village, a child and youth-serving organization in New York City and its suburbs, we have reflected on our tendency to offer people what we have, rather than what they need. Nowhere is this more obvious than if we were to offer people the same old services – counseling, therapy and referrals – during a pandemic. Instead, over these last few months, we have pivoted to providing direct material aid to youth, families, foster families, and communities. This means not just money for food, clothing, or shelter, but access to smartphones, tablets, laptops and broadband internet, so families can stay connected and keep up with school. Private donors and foundations have stepped up to help meet this need, and our local government has also provided flexibility in the use of program funds for these purposes.

Though every social worker learns about Maslow's hierarchy of needs in their first week of classes, it is unfortunately not the norm in our profession to direct our resources first to the basic safety and health needs of our clients. This is because our dominant political and cultural values have always treated poverty (particularly amongst racialized peoples) as a moral failing and poor people as untrustworthy. The result has been the creation of strictly means-tested systems (Kohomban & Collins, 2017) that are more adept at surveillance and control than they are at providing aid. These attitudes have been absorbed by the local charitable sector and exported internationally as well (Doane, 2019). At times, in the child welfare system, we act as if the worst possible outcome is not for a child to be permanently separated from a loving family, but rather for some unworthy parent to get a little more help than they "deserve." If we did not see the harmfulness of this worldview before, we should all certainly be able to see it now.

The dangers of COVID have also forced our system in New York City to rethink standards and practices related to in-person contact with families. Unfortunately, for several months this meant that many children in foster care did not visit with family members, or did not see them as frequently. However, we did identify those children who could immediately return to their families and ride out the pandemic at home instead of in foster care. If material support was needed to help that family care for that child, we provided it. Caseworkers also received the flexibility to conduct many of their home visits by phone or video, rather than in-person.

For years, many advocates have argued that even child welfare services that are intended to be supportive, such as prevention or aftercare, often feel like surveillance to families. Now, we are finding that we can have more frequent, less intrusive, and more constructive interactions by using phone or video, rather than haggling over the timing of in-person visits, or forcing families to travel to our offices. We are able to start by asking if families have what they need; in this way, the concept of 'checking on their wellbeing' is needs-driven and controlled by the families rather than 'expert' social workers. Meanwhile, investigations and removals are down, and there has been no increase in serious safety issues among families who are remaining at home. Going forward, we should keep this more individualized approach to safety and supervision, and strive to have even more constructive and less coercive relationships with families.

We hope that we can keep the clarity of this moment, and the lessons it has provided, close at hand long after this pandemic is over. If we fail to do so, we will deserve every critique we receive as a result. Here are a few other ways we hope our sector and our city can change as a result of this crisis:

First, we must address the lack of safe, affordable, high quality, *integrated* housing in New York City. So much of the trauma and intergenerational

disadvantage experienced by our families stems from this primary issue. In 2015, we partnered with Harlem Dowling to build nine stories of permanently affordable housing in the heart of Harlem, as proof of concept that affordability can be safe, beautiful, and accessible, filled with light and open spaces - just like those city dwellings enjoyed by the privileged.

But we will not solve this problem one building at a time. In *The Cities We Need* (New York Times Editorial Board, 2020), the editorial board of the New York Times observed how the engines of segregation, failing schools and unaffordability have combined to threaten our democracy and the promise of America's cities as engines of growth and innovation. There can be no permanent, high-quality affordable housing without integration - by race as well as by wealth. The people performing the work that makes New York City's neighborhoods so desirable - line cooks, child care workers, home health aides, artists, cab drivers, and many more - must be able to live here as well. Otherwise, those of us who remain are parasites, enjoying the culture and service of oppressed people without being willing to let them share in our opportunities. On this point, leaders in the charitable sector and their donors have rarely led by example. While a few give voice to the problem, most do not. Some simply don't care; others are afraid to offend their colleagues or funders, or are quietly happy with the status quo that allows them to avoid sharing their schools, neighborhoods and communities with the poor and people of color who serve them.

Second, we need to ask ourselves *before* we undertake any program or contract, whether it is structured in a way that helps make transformative change in peoples' lives. Our interventions should be designed to help people make lasting improvements in their health, wellbeing and quality of life, not just to apply a meager balm to the burning pain of intergenerational oppression. And we must respect the self-determination of the people served, by responding to their needs and preferences and including them in organizational decision-making processes. When we do continue to operate programs historically linked to family separation driven by poverty, explicit discrimination and oppression - such as residential schools or foster care programs - then we must work toward a near future where those programs are dramatically shrunk, transformed, or even eliminated. In the last thirty years, New York City has gone from having 50,000 children in foster care to less than 8,000. We believe that number can be reduced further still.

Finally, in that same vein of seeking to be sites of transformation and opportunity, we need to address the fact that our own organizations can be sites of oppression as employers, too. Not only are our clients mostly poor people of color, but in Human Services our workforce is heavily dependent on people (especially women) of color, and many of our jobs still pay poverty wages. In this sense, being oppression-adjacent is a double-edged

sword; many of our programs exist because of intractable poverty and oppression in segregated neighborhoods, while many of our jobs fail to offer a path to prosperity for people from the very same communities. And while locally and internationally, our frontline workforce is predominantly black, brown, and female, many of us remain snowcapped (Schneiderman, 2019) – that is, disproportionately white (and male) at the top. This helps ensure that people of color remain locked in frontline jobs that expose them to higher risk from COVID-19, and indeed, from any health, financial or ecological crisis.

Addressing this situation requires a two-pronged approach as employers: first, we need to make sure that all front line jobs pay a living wage, so that people who do them can raise a family and enjoy a decent quality of life. Second, we need to create viable pathways to advancement for those faithfully serving on the frontlines at all levels of our organizations. You shouldn't have to be an executive to have a rewarding career in the charitable sector – but you shouldn't be prevented from working your way up if you want to, either. We must make sure that our leadership reflects and authentically represents frontline experience, the front-line workforce and the communities we serve. Finally, we must push for increased investment in our workforce alongside, and in tandem with, prioritizing the aforementioned need to channel more program resources directly to families and communities. Only then will we be able to offer transformative opportunities to our employees as well as our clients.

We don't put forward these recommendations to suggest that we have it all figured out. Like most dealing with this pandemic, we have struggled bravely together, and experienced our fair share of successes as well as mistakes. We have lost colleagues, family members and loved ones – because New York City has been at the epicenter of the crisis, and because our workforce is concentrated in its hardest-hit communities. Naming and describing the peculiar condition of being oppression-adjacent during a pandemic does not exempt us from critique. In fact, it requires us to accept that powerful institutions will always be critiqued by those who feel they have been excluded or mistreated. Despite being a historical charity founded in 1851, we do not feel powerful in the grand scheme of New York City politics – but we still exercise tremendous power over our clients and their communities. We have to accept those critiques and do better as we move forward, knowing that the edge of oppression is always a site of struggle and conflict.

The question becomes – if you are oppression-adjacent, which way will you push? We hope to always push toward a more just future, as best we can envision it.

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