



Challenges Staying Afloat

Omicron may be less virulent than previous variants but in its wake the virus continues to leave neighbors at risk of eviction. “We are still seeing consistent numbers in need of assistance, although lower than at the height of the pandemic,” according to Mary Horner, Staff Attorney at Legal Services of Northern Virginia.

Hotel and restaurant workers continue to lose their jobs, suffer reductions in work hours or quarantine with COVID, thwarting them from paying rent. Childcare providers limit the number of children they care for, forcing working mothers to stay home.

Aggravating this situation are the increased out-of-pocket expenses from spending more time at home: the amount paid for groceries and utilities (water, electricity, heat) has jumped. Then there’s inflation. And COVID medical bills. Some, in desperation, turn to predatory lenders to pay rent, which puts them even further behind, according to Erika Gaitan, ALIVE! Service Navigator.

SHORT SUPPLY OF HOUSING

Housing supply and cost remain problematic. “Rental prices are going up,” former Director of Client Services Danien Johnson noted, “and the supply of affordable housing does not meet the demand.” Alexandria has reported an 88% drop in affordable units since 2000. Also, some D.C. residents have moved to suburbs like Alexandria looking for more space, pricing out lower-wage renters, and exacerbating labor shortfalls in local restaurants and other businesses.⁽¹⁾

Those households earning less than \$50,000 spend 50% or more on housing-related costs in Alexandria.⁽²⁾ (Affordable



rentals should cost only 30% of a household salary.) The City of Alexandria estimates that residents must bring home a \$71,960 salary to rent an average one-bedroom in 2021, and a \$89,240 salary to pay for a two-bedroom.⁽³⁾

ALIVE! AND ALEXANDRIA LEAD THE WAY IN PREVENTION

City residents are still learning about the resources offered by the Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership (AEPP) if they cannot make rent due to COVID. Others are lining up for rent relief for the second or third time.

For those living on the edge, the sliver of good news amid the economic turbulence is that AEPP is a leader in preventing dislodgment. In 2019, the eviction rate of tenants was 3.5% to 4%; as of last year the number of renters removed from their homes was whittled down to

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“While I was doing outreach for the Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership at Charles Houston, the lady cleaning the room overheard me. She told me her brother lives on Mount Vernon Avenue and has to borrow money to pay rent. I said I’m here until 2 pm. The brother met me, we filled out an application and stopped his eviction. All because of an overheard conversation.”

- ERIKA GAITAN, ALIVE! SERVICE NAVIGATOR

An *Exciting* New Chapter

ALIVE! will be starting an exciting new chapter in its history. As a sub-awardee of the City of Alexandria, ALIVE! has received funding from the American Rescue Plan to open two Food Hubs, one in the West End and the other in the Arlandria area.

In a departure from ALIVE!'s traditional method of food distribution, clients will be able to visit these Food Hubs at times that are more convenient to their schedules, and will be able to select the specific items they need. Having the opportunity to choose when to visit and increased market-like choice for items will enhance the dignity of the clients and lessen any stigma associated with food bank usage.

At these Food Hubs, ALIVE! staff and volunteers will work to connect clients with other public and private support services. Having service navigators on site to provide information and help clients sign up for these services may provide just the boost they need to start up the path toward self-sustainability.

Listening Sessions with prospective users have been key to learning about preferred hours of operation, the types of food that should be available, and other such needs. Getting continued feedback will be an important aspect of the Food Hubs' operation as we continue to meet the needs of our community.

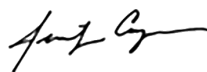
Working with the Alexandria Economic Development Partnership, ALIVE! has identified the location for the first Food Hub in the West End at the Van Dorn Station Shopping Center on South Pickett. The lease was signed in January and ALIVE! staff and volunteers have been working to turn the space into a welcoming location.

If you are interested in supporting us in this new exciting venture, please don't hesitate to contact us: Mary Eileen Dixon at cmedixon8@msn.com and Jenn Ayers at execdir@alive-inc.org.

Best wishes,



Mary Eileen Dixon
President



Jennifer Ayers
Executive Director



P.S. Opening the Food Hubs will not mean the end of ALIVE!'s traditional methods of distribution. To reach as many food insecure Alexandrians as we can, our monthly mass distributions around the city will continue, as will our neighborhood pop-ups and provision of food to various food pantries.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT:



ALIVE! joined Volunteer Alexandria in recognizing the 300+ hours of service that Michael Spatz has given to support all of our neighbors in need. Joined by the Zebra Press, City Council members Canek Aguirre and Kirk McPike, Volunteer Alexandria's Executive Director Marion Brunken, ALIVE!'s President Mary Eileen Dixon and ALIVE!'s Executive Director Jennifer Ayers. All parties came together on February 15th at the ALIVE! food warehouse to recognize Michael for his amazing dedication to the City of Alexandria.

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.08%, according to Katherine Key with Alexandria's Office of Performance Analytics. (These percentages are based on the number of renters issued a writ of eviction, the first step in the eviction process.)

Collaboration between ALIVE!, the City of Alexandria, the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance, Legal Services of Northern Virginia, Christ Church Lazarus Ministry and other non-profits* ensured tenants have been protected and do not fall between the cracks. Other Virginia jurisdictions have asked this task force for guidance to try to accomplish what Alexandria has done, according to Alison Coleman, Director of Alexandria's Office of Community Services.

The task force's effectiveness should improve thanks to ALIVE! receiving a \$550,000 state grant for 2022 to fund more positions and innovative programs to divert evictions from the court system and to help threatened households access assistance. The number of staffers providing legal services,

navigation of the rent relief process, and housing relocation and other financial support should increase later this year. ALIVE! is one of seven grantees statewide receiving funding to promote resiliency, in collaboration with its partners. The ongoing work of this task force not only prevents evictions but also mitigates the risk of children floundering in school, diminished mental and physical health for the family or individual, and bankruptcy.

*Taskforce partners include the Office of Housing, Casa Chirilagua, Tenants and Workers United, Legal Aid Justice Center, and African Communities Together

SOURCES:

- (1) <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/26/989820817/virginia-immigrants-hit-hard-by-pandemic-fear-eviction-housing-squeeze>
- (2) ACS 5-year Estimates 2015-2019 for City of Alexandria
- (3) 2021HousingAffordabilityQuickFacts.pdf

Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Blessings in a Backpack

Lynne Godek, Kindergarten Instructional Aide at Alexandria Country Day School (ACDS) and for the past year the school's Service Learning Coordinator, reports that the monthly collection of food for ALIVE! at the E. Glebe Road Giant is enthusiastically manned by students from all grades, with parental supervision. Students hand out fliers suggesting which donations meet the need, typically shelf-stable dried beans, canned tuna and soups. On one Saturday shoppers responded by donating a whopping 400 pounds of food.



In the fall, kindergartners and first graders also collect and bag groceries for food insecure students at other schools as part of the Blessings in a Backpack program. ALIVE! distributes the food-laden backpacks (two entrees, four snacks and two breakfast items) to tide the students over the weekend until a school breakfast and lunch are available on Monday.

"When asked how they would feel if they were not sure there would be food at home, the kids think about someone their own age going without food and feel some strong emotions," said Lynne. "When they see how much food comes in, they feel ready to do more."

Lifelines

Stephanie Cruz, a Social Worker at John Adams Elementary School for the last four years, sees her mission as connecting families with the two most essential resources, food and shelter.



Either a teacher will tip Stephanie off, or parents consult her when they have lost a job, or a breadwinner's paycheck, and they don't know where to turn. A newly-single mother may have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet after the father leaves the family and as a result the child struggles in school.

Enter ALIVE! -- A call or a written referral from this social worker to ALIVE! will bring emergency rent assistance of up to \$1,000 to help avert the crisis. **"One of our families was living couch to couch, essentially homeless, until ALIVE! provided a deposit and the first month's rent," Stephanie recounted.**

At John Adams, all of the 713 students receive free breakfasts and lunches. The needs of parents who lost their jobs or couldn't work due to COVID quarantine grew during the pandemic, prompting Stephanie to broadcast information on ALIVE! food distributions.

Previously, she had referred families to food distributions on a case-by-case basis.

When parents learn about the nourishment available at Francis Hammond Middle School, William Ramsay Recreation Center and Northern Virginia Community College, the thanks pour in; specifically, there is much appreciation for the robust selection of groceries in addition to canned goods.

Payback

Despite a back that gives her trouble, one ALIVE! volunteer (who prefers to remain anonymous) — inspired by her history with ALIVE! — has volunteered one to two days a week since November at the Payne Street warehouse, examining donations for expiration dates and sorting the food. She also alerted a friend of hers to ALIVE!'s ability to help pay the electric bill. "I let people know there are places to go when they are in need," she noted.

When this volunteer, now retired, was in need of childcare 40 years ago, her daughter attended the Child Development Center. And after calamity struck and a burst water pipe ruined her furniture 25 years ago, ALIVE! furniture provided a box spring and a mattress for her daughter. All of which she remains grateful for.



Tweens and Teens Step Up

A new pop-up food distribution has been added to the ALIVE! schedule, courtesy of UNCUT Youth volunteers. Every third Saturday at the Jefferson-Houston Elementary, six to seven volunteers from UNCUT Youth — an empowerment organization nurturing ages 10-17 — are joined by volunteers from local churches and other organizations to distribute food. Since the pandemic, food insecurity has been a major challenge prompting the organization to partner with ALIVE! to reach more families than it could on its own. Over 700 families have been helped since UNCUT Youth began serving the food in September 2021.



"It was freezing cold and we came ready to serve," according to UNCUT Youth founder Laurese Gerald, remembering the December food pop-up, "and the families receiving the food felt the warmth of our caring and desire to make a difference. One woman showed up with a large suitcase to transport the food to her family using the bus."

UNCUT Youth empowers students through mentoring and a community focus to maximize their potential.

REMEMBRANCES

Ann Matikan

“Ann did not have children but was touched by stories of needy kids,” reflected Patrick Grasso on the legacy of his fiancé Ann Matikan, who died in November 2021 at age 76. “It was her mission to help kids and parents.”

And Ann helped mightily. From a one-table sidewalk sale in 1991 that grew into a block-wide event by 2020, Ann facilitated neighborhood acceptance of ALIVE! House, increased awareness of ALIVE!, and raised thousands of dollars annually in yard sale money to help House residents.

Ann and Patrick moved next door to ALIVE! House in 1990 and, like a good neighbor, Ann immediately asked herself what can we do to help? The first sidewalk sale consisted of Ann and Patrick’s stuff and made a few hundred dollars. Moving into high gear in subsequent years, Ann solicited donations from 200 friends in her network, and recruited about 15-20 friends and neighbors to man the tables at the yard sale held just before Mother’s Day — so Ann could point out objects the shoppers should give their mothers.

What items? Besides the typical yard sale fare, Ann cajoled diamond rings, cameo pins, a bed and even received a donated Volkswagen one year. Soon the entire 100 block of Payne Street was lined with sidewalk sale tables on both sides of the street, worked by neighbors and other ALIVE! volunteers. The street was closed to accommodate the rummage sale which grossed as much as \$10,000 the year the car was sold.

Reshma Begum, a 2008 resident of ALIVE! House, remembers how she and Ann would have fun pricing items for the sale. Ann encouraged Reshma to further her education and bought her everyday clothes and professional suits at the Twig Thrift Shop because “you will need these when you get a great job.” Ann’s prediction came true: since November 2021, Reshma has been working as a business analyst and noted that recently her boss said, “I like your jacket.”



Ann Matikan.

“Ann loved doing this, it was work, but she never saw it as work,” according to Patrick, “it took a whole year to prepare for this event and it became a big part of the neighborhood calendar.”

The remainder of the year, Ann and Patrick were busy providing Halloween costumes and Christmas gifts and playing the Easter Bunny for the children of the House.

Bill Willis

Bill Willis’s legacy to ALIVE! — and to Alexandria — is considerable, making it difficult to convey how many lives he touched. In addition to his involvement with



A favorite Willis family photo with Bill at the far right

ALIVE! Bill also made meaningful contributions to the Alfred Street Baptist Church (ASBC) and the Carpenter’s Shelter. For his civic contributions to Alexandria, Bill was awarded the Marian Van Landingham Lifetime Service Award. In 2021, the Carpenter’s Shelter dedicated their community center to William “Sarge” Willis.

According to his daughter Carol Willis, when her father retired, he wanted to give back to his community of Alexandria where his roots go back four generations. With that commitment, Bill began a twenty-year journey of service. He facilitated ASBC joining ALIVE! as a member. Because of his pick-up and delivery of household furniture and goods to needy residents, Bill has been in more Alexandria homes than most people. “Bill Willis, Alfred Street Baptist Church” is stenciled on the side of an ALIVE! truck used for food and furniture delivery. For his service with ALIVE!, Bill was presented the “A Tribute to a Man of Substance” award given by ASBC Deacons.

A fixture at the StepALIVE! Walkathon, Bill volunteered at the ASBC’s watering hole offering weary walkers an encouraging word, or giving his favorites some grief if that’s what was needed. A highlight was the indoor picnic after the event where his pal Mike Oliver ensured that some sweet potato pie was reserved for Bill.

Bill and his nephew Carlton Willis, who is ASBC’s representative on the ALIVE! Board, also participated in the Last Saturday Food program. Using his logistics expertise from his former profession, Bill brought order to what could have been the chaos in such a large food distribution program.

Employing his own brand of tough love, he earned the nickname “Sarge” because he took a no nonsense approach. Carlton recounts that Bill didn’t have to say anything, people followed him because they wanted to. Observing Bill in action inspired many to think, “That’s who I want to be.”

Many donations to ALIVE! in memory of William Mitchell Willis (1923-2021) continue to be received. Bill keeps on giving.

New Faces at ALIVE! House

TRANSITION AT THE TOP

Ms. Danien (Dee) Johnson started as the ALIVE! House Director and quickly took on a more challenging role as the first ALIVE! Director of Client Services. She brought expertise as a Qualified Mental Health Professional with a Master's degree among other qualifications. As a moving force behind Alexandria's Eviction Prevention Program (AEPP), Dee contributed to the connection of the program to the community.

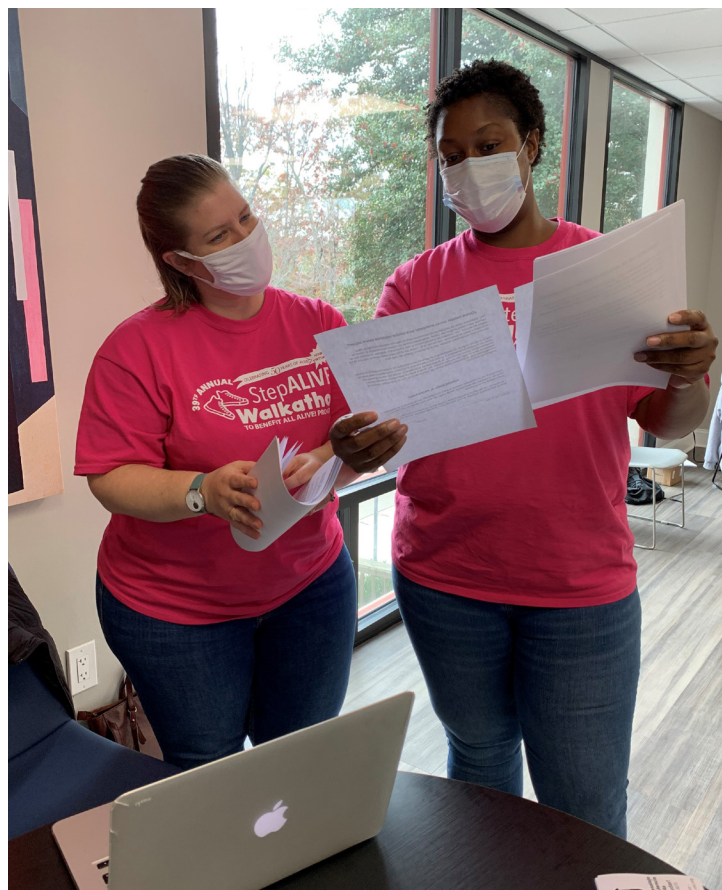
With Dee's departure in January, **Shelley Miller** has been called back to continue her much-appreciated contributions to this effort. Shelley managed the start-up of the AEPP (November 2020 to August 2021), and her previous work and volunteer efforts in the non-profit sector focused on state court administration, access to justice, and immigration issues. We welcome her as ALIVE!'s new Director of Client Services. In this role she will continue to expand the work of the AEPP, oversee ALIVE! House and foster connectedness between ALIVE!'s client facing work, including supervising navigators at the new food centers.

WELCOME ADDITIONS

Three social workers-in-training from George Mason University, aka interns, meet with House residents once a week to assist them with their goals. Until omicron spiked, case management was conducted in one-on-one meetings with masks but the high transmission rate of this latest variant necessitates Zoom meetings.

"I appreciate being part of their journey," George Mason senior **Jasmine Mealy** noted when describing how the ALIVE! House women are putting in time and great effort to better themselves for their sakes and their children's. Jasmine is earning her Bachelor of Social Work and volunteering both at the House and at the warehouse sorting food donations.

Self-sufficiency is the goal for all who enter the House but the steps to achieve it vary. One recent House member is saving for a car to provide reliable job transportation and becoming certified in the medical field. In short, she is a very motivated individual whose confidence in what she can accomplish is



Shelley Miller (left) and Danien Johnson (right).

growing. When her birthday was celebrated with cake and a card, the House became more like a home, and all who spend time there like family to her; her family is far away.

Sarah Taylor, a graduate student at George Mason, manages her education online to facilitate a study, work and family balance. She appreciated that former House Director Danien Johnson attended her meetings with clients. "It's amazing how she asks the questions," said Sarah, "that expertise comes from experience." Sarah has noticed that the lack of childcare is a hindrance to the residents when children are sick or school is closed. "We encourage the ladies to build relationships in the community to have a Plan B when this happens."



ALIVE! Intern, Olivia Ferrante.

Olivia Ferrante, another graduate student, offers encouragement to a young woman at ALIVE! House in addition to helping Erica Gaitan with outreach to clients facing eviction due to COVID.

Half of the interns' work occurs in the classroom and the remainder takes place with ALIVE! Their tenure runs from August 2021 to May 2022.

CONGREGATION CORNER

Welcome Goodwin House Chapel

At its February 1st meeting, ALIVE! welcomed **Goodwin House Alexandria Memorial Chapel** as its 49th member congregation. Goodwin House Alexandria has had a long connection with ALIVE!: its residents used to volunteer at Church of the Resurrection's food distributions in years past, have collected food for ALIVE! and have contributed to ALIVE! and its programs. GHA will be an ecumenical group because of the many faith groups its residents bring to GHA. Kevin Heanue, a GHA resident now and long-time volunteer from Blessed Sacrament, will be the Chapel's congregational representative.



Supersized Donation!

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints donated over 39,000 pounds of food and supplies to ALIVE! in January. The large truckload of food carried various goods, such as rice, corn, pears, peaches, peanut butter, laundry detergent, dish soap, and more.



Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service Congregational Food Drive & Reusable Bag Collection



ALIVE! is thankful to Pastor Tim Bobbitt of First Christian Church Alexandria (center photo) and to all the congregations who donated food and reusable bags.

Despite some scattered snow and extremely cold temperatures, nearly 2,500 pounds of food was donated during ALIVE!'s Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service Congregational Food Drive & Reusable Bag Collection on January 14th – 17th.

This could not have been done without the amazing efforts of **Immanuel Church on the Hill, First Christian Church, Episcopal Church of Saint Clement, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, and Agudas Achim Congregation** in hosting these food collections!

ALIVE! *Wise*

Neighbors Helping Neighbors



The oldest and largest private safety net for Alexandrians living in poverty and with hunger, ALIVE! serves thousands of individuals each month by providing **Food, Shelter, and Emergency Help.**

Founded In 1969, ALIVE! is comprised of **49 faith organizations** and thousands of volunteers, partners and supporters.

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