

CS Direct Report

A Direct Cash Assistance Program
in Alachua County, Florida



December 2020



Summary

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 - Direct Cash Assistance
 - CS Direct Structure and Design Considerations
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- Lessons Learned
- Moving Forward

Community Spring



Left to right: Max Tipping (Policy Director), Tequila McKnight, Nadine Johnson, Latashia Brimm, Kevin Scott, and Lindsay Kallman (Executive Director)

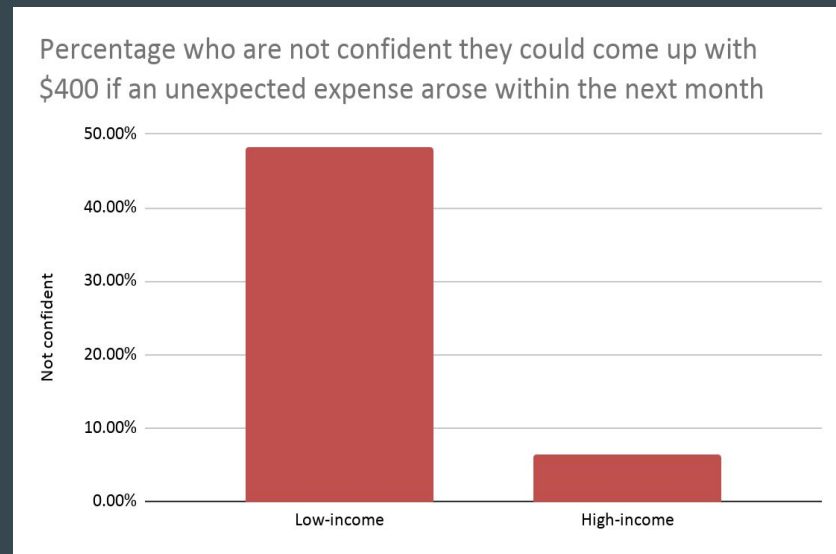
Community Spring is a Gainesville-based nonprofit focused on dismantling structural poverty and spurring economic mobility at a grassroots level. The twin pillars of our work are *providing income* and *building power*. We do this by hiring fellows who have been impacted by poverty to help solve the systemic problems they identify as driving poverty in their communities.

Grassroots COVID Recovery Campaign

- Three main activities
 - Community needs assessment (May-June)
 - Showed that low-income folks were hit hardest economically
 - People had diverse needs as a result of COVID
 - Report available at csgnv.org/covid19
 - CS Direct (June-October)
 - Disaster relief via direct cash assistance
 - Blog series (August-October)
 - Explored systemic problems highlighted by pandemic
 - [Fair credit](#), [racial justice](#), [food access](#), [the cruelty of prisons](#)
- We've wrapped up this campaign and transitioned back to previous work

Economic Resilience

- A person's ability to withstand and recover from an economic shock
- Important for understanding the challenges posed by poverty and living paycheck to paycheck
 - A simple thing like an illness or car repair can have a devastating ripple effect
- Needs assessment found almost half of low-income respondents were not confident that they could come up with \$400 for an unexpected expense
 - Common measure of economic resilience



Direct Cash Assistance

Benefits

- Flexibility
 - Can be used to cover recipients' most critical expenses
- Autonomy
 - Recipients make their own decisions about what to prioritize
- Efficiency
 - Low admin costs means more assistance goes to those in need

National Models

- GiveDirectly
 - \$1000 transfers to households receiving SNAP (food stamps)
 - \$118 million raised
- GiveTogetherNow
 - \$500 transfers to low-income families
 - \$100 million raised

CS Direct

- Ran from June to October
- One-time \$300 payments
- 100% of donations went directly to recipients
- For households in Alachua County who receive SNAP (food stamps)
- Random selection once per month based on how much money was raised
- Community Spring staff confirmed eligibility and delivered payment in-person as a check
- Payments were unconditional
- More info at csgnv.org/csdirect

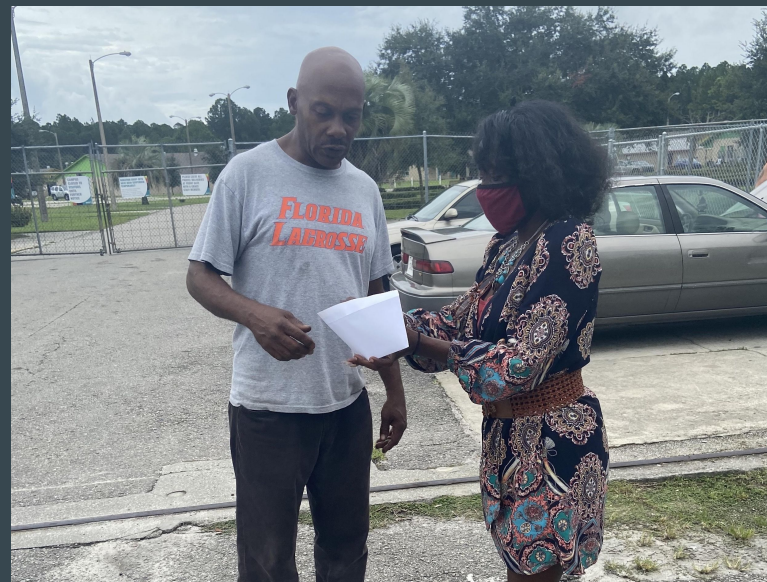


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Design Considerations

- Overall goal:
 - Get assistance directly to low-income households in a manner that promotes autonomy and dignity
- Why did recipients have to get SNAP (food stamps) to be eligible?
 - Wanted eligibility criteria that were (1) transparent and objective, (2) broad enough to cover a lot of people with low economic resilience, and (3) simple for applicants to demonstrate without having to answer invasive questions
- Why random selection?
 - Since everyone in our community has an equal right to the resources they need to get by, random selection seemed to be the most fair method of distributing the available funds
- Why \$300?
 - Originally wanted it to be \$500, but concerned it would negatively impact public benefits
 - SNAP (food stamps) regulations limit cash assistance from a charity to \$300 per quarter
 - Later research found that because CS Direct was disaster relief it would not have counted as income for public benefits even if the amount was higher (this exception would not apply in non-emergency scenarios)

CS Direct by the Numbers

653 Applicants	93 Donors
128 Recipients	\$38,400 Raised

Recipients

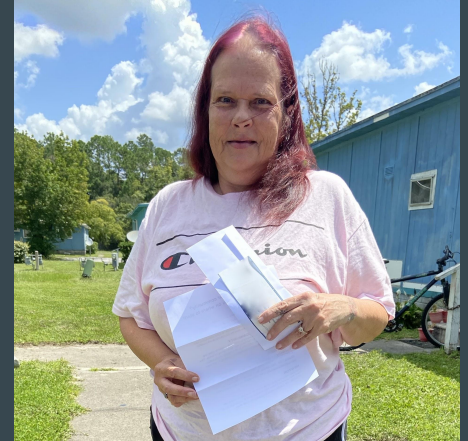
“I was working [but] when the pandemic hit I was released. If I wasn't pregnant I wouldn't have been released, but [my employer] didn't want to take that chance.

Now I'm out of a job until I deliver. I have a car [payment], rent, utilities, and other bills that are piling up.”

“I am back to work [but] due to reduced hours at the Oaks Mall, I get only ten to fifteen hours a week. I haven't been able to pay [GRU].”

“It's stressful wondering how we'll get these bills paid on time. I need help with getting my child's diapers, wipes, hygiene products and other expenses.”

Recipients



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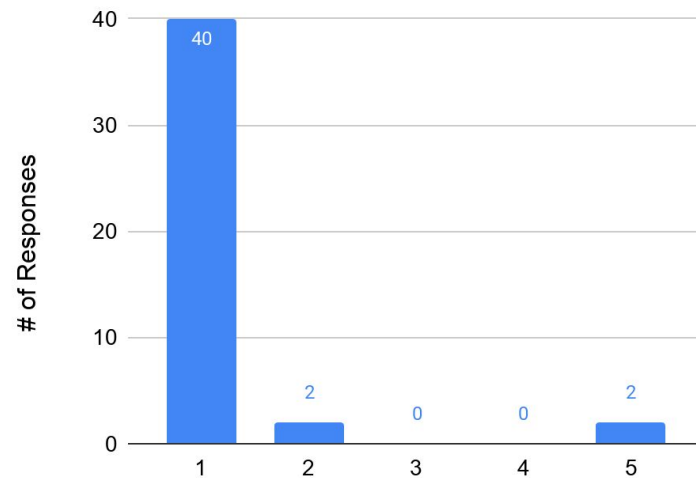
Follow-up Responses

- Followed up with recipients to better understand impact of the payments
- Participation was completely voluntary
- Survey
 - Digital survey sent to recipients
 - Responses were anonymous
 - 44 surveys completed
- Interviews
 - 34 recipients contacted for more in-depth interviews
 - 13 interviews completed
- Primary feedback categories
 - Process, Spending, Autonomy & Flexibility, Stress, Economic Security

Process

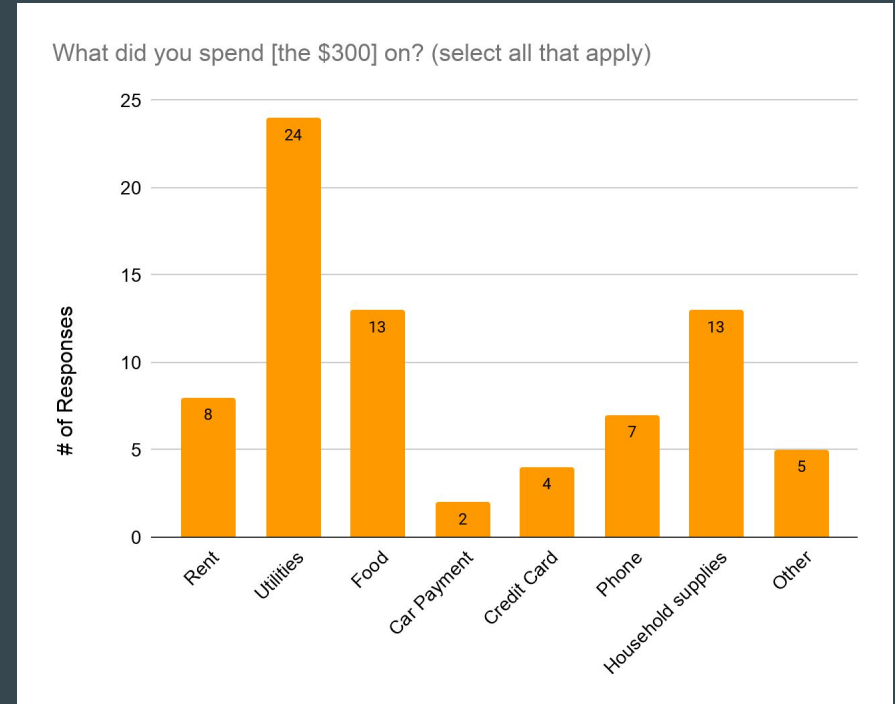
- 91% found online application easy to complete
- Positive feedback on application process and working directly with a person to get the payment
 - A few folks would have preferred mailed checks or using electronic money transfers
- *“Application and process to receive funds was easy and staff was very polite.”*

On a scale of 1 (Easy) to 5 (Hard), how hard was the CS Direct application form to complete?



Spending

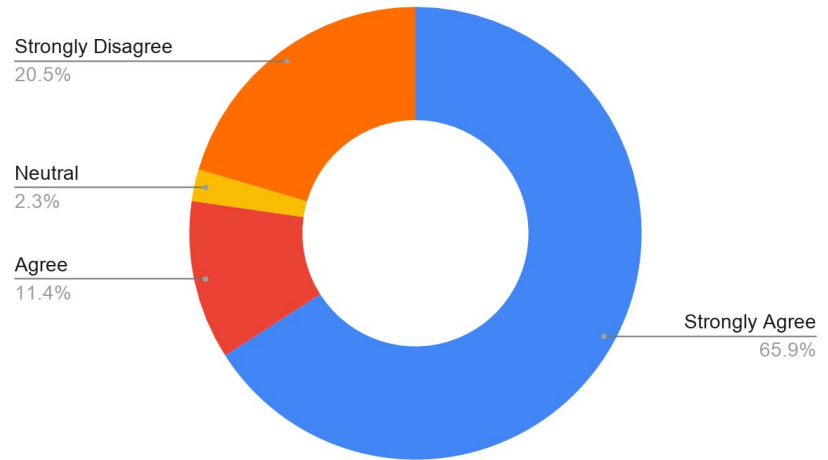
- 55% reported spending at least a portion on utilities
- Household supplies and food next most common expenditures
 - Suggests that SNAP (food stamps), which everyone received, was not enough to their needs
- Other expenditures included rent, phone, credit cards, car payment, and appliance repair



Autonomy & Flexibility

- 77% felt that having payment go to them increased power to make the best decisions for their household
- Many reported splitting it to cover multiple bills, especially things that they normally can't get help with
- *“The unrestricted funds were great because I needed to pay my car note as well as my phone which was off.”*

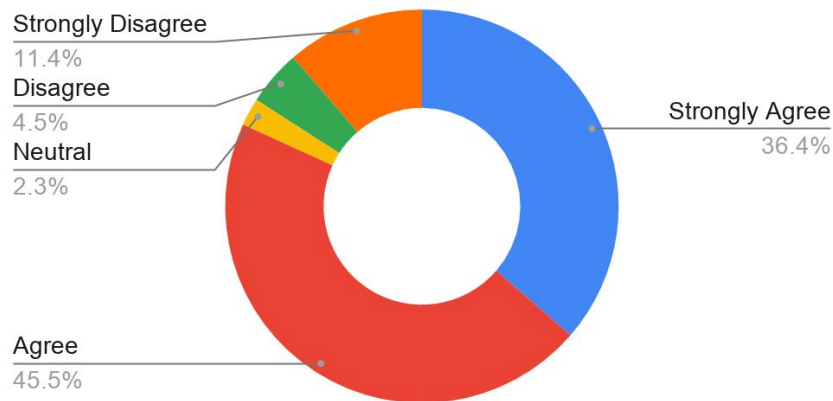
Because I got the payment directly instead of it going to my landlord/utilities/etc., I felt like I had more power to make the best decisions for my household.



Stress

- 82% felt decreased stress about making ends meet that month
- Consistent qualitative feedback that payment reduced stress, often about utility bills
- *“I was so stressed out and worried that my electricity would be shut off. I was relieved when I got the check because it was enough to pay most of the bill.”*

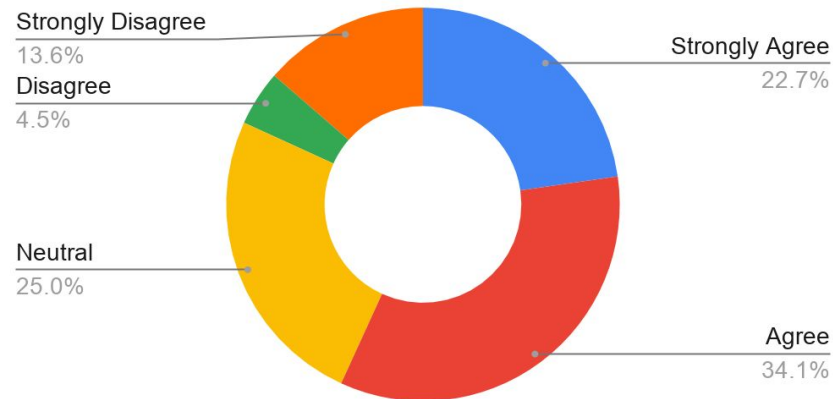
The payment from CS Direct has decreased the stress I feel about making ends meet this month.



Economic Security

- Only 57% felt that it increased their household's economic security
- While everyone was grateful, in interviews it was clear that \$300 was not enough to significantly change their economic situation
- Several recommendations for payments to be increased to \$600
- *“If it was about twice as much each month that would be a great help because every month I have nothing left and come up short.”*

The payment from CS Direct has increased my household's economic security.



Feedback from Ms. C

It was nice to meet a person one on one instead of going into a building where you have to stand in line and wait to be asked a bunch of questions about how you will use the assistance. There is a stigma attached to receiving help, and I'm tired of black women always being the face of poverty. People judge you for needing help but everyone deserves a little dignity. This was less intimidating. I was able to use the money to pay rent in my new place. I had to move out suddenly when the roof in my old apartment almost fell on my daughter.

Feedback from Mr. A

Right now my wife works and attends school, but I have not been able to find work, though I am searching diligently. Before I received the payment I would get angry at my children when they asked for different things. I felt that they should understand my position. They are only children, however, and it falls on me when they go without. After getting the check I do not mind when the kids ask for things because I have been able to meet their needs. I was able to choose what to purchase according to my preferences and priorities. This was great. I still have \$27 left.

Feedback from Ms. D

Right now I have food assistance, but everything else is on me. Food stamps doesn't cover phone bills, internet, electric, rent, or transportation. And in homeschooling right now, the internet is very important. Before I received the payment I was stressed thinking about my lights being cut off and what that would mean for my family. When I got the check in my hands it was a burden lifted off of my shoulders. This gave me more time to collect enough money to pay off the bill entirely. I am very grateful to have had the help when I needed it, but honestly it was not enough money to cover a whole bill. The only things I would change about the program are to raise the amount and make more people eligible.

Lessons Learned

- Unrestricted cash assistance is very useful
 - Many recipients expressed that there was no help to cover essential things (e.g. internet)
- Many people thought it was a scam at first
 - Need to find better ways to build trust
- Even with simple structure, administration was still complicated
 - 20 people never responded after being selected, which delayed getting funds to other eligible applicants
- Having it come from the community added a lot of value
 - Many recipients wanted to get involved and give back in other ways
- There is a lot of unmet need
 - Only able to provide payments to 20% of people who applied
- There is a lot of community support for this idea
 - Raised an average of \$7680/month
- \$300 is helpful but not enough
 - Several recommendations for it to be \$500 or more

Moving Forward

- Community Spring
 - Transitioned back to our [Torchlighters Re-entry Support Campaign](#) for folks coming home after incarceration
 - Will continue advocacy for direct assistance to folks impacted by poverty
- Gainesville & Alachua County
 - Other organizations could take up and expand this idea
 - Could set up a guaranteed income pilot program
 - Gainesville participating in Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, which is advocating for this idea at a national level



Questions?

More info at www.csgnv.org, or contact
Max Tipping at mtipping@csgnv.org