A Lowell program that helps young adults find a path away from life on the streets and criminal involvement is, like other nonprofit organizations, taking a hit as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

But UTEC doesn’t only have to concern itself with the financial toll that work shutdowns, the economic downturn and social distancing are having on its bottom line. It has to worry about the at-risk young adults it serves who are now being cut off from the daily programs that are, for many, a lifeline.

About 3,000 teens and young adults have been through the UTEC program since it was founded 20 years ago. Half of them are parents, and UTEC has...
won accolades for helping them complete their educations, care for their children, get valuable job training and stay out of trouble with the law.

But UTEC’s headquarters and work sites, which are normally buzzing with activity, are a lot quieter these days because of the coronavirus. Donations are down and the organization is losing money in other ways. But in the midst of that, the staff is scrambling to purchase laptops for the young adults in the program, so they can keep up their learning and training remotely while they’re required to stay home. And UTEC staffers are preparing and boxing up meals to bring to the program’s young people every day.

UTEC CEO Gregg Croteau says he wants to make sure the disruption caused by COVID-19 doesn’t set back the young adults in the UTEC “family.”

“We just don’t want any one young person to feel as though they’re forgotten,” Croteau says. “And there’s so many challenges on a regular day, pre-COVID, it is by going to look for young adults in the program when they don’t show up for their day of work or classes. He says he’s concerned about not having that same kind of regular connection with the young people because the coronavirus has necessitated social distancing.

UTEC also works with young adults at the Middlesex and Essex County jails. But right now, the outreach workers can’t go into the jails because of the coronavirus outbreak.

The organization runs three social enterprises in which its young adults receive job training: food services/catering, woodworking and mattress recycling. The staff has been re-purposed to provide daily meals to the young adults and a few staffers are stacking mattresses that are still coming into the recycling facility.

The social enterprises bring in about $1 million in revenue each year, according to Croteau. He says they’ve lost about $155,000 so far as a result of coronavirus-related cancellations and...
work shutdowns. And UTEC has taken on added expenses to box up and deliver the meals and needed supplies, including toilet paper and cleaning products, to the program’s young adults and their children.

“I think it’s not only delivery of food, but it’s the delivery of that engagement,” Croteau says. “The delivery of madd love that might come in a different form right now. The other day, the team was making homemade hand sanitizer. So, you know, learning how to do that, bottling them up and getting ready to deliver that to 100 families.”

“I never thought I would know about mattresses. I never thought I’d know about hand sanitizer,” Croteau reflects. “But Madd Love hand sanitizer is coming the [UTEC] family’s way.”

Manoushka “Money” Gaston, 24, says she’s normally in UTEC programs from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. She is in the culinary program, receiving cooking and catering training, along with classes in resume writing and job interviewing. Now, because of the coronavirus outbreak, Gaston is home alone with her two children, who would normally be in school.

“I feel pretty stable, even though with the social distancing, the only thing I would say is just not being able to be around my UTEC family, like, just having that culture and that motivation,” Gaston says. “Being home, we still are able to contact our transitional coach or our teachers if we need help with any of our online courses.”

Gaston is still receiving a stipend for her work at UTEC, though she can’t do the work right now. UTEC leaders say they made a commitment to continue paying their young adults through the shutdown. The stipends total $55,000 to $60,000 per month, according to Croteau.

Gaston says right now the most critical piece of support she’s getting from UTEC, along with the food and supplies, is help from the program’s social worker.

“With this whole coronavirus, I’ve just been having, like, really bad anxiety about it, because my kids lost their father last year. So I’m basically the only parent they have,” Gaston explains. “So I’ve literally been locked in this house, have not [gone] out of this house since this whole thing started, because I just keep having bad dreams that I’m going to catch coronavirus and then I’m going to die, then I’m going to leave my kids with nobody. Being able to speak to my therapist and her being able to calm me down and ... just basically keep me the same, is one of the biggest roles in my life right now that UTEC’s been helping me with.”

This segment aired on March 26, 2020.

Listen to the segment on 90.9 WBUR:
https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/03/26/utec-lowell-madd-love-coronavirus-shutdown?fbclid=IwAR-2VozRQbaPQE1FbJabFOzOvaODlhF63yleF6CN50CIQW_Sck_5Gx143DzY