Cancellation of funding programs, loss of in-person contact issues

By Elizabeth Dobbins
edobbins@lowellsun.com

LOWELL » For over a decade, 24-year-old Brian Rosario has worked with the same street worker at UTEC, Inc. “He hits us up almost every day,” he said. Nowadays, by phone. With a statewide stay at home advisory and other social distancing measures in place, the work of UTEC in the community looks different than it did just a month ago.

“Unfortunately UTEC is in a spot where we’re impacted in more than a few different ways,” said Gregg Croteau, the chief executive officer.

This includes financially. The pandemic response required UTEC to shut down many of the programs that helped fund the nonprofit’s work.

The organization is facing $200,000 in lost revenue with another roughly $100,000 to $125,000 in losses and new expenses each month, according
to the organization.

The organization is working to raise $500,000 by the end of June to make up the difference. A link to donate is on its website: https://utecinc.org/covid19/.

UTEC is not alone. More than half of Massachusetts nonprofits that responded to a survey early in the crisis are anticipating “significant disruptions” to their operations from the COVID-19 outbreak, and a larger majority are expecting a loss in their annual revenues.

The survey, conducted by the Massachusetts Nonprofit Network and Philanthropy Massachusetts, gauged the global health crisis’ impact on more than 950 respondents from various sizes, fields and regions of the state.

“The results from the poll reinforce what many nonprofits have been sharing with us in recent days: they are already feeling strained by the coronavirus as employers, conveners, and service providers and it’s only just beginning,” Massachusetts Nonprofit Network CEO Jim Klocke and Philanthropy Massachusetts CEO Jeff Poulos said in a joint statement. Revenue generating programs for UTEC, like the cafe and catering, have shut down. Through the crisis, UTEC has committed to continuing to pay people in their programs a weekly base stipend, or about 57 percent of their usual pay, regardless of their involvement. Extra pay is available, if they meet their educational or work goals.

“We’ve made a commitment to all our young adults,” Croteau said. The impact is deeper than finances, as Croteau and employees said much of the organization’s work to reduce violence and promote social and economic success is typically conducted through in-person activities. These efforts have been mostly adapted to virtual platforms or altered to meet the challenges introduced by the ongoing public health crisis.

“It’s really tough for the young adults right now because they’re not only trying to cope with the personal stressors, but the global stressors,” said UTEC’s Career Pathways Coordinator Sophea Sou.

Sou said she and others have been connecting through text or video chat with young adults involved in UTEC. She recalled one woman who she helped land a job at a restaurant. The outbreak has postponed the start date of the position, so Sou said she has been working with the woman on tasks to prepare for the job, like memorizing the menu.

But focusing on the future can be a challenge, especially for the program participants suddenly at home every day with their young children.

“You can tell she is so stressed balancing between being engaged and the personal stressors,” Sou said.

Like daycares around the state, UTEC has suspended its childcare services. Instead UTEC has been providing packets to families, keeping in touch and sending out videos of daily online storytelling.

Rosario said he is at home with three of his four children. The long hours inside reminds him of the time he spent as a teen on house arrest, but the upside is the daily deliveries of food and other supplies, including homemade hand sanitizer, from UTEC.

Rosario said he has volunteered to also help with these deliveries. “I’d be willing to help out, 100%,” he said.

In mid-March he was anticipating the delivery of a Chromebook from UTEC so he can continue studying botany. UTEC has purchased additional Chromebooks so people in their programs can work on educational goals and workforce certifications from home.

“One of the challenges is being able to keep that momentum,” said Rebecca Eppler-Epstein, an educator at UTEC. Instead of group activities she said she and others are checking in individually. She also works on social and emotional skills like self-reflection and self-management. UTEC’s mental health clinicians are currently available to all youth and staff.

“For a lot of our young adults and staff it’s a really stressful moment,” Eppler-Epstein said.

The State House News Service contributed to this report.