

Beaufort County children are also casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis | Opinion

BY NARENDRA P. SHARMA AND DOUGLAS K. FLETCHER SPECIAL TO THE ISLAND PACKET AND THE BEAUFORT GAZETTE. APRIL 16, 2020

The COVID-19 virus has touched everyone in different ways. Many have lost loved ones; families have found themselves in a financial crisis, at risk of losing everything as businesses have closed and jobs have been lost. Children are also casualties, especially as schools and learning facilities have closed.

Many children now lack access to computers, internet, and learning support at home. Real concern about this problem has been expressed by educators, the Gates Foundation, the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries, and many others. Innovative and creative solutions combined with broad-based collaboration are needed to address this problem. Children are in urgent need of help if they are to achieve their hopes and aspirations to be successful in life.

Neighborhood Outreach Connection (NOC) focuses on these problems and is working to make a difference in our own community in Beaufort County.

For over a decade NOC, with the help of teachers, technology, and dedicated volunteers, has been helping children who are behind academically to bring up test scores, to experience accomplishment and pride in their work, and to realize hope for the future. In its seven learning centers, located in low-income neighborhoods across Beaufort County where these children live, NOC uses computers connected to school-approved e-learning platforms and employs teachers from local schools to help children excel in school. NOC offers hope to children who want to learn, to families who have dreams for their children, and to all who want to make our community and our country's future stronger and better.

This is a pivotal moment in the lives of these children. NOC is developing plans for a special summer program for all seven of its locations to help 150 to 200 high-risk children avoid falling a grade behind. The summer program will include a longer session (eight weeks, June and July), increased hours per day (two to four hours, Monday through Friday), and remedial learning to augment skills in math, reading, and language arts.

NOC will mobilize the funds required to support the special summer educational program. However, it now faces the loss of access to its learning center in the Oaks Apartments on Hilton Head Island.

Ten years ago, NOC was invited by the Oaks management to open a learning center there. Since then, NOC has invested nearly \$500,000 in the programs at the Oaks, including education, health care, and workforce development. However, in January, the Oaks board, which favors

short-term rentals, ordered NOC to close its Oaks learning center, which it operates in apartments owned by NOC, effective June 1. NOC reluctantly accepted this demand.

In light of current circumstances, it will be especially difficult for the children at the Oaks to lose this education program at this critical time. NOC is mobilizing support from the community at-large to ensure that NOC can continue to operate for one more year at the Oaks for the benefit of the children and families in the neighborhood. In addition, NOC has petitioned the Oaks property association board to allow NOC to operate there for another year to support about 40 children who live in the Oaks complex.

There has been great community support for NOC, which has changed the lives of many families and children. We are grateful for individual volunteers and donors, for the support of local churches, including St. Luke's, Island Lutheran Church, First Presbyterian, Providence Presbyterian, Hilton Head Island Community Church, St. Francis By the Sea Catholic, and All Saints Episcopal, and the support of community leaders and charitable foundations, all of whom understand the importance of education and this program's impact.

Many of the parents of the children NOC serves are people who have served all of us before and during this crisis. We can also serve by touching these young lives. Working together as caring neighbors, we can make a difference. Investing in these children is investing in our future.

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