

# EL PASO MATTERS

## Low-income El Pasoans can get emergency financial help from new partnership

Robert Moore October 5, 2020



El Paso County commissioners on Monday approved contributing \$275,000 to a partnership that will provide emergency financial assistance to El Pasoans, with a focus on helping people excluded from earlier pandemic stimulus funds.

The Woody and Gayle Hunt Family Foundation is offering a five-year, \$500,000 match for the program, and unnamed national funders are contributing \$150,000, organizers said. Other key partners are **El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization (EPISO)/Border Interfaith** and the Family Independence Initiative.

The partners have committed to raising additional money in coming years to expand the program.

“We have all read reports that nearly half of Americans do not have enough cash on hands to meet a \$400 emergency,” El Paso County Judge Ricardo Samaniego said. “And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic closed businesses and stifled economic activity across the region. Many aid programs create backwards incentives, requiring people to

show how needy they are instead of how resourceful they can be. FII turns the traditional model on its head. This approach will be a game-changer for many in El Paso.”

At least 1,000 El Paso County families this year will benefit from cash grants of up to \$500, which they can use to cover any expense or financial obligation. The partnership especially wants to reach undocumented and mixed immigration status households that were barred from receiving \$1,200 stimulus checks and other COVID-19 relief help approved by Congress.

“They were already in the shadows and now even more in the sense that their poverty became even bigger poverty in the sense of things were not moving,” said Rev. Pablo Matta, a Catholic priest and a leader with **EPISO/Border Interfaith**, which will assist FII in reaching families in need of assistance. “They work so hard and they’re a big part of the economy of El Paso and all throughout the U.S., but never very much taken into account at all.”

FII’s model, which has been used across the country since 2001, requires minimal paperwork. It is meant to help lift families out of poverty, said Ivanna Neri, FII’s partnership director.



Ivanna Neri

“Our model is about letting families lead, rather than prescribing what they should be doing. Families living in poverty have the solutions to achieve economic mobility; we just need to invest in their initiative and goals,” Neri said.

The fund will be overseen by the county government, with payments made through FII’s UpTogether platform. Information on how to apply for the El Paso COVID-19 Relief Fund will be made available in English and Spanish at the El Paso County website. Woody Hunt, the El Paso businessman who chairs his family’s philanthropic foundation, said the \$500,000 donation builds off of efforts in the spring to shore up the El Pasoans Fighting Hunger food bank in the early stages of the pandemic.

“And during that time period, I had some discussions with EPISO, which I’ve kind of met with regularly over a very long period of time, and I know they had concerns about those within the community that were at the very bottom end that



in some cases didn't qualify for some of the federal programs that were coming out," Hunt said.

He learned of FII through programs they were operating in San Antonio and Austin.

*Woody Hunt*

"FII has a platform, they've been doing it for 20 years, they've got the technology to do it. They need local partners like an EPISO who can really identify either directly or through the Catholic Church that they work with, those that really have the greatest need," Hunt said.

Many low-income families in El Paso face cumbersome application processes and a lack of access to computers and other technology to apply for assistance, said Dolores De Avila, a longtime leader with EPISO.

She recalled one woman whose husband and children lost their jobs early in the pandemic, and then a daughter became infected with COVID-19 and spent several weeks in the hospital. When she came home the woman tried to help her daughter get services.

"She was filling out forms and she kept saying that the forms were so difficult to understand. She had no idea whether she was doing them right. That caused a lot of anxiety and depression, not just for the daughter that was sick, but for the family, for her," De Avila said.

Neri said the cash grants to families in need are about more than emergency relief.

"We've found that the combination of cash — and the choice to spend it as they wish — along with community support accelerates economic mobility. People in the middle and upper class are rewarded for their initiative with tax advantages and capital like matched retirement investments. And they are celebrated when they leverage their networks to get ahead. People experiencing poverty deserve the same, and we want philanthropy and government to recognize this," she said.

Cover photo: [The El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization and Border Interfaith](#) will play a key role in implementing a new relief program for low-income El Pasoans. This photo is from an EPISO assembly after the 2019 mass shooting at the Cielo Vista Walmart. (Robert Moore/El Paso Matters)

*Disclosure: The Woody and Gayle Hunt Family Foundation is a financial supporter of El Paso Matters.*