CITY OF ROANOKE

By Aisha Johnson

National and local partners help families gain financial stability and address inequities

Two stories: Tom and Shirley

The following stories are true. Names have been changed to respect the subjects' anonymity.

Like many, COVID-19 negatively impacted Tom financially. He is a divorced, single parent with custody of his son. To increase his income and better support his son, Tom was studying as a plumber's apprentice when the pandemic shut down in-person learning for his son. With his son schooling from home and needing supervision, Tom lost hours at work. He quickly found himself falling behind financially and was unable to pay his rent for many months. Tom was worried he and his young son would become homeless.

Shirley is a child of the 1950s but is not ready for retirement. At one time, Shirley worked as a Certified Nursing Assistant and had hopes of returning to her former career. To accomplish that goal, she needed to learn new guidelines and pass the state boards. Reaching that goal, however, seemed daunting because Shirley is not strong in standardized testing and many years had passed since she was a student.

Not knowing what to do, Tom and Shirley both reached out to the United Way of Roanoke Valley (UWRV) for help.

A clearly defined need for help

The predicaments wfaced by Tom and Shirley are not uncommon. A 2018 study conducted by UWRV showed that 44 percent of all households in the Roanoke Valley were struggling to pay for necessities. This included households below the Federal Poverty Level and households identified as Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE). These are households where individuals are employed and do not qualify for many human support services but are unable to pay for all basic needs to include housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and technology.

In an additional study conducted by UWRV in February 2021, households identified additional stressors. These included (but were not limited to) mental health issues, childcare, debts, medical issues, housing expenses, reduced work hours/wages, and food insecurity. Survey respondents identified options being used to meet their needs such as selling belongings for cash and borrowing money from family and/or friends. Additionally, the respondents identified a need for access to government-assisted human services, personal loans, and credit cards.









"We're honored to be selected by the National League of Cities to participate in this grant project…the pandemic has placed a spotlight on already existing inequities, as well as the urgent need to address the inequities, and the city is committed to this effort."

- Sherman P. Lea, Sr., Mayor of Roanoke

"We are excited and ready to work with the City and other community partners on collaborative approaches to ensure that we serve the most vulnerable and marginalized and create clear and transformational pathways to long-term financial stability."

- Abby Hamilton, President & CEO of United Way of Roanoke Valley

A grant made for economic mobility

The City of Roanoke and UWRV have partnered to meet the needs of the area's residents like Tom and Shirley experiencing economic difficulties due to the pandemic. Additional partners may be added as the project progresses. To aid their work, Roanoke's Innovation and Equity Cluster, housed in the city's Department of Economic Development, recently received a planning grant though the National League of Cities' Equitable Economic Mobility Initiative (EEMI). The EEMI, as defined by the NLC, "…helps cities place the economic mobility of families at the forefront as their local economies and their residents recover and rebuild after the devastating and inequitable economic impacts of the pandemic."

Roanoke is one of eight cohort cities across the country awarded a $25,000 planning grant and a subsequent $80,000 implementation grant to help families in historically underserved areas recover from the pandemic through advancement in the workforce. The grant, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is part of the NLC's efforts under its Institute for Youth Education and Families to financially strengthen families. This includes assisting families in building savings for expenses related to emergencies, pursuing higher education, creating generational wealth through homeownership, and addressing other expenses.

"From Train City to Brain City"

In recent years, Roanoke's economy has transformed from one supported largely by jobs in the railroad industry to one that includes a growing biotechnology hub centered on the Innovation Corridor – a collaborative community of entrepreneurs, businesses, government agencies, and higher education professionals working to create opportunity and success in research, healthcare, and technology.

The expansion of Carilion Clinic and addition of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC will result in a multi-million-dollar investment into the community, including the addition of a significant amount of jobs to the workforce. The NLC planning grant is funding a workforce study and assessment of the Innovation Corridor to create a plan to ready a segment of the population that is untrained or undertrained for jobs in the Corridor. The implementation grant will fund a pilot program to provide the support needed to participants to ensure success as they transition to more secure, higher-wage employment.

Tom and Shirley: Help on the path to success

Thanks to funding from the United Way of Roanoke Valley, Tom was able to pay outstanding rent to his landlord and has enrolled in a new job training program. Free from the stress of owing several months of back rent, Tom is working to create a financially stable household by taking professional skills classes.

The United Way of Roanoke Valley also helped Shirley who has re-entered the workforce. She was able to pass her certification exam and is working as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a nursing home.

Resources such as those provided by the National League of Cities Equitable Economic Mobility Initiative mean that Roanoke, the United Way of Roanoke Valley, and future partners will be able to help families and individuals like Tom and Shirley rebound and find their way to stability.

About the author: *Aisha Johnson is an economic development specialist with the City of Roanoke's Office of Economic Development.*

Innovation Corridor participants

- **City of Roanoke**
- **Carilion Clinic**
- **Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion**
- **Virginia Tech**
- **Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine**
- **Radford University**
- **Radford University Carilion**
- **Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program**
- **Roanoke Regional Partnership**
- **Roanoke Blacksburg Technology Council**
- **Private investors in housing and hospitality**

United Way

United Way of Roanoke Valley