

Good Money by Vancity – Episode 4 – Caring for each other during COVID-19

Avery Shannon: This pandemic in general has highlighted how there are inequalities in our society.

Chris Friesen: Just imagine you're new to the country, you don't have access to technology and you don't speak English or French.

Ian Marcuse: Particularly seniors that were really scared, they were worried and they were telling us, " We have no food."

Avery Shannon: Really, there's as many different needs as there are individuals.

Chris Friesen: So how do you get the information that you need to take care of yourself?

Ian Marcuse: I didn't really know of any food delivery early on.

Avery Shannon: Folks looking for things that especially had been hoarded. Things like hand sanitizer and even over the counter medications.

Ian Marcuse: There was no plan for them, what were they going to do? There was nothing.

Anicka Quin: It's been half a year since COVID hit. And to say the least, it's been tough. Millions of people around the world have contracted the virus. We've been stuck at home and isolated. We miss our friends and our loved ones and many people have taken a serious financial blow. But the pandemic isn't affecting everyone equally. Newcomers, Black, Indigenous, people of colour, women, youth, people with disabilities, people in precarious jobs all hit harder. But the pandemic has also inspired people to step up. They've donated money and time and food. People have been banging pots at 7: 00 PM. And an Ottawa woman started the Hearts and

Windows campaign that spread around the world. And today on Good Money, we're going to hear from a few of the amazing helpers who have made a difference. Now when COVID first hit, everyone was in shock. And everything came to a sudden grinding halt. For some people it caused immediate and very serious problems. Seniors, people with compromised immune systems, people whose income was suddenly cut off, some couldn't get food or medications. Delivery services were overloaded and a lot of the supports they relied on vanished literally overnight. Then a Facebook page appeared, it was called COVID- 19 Coming Together. In a matter of days, it grew from a few hundred followers to tens of thousands. Some people posted about the things that they needed, other posted about what they had to offer. And in a matter of days, a whole new community was created. One of the people who created that community was Avery Shannon. Avery is an activist from Vancouver with deep roots in the disability community and we spoke with Avery about how it happened, what they saw and the difference they made.

Avery Shannon: In the beginning, it really came together from five of us having conversations with each other about how we could fill this need that we saw in our communities, how we could support our networks through mutual aid. We were having these separate conversations and decided to actually have them together. So we hoped on a Zoom call and began chatting about what we were going to do, what we were going to be called and how we were going to do it in a big way was a really big thing for us. We decided that we wanted to share resources and support each other and show solidarity for healthcare and front line workers as well as the vulnerable and we wanted to build community and amplify social movements, fighting for critical access to healthcare and housing and worker's rights. We knew that it would probably have a big launch but it still took us by surprise when we hit so many members so quickly. We saw a huge variety of needs and offers because really, there's as many different needs as there are individuals. But we did see some common patterns emerge such as folks looking for things that especially had been hoarded, things like hand sanitizer and even over the counter medications. One story from the very first day that we launched was someone out in Abbotsford who had a very sick baby who desperately needed some baby Tylenol but everywhere that they had looked had been wiped clean of it. So through the group they were able to connect with someone who was able to find some and bring it to them and help out this new parent. This pandemic in general has highlighted how there are inequalities in our society that have existed since before COVID- 19. All these different people from groups that have been made marginalized are people who are being hit by this pandemic in a more extreme way and this group is, as much as possible, making space for those voices to be uplifted and for those needs to be met. And honestly it's been pretty successful at that. We've seen a number of people have access to resources and community and networks that they wouldn't have otherwise. So that's been truly amazing to see. One of the big things that our group has done is create the survival fund for the people where we launched a GoFundMe and were able to crowdfund \$65, 000 and have begun distributing that money in sums of \$ 25 to \$ 100 to individuals who apply who are in need. And we're really trying to reach people who aren't eligible for the government benefits. So really the people who have fallen through the cracks. And there's been so much gratitude and positive feedback from that. It's been both heartwarming and heartbreaking to see. It's been really heartwarming to know that we can make, what folks are saying, is a huge difference for

them. And it's also heartbreaking that such a small amount is so much and we're just one small group whereas there are so many other larger groups such as the government who could be making so much of an impact. But I'm glad that we're at least able to. So we, as members of society, decided that we have a choice on how to navigate our way forward. We could choose fear and division and toilet paper hoarding or we could build a different narrative, one where practicing physical separation doesn't mean being isolated from each other. Because there's so much that is difficult about this time and it really offers us a chance as a society to slow down, to come together and reconnect with each other and with what's important and with visions for how we want our day to day lives and how we want our future to look.

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Anicka Quin: That was Avery Shannon. Avery is one of the creators of a Facebook page called COVID- 19 Coming Together Vancouver. You're listening to Good Money, brought to you by Vancity. I'm Anicka Quin. Today we're talking about how the communities stepped up to help during COVID- 19. And in our next episode we're going to talk about Canada's financial future, specifically about the country's growing debt. We have lots more financial tips in the weeks ahead but first I'm joined by Chris Friesen. He's the director of settlement services with the Immigrant Services Society of BC, an organization that welcomes new arrivals from around the world. Hi, Chris.

Chris Friesen: Hi, good afternoon.

Anicka Quin: So when COVID hit, borders are closed, flights are grounded, what were some of the immediate impacts on people who were in the process of coming to Canada?

Chris Friesen: Yeah, I mean at that point there were estimated around 7, 500 resettled refugees that had their permanent resident status but couldn't get flights to Canada. So there was a group of folks that were suspended abroad and then there were folks that were already in the country that were being impacted in their ability to look for permanent housing. So it really hit both groups equally in a unique situation.

Anicka Quin: Sure. I imagine a lot of the offices that might be helping them normally were closed?

Chris Friesen: Everything closed down around the 18th of March throughout Canada, including 14 offices that ISS of BC runs throughout BC.

Anicka Quin: Okay. And so what are some of the challenges then that are facing people that have arrived?

Chris Friesen: I think the biggest challenge is that there is a significant cohort of folks, newcomers, that don't have access to technology and are digital illiterate. It's these folks that are having the greatest challenge, whether that's refugees, seniors, youth, etcetera.

Anicka Quin: I can imagine because I think back, even in the early days of COVID, how obsessively I was checking various devices and that sort of thing to try to get the information that you need right now. That must be a real challenge.

Chris Friesen: Absolutely. And then on top of that, just imagine you're new to the country, you don't have the access to technology, you're digital illiterate and you don't speak English or French. So how do you get the information that you need to take care of yourself? Right? Because those early days, those early weeks, the information that was being communicated to the public was primarily only in English. It was only after, I think six or seven weeks that we began to see information in a variety of other languages.

Anicka Quin: And then what about some things like getting food or having to deal with transportation? What did you see affecting these communities?

Chris Friesen: Well those that were in quarantine, of course, weren't leaving so food was being provided to them. Others that were out in the community were, by and large, able to secure their basic needs. But there was a real push to help them access PPE in order to maintain their own safety and follow existing health protocols.

Anicka Quin: So things like getting people masks so they can go shopping themselves? Is that the idea?

Chris Friesen: Exactly. But also realizing too, as the guidelines and lock downs were progressing, of course that meant less transit. So this is all compounding, some of the challenges faced.

Anicka Quin: I wonder, were you seeing, even in non- COVID times, there's massive mental health challenges because of financial stress and migration trauma for people coming, what did you see this time and how was your organization dealing with that?

Chris Friesen: Yeah, probably starting in early April, we did a telephone outreach needs assessment survey with over 450 government assisted refugee families that had arrived since January 1, 2019. And income security, in addition to mental health, were two top issues. As the lockdown was progressing and people were losing their job, they were counting on their jobs to cover some of their rent and so it was leading to precarious situations. Later on the province created these additional emergency COVID benefits but again, many of these benefits, both federal and provincial, were linked to your tax records. But if you arrived in 2019, you didn't necessarily had filed your income tax for that year. So this has been a significant push in late April and May, was helping individuals virtually file their income tax.

On the mental well being piece, yes we've seen a lot of pre- migration trauma, which has played out in various ways. Now, once they're so called safe in Canada, we're doing a lot more spot checks, telephone check ins to try and support, to the best of our ability, these individuals.

Anicka Quin: Okay. And then are you seeing, in terms of financial effects, what does it mean for new immigrants and refugees trying to find work right now?

Chris Friesen: Well that's a huge challenge. So on top of finding work, if you don't have access to technology, ability to do your resume, transit, these all compounded and created really unique challenges for them. And so a lot of effort has been going in to trying to support the most marginalized newcomer families and individuals to the best of our ability under these circumstances. That remains the most pressing need going forward. In fact, we're just finalizing a digital literacy curriculum that will help teach newcomers just by and through their phone to obtain an email, download and access Zoom. So very, very basic things.

Anicka Quin: And I guess with that whole need for virtual support, there's all the more need for tech to be a big part of what they're learning how to do.

Chris Friesen: Absolutely. And this is where we see the great divide, the inequality between those that are digital literate, that have access to technologies, and those that don't. This becomes very problematic, especially for what we call communities of lesser diffusion. So those communities that have small numbers of people, non- English speakers, that don't make the radar screen of some of the larger ethno- communities where interpretation and translation is being provided.

Anicka Quin: Okay so they're less lucky to have the translated COVID information out there, for example?

Chris Friesen: Exactly. And that's been one of the things that we've been advising both the federal government and the BC government is around keeping their eye on a number of languages and communities that are at a particular risk and should be considered for priority translation. For example, Arabic, Karen, Montagnard, Somali are some of the ones.

Anicka Quin: So what can listeners do?

Chris Friesen: Wow. So the easiest way of course is to reach out to an immigrant serving agency such as ours, ISS of BC, we're always looking for, at this time, cash donations. We've got specific programs that we're trying to appeal to the public to help the most marginalized families. We're trying to get up and running, a lending library of computers, iPads for isolated, at risk newcomer families. These are some of the most pressing needs at the moment. Technology and financial donations would be the two most immediate things.

Anicka Quin: Okay, yeah those are great suggestions and can be easily acted on, I think, by our listeners. Thanks so much, Chris.

Chris Friesen: My pleasure.

Anicka Quin: Chris Friesen is the director of settlement services with the Immigrant Services Society of BC. If you know someone who could use their help or if you'd like to make a donation, you can find them at ISSBC.org or by phone at 604- 684-2561. Another person who saw a serious need in those early days was Ian Marcuse. He's a community food developer with the Grandview Woodland Food Connection and he works in partnership with Britannia Community Centre. His main focus is food security and food networks and he leads a program

that teaches people how to grow food. He's also worked with the city on building a stronger local community food system. But when the pandemic hit, his job changed in a big way. He and his team suddenly found themselves delivering food hampers to hundreds of people who needed help. Ian joins me now. Hi, Ian.

Ian Marcuse: Hello, Anicka.

Anicka Quin: So Ian, when COVID first hit, what happened? What need did you see out there?

Ian Marcuse: Oh my gosh, well it was very eerie, wasn't it? Those first few days when the city announced the shutdown, or whatever you call it. Immediate concern were all of the folks that were at home, stuck at home. Because we were told not to go out so how are people going to get their food? And our main concern were the elders and the seniors and those with health conditions that had absolutely no way to get out. And we knew that grocery delivery was backed up for weeks. Britannia was unique in that, unlike many community centres, Britannia has its own board of management because we work with the school board and the library all on one site. So we were able to activate our essential services literally within a day or two. So we kept some childcare open, we immediately set up an emergency food delivery program. So we moved all our fridges and freezers into one space, we redeployed a number of the staff that were potentially laid off, we were able to redeploy them to call all of our people that are connected to the community centre and check in with them, make sure they're okay and what are their needs. And we were able to activate our volunteer programmer who was able to get us a whole lot of volunteers. Pretty immediately, within a couple of days, we started doing food delivery and everything in the city was shut down. I mean it was very eerie. And there weren't many agencies that we're aware of that were able to respond as quickly. They just were struggling with how do we deal with social distancing? How do we deal with all the safety protocols. So the city, some of the larger organizations basically shut down. I didn't really know of any food delivery early on.

Anicka Quin: When you think back on that time, are there stories of people you were speaking with that really stand out for you?

Ian Marcuse: Yeah, well we were getting a few calls from particularly seniors that were really scared. They were worried and they were telling us, " We have no food." And they weren't able to go out, they were afraid to go out. The food banks were closed, most of them. And the grocery stores were inaccessible. It was great that we were able to get food to them

immediately and it was a huge relief to them. I know they've been extremely appreciative and some of the seniors were just like, " Oh my God, you're an angel."

So glad we're able to help. I feel bad that people have been in this situation in this city and in this country, that people are ... We weren't really prepared. Fortunately at Britannia, we had a lot of capacity that's come about through decades of community development so we were able to mobilize resources quite quickly. But for all those people that were told to remain in quarantine or to remain indoors, there was no plan for them. What were they going to do? There was nothing.

Anicka Quin: Yeah. And tell me what this involves then. You've got your volunteers, you've got access to food through organizations? Or how are you distributing this now?

Ian Marcuse: Yeah, so this is all new to us although we had established, because we've been working and doing community development now for decades. And so we had our partnerships, we have business contacts, community member contacts, all those relationships were in place. Other agencies. So for us doing emergency food delivery was not part of our mandate. We're more focused on skill building, education, policy, advocacy and that type of stuff. So it was a quick learning but we had some systems in place. We purchase food through various wholesalers already so we were able to quickly get that food bought. So we'd be ordering food. We don't have a large walk in cooler or anything so we're ordering basically daily, calling up volunteers to help sort, lining up drivers, calling our people, seeing who needs food and sending the drivers out there.

So we redeployed a number of our staff. Many of the staff were laid off but we were able to redeploy some of those people and they were calling all the folks that are connected through Britannia. Like a thousand or 2, 000 people, I can't remember but they were on the phones for two weeks straight, calling everyone, checking in, seeing what their needs were. Did they need masks? Did they need hand sanitizer? Did they need food? Did they need cell phones if they weren't connected? So we were able to mobilize a pretty good network pretty fast and so they would all relay messages to us of people that needed food plus we reached out to various agencies and said, " Listen, we're open. Just send us referrals to people." Specifically focusing, our priority was elders and seniors first and foremost and others with health issues. So it all happened pretty quick.

Anicka Quin: Amazing. And do you have a sense of how many hampers you're delivering on any given day?

Ian Marcuse: We're seven days a week, 25- 35 food hampers to about 500 families. So we're delivering all around east Vancouver. So we're pretty busy and it's been like that since mid-March. Long hours, seven days a week. It's pretty nutty but I guess it's important. I guess it's needed. People are extremely appreciative so I feel good about that and I feel good that we're able to give them really healthy good, a lot of fruits and vegetables. But I've been saying too, it's not something that we really enjoy doing. Yeah, it's nice to help people, of course. We feel good about that, but the system, it's just wrong that people have to be asking for food. You know? People need to have the income to purchase food of their own choosing. This is a temporary program and ultimately we need to work on advocating for better supports for people. Financial, economic supports.

Anicka Quin: So we've been hearing pretty wonderful stories about how businesses have mobilized during this time to try to help people out, whether it's Chambar restaurant's food coalition or some of the staff meal programs for unemployed workers at restaurants like Say Mercy . What have you seen around your organization? Have you had businesses step up to support you as well?

Ian Marcuse: Oh yeah, the businesses have been fantastic. They are a key part of our support system. So we've had many donations from many of the businesses. For example, the Nut Hut who supply a lot of grains and legumes and seeds and nuts and really healthy food stepped up with like an \$ 800 donation of bulk food. So that was fantastic. East End Food Co- op has been purchasing food for us at cost, Pasture to Plate was providing us these wonderful cooked grass fed burgers, Italian Cultural Centre was sending us, or is still sending us food, basically three times a week that they've been preparing. Save On Meats on the Downtown Eastside has been sending us food weekly. So I could name dozens of businesses that have made donations to us and still are making donations. So big shout out to businesses and I really encourage people in the community to really support your local businesses. They're not having an easy time with COVID either but they're there for us. It's a fantastic community that we're in. I'm inspired and heart warmed by the amount of support we've been getting.

Anicka Quin: That's wonderful. And you've been working with farmers too.

Ian Marcuse: Oh yeah, and the farmers too. So one cool relationship that we've established is with the city of Vancouver, the Parks Board. So the horticulture is down at Sunset Nursery, that's where the city grows all of their plants, have started growing food during this COVID time. So we've been getting weekly crates of fresh grown, organic veggies from the Sunset Nursery, which has been fantastic. We partnered with Fractal Farm so they're a local farm as well and they've been donating the equivalent of \$4, 000 worth of farm produce to our program. So

again, high quality, organic food. So those are two examples. Soul Food, which you may know of, the urban agriculture business.

Anicka Quin: Soul Food does really wonderful work about employing people in the downtown east side as well.

Ian Marcuse: They're awesome. They are so awesome, for sure.

Anicka Quin: So do you have sense, you said since mid- March, do you have an idea of just how much food you've delivered overall?

Ian Marcuse: Oh my God, I know that we're getting close to 3,000 food hampers.

Anicka Quin: Amazing.

Ian Marcuse: And it's a lot of food in each hamper. These aren't small little hampers. They're like 40 pound boxes. We ask our drivers, one of the first questions I ask them is how is your back? Because some of these boxes are pretty heavy. So yeah, we're packing the food in.

Anicka Quin: You know you mentioned that this is not an ideal world, that you want people to have the capacity to be able to buy their own food as well. What would you like to see happen come out of this?

Ian Marcuse: Yeah, I think there are a lot of interesting conversations to be had when we get through this. For example, where are resources best put or best sent to be able to respond as quickly and effectively to these issues? We need to build a stronger voice. I mean we have, for many years, been pushing for poverty reduction strategies but we're going to have to work even harder because we're a country with a lot of wealth and again, we need to be advocating for the social support so that people aren't in the situation of having to ask for donated food and free food. And I know many people that have approached us have been really shy about asking for the food. And a number of people have said they've never had to ask for free food before. And you can hear it in people's voices. And it's even hard for us to ask people, " Would you like a

food box today?" You know because we know that there's stigma around poverty and asking for free things.

So we approach it with a lot of gentleness. For example, we're not going to say, " Do you need a food box today?" We'll say, " Would you like to have some food today?" We're happy to deliver this food to you. So we need to be advocating for systems change for proper social supports, proper income supports. So again, people can purchase their own food.

Anicka Quin: Right. Make the choices themselves.

Ian Marcuse: Exactly.

Anicka Quin: And so how can listeners help?

Ian Marcuse: Get engaged in your community. I think the way in which we've responded has largely been about the relationships that we've established. So connect with your community centres. Volunteer, get to know people. Just get involved. Because this is the resilience. This is the social fabric. It's all of those social connections, those relationships that come about through people working together, through getting to know each other, getting to know ... Work with seniors. Get to know some local seniors and build some relationships with people who may have mobility issues and can't get out as easily. Build some support systems in your community, however you feel you can do that. Help advocate for systems change or poverty reduction strategies. Income supports, livable, annual wages, more social housing and all of these things that can go a long ways to putting more money in people's pockets.

Anicka Quin: Right. Yeah I think it's clear that community has never been so important as we've seen right now. Truly, thank you for everything that you did in the last while.

Ian Marcuse: I'm so inspired by the community. And the silver lining in COVID is that people are aware of the importance of community and we've seen the power community mobilize and East Van, it's an amazing community. We've got 120 volunteers that have stepped up. And no complaints. Everyone's so willing to help out. And people care. People have made lots of donations, people are putting a lot of time in to delivering the food and so on. And it's so inspiring. That's the power of community. Despite how hard COVID is, and it is hard for a lot of people, but we've shown that we can get through this with compassion and care.

Anicka Quin: Thanks so much, Ian. Ian is a community food developer with the Grandview Woodland Food Connection. You can find them at GWFoodConnection.com. That's it for Good Money today. I'm your host Anicka Quin. I hope you found this episode and the people in it as inspiring and interesting as I did. Don't miss our next episode where we're going to be talking with a top expert about debt and what a real financial recovery might look like. So make sure to subscribe. Thanks for listening and see you next time.