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Cleveland Pandemic Response
Wellman Hill Recipient 2020

The summer of 2020 posed a unique internship challenge given the COVID-19 pandemic. I had initially planned to intern with the Legal Aid Society of Columbus, but was dissuaded from traveling and renting an apartment for the summer after the pandemic became serious in Ohio and the state shut down. However, the pandemic did provide me with a different public service opportunity. I was able to get involved with Cleveland Pandemic Response.

CPR was formed as the severity of the pandemic became obvious for the US. It is a mutual aid organization seeking to facilitate matching donations with recipients in need. At the start of lockdown, we focused heavily on cleaning supplies, food, and hygiene product donations. Unlike charity, mutual aid is a strategy of community building that seeks to create strong community bonds and remove the paternalism associated with charity. The intent is to provide for one's community where governing institutions have failed, and mutual aid is less hierarchical and conditional compared to charity.

While working with Cleveland Pandemic Response, I became primarily involved in outreach work. I attended both general organizing meetings and outreach team specific ones, where we discussed ways to increase community awareness of our services and also strategies for partnering with businesses who could offer either donations or a space to put up fliers. We also reached out to local breweries and other establishments that might be able to provide emergency PPE or sanitizer (breweries had just started transitioning to creating hand sanitizer in many places).

An additional task I picked up while working with CPR was doing direct deliveries to recipients. Our original model had called for matching donors with recipients, and simply giving the donor an address to bring their donation to. However, this was not always feasible, as the donor might not have a car. Additionally, we realized recipients may be more comfortable if they could interact instead with someone working with CPR who was vetted for safety. So, using my free time when not working on outreach materials, I would take delivery routes created by someone else within the organization, and pick up a few donations before distributing them among 2-4 recipients.

Working with CPR allowed me to become more involved with the organizing community in the Cleveland area. I met many people involved with local organizations such as IRTF, Food not Bombs, and DSA who have been doing community building work like this for many years, and was able to play a small role in building that community myself. This experience was the most direct form of service to the public I could imagine, and the Wellman Hill grant facilitated

it. I'm thankful for the opportunity, and believe these experiences will stick with me as I continue my education and career.