

# Getting Creative with CARES Funds



## CSBG Peer Sharing Event: Getting Creative with CARES Funds

Over the past few years, the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) has been working to connect more with our customers, as well as our internal and external partners. We have made significant progress towards this goal and are constantly seeking new ways to enhance our partnerships.

On November 5, 2021—in partnership with the TDHS People Operations Learning and Development Team—we held our first agency peer sharing event, Getting Creative with CARES Funds. The following is an overview of the event.

**Purpose:** The TDHS CSBG office has been tracking agencies' CARES spending. As of the date of the peer sharing event, only 38% of CARES funds had been used in the 16 months since allocations occurred. With 11 months left until the funds expire, CSBG wanted to help agencies explore spending options. Getting Creative with CARES Funds included guest speakers and brainstorming breakout sessions that allowed agencies to discuss barriers to spending the funds and ask questions about potential fund usage.

### Guest Speakers:

- Sharon Goodson – Executive Director, North Carolina Community Action Association (NCCAA)
  - North Carolina has a network of 34 community action agencies that received a total allocation of \$22 million in CARES funds.
  - The NCCAA partnered with agencies for “The Big Pop Up” events.
  - During “The Big Pop Up” events, residents drive through and get their trunks filled with hygiene and cleaning products, baby products, and food boxes.
  - Agencies partner with other businesses and organizations to obtain donations for the events.
  - Agencies also used CARES funds on:
    - Electricity/Utility/Rent/Mortgage Assistance
    - Food box distribution
    - Meal delivery to seniors
    - Childcare
    - Transportation
    - Medical support
    - Health and safety boxes (PPE/Cleaning Supplies)
    - Distribution of educational packets to children
    - Workforce development



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- COVID-19 Vaccination Outreach
- Barriers to agencies spending funds included:
  - Delayed reimbursements from the state
  - Staffing shortages and remote working
  - Delayed allocations from the federal government
  - Organizational capacity
- Cherry Whitehead-Thompson, Executive Director and Donna Gray, Program Manager – Shelby County Community Services Agency (CSA)
  - Shelby County residents impacted by COVID-19 due to job loss or a reduction in household income were able to receive a higher rent and mortgage benefit through the agency's CARES Program.
  - Shelby County CSA distinguished the CARES Program from the regular Rent and Mortgage Program by extending the eligibility period from 6 months until the onset of COVID-19 and by altering the program criteria and benefit level.
  - For applicants requiring additional assistance, Shelby County CSA referred them to other programs and worked closely with landlords and leasing companies to help customers establish arrangements.
  - Shelby County also partnered with Catholic Charities of West Tennessee (CCWTN) and uses CARES funds to pay the costs of emergency shelter in the form of hotel stays up to 45 days or daily shelter costs.
  - Funds are also used for the CCWTN Housing Ministry to provide housing application fees, utility and rent deposits, arrears utility payments up to \$1,000, and monthly rent and utility payments for up to 9 months.

***If you are interested in learning more about how Shelby County CSA's program or partnerships, you may contact Cherry Whitehead-Thompson or Donna Gray.***

- LaNelle Godsey – Community Services Director, Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency (HRA)
  - In addition to using CARES funds for housing and utility assistance, Upper Cumberland HRA used funds to purchase the software for a new regional database—UC Assist ([ucassist.org](http://ucassist.org)).
  - Through UC Assist, Upper Cumberland is developing a comprehensive resource that residents can use to identify and connect with all support services in the region.
  - UC Assist is operated on software by Caspio, which was selected because it allows for the creation of custom web forms and a searchable database in a secure and scalable environment.
  - Upper Cumberland HRA is also using funds to purchase kiosks that would be available in key community locations, such as the courthouse, for residents to access the UC Assist database.



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*If you are interested in learning more about the UC Assist database, you may contact LaNelle Godsey.*

## Breakout Sessions

Event participants were broken up into smaller breakout groups to discuss the following questions:

- What has your agency done or is thinking of doing with CARES funds?
  - Rent/mortgage assistance
  - Utility assistance
  - New technology for staff members (cell phone/laptops) to promote mobility
  - Hired new full-time and part-time community services staff
  - Hired quality improvement staff
- Are there any barriers that are preventing you from using the funds?
  - Staffing shortages/turnover
  - Excess of COVID-related funding available from other sources
  - Difficulty getting documentation that verifies eligibility due to COVID
- What partnerships are you using?
  - Electric Companies
  - Other CSBG agencies in Tennessee

***We encourage you to reach out to other agencies to learn and share your experiences with spending CARES funds. If you are interested in additional peer sharing events, send us your topic ideas to [CSBG.DHS@tn.gov](mailto:CSBG.DHS@tn.gov).***