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Community aid: Nonprofit uses Kroger gift card program to help thousands of people in need

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Covid-19 has not only caused a massive health crisis, but a financial one. In February 2020, before the pandemic began, the country's unemployment rate was 3.5%. By April, that rate was more than four times higher — 14.8%. The state of Alaska fared slightly better, with an unemployment rate of 11.8%. By December 2020, the state's unemployment had recovered to 6.5%, but unemployment claims were almost five times higher than they had been the previous year. Thousands of Alaskans needed assistance, and for many, this was their first time being in this kind of situation.



The Kroger gift cards were used for daily expenses, such as groceries, diapers, medication, supplies for kids and gasoline.

Many people and organizations looked for ways to make a difference, including a local, business-focused nonprofit, which embarked on a mission to assist members of its community.

Founded in Anchorage in 2009, The Business Boutique is a nonprofit whose mission is to support and amplify underrepresented businesses and other nonprofit organizations, from women- and minority-owned businesses to those located in neighborhoods with historically low income.

“With trainings, workshops and one-on-one projects, we assist 200 to 300 businesses a year,” said Jasmin Smith, The Business Boutique’s founder. “We help with grants, funding, basic financial planning, strategic planning and program management.”

Moved by the unprecedented hardships caused by Covid-19, the organization first established the Frontline Business Safety Initiative to help businesses that interact directly with the public, along with people who prepare or deliver food, by providing PPE — masks and gloves — along with hand wipes and hand sanitizer. However, leaders at The Business Boutique also wanted a way to help members of its community directly.

Gift card program provides direct assistance to people in need

Responding to a proposal from the municipality of Anchorage, which had received funding through the CARES Act, The Business Boutique was selected to operate the city’s Covid voucher (gift card) program.

“The primary purpose of the gift card program was to support families and individuals who were in need and had their livelihood negatively impacted by Covid-19,” said Smith. “We have individuals who had regular jobs and business owners who found themselves having a hard time. We had people who were on disability and seniors who needed help. So, the program was established to give that basic relief.”

The gift cards could be used for daily expenses, such as groceries, diapers, medication, supplies for kids and gasoline. They could not be used for things like tobacco, alcohol and electronics. Families with minor children under the age of 18 in their household could receive a \$200 gift card, while adults without minor children could receive a \$100 card.

“The two areas that were most requested were supplies for kids and gas for transportation,” said Smith. “Fred Meyer gift cards were a perfect choice because Fred Meyer stores have gas, groceries and all of the things included in eligible

expenses.”

Fred Meyer is a part of Kroger’s Family of Stores, which also includes more than 2,700 stores in 35 states.

Despite having only two weeks for people to apply for the gift cards, The Business Boutique received about 22,000 applications and was able to provide gift cards to about 10,000 people. The need was so great, a second and third round of funding was secured to provide help to all the families whose applications were approved.

For the first batch of Fred Meyer gift cards, The Business Boutique worked directly with local store managers to purchase and load the cards. For the second and third batches, the organization ordered the cards through the Kroger gift card website.

“We set up an account with Kroger and the ordering process was fast and simple,” said Smith. “We received the cards two days later all set up and ready to go. With our online order, we were also able to take advantage of discount incentives, which allowed us to get additional gift cards.”

The success of the gift card program has attracted the attention of neighboring areas. “We’ve gotten phone calls from people in other cities asking about our use of the Fred Meyer gift cards,” said Smith. “We’ve been able to give them encouragement and guidance so they can create their own programs.”

Gift card program paves the way for community outreach

In addition to The Business Boutique’s PPE and gift card programs, the organization set out on another community outreach initiative.

“Not everybody knows how to use a computer, access resources and get assistance,” said Smith. “We’ve been working on a community outreach campaign with bilingual radio and TV commercials, community translators and outreach people, focusing on all of the programs available across the city. Through our gift card program, we’ve been able to establish relationships and interact with so many people and let them know about the availability of these other programs.”

Kroger gift cards are a great way to support your community, and they make it easy to make a big impact. [Learn more.](#)

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