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*submitted by Glen Selle*

**Out of School Time Programs such as Boys & Girls Clubs Are Essential to Michigan's Recovery**

*by Dakota Crow, CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of the Muskegon Lakeshore*

COVID-19 has had a devastating, layered impact on Michigan's youth, their families, and communities. Boys & Girls Clubs have always played a critical role in the communities across the country, now serving students across the greater Muskegon area. That role took on a whole new meaning as this crisis unfolded and out of school time providers stepped up to the plate, ensuring youth were safe and supported. As a trusted community leader, Clubs provide critical services, supports, and above all, care for those who need it most. Given the essential services our Club professionals provide, decision-makers must understand that ongoing funding is critical for the continued operations of youth-serving organizations such as ours to meet the basic needs of our communities.

With the suspension of schools and workplaces, the country, and especially kids and teens, are facing challenges unlike anything previously encountered. At Boys and Girls Club of Muskegon Lakeshore, we had to get creative and innovative in the ways we addressed those challenges and how we could effectively and safely serve kids in this "new normal". We partnered with state and local officials to help meet the larger needs of communities by providing care for school-age children of health care professionals and other essential workers, extending hours for in person care and creating new space in the virtual world through "VOICE," Virtual-Online-Interactive-Club-Experience. In July of 2020 we doubled down by providing on-site learning to fill the education gap, remaining open since with no COVID-19 outbreaks to date. As the new school year of 2021 begins, we've expanded after-school programming so more parents can work a full day with the confidence their kids are being supported both at and after school while they're at work.

Friday, March 13th, 2020, was the last "normal" day of programming our team organization experienced. Our team recalls following the news together that day and believing we would be back in action within the next month. Since that day our organization has experienced a continual increase in demand for services, while simultaneously dealing with revenue loss and staffing reductions, due to a wide variety of reasons. Our work continues now just as it did during the worst days of the year 2020, except now others know what our team has known all along- our operations are critical to the state's social and economic recovery.

We're asking pleading that leaders in Lansing include Out-of-School Time providers, like Boys & Girls Clubs, as they decide on funding priorities for the upcoming fiscal year. Studies show that out-of-school time providers' return on investment is large, with a most recent study on Boys & Girls Clubs alone providing an ROI of over \$11 on the dollar. We are professional, flexible and have the pulse on each of our communities across the state. It is likely due to these reasons we have always been called on and will continue to be called on to do even more to accelerate Michigan's efforts to rebuild and recover from the economic and social impacts of this pandemic.

This round of funding for programs could be make or break for many out-of-school-time providers. This is the plea that will keep the doors of organizations like ours, built over decades by community leaders, and allow us to continue doing what we do best: providing our young people a safe place to learn and grow while giving parents and the community vital support and peace of mind.

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