

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

Alumni and donors provide emergency relief to those set adrift by economic hardship.

By Anne Barajas Harp

A University of Oklahoma graduate student and single mother supporting a 6-year-old child. An OU undergraduate who has been on her own since the age of 16 and is suddenly without income. A first-generation college student who worries that a lost job and student debt will “crush” her and potentially leave her homeless.

These are the stories from just three of more than 1,000 students turning to Sooners Helping Sooners for relief. The OU online giving platform is helping to address immediate, emergency needs such as food, rent and childcare for students from OU’s Norman, Oklahoma City and Tulsa campuses.

To date, OU administrators have distributed more than \$205,000 to students directly in cash grants, with an average student grant of \$674.

“Sooners Helping Sooners is allowing us to bridge financial gaps and emergencies for students,” says OU Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students David Surratt. “We have had requests that were as little as \$75 and as much as a couple thousand dollars. Every little bit helps.”

“I would like our alumni to know that these students have a huge need and most of them have lost jobs through no fault of their own, which means that they have lost their ability to pay their rent or utilities,” says Danielle Steely, who has been helping to coordinate the Sooner Helping Sooners grants as director of Student Affairs Administration.

“Our students are adapting well to online classes, but when they don’t know if they are going to have money to eat their next meal or where they are going to live, that adds a whole new level of stress to an already stressful situation.”

The majority of requests have come from Oklahoma students, Steely says. More than 65 applications were submitted by international students, some of whom find themselves stranded in Norman with no income.

“Sooners Helping Sooners may be a check in hand for lost wages for many students whose job with OU Housing and Food Services has ended. It also could be for students who normally receive support from a family member who has been laid off due to the virus,” she says.

On the OU-Tulsa and OU Health Sciences Center campuses, students are often frontline health-care students and workers in their 20s and 30s. They have expressed need for

financial assistance with childcare, housing and food. Funds donated to Sooners Helping Sooners also can be used to purchase critical personal protective equipment.

Steely explains that no deserving applicant is turned away empty-handed. “We are doing everything in our power to make sure we’re taking care of these students.

“The hardest part about going through these applications is seeing the great need and knowing that while we’re doing everything we can, it’s still not enough.”

Applicants fill out an online questionnaire and provide both back-up documentation and a budget for consideration by a committee led by Mark Morvant, OU vice provost for Instruction and Student Success. The committee—which includes staff from OU’s Student Financial Center, the OU Division of Student Affairs and the university’s MoneyCoach program—meets remotely for hours several times a week, reviewing hundreds of applications line by line.

If Sooners Helping Sooners cannot cover all of a student’s needs, they are steered toward additional resources, Morvant says.

“We are doing air traffic control,” he adds, explaining that Sooners Helping Sooners does not cover tuition expenses. “If a student has applied to Sooners Helping Sooners, there’s a good chance that they also have hidden needs. We look at their bursar account and see if they fit into one of OU’s financial aid scholarships or could benefit from our MoneyCoach program.

“We want students to know as soon as we can that they will be taken care of,” he says. “A lot of our students have been working their way through college, trying to keep college debt down, and now they’ve lost their jobs—and, in many cases, their parents have lost their jobs, as well. We are trying to make sure that we take care of our students so their education and careers do not get derailed.”

Students receiving Sooners Helping Sooners grants are learning firsthand what being a part of the OU family truly means.

“This trying time has brought so much grief and worry into my family’s life, and this grant has given me a glimpse of hope,” wrote one recipient. “You have shown me the true pride of being a Sooner, and I promise to pay it forward when I put my degree to work.”

Gifts can be made at thousandstrong.ou.edu.