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Support from Symetra offers gateway to opportunity for immigrants, low-income households



Symetra's support helped provide basic needs like food, rental assistance and childcare for students at campus resource centers like the pantry at Highline Community College, shown here.

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IN THIS ARTICLE

Banking & Financial Services

Industry

Professional Services

Industry

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A degree from a community or technical college offers a gateway for many women, low-income and immigrant individuals to reach in-demand job skills and competitive salaries.

But that window can close quickly when the challenges of full-time work, caring for children or family members and

access to food and other basic necessities come between a student and completing their degree.

The issue was top of mind for Bellevue-based Symetra as it shaped its new corporate giving strategy in 2020. The company partnered with United Way of King County to offer emergency grants for things like food delivery, child care and rental assistance to 40 Seattle-area students.

In doing so, Symetra discovered it could provide a missing element of advocacy for its nonprofit partners on policies, petitions and city council decisions that could help address systemic inequalities and advance economic opportunity for women, at-risk youth and communities of color.



Symetra's support helped provide basic needs like food, rental assistance and childcare for students at campus resource centers like the pantry at Highline Community College, shown here.
COURTESY SYMETRA

“We actually built that into our community program – advocacy,” said Trinity Parker, Symetra’s senior vice president of marketing, communications and public affairs. “All of our partners we have through our grant program, they know that when there’s an issue, we’re very likely to be a willing partner.”

The giving program launched in March 2020 and became a founding sponsor for United Way’s Bridge to Finish, which was also just getting underway.

“It’s just really hard to stay in school when you’re worried about basic stuff like getting your kid to day care because your car broke down,” Parker said. “It goes back to helping women and that barrier reduction. It was a good match for us.”

Symetra Empowers offers up to \$50,000 per year in multiyear grant funding. Meanwhile, early support from an advocate like Symetra can serve to amplify a nonprofit's impact and generate additional sponsorship from the business community.

“When we're first in – first to sign, first to be there – they can tell other businesses Symetra's going to sign, Symetra's going to be there, and that can help other businesses be there,” Parker said.

In addition to the services, Bridge to Finish aims to shape policy to help it expand beyond those 40 students, said Lauren McGowan, United Way of King County's senior director of ending homelessness and poverty.

“Philanthropy is one part of the solution, and what we're able to do is leverage community dollars from companies like Symetra to test and scale out those solutions,” McGowan said. “Investment from Symetra can spark others to come to the table.”

Though it had just spun up its giving program when the pandemic began, the company immediately looked for a way it could extend its support. A friend's food truck gave Parker the idea to provide meals for hospital workers, simultaneously helping struggling small businesses generate revenue.

That included 777 Café & Catering, located in the lobby of Symetra tower, which had previously relied on the company's 1,100 employees for much of its sales.

It quickly folded its diversity and inclusion values into the initiative, partnering with restaurants run by women and minorities to provide food for front-line health care workers and homeless individuals. In the year since, Symetra has worked with 43 restaurants – more than half of them women- or minority-owned – to deliver 21,000 meals to 58 hospitals and shelters across 13 states.

“It’s given them something to keep their morale going, a sense of pride to be able to keep their employees there and make meals,” Parker said. “We just felt so compelled to do something to help.”

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