

Ciera Rawson

## COVID-19: Wildfire or Prescribed Burn?

COVID-19 has been endlessly compared to a wildfire by [journalists](#) and [news anchors](#). Certainly, both are [devastating and relentless](#). For me, that language summons memories of growing up in the Midwest, where it was somewhat normal to see billowing clouds of smoke rising from a burning field. These intentional fires were started by the field's farmers and called "[prescribed burns](#)." The goal was to get rid of existing plants, restore the nutrients of the area, and reinvigorate the land, making it ready for a new growing season. Though COVID-19 has been incredibly harmful in uncountable ways, perhaps this fire might result in some good.

One area of progress coming out of COVID-19 is that it has burnt away all of the clutter and foliage to reveal the stark inequities in our country. These gaps were always present, but many in America were unable or unwilling to see it. Now, like a field devastated by fire, every hill and valley of our failures have been laid bare for all but the irreversibly blind to see. And even then, can they not sense the destruction?

The inequities are not the same as they were before, though, as COVID has deepened existing groves, hitting some harder than others. Individuals experiencing homelessness are [one of the hardest hit](#) within the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, DC, and their numbers are growing as people are more likely to become unemployed and exhaust their savings during the pandemic. [Soon moratoriums will be lifted](#), meaning landlords will be able to evict tenants freely again. That will [further increase](#) the number of people experiencing homelessness in the US and in DC. Even the state of being homeless has worsened during this pandemic because shelters and soup kitchens must function differently or not at all unless they are willing to risk becoming [COVID-19 super-spreaders](#). Similarly, the public services on which many people experiencing homelessness depend, such as [public restrooms and libraries](#), are no longer open to the public. One of the most common orders for the general public is to stay home and away from public areas with lots of people. How does one do this when they have no home and can only rest on publicly owned land?

This philanthropy project gave my senior capstone class the opportunity to focus on this often-forgotten population by seeking to support individuals experiencing homelessness in the Washington Metropolitan area (DMV). Together with the [Learning By Giving Foundation](#), we will support them by providing funding to nonprofit organizations working to alleviate homelessness and its contributing factors. While we recognize that our grant is small, we seek to partner with an organization(s) that has a big impact on this community, such as those who run shelters, temporary/transitional housing programs, day/resource centers, and/or who offer social services. Our class discussed the [trust-based-philanthropy](#) approach and decided that the best way to truly partner with such an organization would be to employ as many [trust-based policies](#) as possible. One example is we are offering unrestricted funding to whichever nonprofit we select. The understanding is that regardless of how that money is spent, it will be ultimately in service of DC's homeless population. For example, the funds could be used to further the reach of a program or they could be used to meet an administrative need in their offices. If they can function better on the administrative end, then their programs will also be improved by the better administrative processes.

We are honored to have this opportunity to assess our community, acknowledge the deep inequities that long existed, and contribute to solving this problem by financially supporting an organization doing this work. Just like the prescribed fires of my youth, COVID-19 was and is devastating. But perhaps what it leaves behind will give us the ability to see who is most in need and work towards a more equitable reality next growing season.

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