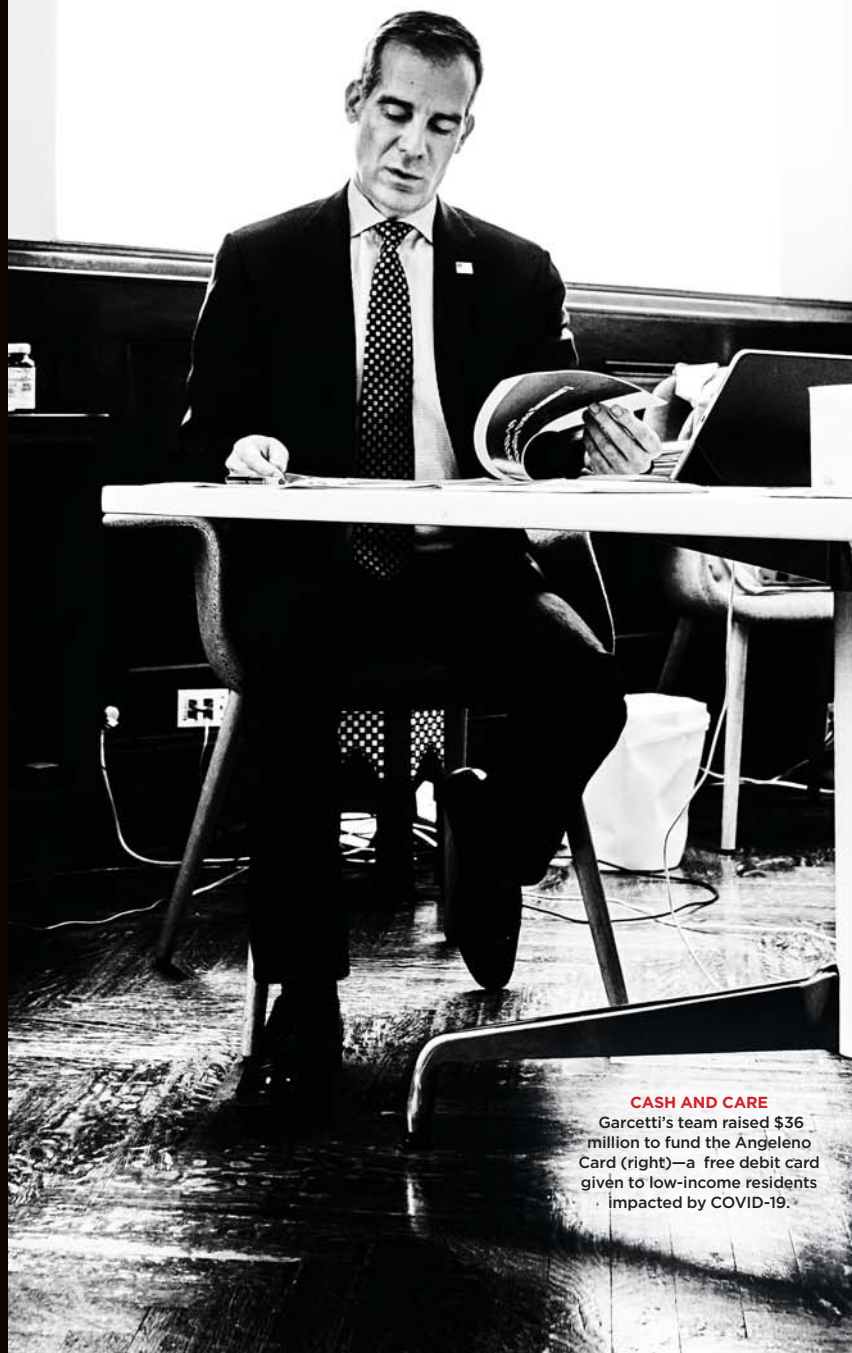


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AS COVID SURGED, A LIFELINE EMERGED

» HOW MAYOR GARCETTI REPURPOSED A LITTLE-KNOWN NONPROFIT TO GET COVID FUNDS TO L.A.'S NEEDIEST



CASH AND CARE
Garcetti's team raised \$36 million to fund the Angeleno Card (right)—a free debit card given to low-income residents impacted by COVID-19.



WHEN THE NOVEL coronavirus began rapidly spreading in Los Angeles in March, Cheyenne Chalk managed to stay healthy. Chalk, a UCLA freshman studying public affairs and labor relations, continued living in her dorm with two roommates and eating in the dining hall as part of the school's meal plan. In addition to her classes, she worked nearly full time as an assistant to a biomathematics professor at the David Geffen School of Medicine. The money she earned covered her cell phone bill, her textbooks, and other necessities.

But as SARS-CoV-2 extended its reach and public officials began to worry that local hospitals could be overwhelmed with the sick and dying, everything changed. UCLA shut down its campus, and Chalk's life—like that of millions of Angelenos—was flipped upside down. She packed her belongings and moved back in with her mother in Sun Valley. Her classes continued online, but with her job gone, she had no income. She and her mother tried to stretch their dollars. "There

was a point where we were trying to eat little things," she says. Seven months after the coronavirus was declared a global pandemic, the impact of the disease and the region's response can be told in three overarching stories. The first two are well known. The third, a tale of community resilience and eight-figure philanthropy that shatters a stereotype of Los Angeles, has been glossed over.

The first story concerns public health and how a virus detected late last year in Wuhan, China, upended Los Angeles. The 231 confirmed COVID-19 cases in L.A. County on March 19 became 1,216 a week later, and ballooned to 4,045 a week after that. On April 1, the county had recorded 65 deaths; by October 14, it had seen 285,016 cases and 6,812 deaths.

The second story is about economic devastation. On March 15, in an effort to stanch a highly communicable virus, Mayor Eric Garcetti ordered all bars, restaurants, and many other businesses in the city to stop serving customers on-site. Four days later, he went further: the "Safer at Home" emergency order mandated that people stay inside unless they were essential workers, exercising, or making grocery runs. That day, Governor Gavin Newsom issued a similar directive for the state.

While Angelenos in white-collar fields turned guest rooms into home offices and learned how to navigate Zoom, thousands of waiters, waitresses, and cooks signed up for state unemployment benefits, and hotels with empty guest rooms laid off housekeepers, valets, and front-desk staff. Nannies couldn't care for children in affluent neighborhoods through an internet connection. Street vendors who sold *paletas* saw few patrons at their carts, as almost no one left home.

The third story is largely a response to the second, and to an unemployment rate that quintupled from approximately 4 percent in April 2019 to 20 percent 12 months later. As Garcetti huddled with senior advisors to determine what could be done from

beyond City Hall to help vulnerable Angelenos, an innovative solution emerged: a philanthropic campaign built around the Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles, a nonprofit Garcetti helped start six years before, would partner with other organizations and city departments. Hovering above everything was a lack of trust that the Trump administration would provide a lifeline to all who needed it, including Los Angeles County's estimated 886,000 undocumented

The Mayor's Fund is an independent nonprofit, and despite its name, Garcetti has no legal authority over it. Yet the mayor is unquestionably its driver. This has caused skeptics to question whether big-budget donors to the fund are simply seeking to curry favor with the city's chief executive, particularly if they do business in City Hall or want their voice heard on contentious matters. Whereas individual donations to Garcetti's last mayoral campaign were capped at \$1,400, publicly available tax



TEAM SPIRIT
Mayor Garcetti, (left) and attorney Matt Johnson (right) coordinated with All People's Community Center executive director Sandra Bryant to distribute COVID relief through the center's facility near downtown L.A.

records show numerous contributions in recent years to the Mayor's Fund of \$100,000 or more, and some in excess of \$1 million.

In the space of eight weeks, the Mayor's Fund raised an unprecedented \$56 million, squeaking by the \$54.5 million that the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City pulled in through July 14. But the bigger accomplishment may have been how the money in Los Angeles went back out. The Mayor's Fund and its partners identified four challenges facing Los Angeles and came up with solutions that complemented existing systems or built new ones.



COURTESY OF MASTERCARD

COURTESY: OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

This enabled the fund to aid more than 100,000 city residents with services including delivering meals to homebound seniors and helping women fleeing domestic violence.

“Angelenos are better off because of the rapid action, creative strategies, and innovative leadership of the Mayor’s Fund for Los Angeles,” Garcetti told *Los Angeles*. “We already understood this organization’s importance before the pandemic, but its value has been



SMALL FAVORS Mayor’s Fund CEO Diedre Lind says individual donations—“one-dollar bills in envelopes”—were crucial.

reinforced many times over in the midst of this crisis—convening leaders and residents across the city to help our hardest-hit families navigate the rough waters of COVID-19 and the resulting economic devastation.”

The most notable component of the economic rescue is the Angeleno Card, a no-fee and no-strings-attached debit card for low-income city residents who lost wages due to the COVID crisis. It gave each recipient from \$700 to \$1,500 (depending on the number of people in the household), and while there was a stringent application process, no questions were asked about immigration status. Altogether, \$36.8 million was raised for the Angeleno Card. According to Diedre Lind, president and CEO of the Mayor’s Fund, over half of the money was spent on food.

GARCETTI ENLISTED longtime allies Rick Jacobs, with whom he started the economic stimulus nonprofit Accelerator for America, and entertainment attorney Matt Johnson, to do the heavy lifting raising money for the Mayor’s Fund. Johnson has deep ties in the entertainment, business, and philanthropic communities. “My initial goal was to raise in the \$10 million range,” Johnson says. “The mayor was like, ‘We need to think bigger.’”

There were hurdles. Johnson noted that early in the crisis some wealthy prospective donors mentioned their declining stock portfolios. Yet careful targeting opened doors. Entertainment industry magnates Jeffrey Katzenberg and Bob Iger were key early supporters, as were Casey Wasserman and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. Their involvement persuaded others to give. Lind says one early donation for the Angeleno Card came from the Calabasas-based Smidt Foundation, established by Harbor Freight Tools founder Eric

Smidt. Its \$1 million gift on April 2 greased the wheels for contributions from other philanthropic organizations.

Around this time, Garcetti was holding nightly televised coronavirus briefings, and he took to mentioning key donors on air. Those name-checked for six- or seven-figure contributions included Clippers owner Steve Ballmer and his wife, Connie, and Snapchat head Evan Spiegel. Philanthropists Eli and Edythe Broad were cited, as were Bruce Karsh, the head of the financial management firm Oaktree Capital, and his wife, Martha. On April 23, Garcetti revealed the single largest donation: \$5 million from the consulate general of Qatar. Days later Snapchat cofounder Bobby Murphy and his wife, Kelsey Bateman, gave another \$5 million. Entertainment and sports figures who participated included basketball star

Russell Westbrook and musicians Rihanna, Jay Z, Pink, the Jonas Brothers, and DJ Mustard.

Yet celebrities were a tiny minority of those giving. Lind said the donor pool was roughly evenly divided among three sectors: corporations and companies, institutional philanthropic organizations, and families and individuals. Ultimately, more than 10,000 Angelenos gave to the Mayor’s Fund. “We got folks who sent us four one-dollar bills in an envelope,” Lind marvels.

OF THE FUND’S programs, Project Safe Haven was launched in response to the spike in calls to the city’s domestic violence hotline after the stay-at-home order was issued; victims were often under the same roof as their abusers for extended periods, yet people could not move into shelters for fear of contracting the virus. The team responded by identifying a handful of hotels willing to house the survivors, and negotiated reduced room rates. The Mayor’s Fund covered the cost and paid for additional resources such as grocery cards.

A similar effort was made to help low-income seniors who, before the pandemic, received daily meals at a city senior center or park. With the virus proving especially dangerous to people over 65, this population became homebound almost overnight. The city has a Department of Aging that aids seniors, but it doesn’t deliver food. The Mayor’s Fund team stepped in, partnering with healthy-meals provider Everytable. During his evening addresses, Garcetti announced the free program and how people could sign up. Everytable soon was delivering ten meals a week to some 12,000 seniors.

The Mayor’s Fund COVID efforts were all intended to be temporary and address problems until they could be permanently resolved. That also came into play with hospitals, which, as ICU beds filled, needed every staff member to step up, even if the employee had a child whose school or daycare center had closed. Although the city does

not have a health department (that’s a county government function), the fund established a program in which grants were distributed to 15 hospitals, allowing them to set up childcare so people could work.

“More than 17,000 shifts were covered, prioritizing lower-wage, non-office, frontline medical and hospital workers, which could be anything from a nurse technician to the janitorial staff,” Lind says.

The Mayor’s Fund’s greatest accomplishment, as well as the steepest challenge, was the Angeleno Card. Although it sounds simple in concept—apply for card, get free money—the program required extensive strategizing and dealmaking. As there was no precedent for how to distribute cash to such a large pool of recipients, the fund’s team settled on a debit card, partnering with Mastercard’s City Possible program. The most efficient way to register for an Angeleno Card was online, but the team needed a phone option for people without internet access. Some 450,000 applications poured in during the three-day window in April; the Los Angeles Housing and Community Investment

Department (HCID) helped winnow applicants who lived outside the city or were otherwise ineligible. The tens of thousands of interviews were held in Family Source Centers—facilities in 16 low-income neighborhoods run by nonprofits under contract with the city. Tech giant Oracle was recruited to help schedule interviews and notify applicants. Abigail Marquez, an assistant general manager at HCID, says speed was of the essence.

“Even though there was a moratorium on evictions, people needed to put food on the table,” she says. “We did close to 60,000



SPECIAL DELIVERY The Mayor’s Fund partnered with Everytable feed to 12,000 seniors.

interviews. In eight weeks.”

Ultimately, 37,841 cards were distributed.

According to the Mayor’s Fund, more than 104,000 city residents received Angeleno Cards, and 685,000 senior meals were delivered. Lind says that \$50 million of the COVID response money has been allocated. For

those involved with the effort, there’s another benefit: Lind sees the \$56 million raised as a repudiation of long-held assertions about Los Angeles’s charitable network, particularly as it compares to places like New York City.

“L.A. as a region has been criticized for not being as philanthropic as other urban centers across the country,”

she says. “We always knew that was wrong. We knew that philanthropy was happening across the city in all different ways, shapes, and forms.”

The point is echoed by Johnson, who saw firsthand that when people are asked to help their city, they say

yes time and again.

“L.A. gets knocked a lot for our lack of civic engagement, and this was a moment where I felt like our city and our civic leaders and business leaders really stepped up and supported the broader community,” he says. “Everything I have read and seen and heard, no other city stepped up in the way that Los Angeles did, and did what we did in a very short period of time. Hopefully that puts to bed that conversation for a while.”

SQUESTERED in Sun Valley with her mother, Chalk was exhilarated when she learned she had qualified for one of the 37,841 Angeleno Cards. She spent two hours riding a bus to the appointment where a program screener vetted her application. She walked out with a \$700 card. The money was put to use immediately.

“The day it went through, I literally went directly to the grocery store and I think we spent like \$400 on groceries,” she says. The haul “lasted us a good two months, because we made sure to get dried foods and stuff than can last us for a while.” Speaking to the enduring uncertainty of the times, she adds: “Just in case, you know?” ■

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Attorney Matt Johnson, lead fundraiser for the Mayor’s Fund

COURTESY OF DEIDRE LIND

COURTESY OF MAYOR GARCETTI