



**FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY:
FRENCH CHARITY TACKLES SOCIAL
DIMENSION OF COVID CRISIS**

IN NORMAL TIMES, THE ABBÉ PIERRE FOUNDATION FOCUSES ON PROVIDING SAFE, LONG-TERM HOUSING FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE. IN THE EXTRAORDINARY TIMES OF COVID-19, IT TOOK ON A SIGNIFICANT NEW ROLE. FOOD PANTRIES HAD CLOSED UNDER THE NATIONAL SHUTDOWNS IN FRANCE, AND WITHIN WEEKS OF THESE CLOSURES, THE NUMBER OF FRENCH CITIZENS NEEDING FOOD ASSISTANCE HAD RISEN BY ALMOST 63%. THE ABBÉ PIERRE FOUNDATION RESPONDED SWIFTLY, AIDED BY ITS LOCAL PARTNERS AND SUPPORTED BY THE GENEROSITY OF NOT ONLY THE FRENCH PEOPLE, BUT ALSO BY THEIR FRIENDS BASED ABROAD.

Abbé Pierre, a Catholic priest born in 1912, is nothing short of a national hero in France - a symbol of the struggle against poverty. A resistance fighter during World War II, the French priest turned his skills toward helping the most vulnerable in the city of Paris after the war.

This quickly led him to create Emmaus, a nonprofit organization that draws its name from a biblical story about the restoration of hope. Emmaus supports homeless individuals in finding both housing and meaningful work. It is now an international movement



with partner branches serving people in over 30 countries, helping the homeless to not only survive, but also thrive as full-fledged members of society.

Abbé Pierre later served as a Member of the French Parliament, where he continued his advocacy for decent housing for all.

In 1988, the Abbé Pierre Foundation was established to pursue adequate solutions to the housing needs. "In remaining faithful to the life and work of Abbé Pierre, we continue to take action on behalf of the poorest among us," declared Laurent Desmard, chairman of the Abbé Pierre Foundation.

ROOFS, REPAIRS AND GUIDANCE

Aurore Soidet, in charge of partnerships at the Abbé Pierre Foundation, explains its work. "The particular focus of the Foundation is that people gain unconditional access to permanent, decent housing." A unique organization in

France, it functions independently of most government funds. Indeed, 96% of its revenue comes from private donations.

The Abbé Pierre Foundation is active throughout France, working in tandem with a network of more than 500 local partners. The Foundation provides them with financial and mentoring support, enabling them to develop and implement programs benefiting homeless and vulnerable individuals. These programs fulfill three priority areas - building and rehabilitating energy-efficient dwellings; refurbishing substandard housing; and running drop-in centers which provide showers, laundry facilities, a warm meal and personalized guidance. "All of that adds up to over 850 projects a year," explains Soidet.

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LAURENT DESMARD

Given its expertise and reach throughout France, the Foundation has an important fourth area of focus - advocacy and communication. Specifically, it provides crucial information about the country's housing issues to the French government and members of the public. Every year the Foundation produces a national evaluation of homelessness and housing shortages in France.

THE KITCHEN IS CLOSED

Known as a country with a strong safety net of programs and government supports, in addition to vibrant charitable institutions such as Emmaus and the Abbé Pierre Foundation, one might think that France would not face a hunger crisis in the modern era.

Yet within two months of the Covid shutdowns, many in France were facing a significant shortage of food. The closing of schools removed access to government-funded school meals.

To feed their children, families across the country suddenly needed help, and those seeking food from pantries rose from 5 million to 8 million people. They turned to what the French call “communal kitchens” - food pantries - but found out that many had closed.

RISING TO THE OCCASION

Faced with these rising numbers, Abbé Pierre Foundation and its local partners sprang into action. “By the end of March 2020, the Abbé Pierre Foundation had established an Emergency Fund to address the food crisis - an effort that would be run in parallel to our traditional housing-related activities,” explains Soidet.

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AURORE SOIDET

Because of the trust and esteem in which the French public holds the Abbé Pierre Foundation, two calls for emergency funds triggered an unprecedented response.

Hearing the need, supporters based abroad also contributed, including Americans and U.S. corporations, who donated via the newly established ‘Friends of Abbé Pierre Foundation’, run by the King Baudouin Foundation United States (KBFUS). All told, the Foundation raised 7 million Euros - roughly \$8.2 million.

Raising the funds launched the effort. Once the donations became available, the Abbé Pierre Foundation quickly moved to identify and reach families who were struggling to put food on the table. “These were people from all walks of life - people with low income who lost their job, small business owners who no longer had any activity, people who worked ‘under the table,’ including some who had previously moved out of homelessness,” says Soidet.

There was an unexpected population that especially needed the Abbé Pierre Foundation - young adults. Soidet explains, “In France there is a gap between the end of school at 18 and the age of 26, when public assistance becomes available. Young people 25 and under don’t qualify for social programs, and if they did not have family support, they were in trouble when their work shut down due to the Covid crisis.” These young people could now turn to the Emergency Fund to feed themselves.



FLEXIBILITY AND AUTONOMY

This unprecedented social crisis, the Abbé Pierre Foundation deftly added staff to ramp up and launched a system of vouchers for basic necessities for those in need.

Distributed by its local partners, these vouchers could be used in stores to purchase food, hygiene products, diapers and baby formula.

More than 36,000 households benefited from the service voucher aid. By February 2021, the Foundation had distributed the full 7 million Euros to feed vulnerable populations throughout the country, and nearly 390,000 people benefited from the Emergency Fund.

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“The values of flexibility and autonomy, which are built into the very structure of the Abbé Pierre Foundation, have proven critical,” says Soidet. “Our financial independence and the deep connection we have with our donor base allowed use to rise to the challenges of this crisis.”

NOT SUCH A SURPRISE

“This is a health crisis turned into a social crisis,” observes Soidet. “What came as a shock to the general public did not, unfortunately, take us by surprise. We are well aware of the vulnerabilities in French society, and we have known for years that many have been living just above the poverty line.”

Soidet goes on, “What we are witnessing is a situation that has long been present, but which the health crisis has accentuated - the Covid shutdowns made it to come into view. It is clear to us that those who are riding the edge of poverty can very easily fall into the abyss.”

STANDING BY OUR SIDE

With a groundswell of support in France and the U.S., the Foundation needed flexible tools to translate support into donations. “KBFUS gave us a very important, even crucial window into the United States, which allowed us to centralize our American fundraising efforts and provide a tax deduction to our patrons in the United States,” says Soidet. “KBFUS was quick to step up, and the funds were transferred seamlessly, which is essential in a time of crisis.”

<https://www.fondation-Abbé-pierre.fr/en>

The King Baudouin Foundation United States (KBFUS) is the leading resource for philanthropic giving to Europe and Africa - a trusted advisor for U.S. donors seeking to support their favorite causes and nonprofits overseas. To learn more about our donor-advised funds, legacy funds and KBFUS ART, please visit www.kbfus.org. Or contact us at (212) 713-7660 or info@kbfus.org.