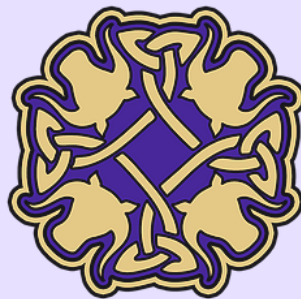


CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS:

PROVIDING COVID-19 MASKS TO THE
HOMELESS & VULNERABLE IN GREATER
PHILADELPHIA & NEW JERSEY



Four Oxen

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INTRODUCTION



My name is Percy Tse. I am a sophomore at Rutgers University and an intern at Four Oxen, a non-profit organization established to help the most vulnerable members of our society. While I have lived in both Hong Kong and South Jersey for a number of years, I have never forgotten about my birthplace - Philadelphia. I have always been aware of the homelessness crisis in Philadelphia, and in starting my internship at Four Oxen, I decided this was my opportunity to give back to my hometown and help this vulnerable population.

Since the beginning of September 2020, I have been working closely with the directors of Four Oxen on a service project to provide COVID-19 masks to the homeless population in both Philadelphia and New Jersey. My research has shown that a lot of homeless people do not have access to masks. This is particularly problematic since a lot of them live in shelters where it is nearly impossible to social distance. As many homeless people often suffer from other health conditions, they are at higher risk of contracting the virus. A mask can be their only protection against COVID-19. There was one quote from my research that particularly stood out to me:

“THERE’S NO SAFETY, NOTHING TO GUARANTEE YOU CAN BE SAFE OUT THERE. HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE ONE OF THE MOST VULNERABLE POPULATIONS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, YET THEY’RE LARGELY INVISIBLE VICTIMS OF THE CRISIS”

The homeless are already living in a crisis, and “COVID-19 is a crisis within a crisis” for them. We should protect them and make them feel safe. I saw this as a chance to help them and make a difference.

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RISING THREAT OF COVID

Since November 2019, at the onset of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in China, I began stocking up on masks and wearing them on campus. I knew there was going to be a shortage of masks and wanted to protect myself and my family. It was a lesson learned while living in Hong Kong in 2003 during the SARS outbreak, which taught me to be prepared for the worst. I was very fortunate to have prepared enough supplies before the virus had entered the United States, but many people did not. There was an acute mask shortage in March and April 2020 due to supply chain deficiencies and consumer panic. ([Before the pandemic ketchup squeeze: A year of COVID-19 product shortages and the items we struggled to find](#)). Many people were affected by these product shortages, especially the vulnerable within our community.

I was very thankful for the opportunity to be accepted into the Four Oxen internship program in September 2020, where I could bring more attention to this problem and perform a service project providing COVID-19 masks. During my research, I learned of many challenges the socially vulnerable face can be a lot more difficult than those faced by the majority of the population during a global health crisis. The vulnerable do not have access to resources to handle material hardships. Many in the homeless population do not have access to masks, which can be their only protection against the coronavirus as many live in shelters where it is nearly impossible to social distance. Another problem is that many homeless might be at a higher risk of contracting the virus if they suffer from other health conditions.

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LITERATURE REVIEW: HOMELESS

I began the project researching how COVID was affecting the homeless. My research showed that the homeless population is one of the most vulnerable groups in the pandemic. Many food providers and shelters were shut down in response to the pandemic, leaving the homeless with limited resources or access to masks and other PPE supplies. The homeless “have been, like, ignored” (“[COVID-19 Is 'a Crisis within a Crisis' for Homeless People](#)”). This feeling of neglect was exaggerated by the coronavirus pandemic as the homeless were already amongst the most vulnerable populations pre-pandemic. The pandemic made it more difficult for the homeless to get food, shelter, and other vital assistance like medications because many places were shut down or operating at a reduced capacity to comply with the social distancing rules. Homelessness has always been a problem in the US and the resources for the homeless are limited.



An article about COVID and the homeless that I found from my research

What makes the street homeless one of the most vulnerable groups in the pandemic is that the homeless “tend to fall under the higher risk category for severe COVID-19 disease... [and are] 10 times more likely to die than the general population. That means providing care to the homeless is even more vital amid a pandemic” (“[Homeless People Are Among the Most Vulnerable to the Coronavirus. Yale Psychiatry's Lo Is Making Sure They Still Receive Care Amid the Pandemic](#)”). Since many homeless people live in unsanitary conditions or tight spaces in shelters, it is difficult to adhere to social distancing rules. The resources for them are “so limited and when [they] reach out to other entities, there’s no masks available” (“['It's Hard to Find Masks': Protecting the Homeless Population from Covid-19 Proves Challenging](#)”). A mask has the potential to be the most important protection for the homeless population.

04 LITERATURE REVIEW: MASKS

Through my mask project, I wanted to offer as much as I could to help the situation that the homeless are facing. In researching various types of masks, I discovered that reusable masks might be the most appropriate type because of their practicality, effectiveness, and price. “Cloth face coverings are most likely to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus when they are widely used by people in public settings... cloth face coverings and masks...can be washed and reused” (“[Can Face Masks Protect against the Coronavirus?](#)”). The homeless can keep and reuse the cloth masks, and therefore, do not have to worry about not having a mask when they are in public. I did quite a lot of research on the types of cloth masks, and I thought that Filter Pocket Mask by Hanes® might be the option. It has a filter pocket where a filter can be placed in there and offers additional protection. As stated in the article “[Which Cloth Masks Are Best? The More Layers the Better, a New Study Suggests](#),” “A single-layer cloth face covering reduced the droplet spread, but a double-layer covering performed better.” Cloth masks with more layers can offer more protection. Since “not all masks are created equally, and some offer more protection than others,” it is best if “another layer in the form of a filter” is added to boost the effectiveness of cloth masks (“[How to Choose the Best Face Mask Filter, According to Experts](#)”). Adding a filter to a cloth mask can provide extra protection from allowing viral particles to enter the air through talking, coughing, and breathing. Experts also claim that household staples such as “coffee filters and paper towels can double in a pinch as face mask filters.” Given their needed use, it was likely that the homeless would not need a medical grade filter.



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PROCESS: PLANNING

After my initial research, I contacted various non-profit organizations to seek professional advice and potential collaborations. Talking to them helped me better understand their struggle and needs in the pandemic. It also helped me to establish some great connections within the community. The President of Four Oxen connected me with [Shielding Our Defenders](#), a student-led organization formed during the pandemic to provide N95 masks to healthcare workers. That conversation allowed me to learn about their experiences and what had gone into a very successful mask project. I also contacted and received some great advice from a member of [The Germination Project](#), who also led a mask project which provided 100,000 masks to the Philadelphia community. From the conversation, I discovered that the donor, Tianchi Med, was a non-profit PPE manufacturer based in China. I sought to obtain a potential mask donation from this supplier by emailing their president.

To better understand what the actual COVID situation is like for the homeless, I called and emailed many of our potential partners within the community. I needed to know whether or not they had enough masks for the homeless, and what types of masks they needed most. The answers I received from them were quite surprising. I had noticed that the masks many of our potential partners received were disposable surgical masks. Many organizations told me that they had already received enough cloth masks, and they needed surgical masks the most. One organization had specifically told me that they could only distribute the disposable masks and could not distribute cloth masks because their guests were not able to do laundry. I learned keeping reusable masks clean enough to be sanitary would be difficult for the homeless. It was a problem that I had never considered. Additionally, even if they had cloth masks, it would be difficult for them to obtain additional protective filters. This disrupted my original plan, but allowed me to focus my efforts towards providing a more effective and sustainable solution with the right types of masks.

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PROCESS: IMPLEMENTATION

After weeks of research, the project had finally come to life. It was called #FOmaskthehomelessPHL. I uploaded a video on Four Oxen’s YouTube channel and posted on Four Oxen’s Instagram account to explain the COVID situation within the homeless community, as well as the reason behind the project. By doing so, we were able to let people find out who we are and gain more awareness about the issue. After getting some attention, I launched a GoFundMe Charity campaign in November to fundraise an initial goal of \$5,000 for the project. I would admit that getting the word out and support was the hardest part. There was a lot of emailing, cold-calling, and promoting on social media.

Mask Project Proposal

| <h3>WHY THE HOMELESS ?</h3> | <h3>POTENTIAL MASK STYLES</h3>  |
|---|---|
| <p>From Percy's research, there was one quote that particularly stood out to her: “Homeless people are one of the most vulnerable populations in the COVID-19 pandemic, yet they're largely invisible victims of the crisis.” They are already living in a crisis, and “COVID-19 is a crisis within a crisis” for them. <small>[Associated Press, Covid-19 is 'a crisis within a crisis' for homeless people]</small></p> <p>Supporting Reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lot of homeless people don't have access to masks. • Many live in shelters where it is nearly impossible to social distance. • Many homeless people often suffer from other health conditions, and are at higher risk of contracting the virus. • A mask can be their only protection against the coronavirus.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surgical Masks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Disposable ✓ Hygienic ✓ Very protective • Cloth Masks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reusable ✓ Washable ✓ Sustainable ✓ Effective • Cloth Masks with Filter Pocket <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ All the benefits of cloth masks plus: ✓ Allows for additional protection with filters or extra layers  |

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PROCESS: IMPLEMENTATION

While I was scrolling through Instagram, I discovered a mask-making company based in Hong Kong called masklab™. It was founded in March 2020 in response to the urgent need for masks. I decided to give it a shot and contacted them about a potential mask donation to my project. They responded very quickly and were happy to donate 26,000 surgical masks! Thanks to their donation, I reset the fundraising goal from \$5,000 to \$1,000. The entire process was unexpectedly quick and smooth, from the initial contact at the beginning of December to receiving the masks in mid-December. We began shipping the masklab™ masks to various non-profit organizations in Philadelphia and New Jersey from around Christmas time to mid February.

List of Recipients:

- Project HOME
- Sunday Love Project
- Cooper Lanning - Camden
- Covenant House PA
- People’s Emergency Center
- Cape Regional Recovery Center
- AC Rescue Mission
- Rescue Mission of Trenton
- Prevention Point
- Acts Christian Transitional Services (ACTS)

Boxes of masklab™ masks



An example of a shipment of masks



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RALLY THE HERD

PROFILES OF SERVICE

Sunday Love Project's RTH segment

PROCESS: RALLY THE HERD

We received more attention from the public after launching the social media segment to “Rally the Herd.” Each “Rally the Herd” post highlighted the great work of each partner and showcased how they are protecting either vulnerable members of the society or the public in general during the pandemic. We were able to obtain some cross-promotion from our partners, which gave more publicity to my mask project.

PROCESS: NEWS COVERAGE

Additionally, we reached out to various news organizations in search of additional partnerships. News 12 New Jersey covered my story in their “Jersey Proud” segment to help spread awareness, thanking me for helping the homeless defend against the coronavirus. New Jersey 101.5 radio interviewed me and featured my project on their “What's So Great About the Garden State?” segment, which highlighted my contribution to the homeless community. I am grateful for their acknowledgement of my mask project, and this motivated me to continue the effort in helping the vulnerable members of the community.

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PROCESS: DELIVERY

100,000 Tianchi masks



After these engagements, we had successfully distributed over 26,000 masks to over fifteen different homeless shelters and clinics across Greater Philadelphia and New Jersey and I thought the project was coming to an end. I received a surprise email from the president of Tianchi Med, who promised to donate 100,000 3-ply masks in adult and children sizes to my project through Tianchi Med and their US company Watchtower Supplies. I was humbled by their generosity and willingness to help, which allowed the scope of this project to include other vulnerable populations.

As the initial donation from masklab™ allowed for a comprehensive coverage of numerous homeless shelters, it was decided that the Tianchi donation would have greatest utility in serving the vulnerable population in the Philadelphia Chinatown community. Much like how the homeless were in a crisis within a crisis, there are many invisible and vulnerable members within the Chinatown community. This is of particular importance to me, as I come from a Chinese immigrant family and I know the hardships in moving to a foreign country, such as the financial struggle or the language barrier. I understand this community's struggles, and wanted to provide much needed help to those families, especially in such a difficult time as a pandemic.

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PROCESS: DELIVERY

This was an opportunity to contribute to the Chinese community in Philadelphia. I hoped by giving back this would alleviate stress on the community incurred by the pandemic itself, as well as racism and xenophobia associated with Covid-19. I was very thankful for Four Oxen's support in my desire to expand the scope from the homeless population to the vulnerable in the Chinese community. The only hassle I had was looking for a van that was big enough to fit 100,000 masks!

Luckily, the director of my church had a 15-seater van, which he was able to pick them up with me in New York. On the day of the pick-up, we drove 2 hours up to New York. The pick-up process was quick. It only took about 20 minutes to load the masks into the van, thanks to the employee who was sent by WTS to help us out. After that, we drove another 2 hours back to Philadelphia to distribute the masks.



Masks dropped off at PCDC

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PROCESS: DELIVERY

We first dropped off a significant portion of the masks to Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC). They would distribute them through their weekly food program, afterschool programs, and a free tax filing service (VITA) for qualified low-income residents. Then, we delivered a couple cartons to OnLok House (senior housing in Chinatown) and another carton to St. John Hospice. They were thrilled with our mask donations. Lastly, we dropped off the rest of the masks at my church where they would be distributed through the Philadelphia Suns (a non-profit organization in Chinatown).

Our donation of masks to OnLok House



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PROCESS: DELIVERY

Delivering masks to St. John Hospice



Delivering masks to Philadelphia Suns



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CONCLUSION: OVERALL

#FOmaskthehomelessPHL was a success. A total of 126,060 masks were donated to various organizations and \$1,070 had been raised to support the project. I was honored to be recognized by Asian American Women's Coalition (AAWC) for my mask project at their annual meeting. This experience had been truly amazing and I learned so much from it. It is important to always have that "Next Draft" mentality because it allows me to be flexible and to find the best solution. It taught me not to be afraid to reach out and ask for support even though there is a high chance of being rejected. Communication is the key to success. I also learned some good communication techniques from emailing and calling different organizations. I met a lot of people and was able to establish some good relationships with our partners. By communicating with them, I learned more about how a non-profit organization works. I did not know what exactly cross-promotional engagement was, but I now know how useful it is in a business setting. I am grateful for this special opportunity to be able to give back to the community. The happiness and fulfillment I have after completing this project is irreplaceable.

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CONCLUSION: ADVICE

If I were to give some advice to someone looking to do a service project, I would recommend they determine the target group they want to serve before beginning their research. My initial target population was too broad and I just wanted to serve whoever was in need of masks. I was indecisive in choosing which specific population to target, which took up a lot of my time. One factor that contributed to this was creative overwhelm. Many good ideas kept flowing which made it difficult for me to focus or pick just one. Therefore, having too many ideas could delay the entire process. Besides being decisive, having a growth mindset is important in the process of designing a project from scratch. We called it a “Next Draft Mentality.” You are not going to have the best draft the first time because the final product requires lots of corrections and improvements. Accepting the critiques from directors and making adjustments are crucial in terms of perfecting the final product. These are going to make the process of implementing the actual project smoother and easier.

After you have done all the research and started implementing your project, making an appealing fundraising campaign is the next step. I would recommend writing a heartfelt campaign story, which explains why you are fundraising for your project. Do not be afraid to ask for donations. Make your donors feel engaged by posting updates on your fundraising page. Continual emailing and messaging is a must to find partners and supporters for your project. Good social media content plays an important role in promoting your project to potential supporters. Making a special segment on social media about your partners and their work might be a great cross-promotional strategy. My final advice is to just go for it and give your best! There is nothing that can stop you if you are passionate about helping your target population.

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