



Corinne O'Connell
Chief Executive Officer
Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY PHILADELPHIA

Executive Summary/Synopsis

Imagine being the CEO of a large nonprofit organization facing a global pandemic for the first time. This was Corinne O'Connell's reality in 2020. Covid-19 was something no could prepare for, and it completely blindsided Corinne, Chief Executive Officer of Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia. Corinne is a seasoned business leader who has often faced tough decisions. However, like many business leaders during the pandemic, she was faced with unprecedented challenges. While attempting to continue business as usual – building homes for those in need - Habitat also had to maintain service levels in an environment which included quarantines, government restrictions, rampant illness, and death. Retaining staff while confronting a drastic reduction in revenues was an excruciating task. After months of uncertainty in making payroll, Corinne needed to assess whether there would be a company-wide layoff, or if another path forward could keep her staff employed.

In the balance was fulfilling the organization's mission: *To transform lives and our city by building and repairing homes in partnership with families in need, and uniting all Philadelphians around the cause of affordable housing. Our vision is a city where all Philadelphians live in safe, affordable homes.*

This purpose-driven organization was struggling to stay afloat; if a nonprofit building organization could not build, then they would not accomplish their mission, and the very backbone of Habitat's financial structure of would collapse.

Background

Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia is an independently chartered affiliate of the largest global nonprofit worldwide, Habitat for Humanity International. They are located at the epicenter of Philadelphia's housing crisis for low-income city dwellers: the very people they are trying to help. Their mission to "transform lives and the City of Philadelphia by building and repairing homes in partnership with families in need" is real. The organization is based in North Philadelphia, one of the most impoverished and dangerous sections of the City. Habitat is committed to the City, focused on improving one house and one block at a time. Globally, Habitat's mission is "to put God's love into action."



An estimated 400 people per month contact Habitat to inquire about the application process for buying a new home. In 2023, they have sold 27 houses and completed over 125 repairs to date. Since 2010, they have sold 265 houses and repaired 850 houses within Philadelphia. Habitat currently employs more than 40 full-time employees and engages with thousands of volunteers over the course of a year. Additionally, Habitat operates a resale store, which sells used and donated goods to those in need at an affordable price point, further serving their clients.

For every one home built to completion, the crime rate will be reduced on that city block by 22%.

Corinne O'Connell grew up in the Philadelphia area. Raised in a Catholic family, she attended Gwynedd Mercy Academy, where her calling of service was nurtured. While completing her bachelor's degree at St. Joseph's University, she learned a very important lesson about service: it should be *with* others, not *for* others. Prior to joining Habitat, Corinne gained a master's degree in Nonprofit Leadership, which led to working at Seattle's YWCA. She also worked alongside activist Sister Mary Scullion at Project Home, which provides housing assistance for those dealing with homelessness. In 2009, Corinne became Director of Development at Habitat. In 2011, she served as the organization's Associate Executive Director until 2017, when she accepted the responsibility of CEO.

Case (Problem)

In March of 2020, COVID-19 took the United States by storm. Quarantine mandates spread across the nation. In Philadelphia, businesses were shutting down because of those mandates. As CEO, Corinne never saw anything like this before. . . . no one did. Corinne had to work quickly and navigate several complex challenges. At the start of the pandemic, all construction was shut down and the retail stores had to shutter per government regulations.

While Covid proved most jobs can be performed remotely, the pandemic also showed which lines of work can only exist in person. Building construction is one of those industries. Corinne's senior executive team was able to remain safe within the walls of their own homes. However, critical employees of the operation including builders, tradespeople, suppliers and retail store workers no longer had the ability to perform their duties, per city and state regulations. Navigating this fast-changing era was confusing and difficult. Requirements and restrictions recalibrated on a daily basis, at times even hourly. This made it hard to plan and execute day-to-day operations. Even as vaccines became available, there was still uncertainty of how quickly operations could ramp up, especially for a nonprofit organization in competition with corporate builders; the demand for construction resources skyrocketed as supply availability delayed. Global supply chains maxed out in devastating fashion.

With no playbook to follow and funding almost non-existent, Corinne had to reconcile the future of Habitat. She oversaw a staff of 55 employees and, in order to stay afloat through Covid, it would be imperative to layoff at least twenty-five percent of her team. As CEO, many people depended on her. It was not only the homebuyers whom depended on Corinne and Habitat, but her staff, volunteers, suppliers, truck drivers, builders and so many more needed Habitat to continue building. The ripple effect was wide. However, to keep production moving meant that she would be in violation of endless regulatory Covid practices. More importantly, she would in essence be asking people to put their health, and possibly lives, at risk.



Corinne feels that her home is safer, warmer, and drier when every home is safer, warmer, and drier. Nonetheless, with budgets depleting as home sales ceased, Corinne had to make some very hard decisions across her staff and operations. Specifically:

Should she lay off staff and wait for COVID to further subside, hoping to stretch the budget and lengthen the time the organization could survive? OR, disregard confusing city COVID regulations to continuing building on behalf of families in need (risking being shut down, but living into their mission)?

Conclusion

In the beginning, Corinne and her board members met constantly to figure out a game plan to keep employees healthy while running a business in the face of a global pandemic. Ultimately, she made the crucial decision that it was imperative to eliminate 14 positions, all of which were in the field. Some were truck drivers and some were working in the resale stores. Instead of having someone else make the calls, Corinne personally called each employee she chose to lay off. She assured them they could regain employment when Habitat was ready to hire again.

As Covid wore on, every decision she made involved taking a step back to analyze what information was factual, then talking it through with her Board. For onsite construction work, they had to create health checks and schedules to guarantee that the spread of Covid remain at a minimum for the sake of the workers' wellbeing, and to keep the projects moving. Today, Corinne feels she made the right decision in letting people go to ensure safety. Many of them returned to Habitat as rehires.

