



**Co-op Headquarters
La Crosse Store**

315 Fifth Avenue South
La Crosse, WI 54601
608.784.5798

Rochester Store

519 First Avenue SW
Rochester, MN 55902
507.289.9061

www.pfc.coop

**Working together to
build a sustainable
community while
treating all people with
kindness and fairness.**

September 8, 2023

Request for Financial Assistance

From: People's Food Co-op

To: Mayor Reynolds, Director of Planning Trane, Council President Kahlow

Due to the long-term impacts of the pandemic era, and subsequent changes to the environment surrounding our business, we are requesting financial assistance of \$29,657.00, related to store security in 2023.

As with businesses across the country, People's Food Co-op was hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and its following effects. Two major impacts hurt our business. First, the shift to hybrid work arrangements by downtown businesses ended much of our lunchtime customer base. Second, the growing perception of an unsafe neighborhood, perpetuated by a general rise in criminal activity and proximity of the Cameron Park encampment, has stopped people from shopping at the co-op.

A perception exists in La Crosse that shopping at the co-op is less safe than at other grocery stores, and even that employment at the co-op comes with the possible aggravation of dealing with criminal activity or unsafe situations.

Changes experienced at People's Food Co-op this year:

- Decrease in shoppers at the co-op by 65 people per day, compared to same period in 2022
- Fewer applicants for jobs at the co-op due to safety concerns for parking or walking
- Threats of physical harm to employees and customers
- Spike in retail theft
- Theft of bikes belonging to staff and customers
- Customers harassed inside the store by members of the public
- Panhandling in our parking lots
- Drug use in our bathrooms
- Individuals entering private storage space to hide and sleep
- Attempted robbery incident
- Individuals loitering in our café and bathrooms
- Dumpster diving leading to unsafe conditions for that person and co-op employees
- Vandalism
- General uncomfortable feelings of insecurity for many who work and shop with us

Expenses to mitigate these impacts fall to us. We've taken these measures to ensure employees and customers feel secure coming to work and shopping with us:

- Hired a security officer (\$11,657 for First Priority Investigations, May – August '23)
- Posted "No Loitering" signs with instructions for accessing help and safety
- Installed additional lighting in our parking lot (\$2,123)
- Converted outdoor seating to bike parking, to increase security and reduce loitering (\$1,168)
- Installed an additional exterior security camera (\$1,123)
- Added additional landscaping to better create a barrier from our south side alley (\$500)

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- Established relationships with police officers who quickly assist in many safety situations
- Renewed relationships with neighborhood associations and downtown organizations
- Trained staff for Narcan administration and Active Threat events
- Will continue using on-site security services until safety levels increase (\$18,000 Sept – Dec '23)

In April 2023 the encampment at Houska Park was closed. The Catholic Charities warming shelter closed for the season. The Salvation Army tightened restrictions for those who had access to the shelter. These factors led to an increase in people taking residence at Cameron Park. While changes in city ordinances have improved park conditions, the neighborhood impact remains high. After the encampment was removed in August, people are seeking shelter in any public or even private spaces at nearby locations.

We understand that the emergence and rise of the crisis of homelessness in La Crosse is due to complicated factors. Many can be traced to pandemic impact on food costs, rent increases, reduction of access to health services, and the recent end of benefits on which many people relied. Solutions to this issue will come through collaborative governmental efforts, which we strongly support.

Meanwhile, the cost of bearing liability for our employee and customer safety is affecting our financial viability. On behalf of the 6,000 People's Food Co-op owners who call this area home, we thank you for considering our request for financial assistance of \$29,657.00. It will make a difference to our business.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lizzy Haywood". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Lizzy Haywood

CEO

People's Food Co-op