

Local Heroes

# Laura Brookes' neighborhoods

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Laura Brooke building her network from home.  
Provided Photo

*Editor's note: This occasional column by Bronwyn Fryer highlights the special people who are helping others during the coronavirus crisis. To nominate someone whom you think should be profiled, send an email to [news@timesargus.com](mailto:news@timesargus.com)*

Every day, 30-year-old Laura Brooke spends her time scouring Montpelier's neighborhoods for volunteers with a CAN-do spirit.

CAN is short for Capital Area Neighborhoods, a communication and connection project first founded during the 2008-9 financial crisis. Back then, Montpelier Mayor Mary Hooper garnered help from Americorps volunteers to regularly check on people to see how they were faring as unemployment soared. As the economy improved, CAN went into hibernation, but today Laura Brooke is helping to revive it. And none too soon, for the frightening COVID-19 crisis has driven many people into anxious isolation.

Who can they turn to for help? The answer is: neighbors.

In March, Mayor Anne Watson began hearing from constituents who wanted to know about the city's plans for sharing resources and information as the crisis grew.

The Sustainable Montpelier Coalition, whose mission is focused on building a resilient city, offered to help.

"We thought CAN was a great idea to build relationships in Montpelier's neighborhoods, so that central Vermont could be as resilient as possible," Brooke says. "We'd already been researching bringing it back for a while, and talking with people about turning their lawns into gardens as a fun neighborhood bonding activity. But everything changed with the outbreak."

Brooke and her colleagues at SMC began asking people they knew in various areas around the city if they would care to act as coordinators. In partnership with Montpelier Mutual Aid, they have signed up more than 30 enthusiastic coordinators, some of whom have never done any kind of neighborhood organizing before. The coordinators work

with volunteers from the area, all of whom are checking on residents via telephone, email and social media.

The volunteers are taping fliers with outreach information to the tops of mailboxes, since not everyone has Internet access. The fliers state the name and contact information of the CAN volunteer, and let the recipient know that someone is available to help with everything from offering a listening ear to delivering medicine, even pointing to financial resources.

Brooke has found that some neighborhoods are trickier to coordinate than others. Those around College Street, Park West and in the Meadows were already fairly well networked because residents had lived there for many years. Other areas with many rental units and more transient households, such as Barre and Berlin Streets, have been harder to coordinate, so Brooke is spending more time supporting volunteers there.

She has been pleased with the reception for the revitalized CAN. “There’s a lot of darkness right now, but this is such a heartwarming project. One woman put together a ‘Front Porch Sing’ after seeing Montpelier Alive’s post, modeled on what people in Italy did, singing from their balconies,” she recalls. “Lots of people participated in singing songs from a safe social distance, and it raised everyone’s spirits. It reiterated the importance of neighbors establishing and growing relationships – hopefully, ones that will last for months and years to come.”

Consider signing up to volunteer to support the state’s response to COVID-19: <https://vermont.gov/volunteer>

*Bronwyn Fryer is a writer who lives in Montpelier. Disclosure: The author is married to Dan Jones, SMC’s executive director.*