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Tucson group helps families with ill children pay mortgage

By Stephanie Innes Arizona Daily Star Mar 14, 2016



The Koenig family in their Tucson back yard, from left to right: Mary, Sarah, 18, Jennifer, 24 and Mark. Sarah Koenig was diagnosed with a stage 4 cancerous tumor on her kidney at the age of 16. Her parents wanted to do everything they could to be by her side through dozens of hospitalizations over an 18 month period. Helping them through a difficult and expensive time was the Care Fund, which was started in Scottsdale and is now officially in Tucson. The fund helps local families with hospitalized children pay their rent or mortgage. Photo taken Monday, March 14, 2016.

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While **Pat Lamb's** infant son was hospitalized at Phoenix Children's Hospital, Lamb noticed the heartbreak of many parents who could not always stay with their ill child.

It was not for lack of desire. The families were desperate to be with their children.

But the expense is enormously high and almost always unexpected. Taking time off of work and losing income while trying to pay for insurance deductibles, copays and other related expenses often leaves families of hospitalized children with horrible choices.

That's where the Care Fund comes in. Co-founded by Lamb in 2013, the fund has to date helped 280 Arizona families with seriously ill or injured children by granting them mortgage or rent relief for an average of three months. The fund was launched in Tucson last week.

The Care Fund gives out average grants of \$2,200 with an aim of giving families a chance to make another plan, get back on their feet and keep a roof over their heads while dealing with a sick child.

It started out with donations from the real estate community, as Lamb is president of the Homeowners Financial Group in Scottsdale and his co-founder, **Bill Rogers**, is the company's CEO and founder.

The donation pool has grown to include a wide range of business partners and individual donors. Since its inception, \$1.6 million has been raised to help kids and their families.

The nonprofit hopes to now raise money from the real estate community and others in Pima County. Lamb grew up in Tucson and graduated from the University of Arizona.

"No one should have to choose between staying in their home and caring for their child," Mayor **Jonathan Rothschild** said during the Tucson launch.

Though the fund only just officially launched in Tucson, it has been quietly working in Pima County residents for the past 18 months. To date, the Care Fund has already helped 24 local families, among them the Koenigs of Tucson.

Sarah Koenig was diagnosed with a stage 4 metastatic Wilms' tumor, a rare form of kidney cancer, in March of 2014 at the age of 16. She was a junior at Sahuaro High School at the time.

By the time the cancer was identified, it had already metastasized to both her lungs. Her left kidney was removed due to a large tumor and she also needed additional chemotherapy and radiation.

The Care Fund paid the Koenig family's mortgage for three months, said her dad, **Mark Koenig**, who is a systems administrator at the UA. Her mother, **Mary Koenig**, is a teacher. Sarah has one sibling, her older sister **Jennifer Koenig**.

Sarah was hospitalized too many times to count.

Not only was she sick from the cancer, the chemotherapy and radiation treatments put additional stress on her heart and liver. She caught a virus that led her to being hospitalized during the last few weeks of her senior year.

Since she was too sick to leave the hospital for her high school graduation, a ceremony was held at Diamond Children's, which is part of Banner-University Medical Center Tucson, 1501 N. Campbell Ave.

Through it all, a family member was always by her side.

"Even with insurance, which we have, it can pile up to be hundreds of dollars a week," Mark said. "You are missing work, eating out, setting up another household at the hospital. The Care Fund allows you to keep your focus where it needs to be. What they do can't be measured by financial impact alone."

Sarah, now 18, is a freshman at the UA and hopes to become a pediatric oncology nurse one day. She is also working part-time as a restaurant hostess. She spoke at the Care Fund's Tucson launch at the Arizona Inn last week, along with her dad.

Among business leaders who attended and encouraged Pima County donations were the Tucson Association of Realtors' Realtor of the Year **Pam Ruggeroli** and **Lea Marquez-Peterson**, who is president and CEO of the Tucson Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

More than 75 percent of the Tucson families that the Care Fund has helped to date are Hispanic.

Typically, Care Fund referrals come from partnerships with caseworkers at hospitals.

The Care Fund has supported Pima County with \$64,081.92 in family grants and \$95,479 overall to Southern Arizona counties, Care Fund leaders say.

They hope to be able to meet local demand. For some families, being by their child's side in the hospital is the last time they spend together.

Lamb knows that firsthand — his son, **Apollo Lamb**, died at the hospital on June 23, 2009, in his parents' arms.

"We put our lives on hold and didn't leave the hospital for seven weeks," Lamb said. "The vast majority of people don't have that luxury and they have to make wrenching decisions."

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More information about the Care Fund

To donate to the Care Fund or apply for assistance:
<http://www.thecarefund.org/> or call 480-305-8607

The organization is putting together a Tucson Care Fund Advisory Board.