



The Breathe Easy Project

By Molly Rosenthal, Healthy Mendocino Coast Coordinator

One recent afternoon, Annie Liner, the Volunteer Executive Director of [Mendocino Coast Children's Fund \(MCCF\)](#), was scrolling through Facebook when she came across a short video tutorial on how to make an effective indoor air filtration system with just 3 inexpensive materials—a 20-inch box fan, a HEPA furnace filter rated at MERV-13, and a bungee cord. At the time, the county was blanketed in smoke from the recent fires and COVID-19 cases were on the rise.

A light went off. Here was an affordable and simple tool to help families mitigate the health complications associated with our longer and more intense fire seasons, and respiratory conditions such as COVID-19. She started to brainstorm how MCCF could get these kits into the hands of at-risk families, and the project known as the Breathe Easy Project was born.

Since 1992, Mendocino Coast Children's Fund has been an underground railroad, building an extensive network to promote family resilience and to support at-risk children from Westport to Gualala with basic needs—food, clothing, educational opportunities, and more. For them, it is always more important how they give than what they give. That's why confidentiality, dignity, and modesty are paramount values of MCCF. Liner, along with MCCF's network of volunteers, understand there is a stigma and immense shame associated with asking for help and always strive to empower the families they serve.

“We advocate for the needs of the child, not the needs of the agency [that makes the referral],” said Liner. “We know there’s a Venn Diagram where the needs of the child and the needs of the agency overlap.” Liner indicates that sometimes there are certain needs that the agency is unable to fill, and that’s where MCCF comes in.

They understand how tiring it is to be a teacher or a child protective services worker and support these professionals that are on the frontlines with children and families so they can say “yes” more often. For instance, if a teacher notices that a student is attending school without a coat, that educator may bring MCCF in to provide that child and his family with the winter gear they need.

“In other words, they envision the picture, we provide the crayons,” said Liner.

[More than 13% of Fort Bragg children suffer from asthma, the highest in the county.](#) Asthma is one of the most common long-term diseases in children that disproportionately affect low-income and minority children. Much of the coast housing is inadequate with mildew, dampness, and old windows that allow smoke to seep indoors. Additionally, many coast residents heat their homes with wood, which produces smoke in the atmosphere even after the threat of the fire season has ended. These conditions, along with the dropping temperatures, has the potential to increase the severity of COVID symptoms and the number of emergency room visits, especially for those with pre-existing respiratory conditions.

MCCF’s grassroots structure enables them to respond quickly to crises and emergencies. For 28 years, the volunteer-run organization has operated exclusively on individual donations, in-kind gifts, and the compassion of the Mendocino Coast community. This has enabled them to inject nearly \$400,000 into the community since the pandemic began through clothing, emergency supplies, grocery gift cards, and more, and allowed them to move quickly on the Breathe Easy Project.

Amidst fire season and a global pandemic, sourcing materials for the Breathe Easy Project was not, well, easy. Shopping first with local businesses, and then expanding to chain stores, Liner was eventually able to secure materials for 96 filtration systems. MCCF then partnered with the

coastal clinics and [Adventist Health Mendocino Coast](#) to distribute vouchers to families during their appointments and visits. Families redeem the vouchers at 3 local pharmacies on the coast and receive the materials and simple assembly instructions for the kits, which take a maximum of 30 seconds to install. Additionally, families can exchange their dirty air filters for a clean one, free of charge.

Along with the air filtration systems, the family can receive a sleeping bag as well, which Liner believes is an essential element to keeping children healthy throughout the pandemic and into the winter. When a child is warm, their immune system is boosted and supported, and they are more resilient to illness. For many low-income families, it is a lot cheaper to heat the child than the entire house. A separate voucher for sleeping bags are handed out through the clinics, schools and other MCCF partners and families can redeem them at the [Fort Bragg Food Bank](#) and other MCCF partner sites.*

“That’s just \$75—a \$25 sleeping bag and \$50 for the home air filtration system, “ said Liner “ That’s a whole lot cheaper for the family and the greater community than sending a child to the ER for a severe illness or breathing problems.”

Additionally, these filters could potentially support safe isolation for a child if a family member in the household receives a positive COVID-19 result, by helping clean the air in a section of the home where the healthy children are residing to prevent further spread of the illness within the family.

MCCF has committed the first 100 kits to the coastal clinics and Adventist Health Mendocino Coast. With a grant from the [Mendocino Coast Healthcare Foundation](#), they have been able to purchase materials for 100 more kits. MCCF is also working to make them available for at-risk seniors to keep them from dipping into acute illness during this precarious time.

Liner’s hope is that the Breathe Easy Project will inspire other agencies and organizations to enact a similar program in other regions of the county. As we inevitably witness spikes in COVID-19 cases over the winter, she believes this project can be an affordable and effective tool to help prevent severe complications related to COVID and smoke exposure, while helping to increase family resilience as well as community and economic resilience.

“If we can help reduce severe illness throughout this winter, families will not lose crucial income to stay home with sick kids, the school district will not lose that \$80 per child per day, and money is saved on ER and medical expenses,” said Liner. “[This program] could help prevent a negative ripple effect in the community.”

To learn more about Mendocino Coast Children’s Fund and all their activities, [visit their website](#) or read the current [Real Estate Magazine](#) editorial, [“The Helpers” by Esther Liner](#)

*Sleeping bag voucher distribution and pick-up sites are still evolving. Please contact mccf@mcn.org for more info on a list of partner organizations.