Community Responses to the Economic Effects of COVID-19 and Lessons Learned

Report by NCGrowth-SmartUp
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NCGrowth-SmartUp is an award-winning applied economic development university center with a goal of directly addressing inequality, poverty, underemployment and other factors that keep people and communities from reaching their greatest potential. NCGrowth’s team includes expert staff across the Carolinas, academic advisors from multiple universities and hundreds of local partners. Together we are transforming communities by (1) providing technical support to promising businesses so they can grow, hire more people, and create wealth; (2) helping towns/counties/tribes create robust local economies with equitable opportunities for residents; and (3) providing policymakers across the U.S. the tools to learn how to achieve success. Learn more at ncgrowth.unc.edu.

NCGrowth-SmartUp is part of CREATE, an economic development research center at the UNC Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise working to tackle the problem of severe and increasing wealth inequality by generating shared economic prosperity through a combination of research, data analytics, homegrown interventions and policy development. Learn more at createprosperity.unc.edu.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes various community responses to the economic effects of COVID-19, and analyzes some of the lessons learned in the process. The information targets local government officials, economic and community developers, business-owners, and other community-leaders. Community responses fit into eight main categories:

1. Community Technical Assistance
2. Emergency Loan/Grant Programs
3. Information Sharing
4. Surveying
5. Training/Certification
6. Leveraging Municipal Power
7. Mobile Internet
8. Partnerships

Research methods included searching individual community and economic development websites, searching local newspaper databases, attending COVID-19 resource webinars, and interviewing individuals involved in the various response efforts.

The analysis of case studies indicates that:

- Local governments can play an important matchmaking role between businesses and organizations to match local resources with local needs.
- Local governments can support businesses working to enforce social distancing guidelines while maintaining business foot traffic.
- Local governments can issue emergency or rotating loans and grants to fill funding gaps from national and state programs.
- Local governments can disseminate or support efforts to disseminate periodic surveys to determine the needs of local business owners and inform action plans.
- Short-term responses to problems should complement longer-term responses.

The case studies described in this report are not a comprehensive list of local community responses in the United States.
INTRODUCTION

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has bombarded governments at all levels with unforeseen challenges. Unlike natural disasters—like hurricanes, typhoons, and floods—that are commonplace and expected—COVID-19 is incomparable to any major disaster of the recent past. The last pandemic with the gravity of COVID-19 transpired over a century ago in 1918—notoriously remembered as the Great Influenza. Between February 2020 and April 2020, the number of people employed fell by more than 25 million.\(^1\) Real consumer spending dropped 7.3% in March 2020 because of reduced demand for goods and services as well as businesses’ limited operations and closings.\(^2\) As such, there is no simple “how-to” guide for how governments should respond to the economic impacts of COVID-19.

As of August 10 of this year, the United States leads the world in number of total confirmed cases of COVID-19 (5,044,864) and total coronavirus deaths (162,938).\(^3\) Health experts indicate that the virus will likely remain a threat to public health for the foreseeable future. The federal and subnational governments’ lack of a cohesive strategy to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 mixed with the country’s deeply rooted systemic racism concocts a deadly cocktail for minority communities. According to the United States Center for Disease Control, long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put many people from racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19.\(^4\) According to APM Research Lab’s preliminary data, the overall death rate from COVID-19 is 3.7 times greater for African-Americans than it is for White-Americans.\(^5\) Emerging national research shows that minority owned businesses, which were disproportionately vulnerable to financial shocks prior to the pandemic, have unsurprisingly experienced more drastic decreases in cash balances and revenues compared to white-owned businesses.\(^6\) Black workers are more likely than others to be in frontline or “essential” jobs, putting them and their families at increased risk to sustain a living.\(^7\)

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Communities and local governments in the United States, especially early on in the pandemic, had to respond to both the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 in real time, often with little to no guidance from the scientific community or federal and state officials. Successful policies, while varying from place to place, have some commonalities and themes. This report presents a number of case studies across a range of categories for local governments to learn from and to utilize during this pandemic.

**METHODOLOGY**

Research methods included searching individual community and economic development websites, searching local newspaper databases, attending COVID-19 resource webinars, and interviewing individuals involved in various community response efforts.

Databases used include “America’s News” from Newsbank, which is a repository of local news articles and google searches. Keywords to find articles with local initiatives included “coronavirus”, “covid-19”, and “initiative.” Interviews were conducted via email and phone to ask for clarification on local program details.

**CASE STUDIES**

**SURVEYING EARLY AND OFTEN DURING A NEW CRISIS**

**Weaverville Small-Town-Strong Initiative**

The town of Weaverville, North Carolina launched an initiative called Weaverville Small-Town Strong to advocate for Weaverville’s small businesses. The initiative starts with a survey for local small business owners to take; this survey collects information on business needs. Then, the survey provides information about business needs. Then, the town created a website where the business’ long-term customers will see ways to support the businesses. As a response to the survey, the town of Weaverville created a business directory.

*Lessons*

Small business surveys can illuminate unanticipated issues. The pandemic has disparate impacts across communities and businesses. Regular surveys can address unidentified needs and problems. Local governments can then tailor their action plans based on survey responses.

Survey data is the backbone of robust community responses. Survey input from community members tells local governments what needs are urgent, experienced by the majority of business owners, and need to be addressed immediately. Survey data can also reveal future problems.

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Quantitative survey data implies what needs are the most urgent. Qualitative survey data provides the space for survey respondents to elaborate on particular problems and experiences.

**Longmont COVID-19 Business Response Team (BRT) Surveys**

The city of Longmont, Colorado created a COVID-19 Business Response Team (BRT) to support local small businesses in the wake of coronavirus. The BRT conducted two surveys to small businesses to inform *Longmont’s Economic Resilience Strategy*. This strategy has a three-pronged approach:

- **Capital**: this prioritizes cash conservation and capital infusion needs of the business community.
- **Communication**: survey-takers underscored the need for communication, so the strategy focuses on coordinating information across multiple channels.
- **Education**: Since businesses need to adjust to the new normal, they need to be connected to resources to help them adjust to new realities like e-commerce and accessing federal resources.

**Lessons**

Rapidly changing conditions require multiple surveys. New problems occur in real time. Thus, local governments must survey businesses multiple times throughout the pandemic to identify novel problems and needs. Multiple surveys give “temperature checks”. Local governments can check on what is and isn’t working as well as check the efficacy of programs.

**SMART PARTNERSHIPS TO MEET MULTIPLE COMMUNITY NEEDS**

**Beaufort County Matchmaking**

In Beaufort County, due to COVID-19, small businesses are losing revenue streams and medical supplies have become high in demand but short in supply. To address these problems, some Beaufort County local manufacturers have started repurposing their operations to manufacture medical supplies and to keep their employees working. The Beaufort County Economic Development Corporation spearheaded a matchmaking initiative, guiding local businesses to pivot and provide essential medical supplies. Beaufort County Economic Development Director Martyn Johnson clarifies the decision:

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“Repurposing businesses to provide essential materials for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic not only creates the needed materials but also keeps businesses in business, their staff paid and the local economy moving through the initial impacts, plus the multiplier effects.”

Beaufort County has around 80 companies, employing 3,800 people. The matchmaking initiative ensures those people are still employed.

Lessons

Local businesses and manufacturers should be creative about how they can repurpose their businesses to meet covid-19 related demand. Businesses such as The Hackney switched over to making critical supplies for the front lines. Pre-COVID, it was a fine-dining restaurant and gin distillery, but the business pivoted to producing hand sanitizer, distributing to local EMS units, Zion Shelter and Kitchen, childcare facilities and Beaufort Area Transportation System.

Explore matchmaking platforms for other needs. Local governments should explore how they can implement matchmaking platforms so that local businesses who are repurposing can quickly connect with healthcare needs.

Open communication with small businesses creates easy access in the case of unexpected disasters. Small businesses value open communication with local governments. Local governments can nurture this communication by interviewing business owners, partnering with small business development centers, or holding roundtables with local business organizations. In case of disaster, small businesses will feel comfortable reaching out to their local governments with their needs.

Durham Feast

The Durham Public Schools (DPS) feeding program grinded to a halt due to stay at home orders, school closures, and employees testing positive for COVID-19. The free and reduced lunch program was the main source of food for many Durham children, but now these children no longer had access. To solve this problem, a new partnership formed where local restaurants and vendors, funded by federal money, prepared children’s breakfasts and lunches. Durham restaurants buy local ingredients and put their employees to work making healthy and delicious meals.

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meals for Durham children. This partnership supports local restaurants and farmers while simultaneously ensuring the health and wellbeing of local children.

Lessons

Local institutions should improvise the original intentions of funding to adjust for coronavirus. Originally, federal dollars were being used for a feeding program administered by Durham Public Schools. Since this feeding program had to stop, DPS got creative. Their costs are still reimbursed by federal school meals funding.

Mobilize local volunteers to meet immediate needs. Not all Durham families have access to reliable and safe transportation or the capacity to pick up meals at pick up sites. To meet this need, the partnership recruited volunteers to help load food onto buses and deliver contactless meals to families. Incorporating volunteers saves money while also meeting the partnership’s needs.

When creating partnerships, address the needs of as many groups as possible. First, brainstorm the needs of community groups. Then, develop creative partnerships that address the needs of multiple affected groups. In this case, school children, restaurant-owners, and farmers all benefit from the partnership.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Gaston College Free Consulting for Small Businesses

The Small Business Center at Gaston College is offering free consulting for small businesses facing challenges prompted by COVID-19. The center has funds available to provide consulting for businesses in Gaston and Lincoln counties in North Carolina facing challenges as a result of COVID-19. Nearly 3 million in special allocation funds were approved by the State Board of Community Colleges to support the Small Business Center Network. The Small Business Center is comprised of 60 small business centers. Each of the small business centers in North Carolina received approximately $50,000 to provide counseling to businesses.14

Lessons

Utilize special allocation funds to re-distribute money to support services for local businesses. In this case, the State Board of Community Colleges approved the allocation of funds to go to the Small Business Center Network.

Duke Volunteer Corps

May 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic is in full swing, and no one is immune especially educational institutions. Dr. Jeremy Petranka, a professor at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business, observed an unfortunate but common occurrence: students and recent graduates of the business school were either losing their job offers or hadn’t secured one yet due to the volatile job market.

Meanwhile, non-profits needed to quickly pivot in order to continue to provide services and fulfill their missions. Seeing an opportunity, Pentranka created Fuqua Volunteer Corps (FVC) as a way to connect the two groups. The Fuqua Volunteer Corps works to match Fuqua students and graduates to 501(c) firms based in the United States. Duke Volunteer Corps is flexible, meaning students should be committed to finishing a project for a client, but the client is aware that a student might get an offer from a company (internship or job) and has the ability to transition out of the role.15

Currently, there are 79 Fuqua Volunteer Corps projects.16 One project (name withheld to maintain anonymity) is for a culinary institute. The culinary institute offers a comprehensive culinary curriculum to prepare students from all skill levels to start careers in the culinary arts. The project has an expected duration of 8 weeks. The volunteer is tasked with doing the following:

- Marketing: the volunteer manages social media and crafts recruitment plans.
- Acquire funding: the volunteer creates plans for fundraising, grant writing and sponsorships.17

Aggressive Marketing Strategy to Reach as many Nonprofits as possible

Fuqua Volunteer Corps marketed towards potential student volunteers by:

- Engaging the Fuqua Career Services who informed students of the option.
- Posting on FuquaConnect, a resources page for Fuqua students.

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Fuqua Volunteer Corps marketed towards potential 501(c) firms through:
- Creating media outreach which consisted of press releases, news publications, and social media.\(^{18}\)
- Sending notices via on-campus and off-campus list serves
  - North Carolina Center for Nonprofits, an organization that serves NC nonprofits, sent the opportunity to all of their nonprofits.
  - Duke Center for Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship
  - Duke Alumni Network
- Reaching out individually
  - Duke Fuqua students reached out to their personal networks via e-mail and LinkedIn to see if non-profit would be interested.

**Lessons**

Local governments can use educational institutions as sources of volunteers. Local governments should assess gaps in their services and see if there are ways to partner with educational institutions to recruit students to fulfill those services on a volunteer-basis.

Matchmaking platforms can help pair in-need groups to groups with offerings. In this case, business school students lost internships as a result of COVID-19 and needed opportunities to practice their skills. 501(c) firms were burdened by unexpected problems and extra work from COVID. Fuqua Volunteer Corps matches the two groups and fulfills both of their needs.

Maximize networks to market platforms. Fuqua and Duke have a strong alumni network who provided them potential non-profit firms. Fuqua students also have robust professional networks to tap into. Thus, plenty of non-profit partners became readily accessible. Local governments should be helping to market matchmaking platforms.

**New Jersey Emergency Assistance Eligibility Wizard**

The Emergency Assistance Eligibility Wizard, created by New Jersey’s Office of Innovation, makes it easy for New Jersey businesses to understand their eligibility for financial support programs.\(^{19}\)

The programs being tested for eligibility include state emergency support programs, federal programs, loans from CDFI, and financing from a private bank. After answering a list of yes or no questions, a New Jersey business is left with a list of suggestions of financial support programs to apply to.

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Examples of yes/no questions asked by the Emergency Assistance Eligibility Wizard

Lessons

Simplify the process of applying to financial support programs. Each financial support program has different eligibility requirements. This can leave small businesses confused about what they qualify for, or incorrectly assume they don’t qualify for a particular financial support program. The Emergency Assistance Eligibility Wizard simplifies the process of understanding eligibility. By asking a list of yes or no questions, small businesses don’t have to undergo the menial task of checking their qualifications. The Wizard also includes financial support programs at all levels of government and streamlines the tedious process of checking eligibility.

Governments should use demographic data on small businesses to tailor individual outreach to small businesses that qualify for specific governments. Financial support program applications place the onus on small businesses to understand what they qualify for and then take the step of applying. The assumption here is that small businesses have the time and capacity to research these programs. However, local and state and governments should be pro-active in reaching out

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to individual small businesses, using pre-collected demographic data to tell them they qualify for specific programs.

**University of Hawai‘i at Hilo Free Marketing Assistance to Small Businesses**

At the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, a marketing instructor is using her course, called Marketing 394, to give free assistance to local businesses. Small businesses can submit a Google form requesting help. The instructor and students then tackle the problem through 1-hour sessions. During the session, a small business will receive help on moving their business online, finding out more about their customers, analyzing market effectiveness, and providing website feedback.21

**Lessons**

*Update classroom curriculum to focus on real world assistance to small businesses and community members.* Local governments can reach out to professors at local universities and request that they pivot the curriculum to work on real-world problems faced by small businesses and community members. Students also benefit from applying knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world applications.

**EMERGENCY LOAN AND GRANT PROGRAMS TO FILL GAPS IN FEDERAL AND STATE PROGRAMS**

Small businesses are facing the risk of closure from the economic fallout of the pandemic. These small businesses employ 58.9 million people in the United States, create jobs, and stimulate the economy.22 If these businesses shut down, employees lose their jobs and security, and the economy suffers. There are federal relief programs available but not all small businesses qualify, have knowledge, or apply before the deadline. In the meantime, local governments should develop emergency loans and grants for temporary relief to small businesses.23 Local governments also need to collect demographic data on emergency loan and grant recipients, so as the process continues, the most vulnerable communities are reached and targeted for funds. Publicly subsidized grants and loan forgiveness can be combined with low-interest loans. While

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low-interest loans should be the ideal method of financing, publicly subsidized grants and partial loan forgiveness can relieve the cost of recovery for struggling small businesses.

The case studies below feature different types of emergency loans and/or grants:

- Bridge Loan: keeps the business operating while it waits for a federal loan
- Grant Matching: matches the original value of the grant
- Self-Administered: local government entity creates a system for loan administration, including application process, eligibility, loan review, and loan award
- Third-Party Loan: local government funds are allocated via loans through a third party (e.g. CDFI small business lender local bank)

Raleigh Small Business COVID-19 Relief Fund and All in for Raleigh Matching Fundraiser

The city of Raleigh created a $1 million grant called “The Raleigh Small Business COVID-19 Relief Fund” as an immediate response for small businesses to recover from COVID-19. The city of Raleigh partnered with Carolina Small Business Development Fund to provide grants of up to $10,000. A fundraising initiative called “All In For Raleigh” was then created as a response. The initiative’s goal is to match the original grant amount through corporate and private donations. This will then be combined with the original grant amount to go to local businesses.


All in for Raleigh fundraiser

**Lessons**

Matching fundraisers takes advantage of a community's financial resources. Fundraisers prompt potential individual and corporate donors to use their financial resources for community benefit.

**Belmont Small Business Emergency Loan Program**

The City of Belmont is offering a total of $400,000 in small business emergency loans to locally owned, non-franchise businesses located within the Belmont corporate limits as part of the City's “Keep the Lights on in Belmont” program. “Keep the Lights on in Belmont” is a relief effort by Downton Belmont Development Association to support local small businesses. Loans to eligible small businesses will be awarded in amounts up to $10,000 to help cover operating expenses until state or federal assistance is available or until the economic crisis passes. The City of Belmont performed the loan administration themselves, instead of going through a third party. They created a system to review applicants and reward funds.

**Lessons**

By offering small business emergency loans, local governments give small businesses the funds to operate now while they wait on federal loans. Even if a small business applies for federal emergency funds, there is still a waiting period for those funds to appear. In the meantime, local governments can create small business emergency loans or grants to act as bridge loans for small businesses.

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Carrboro Small Business & Non-Profit Emergency Fund

The town of Carrboro is offering a small business & non-profit emergency fund for Carrboro based businesses and non-profits that serve Carrboro with short-term payroll and other recurring expenses. The goal of the fund is to help maintain and sustain operations for existing businesses. The fund is intended to assist small local businesses and non-profits that are in current good standing with creditors, but do not have enough capital to maintain operations. According to Jon Hartman-Brown, the economic development director, the fund is meant to cover businesses who were not recipients of federal funding. If a business applies to and receives both federal funding and the emergency fund, the business would have to return the difference to the Town of Carrboro. For example, if a business applies and receives $10,000 from the Paycheck Protection Program and $15,000 from the Town of Carrboro, the business would return $10,000 to the town of Carrboro.

The town allocated $400,000 to two rounds of funding. Whatever was left over from the first round was distributed in the second round. The application process is straightforward; if a business meets the criteria, they are eligible for the funding. The Town of Carrboro collected optional demographic data of applicants in the application.

Lessons

In the application process, demographic data needs to be mandatory not voluntary so local governments can identify if funds are reaching the most vulnerable. By basing their outreach on demographic data, local governments can reach out to small businesses who need the money the most. This can include minority small business owners. The local government mitigates economic losses by reaching out to small businesses that did not already receive funding from federal and state sources.

Morehead City Emergency Small Business Loan Program

Morehead City launched a new loan program to help local small businesses. The program grants emergency short-term loans of a maximum $5000 to small businesses located within the city. The loan will help pay up to two months’ rent or mortgage/interest payments for recipients. The goal is to protect businesses from eviction or foreclosure. Businesses that have 25 or fewer employees are eligible.

“This program is intended to provide support to Morehead City small businesses as they navigate the challenges created by this unprecedented event,” said Jerry Jones, Morehead City Mayor.

“Many of our beloved local businesses are struggling to pay the bills through our State of Emergency and Stay at Home order, and we hope this loan can help carry them through this difficult time.”

Participating business owners have up to three years to repay the loan. This includes no payments required for the first 12 months of the loan.31

Lessons

Eligibility guidelines should take into account resources available. One of the funding guidelines, for example, says small businesses should have 25 workers or less. Loans also go up to $5,000. These guidelines and funding limits take into account the resources and demographics of the community. In this way, local governments avoid promising funds that aren’t available.

Local governments need to create funding opportunities for small businesses that fall just above the cutoff guidelines. In the Morehead City emergency small business loan program, small business that have 25 workers or less are eligible. What happens to small businesses that have 26 workers but all the other requirements for the loan? Local governments need to anticipate for the possibility that businesses that serve to benefit might be excluded because of eligibility guidelines.

Orange County Emergency Small Business Funding Program

Orange County launched the Orange County Emergency Small Business Funding Program to assist Orange County-based small businesses that are experiencing financial difficulties, such as mandated shutdowns, employee layoffs, and operating losses.

Businesses who have already received COVID-19 related financial assistance from either the state, federal or local governments are not eligible to apply. This can include the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL), Small Business Administration (SBA) Loan, Carrboro Small Business and Non-Profit Emergency Loan/Grant Fund. Personal loans or personal stimulus funds received are not included.32

Lessons


Some businesses might not qualify for state, federal, or local government help. External funding programs can ensure that these businesses still have the opportunity to acquire money for operating expenses. Not all small businesses qualify for state, federal, or local funds. Thus, other funding programs can fill in funding gaps to businesses who might be left behind otherwise.

**BAND-NC**

COVID-19 is exposing the disparity in internet access across North Carolina. Students and adults who do not have access to the internet, possess a computer, digital acumen are being left behind. This is the “digital divide.”

In response, the Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State (IEI) partnered with the Broadband Infrastructure Office at the NC Department of Information Technology, backed with principal support from the John M. Belk Endowment. They are addressing the digital divide across NC through a new program called “Building a New Digital Economy” (BAND-NC). BAND-NC is providing rapid-response community innovation mini-grants to communities across the state. Projects that serve low-income households, Black, Latino, immigrant, and Tribal communities will be prioritized.

**Lessons**

Communities understand their problems first-hand and often have the solutions. Grants give them the ability to pursue these solutions. Communities experience issues on digital-inclusion firsthand and consequently know how to best address these problems. Access to capital, like grants, can motivate community members to create their own solutions to local digital inclusion needs.

**QUICK AND IMPORTANT INFORMATION SHARING**

**We are Mitchell**

#WeAreMitchell is a campaign to bring the community of Mitchell County, North Carolina together to support small businesses. The website lists ways community members can commit to helping local small businesses. This includes purchasing a gift card, shopping online, and tipping when ordering takeout. Under the link to purchase a gift card, the different categories of businesses are listed: “food”, “experiences”, “lodging”, “retail/shopping”, and “services”. That way, potential purchasers can easily choose what kind of gift card to purchase. Under the link to shop online, the user is led to a directory of businesses. The main site also has recent updates from local organizations and contact info for potential volunteers to get involved. There are also

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tabs on the main page to access a variety of information. The tab “Spread the Word” contains graphics and images for community members to use on their social media to spread the word.34

Lessons

Eliminate barriers for individuals to help local businesses. Direct clear tasks to community members on how they can help small businesses and share relevant information. In Mitchell County, three main actions individuals can take to help local businesses is printed clearly on the main website. Pre-made marketing graphics are easy for individuals to download and promote the #wearemitchell campaign.

Online Citizen Workshops

In Belgium, citizen workshops that were formerly in-person are now being hosted in a new location: online. Online citizen workshops, a feature housed on the platform CitizenLab, facilitate live interactions, develop in-depth discussion and build consensus.

The online workshops format is inspired by traditional town hall meetings:

1. The project administrator greets participants and presents the topic(s) at hand. At this point administrators can also share information and resources to be used in later stages

2. Participants break out into "rooms" where they discuss the topic amongst themselves. Using video chats and traditional participation features, they come up with suggestions, debate solutions amongst themselves, vote for the ideas and then summarize their input into the "room conclusions."

3. Participants come back to the main session where input from all groups is discussed and merged into overall group solutions.35


Lessons

Solutions providing democratic engagement need to replicate in-person interactions. Without the ability to interact with their governments in-person, new communication must replicate these interactions as closely as possible. Platforms like CitizenLab mimic small group breakouts and voting, so that citizens can remain democratically engaged.

Local governments need to train citizens on how to use these new platforms. Not all community members have the technological know-how to navigate online platforms. Local governments need to create webinars, how-to guides, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for people with a wide range of technological familiarity.

Burlington, NC Coronavirus Website

Burlington, NC, like many cities, created a section on their local government website with updates about COVID-19. At the top of the City’s page is information on permits and applications for businesses for outdoor dining. Immediately below that are the latest announcements from the North Carolina State and Burlington local governments. To the right of that includes links which directs residents to the County Health Department, FAQs, and resources for businesses. The site

also includes media releases, followed by cancellations, closures, and modified schedules for services offered by the local government.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Lessons}

\textbf{Information websites should use layout and design to prioritize the most relevant information.} With plenty of information, websites must use the power of layout and graphic design to communicate the most relevant information to community members. For example, this website features the CARES Act Financial Assistance at the top to ensure residents see vital information on funding. The website also has FAQs so that residents do not have to contact the local government with questions.

\textbf{Lowcountry Local First Coronavirus Resource and Action Center for Local Businesses}

Lowcountry Local First creates an economy based in local ownership. They deliver resources, programming, networking, and mentorship to local businesses.\textsuperscript{38} On their website is a page titled “COVID-19 Resource & Action Center for Local Businesses”. At the top of the page is graphic that directs the user to a google form for a complimentary business consultation if a business needs help with business processes impacted by COVID-19. Consultations are facilitated by “Local Expertise Exchange Advisors” who help with: human resource issues, financial planning, access to capital, and other processes.\textsuperscript{39} Below the graphic is a clickable table of contents of FAQs for small businesses.

\textit{Lessons}

Website layout makes it easier to find specific resources or answers. A clickable table of contents can make information and resources easily identifiable to small business owners. Information sharing should prioritize the layout and design of a website as much as the actual quality of the resources.

\textbf{Existing community organizations with robust networks are well poised to broadcast important information in a timely manner.} Developing networks early on enables easy communication with community members when relaying urgent information. This organization has a business directory to keep track of local businesses.


\textsuperscript{39} Lowcountry Local First. “Local Expertise Exchange by Lowcountry Local First.” Lowcountry Local First. Accessed July 31, 2020. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScN6_stEOM52FRHu-9m1dgaKfuJS31U_dij4A-MDIDojirT0g/viewform.
Categorize resources or information. Categories make it easier for individuals to find pertinent information. Examples of the most relevant categories can include: “state and federal updates,” “loans and grants – public and private,” “webinars,” “re-opening guide,” and “employee resources.”

Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce: Coronavirus Resource Guide

Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce created a coronavirus resource website with a clickable table of categories. These categories are: “back to business resources”, “information on COVID-19”, “supporting local business & community”, “business resources”, “unemployment & job information”, “funding resource for business”, “resources for individuals and families”, and “webinar recordings.” Not all the resources are listed. Once a category is clicked, the resources for that category are revealed on the page. This makes it easier to navigate the categories and resources, and removes material less relevant to users. The resources are followed by a section for links to news updates.40

![Screenshot of Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce resource guide interactive table of contents](image)

Downtown Raleigh Takeout Site

The downtown Raleigh website created a site for individuals to access information on downtown small businesses. The site has a list of businesses with accompanying icons below the business name. The icons represent: “dine-in available”, “outdoor dining available”, “takeout available”, “curbside available”, “delivery available”, and “gift cards available”. Businesses have information on their capacity for dine-in if that is an option as well as contact information.

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Lessons

Graphic design communicates essential information about small businesses. Downtown Raleigh created different graphics for different features. This allows individuals to easily identify what information they need to know when looking for a restaurant.

Local governments can communicate business operating statuses to local residents and consumers. Local government can regularly update social media and government websites with relevant information. Local governments can work with local businesses to communicate updates to customers.

Bull City Responds

This volunteer-created website features a list of ideas and resources for Durham residents to access resources and help their fellow community members. The categories include “Helpful General Information”, “How You can Help”, “Assistance Programs and Resources”, “Public Health Information”, “Resources for Families and Parents”, “Wall of Awesome Humans!” and “Contact Me”. Each action and idea under the categories are accompanied by a picture and a link to relevant information.  

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Lessons

Tell people how they can help. This website creates a list of action items Durham residents can take to help their neighbors. Whether helping low-income elderly adults or buying food from local farms, there are plenty of potential actions for people with a wide range of capacities and availabilities to assist.

Crowdsourcing information takes advantage of local knowledge. The contact me section has an option for individuals to contact the website creator with relevant information for the website. The website creator then has the option to filter through submissions and add helpful information to the website.

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION TO CREATE TRUST

Count on ME NC

Like many states, North Carolina on May 22 lifted restrictions on dining services, which allowed restaurants to resume serving customers in their dining areas. To educate restaurants, Governor Roy Cooper, North Carolina healthcare leaders, and the North Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association came together to create Count on Me NC. The free training program empowers businesses with courses to serve customers as safely as possible. Once businesses complete the training, they then gain access to a logo to display their commitment to social distancing and health guidelines. The logo signals to customers that a restaurant prioritizes safety. The training includes evidence-based practices on social distancing, employee health and sanitation.

Lessons

Create trust between local businesses and local consumers. Consumer behavior has changed drastically because of the pandemic. There is a shift to a homebody economy, meaning more than 70% of consumers do not feel comfortable resuming their “normal” out-of-home activities yet. Consumers are staying away from crowded spaces, one of these being restaurants. In response, local governments need to help build trust between consumers and businesses. One

way they can do this is by educating restaurants on evidence-backed ways to keep employees and customers safe.

Local governments can create policies to standardize safety procedures. Without uniform guidance from the federal government, local governments can play a part to enforce standardized safety procedures within their jurisdiction. That way, consumers are safe going to any business, not just specific businesses with training. As consumers return to more normal spending habits and begin to frequent shops, those with certifications may see an uptick of business compared to those without.

LEVERAGING MUNICIPAL POWER

Maryland: Seats on the Street

Across Maryland, several communities implemented an innovative way to support local businesses by shutting down parts of roads. The initiative, called “Seats on the Street”, allows restaurants to set up tables on these roads to allow for outdoor dining that adheres to social distancing. Developed in partnership with the Towson Chamber of Commerce, Seats on the Streets operated from 11 am to 9:30 pm Saturday and 10 am to 10 pm Sunday through June 2020.

Colorado: on street-dining

In Pueblo, Colorado bars and restaurants started to be able to provide outdoor seating to customers. The city is granting businesses provisional permits to seat people on the streets. For example: the Senate Bar & Grill doesn’t have a patio, so it applied for a permit to seat customers on the street. It was granted an additional 40 outdoor seats. Additional seats helped sales rebound to pre-coronavirus times for the business. The permit lasts until the end of 2020 and can be revoked, so businesses are looking to petition the city to grant a permanent option for outdoor seating. Other cities in Colorado are allowing restaurants to expand onto sidewalks and into alleyways, while others are creating new pedestrian malls. All seating tends to be located in highly-concentrated, downtown areas.

latest/#:%3A:text=Seats%20on%20the%20street%20is,up%20tables%20in%20the%20street.
Hendersonville: Outdoor Dining

In Hendersonville, North Carolina, the city council adopted a resolution to expand outdoor dining spaces on sidewalks and in parking lots. As a trial run, Main Street will be closed to vehicles one weekend. Closing Main Street is also not a new idea in Hendersonville, as it is closed for special events throughout the year like the North Carolina Apple Festival.50 Hendersonville also launched "Love Hendo - Shop Local" on Main Street. It is similar to the open streets program the city held on several summer weekends. It allows for outdoor dining and displays. The area is open to pedestrians and bicycles only.51

Combined Lessons from Maryland, Colorado, and North Carolina

Municipalities should take innovative actions for restaurants to operate safely. For example: by changing parking and permitting for businesses to operate in public spaces. Municipalities can also collaborate with different parts of the government to coordinate actions.

Outdoor dining respects social distancing while helping local businesses. Outdoor dining prioritizes safety while stimulating the economy.

City councils should establish permits to accommodate for the new need for outdoor seating. Cities have a unique role in granting permits to small businesses. These permits may not be currently available because of this new need. Thus, city councils need to work to quickly approve the necessary permits.

Think creatively about ways to encourage foot traffic while keeping community safe. In each of these examples, local governments utilize outdoor spaces to encourage community engagement with small businesses while respecting social distancing guidelines.

MOBILE INTERNET

Caldwell County: Rolling Hotspots

With the stream of school closures across the country, children are falling behind in their academics because of poor quality or lack of access to internet. In Caldwell County, North Carolina, many parts of the county are rural and face poor reception. Other families in the county cannot afford the extra cost of internet. To solve this problem, a partnership formed among the Caldwell County school system, the Educational Foundation of Caldwell County, and Google, to take internet to schoolchildren. High-powered Wi-Fi was set-up within school buses. Anyone within 300-400 feet of these school buses could access the internet. It is open to anyone in the community, not just schoolchildren. 52 The Google map showing the Wi-Fi bus locations is located on the Caldwell County schools front page. 53

Lessons

Where legislatively possible, local governments should work towards creating community broadband services and infrastructure for community members to access high-speed internet from their homes. 54 Since the infrastructure is not available, rolling hotspots are a band-aid solution to a bigger problem: lack of home broadband internet access at usable speeds.

Where legislatively possible, local governments should work toward creating local-owned internet networks, not reliant on corporate owned monopoly-telecoms. Everyone should have access to high-speed internet at low prices. With a monopoly on internet, corporations who are internet-providers consistently do not provide the option of high-speed internet at affordable prices.


Local governments should work with schools to ensure that all students and community members have broadband access. While local governments work on providing community broadband services, they need to supply community members with access now. The internet has become a necessity, like water and electricity, and it should be treated as such. For students, it is absolutely necessary to become educated. Thus, local governments need to identify areas in the community that do not have access to broadband internet and place the hotspots there.

**Robeson Community College Mobile Internet**

Robeson Community College in North Carolina established a “learning lot” within their campus for students who do not have internet access at home or do not have a conducive learning environment at home. The lot is monitored by campus security and social distancing measures need to be followed to utilize the service. Robeson Community College students are prioritized in the case the parking lot is full.55

*Lessons*

Local government can create partnerships with internet providers or allocate funding to emergency internet services. Educational institutions are spending extra money to supply the necessary services to their students. Local governments can provide grants or find other ways to support these institutions to encourage and ensure that they have adequate funding.

**Analysis**

Local governments play a key role during this pandemic. Lack of state and national leadership give local governments disproportionate responsibility. Local government responses are not uniform, and local governments can learn from successful implementation by other local governments. There are recurring themes among different local communities. There are several recurring themes from these case studies:

- **Local governments can occupy a matchmaking role to match local resources with local needs.** Across multiple case studies and themes (for example: Durham Feast, Burlington Coronavirus website, Wake Forest Pro-Bono Initiative, Beaufort County matchmaking), governments assess the resources available and match with community needs. Local governments are ideally positioned to do this because of their reach and communications within the community. They also have full information on all businesses and institutions within their jurisdiction. The impacts of matchmaking bring groups together that might otherwise be unable to partner with each other.

- **Local governments can work with businesses to enforce social distancing guidelines while maintaining business foot traffic.** Municipalities have powers to give permits; they need to re-evaluate how they can distribute them for coronavirus-related needs. City councils should meet and discuss regularly to see what permits can be created if none are applicable. More so than

state and federal governments, municipalities can be flexible and fast-acting because they have a smaller jurisdiction. They also intimately know what their businesses need. Municipalities know what the coronavirus risk is for their communities and can adjust their responses accordingly to keep people safe.

- **Loans/Grants can fill in funding gaps.** Local governments have the power to reallocate funds. They have a more nuanced understanding of the businesses that can and cannot access federal resources. Loans and grants can serve as a bridge, reaching businesses that can’t access federal funds. Loans and grants can address inequitable distribution of funds among historically marginalized groups. Short-term loans and grants should be combined with long-term assistance programs. To complement the effects of short-term loan, longer-term programs to help small businesses navigate the ongoing financial shocks of coronavirus should be implemented.

- **Surveys can clarify needs and inform plans of action.** Surveys are easy to administer and can provide the information to create tailored action plans for an area. Multiple rounds of surveys are helpful since new conditions can often create new, unanticipated problems for the community. Surveys can help governments pivot when current actions are not effective.

- **Short-term responses to problems should complement longer-term responses.** Coronavirus exposes underlying problems in infrastructure. This infrastructure either needs to be built or changed entirely. Longer-term responses need to understand the new realities of coronavirus. Short-term responses should be informed by strategizing for the future.

**Conclusion**

The economic impacts of COVID-19 are far-reaching and wide-ranging. For U.S. and local economies, the total effect of the pandemic is still unknown. From a survey by the United States Conference of Mayors, local leaders are reporting an immediate economic hit from losing revenue sources they depend on to fund essential services. Public services also will be reduced by the strain of COVID-19. With this in mind, local governments play an even more crucial role than normal in supporting local economies and businesses; the uncoordinated federal response to the spread of the virus will prolong its negative economic trajectory. This is a massive responsibility, but local governments can employ their networks, study responses in other communities, and tailor these responses to their own contexts. While the statistics talk about the positive economic effects of re-opening formerly closed economies, community responses ought to prioritize the wellbeing of community members. Employment status (essential worker vs. non-essential worker), previous health conditions, and population density are all examples of factors to take into account when “re-opening” economies. Prematurely re-opening economies has disparate effects on different groups.

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In addition to evidence-based action, local governments must be open to experimentation. Not all responses have data and evidence to back them up; thus, informed risk-taking may lead to discovering solutions to unprecedented problems. The coronavirus is a unique challenge, and local governments can use their networks to create task forces with backgrounds in innovation and experimentation. These assembled groups can tackle difficult problems, using trial and error. To assist the work of peer governments, officials should always collect pertinent data to share outcomes and see what responses are effective. Currently, coronavirus does not have a set “finished date”; this requires an openness to new problems that may arise and the need for interdisciplinary partnerships amongst groups that might otherwise not engage. Despite the economic challenges, local governments must prioritize the safety of their people. Specifically, community responses ought to understand the heightened risks of marginalized communities during this pandemic. Disproportionate impact among essential workers, Black and brown workers, the poor and undocumented needs to have aligned community responses that take on these historical disparities.
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Appendices
The appendix is where you include important information that didn’t fit in the main part of the report. The appendix often contains helpful background information into the problem or company/community. It can also contain the list of people you interviewed, maps, or a list of relevant resources for your client as they continue to work towards solving the problem they are having.