Community Needs Survey in Response to COVID-19 Summary Report

By Casey Porter, Community and Economic Development Program Manager
& Charlie French, Community and Economic Development Program Leader

This report summarizes the results of an online survey distributed by UNH Extension in partnership with the NH Community Development Finance Authority to determine community, business and organization needs in response to the pandemic. The survey was distributed through UNH Extension Community and Economic Development newsletter, social media and the NH Municipal Association's newsletter. The survey was open from March 19, 2020 to April 1, 2020 and was completed by 47 participants in New Hampshire. While there are many needs and concerns identified through the survey, it is evident that many communities, organizations and businesses are innovating in order to adapt.

Key Findings

Businesses are experiencing financial stress and need information and resources to keep operations going.

Municipalities are working to maintain municipal services, reach vulnerable populations and understand the financial impact on communities.

There is a need for worker relief including accessing and applying for unemployment and stimulus funds.

There are many health and safety needs including increased access to testing, cleaning supplies, PPE, and best practices for being safe in different contexts.

Remote working & learning is a key issue and people need broadband internet, best practices for working remote and technology training.

During challenging times, communities are stepping up. People are volunteering (making masks, delivering food, caring for elders), purchasing gift cards for local businesses and connecting virtually.

There are a number of training needs: accessing resources for businesses, grant writing, business retention, remote working, helping vulnerable populations, and returning to normal.

Survey Participants

The survey was completed by 47 individuals across the state of New Hampshire.

#	Type
12	Municipal employee
11	Business owner/manager
10	Community volunteer (e.g. local board/committee member)
5	Non-profit organization staff
4	Engaged citizen
3	Other
2	Business/economic development professional

Immediate and Long-Term Needs and Concerns

Survey respondents were asked to identify immediate as well as long term needs and concerns related to keeping their community, business or organization running during the pandemic. These have been combined as many survey respondents listed the same response in the immediate and long-term need category. The following is a summary of comments by theme:

Municipal Governance
- Ability to provide critical services, as well as all municipal services
- Financial impacts on communities and who is on the hook to pay
- Coordination among departments, organizations, towns
- Health of public safety workers (need for best practices, lack of cleaning equipment, and shortage of PPE)
- Technology for meeting and working remotely
- Reaching vulnerable populations

Business and Industry
- Financial stress: cash flow, access to capital, additional expenses
- Challenge of navigating ever-changing landscape of resources/policies
- Protecting workers (e.g. when HIPPA doesn't allow for ID of Covid cases, even to public safety workers)
- Adapting to new modes of business (e.g. technology platforms for on-line sales)
- Learning from other businesses
- Stress on workers (inability to work due to sickness or family obligations, reduced hours, layoffs, furloughs, etc.)
- Resources to bridge business operations
- Worker relief (for laid-off/furloughed workers)

Health and Safety
- Best practices for being safe in different contexts (business, home, while providing critical services, outdoors, etc.).
- Risk of exposure for food service workers, grocery workers, health workers, delivery services, etc.)
- Mental health
- Need increased testing and PPE

Infrastructure
- Broadband internet (further disadvantages poorly connected people and places)
- Equipment and infrastructure for first-line response
- Communication—how best to share information across agencies/orgs (e.g. 211)

Information & Trainings

Survey respondents were asked to identify training and resource needs. The following is a summary of comments organized by theme:

- *Municipalities:* managing access to town hall, business retention, need communication with state and federal government.
- *Businesses:* disaster loan options simplified for owners, information on the Paycheck Protection Program, online commerce how-to, other ways to market product, online webinars to share stimulus information for businesses of all sizes.
- *Non-Profits:* resources specific to not-for-profits, professional development as an organization on how much money to keep in reserve as a nonprofit for emergencies.
- *Grants & resources:* grant writing, how to access emergency funds and resources.
- *Unemployment:* unemployment options for workers, qualifications for unemployment, and qualifications for self-employed unemployment.
- *Remote work skills:* time management, HR, virtual office work, remote work best practices, use of communication apps, technology.
- *Health & safety:* how to manage anxiety, how to protect ourselves, best way to keep the public informed and calm.
- *Community revitalization:* working on sustaining employment and basic community needs.
- *Information:* there is so much conflicting and misinformation published, even by supposedly good sources.
- *Returning to normal:* how to safely and slowly return to normal operations when the virus wanes, guidance on types of festivals and events allowed.
- *Helping vulnerable populations:* how to assist isolated individuals, interested in helping vulnerable groups.

Creativity & Innovation

Survey respondents were asked to share ways in which their community or business is innovating and adapting during this crisis. The following is a summary of comments:

Businesses are offering sidewalk service/curbside pickup and engaging with patrons on social media

Connecting virtually and adopting virtual collaboration tools

Sharing positive news and information

Helpers in community: buying food for the elderly and compromised, sewing masks, donating rain ponchos for PPE

Purchasing gift cards for local businesses

Online community arts initiatives

Local farms supporting and recommending other local farms

Next Steps

Thank you for completing our survey. We have heard from you and are using this survey to inform our response to the pandemic. We have developed a weekly newsletter that promotes blogs about local communities and businesses, reliable resources, and weekly virtual trainings. Our weekly virtual trainings address best practices for virtual meetings, how to leverage grants and best practices for virtual meetings. We also plan to share resources on business retention and strengthening main street. If you have other ideas for future programming, please contact us.

For more information:

Charlie French

charlie.french@unh.edu

Community & Economic Development Program Leader

UNH Cooperative Extension