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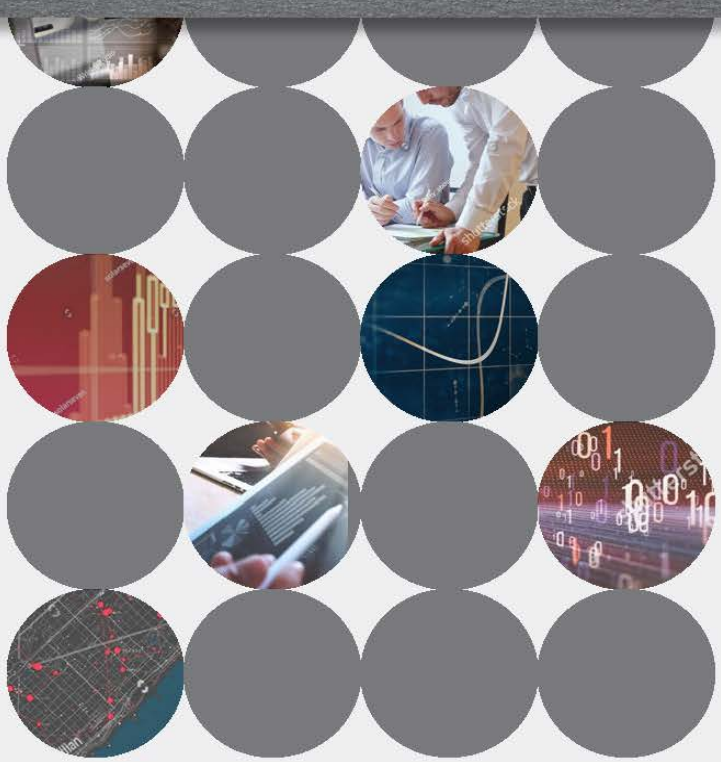

Institute Insights: The Impact of COVID-19 on Social Services

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July 2020

Introduction

This research was underwritten by **the Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce, Sordoni Family Foundation, and UGI Utilities** and with support from **the Luzerne County COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund of The Luzerne Foundation, the Scranton Area Community Foundation COVID 19 Fund and the Wells Fargo Foundation.**

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in greater need among many populations who rely on social service agencies in various aspects of their life (e.g., health and mental health, food, housing, support, rehabilitation, job training, education, etc.). It has also significantly impacted the ability of those agencies to effectively deliver their services to the communities that need their help.

The Institute has conducted a survey of staff at numerous social service agencies throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania in order to identify the ways in which their organizations have been impacted by the pandemic. The questions focused on the impact on service delivery, processes and procedures, staffing and volunteers, and fundraising.

The survey also sought to gain a better understanding of how the region's social service agencies have responded to the crisis, and what actions and best practices can be implemented to best serve the needs of their client populations (in addition to allowing the agencies to continue operating).

Agency types and service areas

The survey first asked each respondent to briefly explain the type of work their agency does. Respondents work in a broad range of social service agencies. Many are focused on health care or mental health care in different forms; for example, some offer community-based outpatient mental health care, others provide treatment for people struggling with addiction, and others offer services to help clients meet medical or hygienic needs. Several respondents work for agencies that serve vulnerable populations, such as disadvantaged children, homeless individuals, people with intellectual disabilities, and victims of domestic abuse. Many represent agencies that address issues related to poverty, like housing, food insecurity, and career development. The survey also received responses from a number of people who work at education-focused agencies.

Respondents were then asked which counties their agencies provide services in. The most commonly served counties are Lackawanna and Luzerne, with more than half of respondents saying their agencies serve those counties. A slightly larger share of agencies serve northern Luzerne County (which includes Wilkes-Barre) than serve the southern part of the county (which includes Hazleton). Monroe County was the third most frequently listed county, followed by Pike and Wayne Counties.

Impact on community needs

Next, the survey asked how the pandemic has affected the short-term and long-term needs of the populations served by the respondents' agencies. The responses indicate that the short-term needs of communities have increased substantially in certain areas, including health care, mental health, food assistance, housing, job preparation, and child care (as more workplaces reopen).

Respondents frequently expressed concern about the economic strain that the pandemic has imposed on the families they serve. Many households have lost income after being laid off – temporarily or permanently – or after having their work hours reduced by their employers. As a result, these households are likely to face increased difficulty in affording necessary costs such as food and housing. Several responses mentioned that the demand for food assistance has increased due to the rise in unemployment. Concern about food insecurity was particularly common among respondents whose agencies serve families with children. Similarly, many respondents explained that the issue of housing insecurity has grown worse during the pandemic, as households are less able to afford their rent and utility bills. Some reported that there is a growing need for emergency shelter and transitional housing services for people experiencing homelessness and victims of domestic abuse.

Agencies serving victims of domestic abuse have other short-term concerns as well. According to staff at these agencies, reports of domestic abuse have

become less frequent during the pandemic. However, this does not mean domestic abuse is occurring less frequently than before; instead, it is likely that victims feel less safe reporting abuse when they are stuck at home with their abusers, and that there are fewer witnesses to the abuse taking place. State officials – including Department of Human Services Secretary Teresa Miller – have shared this concern as well.[1]

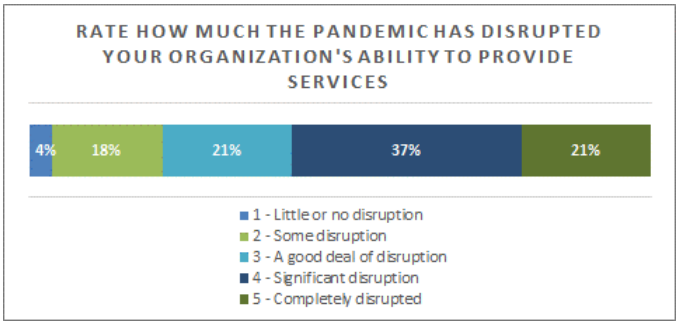
Representatives from various types of agencies claimed that the individuals they work with have become more isolated as a result of the pandemic. Isolation is an issue across a wide range of populations, including but not limited to disadvantaged children, older adults, survivors of abuse, and people with disabilities. This isolation is caused in part by restrictions on in-person gatherings, which have made it difficult for people to receive services, participate in day programs, and connect with friends, mentors, and support groups. Other short-term needs include transportation to help families and individuals access food and medication, and childcare for children whose parents are returning to work.

Respondents' thoughts on the long-term needs of their communities largely echoed their observations on short-term needs; more specifically, many expect the economic impact of the pandemic to result in food and housing insecurity in the long term as well as the short term. Multiple responses raised the issue of education – the closure of schools and the transition to remote learning have caused many children to lose progress in their education, particularly for those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is possible that this loss of progress will exacerbate existing gaps in academic achievement. Access to healthcare was also identified as both a short-term and long-term need; respondents explained that the pandemic may cause people to struggle with behavioral health and addiction, and that it may be more difficult for these people to receive treatment under social distancing restrictions. Additionally, people who need healthcare may not be able to afford it due to financial constraints or a loss of health insurance. Many respondents expressed uncertainty about the future and about the long-term effects of the pandemic.

Impact on service delivery

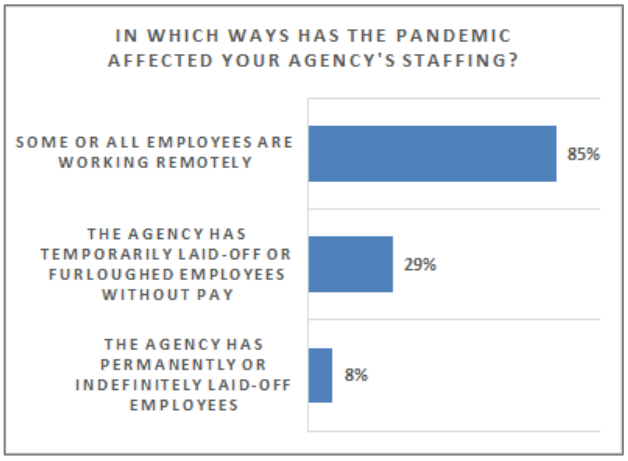
The next question on the survey asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the extent to which the pandemic has disrupted their organizations' ability to provide services. A rating of 1 means the organization has experienced little or no disruption, and a rating of 5 means the organization has been completely disrupted. Of the 168 responses, only (4 percent) said their organizations experienced little or no disruption. More than half of all respondents said that their agencies were either significantly or completely disrupted - ratings of 4 and 5, respectively.

As mentioned previously, the pandemic has severely limited the capacity of social service agencies and other nonprofits to provide in-person services. Many organizations have had to cancel all programs and services that require staff to be in close proximity to the people they serve. Some organizations have been able to transition to remote service delivery, with varying degrees of success. Agencies have faced obstacles in this type of transition; for example, clients do not always have the equipment or technical knowledge necessary for participation in virtual programs, and staff may lack training in how to effectively run these types of programs. Other disruptions have stemmed from the permanent or temporary loss of staff, the loss of volunteers, and a decline in funding.



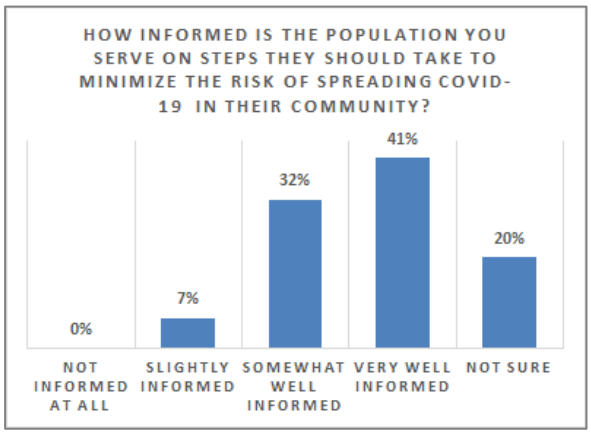
1 Xian, Min. "Calls to report child abuse dropped significantly since Pa. coronavirus shutdown began." WPSU. Accessed at https://www.witf.org/2020/06/12/calls-to-report-child-abuse-dropped-significantly-since-pa-coronavirus-shutdown-began/. 2020.

Where possible, social service agencies have modified how they deliver services in order to follow social distancing guidelines and mitigate risks to public health. For organizations that focus on providing health services to communities, this has often meant a shift toward relying more on telehealth, using both phone calls and video conference platforms like Zoom. Several respondents said that their offices have been closed or that their agencies have limited the number of staff and visitors allowed inside at any given time. Nearly all respondents (85 percent) said their agencies have transitioned to remote work for some or all of their employees. Agencies that cannot provide services remotely have taken other precautions; for example, organizations that provide food assistance have shifted to contact-free methods of service delivery, such as curbside pickup or drive-through services. Many respondents emphasized the importance of effective sanitation practices and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) when working closely with clients (e.g. for home health visits).

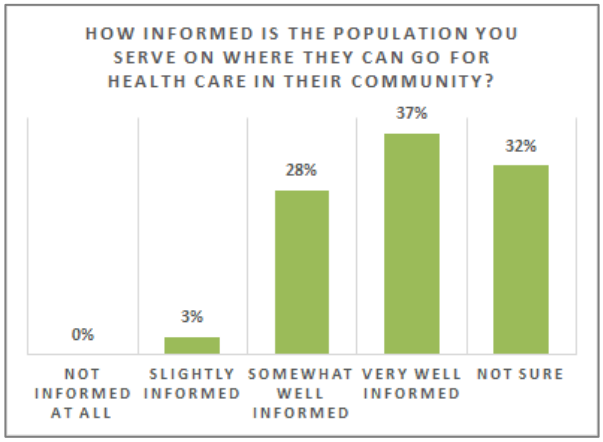


Community knowledge of public health

Next, the survey asked whether respondents' organizations have been involved in delivering public health messages to the populations they serve. Examples of this include sharing information about social distancing or about where to go for COVID-19 testing. More than two thirds of respondents say their agencies have shared these types of messages. Respondents were then asked how informed the populations they serve are regarding the steps they can take to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. Nearly three in four respondents said the populations they serve are either somewhat or very well-informed. No respondents said that their client populations were not informed at all. Some pointed out that there are language barriers to public health information in some communities. This issue was raised by multiple people who work at agencies in areas with growing Hispanic communities, such as Luzerne County.



About two thirds of respondents reported that the populations they serve are at least somewhat well-informed about where they can go for healthcare in their communities. Most of the remaining third said that it is difficult to determine how informed people are. Some respondents have observed other issues related to healthcare. For example, people who need healthcare may not have access to any form of transportation, and some are unwilling to seek care or to share information with agencies about their medical needs. Meanwhile, others are uninsured and rely entirely on the emergency room for healthcare.



Impact on staff and volunteers

The results of the survey indicate that the pandemic has had a significant effect on agencies' staffing. A large majority of respondents said that their agencies have transitioned some or all employees to working remotely. Close to 30 percent of respondents said their agencies have temporarily laid off or furloughed employees without pay, and several said that employees have been permanently or indefinitely laid off.

According to the respondents, many of their agencies rely heavily on volunteers for various purposes. Some volunteers – particularly those focused on tasks like database management, communication, and creating digital content – have been able to work remotely. However, volunteers who generally offer hands-on assistance have been more limited in their ability to help during the pandemic, due to safety concerns, office closures, program cancellations, and social distancing requirements. A large number of respondents explained that their agencies are currently not receiving any volunteer assistance at all.

Impact on financial resources and fundraising

The next set of questions inquired about the impact of the pandemic on agencies' financial resources and fundraising efforts. The majority of respondents stated that their agencies have experienced a loss of financial resources as a result of COVID-19. The cancellation of fundraising events and campaigns was a common theme among the responses. Many organizations rely on fundraising for a large portion of their revenue. According to some agency staff, it is difficult to ask for donations when people have lost income and are struggling to meet their own needs. It may be particularly difficult to raise funds for causes that are not considered to be essential – for example, people may not feel comfortable giving money to organizations that focus on arts and entertainment when there is a greater need for food and housing assistance.

Additionally, agencies that usually bill for services have been less able to do so because of reduced services and program cancellations. Multiple respondents have also said that they are no longer able to apply for funding from certain grants, although other grant opportunities have emerged to help agencies survive the pandemic. One respondent said their agency has struggled to pay employees enough to sufficiently compensate them for risking their safety.

When asked if their agencies have reworked their fundraising plans or found alternative approaches to fundraising, the majority of respondents said yes. Many answers mention that agencies are trying to shift toward online fundraising campaigns and virtual events. However, these methods of fundraising are new to many agencies, and respondents suggested that it may take time to learn how to implement them effectively. Several agencies have begun to apply for more grant funding to make up for lost fundraising revenue. The responses to this question largely indicated that social service agencies are still in the process of finding alternative approaches to fundraising.

Emergency funding

The survey then asked whether agencies had applied for funding through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), a program under the federal government's coronavirus relief plan that offers loans to help small businesses keep their employees during the pandemic. Approximately 60 percent of respondents said their agencies had applied for loans through the PPP, while about 40 percent had not applied. Among the respondents whose organizations had not applied for PPP loans, most said they did not believe they were eligible due to the size or structure of their organizations. Multiple respondents said they did not apply because they were not familiar with the program. One respondent had heard that they needed to choose either PPP funding or unemployment compensation, and they chose the latter option. Most of the agencies that did apply for PPP have since received funding, and several respondents credited the program with helping their agencies continue operating. Unfortunately, some of these agencies still face financial difficulties even after receiving PPP funding.

Social service agencies have applied for emergency funding from other sources as well. Many have applied for and received loans from the Small Business Administration (SBA). Specifically, the most commonly mentioned SBA loan was the Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL), which is designed to provide economic relief to struggling business.

Respondents also frequently said they received emergency assistance from local foundations such as the Scranton Area Community Foundation, the Luzerne Foundation, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Health Care Foundation, and the Moses Taylor Foundation, among others. Beyond these foundations, many organizations have sought emergency grants from state and local government agencies and major corporations.

Preparing for the future

Finally, the survey asked what measures their organizations anticipate taking if a similar crisis happens in the future. One common answer was that agencies will continue to develop options for effectively delivering services online, so that services are not as severely disrupted if in-person programs are canceled again. One respondent explained that transitioning to telehealth has been very effective for engaging with clients, and their agency may continue to provide telehealth services after the pandemic ends. Similarly, several agencies intend to continue exploring options for virtual fundraising, and many intend to develop a plan to more smoothly transition employees to remote work.

Several respondents said their agencies would prepare for future crises by saving money for an emergency fund or by ensuring that they have sufficient supplies of PPE and equipment to help staff work from home. Other ideas include building relationships with vendors and food banks to help address food insecurity, working closely with local school districts to meet education needs, and setting aside additional money to pay for rent and utility bills. A small number of respondents said that they would not do anything differently if a similar crisis were to occur in the future, while others said that another crisis could result in their agencies laying off all staff and shutting down operations.

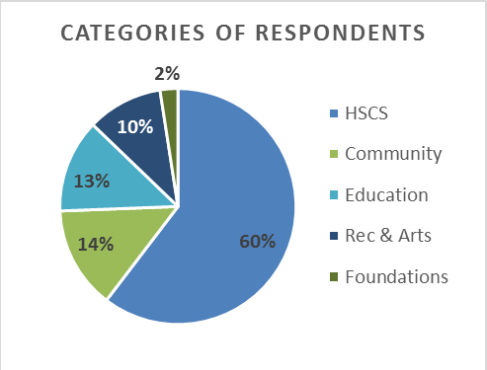
Differences between organization types

The Institute received responses from over 160 agencies providing a wide range of services to communities throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania. This report organizes these agencies into five broad categories in order to examine how different types of agencies were affected by the pandemic. The five categories are:

- **Health and social care services (HSCS)**, including agencies that provide health- and healthcare-focused services (37 percent of respondents in this category) as well as those that provide services like food (8%) and housing assistance (5%), and support for people with disabilities (9%). Other agencies in this category provide services for seniors (5%), children (10%), and victims for domestic violence (5%), and other social services (21%);
- **Recreation and arts services**, in which 53 percent of respondents provide recreation services and 47 percent provide art services;
- **Foundations**;
- **Education and library services**, with 62 percent of respondents working at general education agencies, 24 percent providing library services, and 14 percent working at higher education organizations; and
- **Community and quality of life services**, which include community and workforce development agencies (52%), environmental and animal welfare agencies (26%), historic preservation organizations (17%), and transit services (4%).

Health and social care services (HSCS) is by far the largest category in terms of representation in this survey, with 100 respondents working at this type of agency. The category with the least representation in this survey was foundations, with only 4 respondents. The remaining three categories were each represented by approximately 20 respondents.

The mix of organization types was generally similar across the different counties in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Health and social care organizations comprised the majority of agencies in each county. Clinton County had the largest share of respondents from these agencies compared to other counties, at 71 percent of all respondents that mentioned the county. However, it was also served by the smallest overall number of respondents' agencies out of all the counties, being mentioned only 17 times.



Lackawanna County had the largest absolute number of respondents from health and social care organizations, at 57 (or 61 percent of respondents whose agencies work in the county).

On average, health and social care agencies were also the most likely to serve multiple counties (the average organization in this category served 4.5 counties). Meanwhile, 52 percent of respondents in the education and library category said their agencies exclusively served a single county. Only three foundations were represented in the survey (by four respondents), and each serves only a single county – one foundation serves the northern and southern portions of Luzerne County, another serves Wayne County, and the third operates in Columbia County.

The table below shows the number of counties served by the average respondent's agency in each category, followed by the share of respondents in each category who said their agencies only serve a single county. It is important to note that certain agencies were likely represented multiple times by different respondents, as was the case with the foundations discussed above.

Type of agency	Average number of counties served	Share serving only one county
Health and Social Care Services	4.5	36%
Recreation and Arts	4.2	41%
Community and Quality of Life	4.2	39%
Education and Library	3.9	52%
Foundations	1.0	100%

Needs by type of organization

Sorting agencies into separate categories allows us to more closely examine how the pandemic has affected the needs of different groups of people. There are common themes among responses from different categories – cancellations of programs and fundraising events were brought up by respondents in every category, as were the effects of food insecurity and unemployment on families.

Other issues are more specific to populations served by certain types of agencies. For example, several respondents from community and quality of life agencies discussed the pandemic's impact on career development and entrepreneurship. Many career development and work-based learning programs have been cancelled to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and although some services are now being delivered virtually, not everyone has access to these opportunities due to a lack of equipment or technical knowledge. Respondents also noted that participation in workforce development programs is also difficult for parents who are unable to find childcare, and for families that are struggling to secure basic needs like food and shelter. Another setback to economic development has been the closure of early-stage businesses that have been deemed nonessential, limiting the ability of entrepreneurs to be successful. Additionally, transit services have become more restricted, making it difficult for people to access the services and resources they need. Respondents working for animal welfare organizations are concerned that caring for animals has become less of a priority during the pandemic, and one environmentally-focused organization was forced to cancel its services because they were not deemed essential. Another respondent at a community development organization shared a concern that the pandemic has caused people to focus on emergency needs instead of planning for the long term.

Among respondents from education and library organizations, there was a significant amount of concern regarding school closures, the cancellation of in-person educational programs, and the transition to online learning. According to one respondent, the pandemic caused a "scramble to figure out how to learn online," which has presented a number of challenges. As mentioned previously, not all households have equitable access to remote learning opportunities. Lower-income households in particular often lack computer and internet access. Because not all households can engage in remote learning, and because educational agencies are still learning how to effectively use online platforms to engage students, some respondents suggested that the pandemic may lead to a loss of academic progress, which may have

negative implications for the future. Libraries largely transitioned to online services as well, which can be similarly prohibitive to older and low-income individuals. Library closures have also meant that people cannot rely on libraries for information, computer or internet access, services like printing and copying, or programs and social gatherings.

The four respondents from foundations were generally concerned about the emergency needs of their communities in the short term. All four discussed the urgency of addressing food insecurity, and three mentioned how unemployment has led to difficulty affording other basic needs like housing and utilities. Respondents in this category suggested that the pandemic could exacerbate issues like domestic violence and untreated mental illness and addiction. In the long-term, one respondent mentioned the importance of supporting small businesses, and another pointed out that nonprofits are in "desperate need for operational funds due to limited fundraising and cancelled events." This last respondent specifically mentioned that nonprofits that provide case management and service navigation are struggling with their operational expenses.

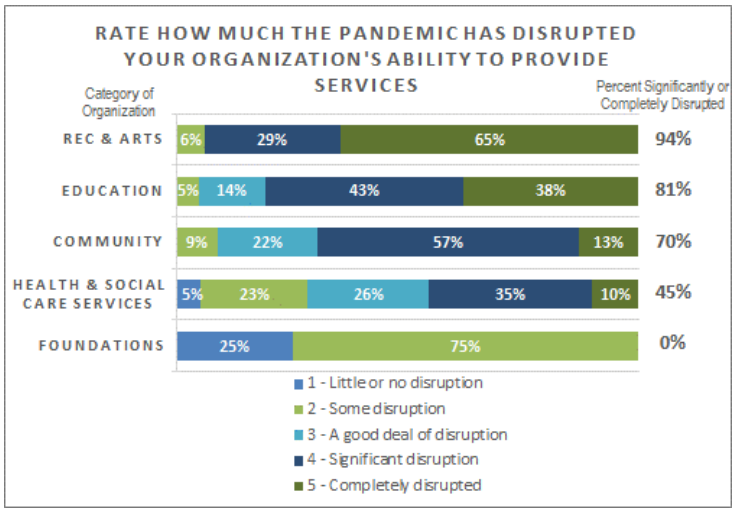
Many of the respondents from recreation and art organizations explained that their agencies have been unable to provide services to their communities during the pandemic. Some responses suggested that the cancellation of these programs has caused people to lose rare opportunities to experience art and learn about other cultures. Music events and performances have also been cancelled, eliminating a source of entertainment for families and individuals. A respondent from a cultural organization explained that they have lost income as their funders have reallocated their financial support to other causes. Programs focused on recreation and wellness have also been cancelled. Respondents from agencies that provide these services shared concerns that the loss of those programs has eliminated a method of preventing chronic illness and improving physical and mental wellbeing. Some of these recreation programs also offered other benefits, like childcare and a means of reducing senior isolation.

The needs of populations that rely on agencies in the health and social care category have increased significantly due to the pandemic and its economic effects. Food assistance agencies have reportedly experienced unprecedented demand, as households have lost employment and income, and students have not been able to receive free meals in schools. Social service agencies are also anticipating a greater demand for housing assistance and homeless services when the statewide eviction moratorium ends. Older adults face a number of challenges, being particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. It has been necessary for seniors to minimize contact with other people in order to remain safe, but this has resulted in increased levels of isolation. People with disabilities have become similarly isolated in some cases. Isolation and the loss of support systems can be harmful to individuals' mental health, and it may cause some people to turn to negative coping skills or destructive behaviors. A reported increase in demand for mental health services is likely related to the isolation and stress caused by the pandemic. Multiple respondents also explained that the pandemic could put families at a greater risk of domestic violence or child abuse, and one explained that victims of domestic violence have experienced longer stays in emergency shelters while searching for permanent housing. Finally, like other basic needs, many households have struggled to afford healthcare. This has led some people to avoid seeking care when they need it. One respondent who works with cancer patients noted that some of those patients have an urgent need for financial assistance, as they are unable to afford cancer treatments.

Disruption of services by type of organization

Respondents from recreation and arts agencies reported the highest levels of service disruption by far, with 94 percent of respondents in this category saying that their services had been either significantly or completely disrupted. Many of these organizations rely on in-person events and performances to reach their communities, and the pandemic has largely forced them to cancel these types of programs due to safety concerns. Education agencies have been similarly disrupted, as they often deliver their services at schools and in classroom settings. Several respondents from these agencies have said that they have ceased their programs indefinitely, although some have been able to transition partly to remote services.

Meanwhile, foundations have experienced relatively little disruption from the pandemic. According to respondents, the foundations they work at have closed their offices and transitioned to remote work, but they have generally remained operational. It is worth noting that because only four respondents worked with foundations, this data may not be fully representative of the pandemic's impact on foundations.



Service modifications by type of organization

The modifications agencies made in order to deliver services during the pandemic varied slightly between the different categories of agencies. In all four categories, respondents frequently mentioned that their organizations had pivoted to remote work for employees, and to virtual service delivery where possible. In the community and quality of life category, career development agencies have started providing online workshops to help their clients.

Most of the historic preservation organizations represented in the survey were unable to modify their programs and needed to temporarily shut down. A respondent from a transit agency explained that the agency has taken precautions like requiring drivers to wear masks, requesting that passengers wear masks, and regularly cleaning vehicles to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Education and library organizations have implemented virtual learning programs for students. Two respondents in this category said that their agencies have been providing laptops to students who do not have them, and that they have also been helping families acquire internet access, so that more students can participate in online programs. Education agencies have made efforts to fill service gaps left by school closures; for example, some have prepared meals and clothing for delivery to families, and one respondent's agency has been providing virtual counseling to students. While the pandemic has caused libraries to close, some continued to offer online services, such as access to online databases and e-books.

Foundations made modifications similar to those made in other categories; their employees transitioned to working from home for the most part, and they developed staggered work schedules for cases in which office work was necessary. Respondents from foundations emphasized the importance of keeping lines of communication open and holding regular virtual meetings. Agencies focused on arts and entertainment have been unable to continue in-person programs. As a result, some have shifted their focus toward improving their social media presence and making online content more accessible. Some agencies have made musical and artistic performances available online. Recreation-focused organizations have taken similar actions, such as launching virtual fitness programs.

Like the other categories, health and social care organizations have shifted toward virtual service delivery and remote work to the extent possible. However, some health and social care services cannot be delivered remotely and cannot be cancelled or postponed, particularly medical, home health, and disability services. Agencies that provide these services have implemented measures that include requiring staff to wear protective equipment, following strict sanitation protocols, and training staff to provide care while minimizing health risks. Where possible, medical and behavioral healthcare agencies have offered telehealth appointments using both video platforms and phone calls. At least one mental health agency has reportedly begun waiving service fees for financially-struggling clients. Agencies that facilitate mentorship and support groups have transitioned these programs to virtual platforms as well. Food assistance organizations have developed contact-free methods of meal distribution, such as delivery, drive-through, and curbside pickup services.

Impact on staff by type of organization

The majority of respondents in all categories reported that some or all of the employees at their organizations that transitioned to working remotely. All four respondents from foundations said they have made this change, as did large majorities of respondents from community and quality of life agencies and health and social care agencies. Recreation and arts was the category in which the largest share of respondents reported that their agencies had either temporarily or indefinitely laid off employees, followed closely by education and library services.

Impact on financial resources by type of organization

Agencies in all categories have experienced changes in the financial resources available to them and in their fundraising capabilities. Organizations that provide services that are considered to be less essential – particularly in the recreation and arts category – have received less revenue from donations, as donors have shifted their support more toward services like food assistance and health care, where short-term needs seem to be greater. Nevertheless, many health and social care agencies have also been struggling financially, due to the cancellation of fundraising events and growing need for their services.

Respondents from all categories of agencies showed interest in launching virtual fundraising campaigns and events, although they often expressed uncertainty about the details of online fundraising, as these methods are relatively new. Health and social care organizations have proposed some specific ideas, such as raising awareness through podcasts and social media, or hosting virtual bingo games or benefit concerts.

External funding

Different types of organizations reported different rates of application for funding through the Paycheck Protection Program. All three foundations represented in this survey applied for and received PPP loans. The category with the second-highest application rate was recreation and arts organizations, in which 81 percent of respondents said that their organizations had applied for PPP funding. At the time of the survey's completion, all but two of those applicants had received funding (the remaining two had not yet heard back about their application status). Slightly more than two thirds of respondents from the education and library category had applied for PPP loans, as did slightly less than two thirds of the health and social care category. All applicants in the education and library category either received funding or were informed they would receive funding.

The majority of applicants in the health and social care category received funding as well, although a small number (about 4 percent) said that they had not yet received funding or that they were not sure whether the application was successful. The most frequently cited reason for not applying among health and social care organizations was the belief that they would not qualify for a loan under the SBA's requirements. Several respondents said that they did not apply because their agencies are mostly run by volunteers or independent contractors. One health and social care respondent and one education and library respondent said that they were unfamiliar with the PPP. Community and quality of life was the only category in which the majority of respondents (57 percent) said that their agencies had not applied for PPP loans. Most of these respondents did not give a reason for not applying, but three explained that they had no paid staff, and one said they did not apply because their organization would not have qualified.

Emergency planning by type of organization

When discussing how their organizations may plan for future emergencies, respondents from different agency categories raised a few similar ideas. One common response across categories was that organizations should put plans in place for providing remote services and having employees work from home. These plans sometimes involve acquiring supplies and equipment to help staff work remotely, and training employees how to effectively use online platforms for service delivery, communications, and fundraising. Respondents from all categories also suggested that it would be helpful to save larger emergency funds to better withstand the financial effects of another crisis.

Respondents from organizations that provide community and quality of life services said that they may prepare for future emergencies by seeking funding from sources like grants and area

foundations. One respondent said their organization should work to become less dependent on state funding. Another said their agency is trying to establish a monthly fundraiser. One workforce development agency hopes to ensure that its clients have access to the technology they would need for participation in online programs.

Respondents from the education and library category said their organizations should have plans in place to provide online learning if in-person programs need to be cancelled again. Several respondents pointed out a need for more emergency funding and a more proactive approach to fundraising. One respondent advocated for offering more frequent virtual services, and another specifically suggested that their education agency could provide more health classes to help their community stay safe.

Foundation respondents mentioned a need to develop additional community resources to build a reserve of funding, as well as a need to build better collaborations and cooperative activities. One respondent said their foundation would need to significantly improve its online communication strategy going forward.

According to one respondent in the recreation and arts category, their agency may prepare a more effective action plan for announcing program cancellations in the future. Additionally, a respondent from an agency that offers childcare services suggested that the agency should keep those services open for essential workers if another crisis occurs.

One of the major concerns for health and social care organizations during the pandemic has been a shortage of personal protective equipment. Because of this, some respondents emphasized the importance of building an emergency supply of PPE to prepare for future crises. One said that their organization plans to order emergency supplies ahead of time, in order to avoid price escalations and shortages. A respondent from a food pantry said that their agency has formed relationships with vendors and food banks so that it can better meet the demand for food assistance in future emergencies. Others recommended ensuring that people in vulnerable populations – such as disadvantaged children, victims of domestic abuse, and individuals struggling with mental illness – have opportunities to engage in activities like support groups, counseling, and peer mentoring.

Organizations by geography

The two-county area of Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties has the largest amount of organizations serving it who participated in this study; fewer organizations are in the areas further west and north. Monroe County follows Lackawanna County and the two Luzerne County regions in the total number of organizations participating in the study that serve the region. Lackawanna County is home to the largest number of organizations and Clinton County the smallest, a difference of 77 organizations. The total number of organizations in the table should not be summed as some organizations are counted multiple times across counties as they serve more than one.

Organizations Responding by Counties Served	
County	Count of organizations
Lackawanna County	94
Northern Luzerne County/Wyoming Valley	88
Southern Luzerne County	77
Monroe County	75
Luzerne County, whole	70
Pike County	54
Wayne County	54
Wyoming County	50
Carbon County	48
Susquehanna County	44
Schuylkill County	34
Columbia County	32
Bradford County	29
Sullivan County	26
Lycoming County	24
Tioga County	23
Clinton County	17

Almost two-thirds of organizations reported they serve more than one county, while 32 percent of those responding serve one county. The largest share

Number of Counties Served		
Counties Served	Total Organizations	Percent of Organizations
One	**53**	**32%**
More than one	**111**	**64%**
Two to five	*63*	*57%*
Six to ten	*23*	*21%*
11 to 15	*13*	*12%*
All	*12*	*11%*

of organizations who serve more than one county reported they serve between two to five counties. There are a dozen organizations who serve all 16 counties/ areas (not including Luzerne County, whole).

Disruption of Services by County						
	Little or no disruption	Some disruption	A good deal of disruption	Significant disruption	Completely disrupted	Percent significantly or completely disrupted
Bradford County	7%	7%	24%	55%	7%	62%
Carbon County	4%	8%	29%	50%	8%	58%
Clinton County	6%	6%	35%	53%	0%	53%
Columbia County	3%	6%	25%	53%	13%	66%
Lackawanna County	3%	12%	22%	39%	23%	63%
Luzerne County, whole	6%	14%	19%	47%	14%	61%
Northern Luzerne County	5%	15%	21%	46%	15%	60%
Southern Luzerne County	7%	14%	18%	47%	14%	61%
Lycoming County	4%	4%	25%	63%	4%	67%
Monroe County	1%	20%	25%	41%	12%	53%
Pike County	2%	17%	24%	48%	9%	57%
Schuylkill County	6%	9%	21%	53%	12%	65%
Sullivan County	8%	8%	23%	50%	12%	62%
Susquehanna County	5%	9%	27%	50%	9%	59%
Tioga County	9%	9%	26%	48%	9%	57%
Wayne County	2%	13%	20%	52%	13%	65%
Wyoming County	4%	12%	24%	48%	12%	60%
Average	**5%**	**11%**	**24%**	**50%**	**11%**	**61%**

A majority of the organizations in each of the counties reported their organization's services had been significantly disrupted. Organizations serving Lycoming, Columbia, Schuylkill and Wayne Counties reported the highest levels of significant or complete disruption to their services. Across all counties, at least half of organizations reported that their organizations' services had been significantly or completely disrupted. Tioga and Sullivan Counties saw the largest share of organizations that experienced little or no disruption. Clinton and Monroe Counties experienced the least amount of significant or complete disruption in the region.

Has your organization been involved in delivering public health messages to the population you serve?		
	Yes	No
Bradford County	76%	24%
Carbon County	73%	27%
Clinton County	77%	24%
Columbia County	63%	38%
Lackawanna County	68%	32%
Luzerne County, whole	69%	31%
Lycoming County	71%	29%
Monroe County	76%	24%
Northern Luzerne County/Wyoming Valley	68%	32%
Pike County	76%	24%
Schuylkill County	65%	35%
Southern Luzerne County	69%	31%
Sullivan County	65%	35%
Susquehanna County	75%	25%
Tioga County	74%	26%
Wayne County	69%	32%
Wyoming County	70%	30%
Total	**69%**	**31%**

Across all counties, nearly two-thirds of the organizations surveyed state they have been involved in delivering public health messages to the populations they serve. These messages could include sharing information on social distancing, where to go for COVID-19 testing, etc. Organizations serving Clinton, Monroe, Bradford and Pike Counties were most often involved in reporting public health information. Columbia County had the largest amount of organizations that stated they did not share public health information.

Across all counties, at least two-thirds of organizations reported the populations they serve are either somewhat or very well-informed of the steps they can take to minimize the spreading COVID-19 in their community. The counties with organizations reporting the highest percentages of populations who are very well informed are Lackawanna and Monroe Counties, while organizations serving Lycoming and Clinton Counties report more than ten percent of the populations they serve are only slightly informed. Thirty percent of organizations serving those in Carbon County report they are unsure of how informed the populations they serve are.

How informed is the population you serve on steps they should take to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19 in their community?				
	Not sure	Slightly informed	Somewhat well informed	Very well informed
Bradford County	21%	7%	48%	24%
Carbon County	30%	5%	36%	30%
Clinton County	12%	12%	53%	24%
Columbia County	25%	6%	41%	28%
Lackawanna County	21%	7%	31%	40%
Luzerne County, whole	20%	9%	36%	36%
Lycoming County	17%	13%	46%	25%
Monroe County	20%	4%	36%	40%
Northern Luzerne County/Wyoming Valley	21%	8%	34%	38%
Pike County	20%	7%	37%	35%
Schuylkill County	24%	6%	41%	29%
Southern Luzerne County	20%	8%	36%	36%
Sullivan County	23%	8%	46%	23%
Susquehanna County	23%	7%	41%	30%
Tioga County	17%	9%	52%	22%
Wayne County	24%	7%	37%	32%
Wyoming County	20%	8%	40%	32%
Total	**20%**	**7%**	**32%**	**41%**

Lackawanna & Luzerne Counties Supplement

The survey asked respondents how the pandemic is affecting the needs of the respondent's served populations in the short term. Below are the most frequently cited words and phrases.

When it comes to community organizations, they most often said cancelled tours, events, and visitation that account for fundraising and income affected them. Those in education mentioned that the closure of campuses, schools, and in person instruction as well as the move to remote classes and office were affecting their populations' needs the most. Foundations noted that food, housing/ utilities, loss of income, and homeschooling were the repeatedly named issues. Recreation and Arts Organizations said event cancellations (including fundraising), loss of work, and programming cancellations and limitations were affecting those they served. Social services and health care had far more responses to the survey and have many more ways the pandemic is affecting the populations they serve. They most frequently stated that the overall need was increasing; clients were worried about unemployment, financial insecurity, childcare, and, with a far greater emphasis, food insecurity; clients are largely and negatively affected by isolation; the amount of programming and services shut down and events cancelled; and finally, an increase in mental health issues and/or suicides especially amongst veterans and first responders suffering from PTSD.

Many said that they were serving low income families and individuals as well as those who are at high risk of falling ill due to COVID-19, whether attributed to health issues or poverty.

Respondents were also asked about the needs of the populations they serve in the long term.

Many cited mental health and childcare as top concerns beyond the overall need largely increasing. Others also noted that there may be an end to some services for a handful of reasons, including these organizations suffering from a significant cash flow disruption. Just as there was mention of child abuse and domestic violence in the short term needs of clients, it has been mentioned here as a long term effect because how the pandemic affects abuse rates will not be known until later. They also noted there will be an increased need for public health programs and offerings and that telemedicine may become the new normal.

When asked how they have modified service delivery, many respondents from the two county region noted they use personal protective equipment and require clients to do so as well. They also stated that some services have been moved to a remote setting, if applicable, through Zoom, Zoom support groups, Google Meet calls, and other virtual options. Many also mentioned they follow CDC guidelines. There were a few respondents who remarked that they were unable to modify their services.

Across the two-county region of Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, more than 90 percent of organizations report the pandemic has affected their financial resources.

A large share of the respondents note that their major fundraising events have been cancelled or made virtual, which have significantly affected organizational finances. Some note their cancelled fundraisers are the only form of income they have.

Some are looking to other resources for funding and a handful have mentioned that they are more concerned with how COVID will affect future finances. A larger amount of organizations that indicated they hadn't been affected were sure to note that they hadn't been yet, indicating they anticipate being affected. Some found a silver lining stating that other opportunities for funding arose in response to COVID.

Those in Southern Luzerne County have noted that being able to go virtual helps finances slightly while another noted that going virtual also costs money that might not be readily available for the organizations and the populations they serve.

One in Lackawanna noted that compensation from insurance companies for telehealth visits has been an issue.

Within the two-county region of Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, an average 86 percent of organizations utilize volunteers. Of those organizations that indicated they do use volunteers, a majority (average of 82 percent) stated that the pandemic has affected their volunteers' ability to help. A sizeable portion of those who stated it did not affect them was a result of moving volunteer activities online with no detriment. The other said they were not affected because they were closed and there was nothing for volunteers to do.

Has the pandemic affected the financial resources available to your agency?				
	Category	Yes	No	NA
North Luzerne	HSCS	58%	2%	6%
	Community	12%	0%	0%
	Education	7%	0%	1%
	Rec & Art	13%	1%	1%
	Foundation	2%	0%	0%
South Luzerne	HSCS	58%	4%	5%
	Community	12%	0%	0%
	Education	8%	1%	1%
	Rec & Art	10%	1%	1%
	Foundation	3%	0%	0%
Lackawanna	HSCS	56%	3%	4%
	Community	13%	0%	0%
	Education	13%	0%	1%
	Rec & Art	10%	1%	1%
	Foundation	0%	0%	0%

While respondents share that populations are more informed about knowing the steps to risk spreading COVID-19, nearly one-third overall are unsure of how informed the populations are on where they can access health care. Organizations that serve Luzerne County in its entirety report that half of the populations they serve are very well informed on where they can go for health care, followed by Lackawanna County at 37 percent. Sullivan County has the smallest percentage at 19 percent. Pike County has the largest share of organizations stating the population is slightly informed. Both Carbon and Columbia Counties have the largest share of organizations that are unsure how informed the population is.

How informed is the population you serve on where they can go for health care in their community?				
	Not sure	Slightly informed	Somewhat well informed	Very well informed
Bradford County	39%	4%	32%	25%
Carbon County	44%	2%	23%	31%
Clinton County	29%	6%	35%	29%
Columbia County	44%	3%	25%	28%
Lackawanna County	37%	2%	25%	37%
Luzerne County, whole	27%	2%	21%	50%
Lycoming County	42%	4%	33%	21%
Monroe County	35%	3%	29%	33%
Northern Luzerne County/Wyoming Valley	37%	3%	28%	32%
Pike County	35%	7%	22%	35%
Schuylkill County	35%	0%	29%	35%
Southern Luzerne County	37%	3%	28%	33%
Sullivan County	42%	4%	35%	19%
Susquehanna County	41%	5%	30%	25%
Tioga County	36%	5%	36%	23%
Wayne County	40%	6%	21%	34%
Wyoming County	37%	4%	29%	31%
Total	**32%**	**3%**	**28%**	**37%**

A majority of agencies (61 percent) have applied for funding through the Paycheck Protection Program, 98 organizations in total. The remaining organizations that responded, nearly 40 percent have not applied. Columbia County has the largest share of organizations who have not applied for funding through the paycheck protection program and Northern Luzerne County has the largest share of organizations who have applied for funding. Monroe County has the second lowest share of organizations that have applied for this funding.

Has your agency applied for funding through the Paycheck Protection Program?		
	Yes	No
Bradford County	65%	35%
Carbon County	56%	44%
Clinton County	56%	44%
Columbia County	53%	47%
Lackawanna County	68%	32%
Luzerne County, whole	68%	32%
Lycoming County	68%	32%
Monroe County	55%	45%
Northern Luzerne County/Wyoming Valley	72%	28%
Pike County	63%	37%
Schuylkill County	61%	39%
Southern Luzerne County	70%	30%
Sullivan County	63%	38%
Susquehanna County	69%	31%
Tioga County	65%	35%
Wayne County	65%	35%
Wyoming County	68%	32%
Total	**61%**	**39%**

Respondents were also asked about other funding that they have applied for. Scranton Area Foundation was the most often noted other source of emergency funding to which agencies in Lackawanna County applied. It was also frequently mentioned in Luzerne County along with 'Community Foundation', SBA, COVID-19 grant, and EIDL as well as in Monroe County which also had many note various COVID-19 grants, EIDL, and the United Way.

Across all counties, nearly two-thirds or more of organizations report that some or all employees are working remotely as a result of the pandemic. Those serving Clinton County report the largest share of their employees working remotely. Lycoming County has the largest percentage of organizations that had to permanently or indefinitely lay off employees and Schuylkill County has the greatest share of agencies that had to temporarily lay off or furlough employees without pay. The northern counties have experienced a smaller share of organizations temporarily laying off employees than the rest of the region.

In which ways has the pandemic affected your agency's staffing?			
	The agency has temporarily laid-off or furloughed employees without pay	The agency has permanently or indefinitely laid-off employees	Some or all employees are working remotely
Bradford County	16%	10%	74%
Carbon County	25%	7%	68%
Clinton County	17%	6%	78%
Columbia County	24%	8%	68%
Lackawanna County	22%	10%	67%
Luzerne County, whole	22%	8%	70%
Lycoming County	23%	13%	65%
Monroe County	25%	8%	67%
Northern Luzerne County/Wyoming Valley	22%	8%	71%
Pike County	19%	10%	71%
Schuylkill County	26%	9%	65%
Southern Luzerne County	23%	9%	69%
Sullivan County	17%	10%	73%
Susquehanna County	19%	9%	72%
Tioga County	15%	12%	73%
Wayne County	21%	10%	70%
Wyoming County	20%	10%	70%
Total	**29%**	**8%**	**85%**

Conclusions and recommendations

The responses to this survey share valuable insight regarding the pandemic's impact on social service organizations in Northeastern Pennsylvania and the communities they serve. From these insights, it is possible to draw conclusions about the greatest needs of agencies and their clients, and to identify a set of actions agencies themselves and other community stakeholders could take in order to respond to the current crisis and prepare for the future.

Address the basic needs of communities

In many areas, the need for social service agencies has increased as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and its economic effects. Much of this need stems from the loss of employment and income that has been experienced by households throughout the region and the country. According to the participants in this survey, the families and individuals who rely on many of their agencies are struggling to afford essentials, such as food, housing, and healthcare. Where appropriate, organizations could take steps to communicate with clients to ensure that their basic needs are being met. Agencies that do not generally provide these types of services may be able to refer clients to other organizations that can assist them. Similarly, service providers could consider working closely with local governments and other agencies to identify and address the needs of their communities.

Service agencies that directly provide services to help households meet their basic needs should also consider planning for the eventual end of certain government assistance programs. Pennsylvania's statewide eviction moratorium, rental assistance program, and increase to pandemic-related unemployment benefits have been helpful for many residents, but they are not expected to be in place permanently. The expiration of these programs will likely result in increased demand for assistance from other sources. Social service agencies could begin preparations to meet this bump in demand when it occurs.

Explore alternative fundraising methods and seek emergency funding

Social service agencies are facing their own financial difficulties as well. Cancellations of fundraising events and campaigns have resulted in a loss of revenue for many organizations, forcing them to explore other options for funding. Respondents frequently said that their organizations are interested in launching virtual events and transitioning to online fundraising, although most appear to be in the early stages of learning about these methods. Agencies are likely to benefit from continually educating themselves about these types of options – this may allow for a smoother transition should a similar crisis occur in the future.

Organizations must be in constant communication with their donors. Effective crisis communications will help the donors understand the need, the capabilities and the limitations of the organization and those it serves. Maintaining close relations and being honest about operational and financial challenges organizations are facing due to COVID-19 will improve fundraising outcomes.

There are also opportunities for new collaboration for fundraising. Foundations and larger agencies can act as conveners to help identify these opportunities, and help to educate leaders of smaller agencies about effective fundraising strategies during the pandemic.

Agencies could also continue to seek emergency funding in the form of grants and loans from sources like the SBA or local foundations. The Paycheck Protection Program appears to have been particularly helpful for many agencies, but some did not apply because they were unfamiliar with the program or unsure if they would qualify for assistance. It is worthwhile for agencies to research the eligibility requirements for such programs so that they do not miss out on resources that may be available to them. Foundations and organizations that support networks of nonprofits could be instrumental for helping with this; they may be able to use their networks and knowledge of the nonprofit sector to communicate with agencies, sharing information about potential opportunities for emergency assistance and helping them understand the eligibility requirements for those resources.

Share public health messages

Organizations could consider adopting a more proactive role in distributing public health information to their communities, in order to help educate people on how to stay healthy and prevent

the spread of the coronavirus. In addition to the direct public health benefits of sharing this information, significantly reducing new cases of COVID-19 could allow agencies to resume providing services more quickly. When distributing public health information and engaging with communities, is important for organizations to be aware of language barriers and make an effort to overcome them. This is particularly important in areas where large portions of the population primarily speak languages other than English.

Develop plans for crisis response and recovery

Unfortunately, it is possible that another pandemic or similar event could occur in the future, resulting in more office closures and further disruptions to services. Social service agencies should reflect on their experiences in the pandemic and use what they have learned to prepare for future crises. Many respondents to this survey suggested that their agencies would start setting aside money and equipment (including PPE) for use in an emergency, which could help them withstand the economic effects of a crisis and allow them to respond more quickly to the needs of their clients.

It may also be helpful to develop plans for transitioning to remote service delivery and for having staff work from home. These plans could involve training employees on how to most effectively use virtual platforms to provide services. When preparing this type of plan, agencies should make an effort to ensure that clients have the technology and skills they would need to engage in virtual programs; doing so could potentially increase participation in the programs and reduce isolation among clients. Agency staff could also receive training on how to use social media and online platforms to conduct fundraising, in order to help mitigate losses in revenue.

Foundations could consider helping service agencies prepare for the future by offering targeted assistance to improve their capacity for remote operations. This assistance could involve grants for the purpose of upgrading agency technology, or for training employees to more effectively use virtual platforms for communication and remote service delivery. Investing in service agencies' capability to work and provide services remotely may facilitate a better emergency response in the case of other crises.

Strive for Equity in COVID-19 Recovery

There is growing evidence that the health outcomes and economic impacts of COVID-19 are uneven across social groups. In particular, racial and ethnic minority groups have been disproportionately impacted. Therefore, health and social service providers need to re-evaluate service delivery to more effectively reach and serve those segments of our population. Especially with a growing emphasis nationally on addressing institutional racism, it is critical that agencies providing services in diverse communities do so with an understanding of racial equity and cultural competency. This includes understanding and addressing racial disparities in health and education, ensuring access to services in historically underserved neighborhoods, and hiring staff that reflect the makeup of the community they serve.

Advocacy

Finally, there are opportunities for advocacy to support public policies that will help sustain nonprofit organizations.

Areas for legislative action include, but are not limited to:

- Continued and expanded access to capital, such as continued availability of PPP funds and/or incentives for private financial institutions to lend to nonprofit organizations
- Expand communication and education about assistance programs and services available to nonprofit organizations
- Provide one-time expanded federal income tax incentives for charitable contributions, or other incentives to support individual charitable giving
- Recognize nonprofit employees and volunteers as essential workers, including considering support for PPE and hazard duty pay.