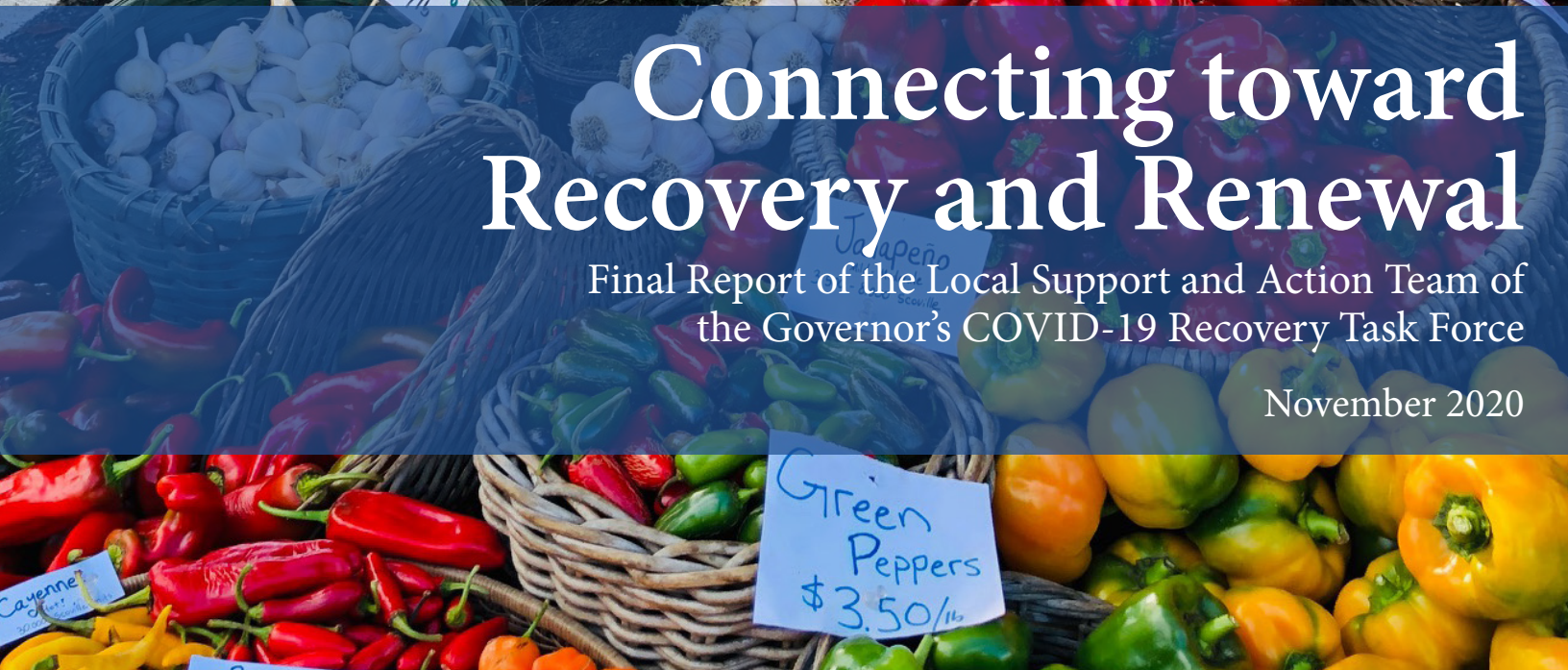# Connecting toward Recovery and Renewal

Final Report of the Local Support and Action Team of the Governor's COVID-19 Recovery Task Force

November 2020

Members of the Local Support and Action Team deeply appreciate Governor Scott's invitation to serve those stepping up to advance action and build recovery solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing that the keys to recovery do not come from Washington or Montpelier alone, Governor Scott created this Action Team to connect initiatives in communities and regions throughout Vermont, to share inspiring practices, to ensure the state's recovery was equitable, and to help weave together the efforts of residents across the state.

Team Observations

In addition to the lives lost and suffering brought by COVID-19, the health crisis highlighted or exacerbated fundamental challenges long faced by Vermonters—the loss of youth and economic stagnation in many communities, racial and economic disparities, and unmet needs of families, seniors, and children.

The impacts of COVID-19 are varied throughout the state. Employees lost jobs. Businesses closed and are suffering slow and interrupted re-openings. Families, especially those working from home, are struggling to balance their children's well-being and remote education. Many Vermonters are struggling to feed themselves and their families. And everywhere, we feel the impact of isolation as we are cut off from friends, families, and society.

But the crisis has also motivated us. Neighbors built pop-up food pantries and are delivering meals and groceries to homes. Housing providers found safe shelter for people experiencing homelessness. Schools built outdoor classrooms. People sewed masks, nurses moved to telemedicine, and families, providers, and communities developed creative solutions to meet childcare needs. Farmers markets moved online. Restaurants are providing meals for Vermonters in need. We now have important new connections, partnerships, and collaborations. We rallied, and we are united.

The COVID-19 crisis is deepening some well-known challenges and illuminating others. Members of the Action Team frequently heard skepticism about "getting back to normal." To many, "normal" was not a sustainable place to go back to. In fact, the pandemic is a galvanizing crucible that is testing and calling on Vermonters for a new dedication – a dedication going beyond our neighborly responses to the Covid crisis to address fundamental needs for a vital and prosperous future. This report is our attempt to share Vermonters' call for action toward a recovered and renewed future.

This report is also written in recognition that the recovery will rely on our ability to move beyond the public health crisis, which is ongoing, and the fact that the pandemic is not the only crisis we will face in the next generation. Even as the COVID-19 crisis hit, Vermonters were confronted by intolerable racist acts nationally and here at home. We have watched and experienced unprecedented national political division. We have seen the ravages of the climate crisis; wildfires in the West and storms in the South are harbingers of the cascading catastrophic effects predicted by science to grow progressively worse. While watching our virtual spaces in meeting after meeting with dedicated Vermonters who are determined to answer the COVID-19 crisis, the Action Team has seen a people tired, anxious, but undaunted. Overwhelmingly, Vermonters call for change, for seizing this day, for action to answer racism and other forms of inequity. Vermonters want to stand together for social justice and economic opportunity, to act at scale to answer climate change, and to renew our commitment to each other and to the very best of Vermont's opportunities. Together, we are Vermont Strong.

Action Team Efforts

Since its inception in March, the Action Team has been gathering best practices for COVID-19 response and recovery throughout Vermont (see highlights here). We've worked with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development to survey Vermonters on their best ideas. We've worked with local steering committees to build "Recovery Visits" for each of our fourteen counties. We've seen the power of Vermonters. We've seen what they are doing for one another. We've heard what they stand for.

In this report of our findings, we (1) share the transcribed Challenges, Stories of Success, and Ideas for the Future from County forums as an Appendix and (2) list below the Ideas for Action that rose everywhere from the people of Vermont. None of the findings below can stand alone and each are dependent on each other. Investing in the future of our economy will help us combat racism, just as universal broadband connectivity must be linked to affordable housing and a strong childcare system. There is no way to prioritize one of these actions over the others; together, they can strengthen the fabric of Vermont for the future.

Photo Credit: Downtown Brattleboro Alliance and AARP-VT

Combat racism in all its forms. Advance equity and inclusion as a foundation for welcoming new residents and enhancing our creative and prosperous future.

As in the rest of the nation, people of color in Vermont were hit harder by the pandemic and its economic fallout than white Vermonters. Events of the past year have awakened Vermonters to the uncomfortable but enduring fact of systemic racism and have galvanized us to examine and take action to ameliorate injustices and inequities and advance diversity and inclusion. We are at the beginning of this process. In one of the whitest states in the union, many white Vermonters have not confronted racism or been aware of the constant pressure of racism that Vermont residents or visitors of color feel in this state. We need to overcome institutionalized practices that discriminate or disfavor Vermonters of color.

One of Vermont's greatest opportunities is to build welcoming communities to attract entrepreneurs, workforce, creatives, and families that can answer our longstanding demographic challenge and enrich the state culturally as it advances economically. We must also go beyond simply attracting a more diverse population to the state. Having a diverse population is important, but even more important is meaningful inclusion. We must ensure that everyone's voice is heard and represented in local, state, and federal leadership in Vermont. Our Action Team has supported this by creating a Municipal Engagement Guide for communities. A meaningful welcome also means providing adequate redress for people who are targeted through harassment and threats, so that people can feel safe no matter what town they live in. It means retaining the people we attract.

Nationally, the most diverse generations in U.S. history are Millennial and Gen Z. The data show us that this is true in Vermont as well: people of color represent a larger share of Vermont's young people than their share of Vermont's older cohorts. This means the state's young people are helping the state become more racially diverse, and our efforts to attract and retain Vermonters of color must also focus on young people.

Systemic racism takes many forms, and much of it goes unnoticed. For this reason, we need to identify our blind spots, and the people best equipped to help us do that are the people who have lived experience. Including historically marginalized people in decision-making and conversations about equity is critical, and it is equally important to treat their tangible and emotional labor as labor and not take their contributions to this work for granted. It is not the job of marginalized people to un-marginalize themselves or to teach members of dominant groups about why marginalization is harmful to them or to the whole.

Photo Credit: Monique E. Priestley, The Space on Main

Build universal broadband connectivity.

Throughout Vermont, citizens are calling for universal and affordable broadband to every home and business. The pandemic has made the need for connectivity paramount for telemedicine, for remote work, for the education and opportunity of our children, and for social connection. Connectivity has become the essential tool for economic innovation and growth. The fact that many areas, families, and individuals are left out of these essential services is no longer tenable economically or from a health, welfare, education, or social justice position. It is time that we systematically close the circle by engaging state and federal investment, Communication Union Districts, electrical utilities, and the network of current providers to implement last mile solutions throughout Vermont.

Broadband infrastructure is a necessary but not sufficient condition to maximize economic opportunity and social well-being. Vermont should lead in finding ways to stimulate local purchasing, local commerce, local foods, and natural resource economies with online applications to counter the destruction of downtown economies and extraction of resources through the internet to the global economy. In the spirit of Town Meeting Day, Vermont should also lead in the development of civic tools to enhance community rather than divide it and to build trust, unity, and progress with the assistance of digital technologies. It's important to recognize that the construction of the infrastructure is not the final goal or end point of this work. Underlying issues of affordability (and therefore access) must also be addressed as we work to create the technological solutions that will include all parts of the state to optimize the benefits for all Vermonters.

Build an accessible, affordable, and universally available childcare system.

In households throughout Vermont, parents are wrestling to find high quality care and early learning for their children. Parents' capacity to contribute and participate in the economy is undermined, and many fear that their children are not getting the stimulation and developmental experiences that they need. And their fears are true; three out of every five of Vermont's youngest children don't have access to the care they need. Uncertainty, expense, and on-and-off closures have put families into perpetual anxiety and crisis.

Vermont needs to close the opportunity gap between families and develop ubiquitous, affordable childcare as well as out-of-school-time programming and care for all our children. This benefits families and employers, will help make Vermont more equitable and inclusive, and can brand Vermont nationally as the family-friendly destination for the next generation of workers and job creators. The work to do this must involve three elements: legislative structures and policies, community business models, and the professionalization and celebration of the early care education field. By investing in childcare solutions, Vermont can attract young families to the state, can save in future costs related to health care, special education, and even corrections, and ensure that parents are able to engage fully in Vermont's workforce.

Vermont should advance an affordable, high-quality childcare system where all families have access to the childcare they need; where childcare programs are compensated for the cost of care including the healthy meals and snacks, materials, and resources provided to support early learning experiences and access to comprehensive services; where educators are valued, fairly compensated, and supported in their professions; and where the statewide system ensures there is leveraged funding and accountability for outcomes.

End homelessness and advance housing for all Vermonters.

Under the leadership of the Scott administration, Vermont has stepped up to find temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness. We can be proud that there have been no COVID-19-related fatalities recorded in the homeless community. This public health emergency has highlighted how safe, decent, and affordable housing is critical to the health of our state's residents and economy overall. Knowing that people without homes in Vermont are more likely to be disabled, people of color, and have experienced trauma, it is unconscionable to only offer congregate emergency shelter settings for people who are homeless. We must build on the state's emergency response to date and work together to house all Vermonters permanently. This will reduce further trauma experienced by people who are homeless, especially children, and data show permanent housing will cost the state a fraction of the alternative and has far better outcomes for the individuals involved.

The state has already started securing permanent housing for homeless Vermonters through its Coronavirus Relief Fund, and future state investments must prioritize to address the limited resources available to this population until the achievable goal of ending homelessness is reached. Doing so will support vitality in town and city centers, support the state's workforce, and ultimately build equity and help young people and lower income people move into a growing middle class. It is crucial that Vermont seizes this moment to answer the long-term housing shortage and invest in the homes needed to attract and support the next generation of Vermonters.

Invest in the innovative future of our economy.

To recover, Vermont needs to provide supports to businesses today and also envision and seed longer-term economic renewal. With the leadership of the Scott administration and our congressional delegation, Vermont has availed PPP and other Cares Act funding as well as any state in the country. It is essential in the short-term that we continue to leverage federal and state funds to the highest level possible to provide subsidies that will make up business losses and stimulate the economy.

To fully optimize the economic potential of the state and advance its future prosperity, Vermont will need to: Build deep collaboration among all services and supports for enterprises and entrepreneurs, close the equity gap for women and minority-owned businesses, and seize the opportunity to drive success in key growth sectors. COVID-19 recovery presents an unparalleled opportunity for Vermont to proactively invest in micro-business development and technology as well as workforce growth and training – including strategies to make Vermont a remote worker destination. COVID-19 recovery also provides us with the opportunity to invest in the creative sector, energy, farm and forest enterprises, outdoor recreation, and businesses that provide solutions that combat the climate challenge and help us prepare for a resilient future.

IDEAS FOR
ACTION

ANTI-RACISM & RACIAL EQUITY

Identify blind spots. Invest tangibly in equity. Include historically marginalized people in decision-making.

BROADBAND

Build infrastructure. Develop civic tools to enhance community. Expand affordability/access.

Response, Recovery, and Renewal

LONG-TERM ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Deepen collaboration across sectors. Close the equity gap for MWBEs. Focus on key growth sectors.

CHILD CARE

Build a universally available childcare system. Aid the professionalization of the field.

HOUSING

Continue securing affordable housing for previously homeless people. Invest in housing to attract new and young residents.

Support Food System Resilience.

Across Vermont, our food system has been highly connected and has pivoted in this time of crisis as exampled at the local level by supporting new food pantries within villages, and at a statewide level, by the establishment of the state-supported Everyone Eats program. Many communities quickly connected producers and created community CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture). Green Mountain Farm to School and Northshire Grows both set up CSAs and marketed to community members who could pay and built in discounted shares and delivery options for those that needed them.

Support Local Purchasing to Boost Businesses and the Economy.

Vermont communities turned to support local businesses by creating new models to incentivize buying local. In St. Albans, Downtown Dollars and collective marketing pointed locals and visitors towards downtown businesses while local purchasing programs in Island Pond and Wilmington helped to leverage and boost local spending with collective marketing, online hubs, and local coupons.

Use Art and Outdoor Recreation to Revitalize and Build Community Connection.

Examples of this strategy throughout Vermont include handwashing stations for shoppers in downtown Brattleboro designed by local artists, drive-in concerts and movies in the Northeast Kingdom, socially distanced Food Trucks in Currier Park in Barre, and a Hike 100 challenge in the Deerfield Valley to encourage community members to get outdoors and stay active.

Develop Community/Provider Partnerships to Support Education and Childcare.

For instance, a partnership formed between Castleton University, the City of Rutland, and Rutland Schools to set up affordable out-of-school-time care. Also, the Whiting School leased out their vacant building to a private childcare provider to open a new program and provide childcare for community members and school staff.

Use Service-Provider Coordination to Collaboratively Address Challenges.

Vermont can leverage existing collaboration – including the Lamoille/Central VT command center, Working Communities Challenge (WCC) communities, and Hunger Councils -- to come together across sectors to address challenges and shorten the linkages between organizations for the people in need of critical services.

Leverage Community-Based Organizations and Groups to Provide Support.

The Action Team noted successful examples of this such as the mutual aid/community response groups that came together around the state. Additionally, existing community groups helped to connect those in need with help/funding, supported access to masks for their communities, created phone trees to check in on neighbors, coordinated meal and grocery delivery, built funds to help neighbors in need, and more.

WHAT

Local Support and Community Action Team Roster

Action Team Lead: Paul Costello, Executive Director, Vermont Council on Rural Development
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Summary of County Visit Ideas toward Action
Local Support and Community Action Team
Vermont Recovery Task Force

This list of issues represents the ideas and input that <u>we heard</u> from the 1,000 participants in the 14 county Covid-19 recovery visit sessions produced by VCRD for the Local Support and Community Action Team

Childcare

Needs/Challenges

- The lack of accessible, affordable child care is an economic and social challenge.
- Lack of childcare disproportionately affects women.
- Systemic investment is needed at the state level to subsidize early childhood education.
- Educators are currently paid too little, and parents can't afford to pay more. It is hard to attract and retain staff.
- It can be difficult for families to find a program that has spots available. Families don't know where to go to search for programs with openings.
- Education and training for early childhood educators is expensive and under-supported.
- Child care providers are underrepresented in policy discussions. Decisions are often made that don't reflect the realities on the ground.
- Often municipalities and local leaders lack clear guidance on the steps they can take to support local affordable childcare.
- It is difficult, and often costly, for child care providers to constantly adapt to changing health guidance.
- The Childcare Hubs created to fill gaps in out of school time have been helpful in some areas, but have faced challenges in others around availability and affordability.
- The strict regulations around covid are causing challenges for some families. If their child shows any sign of illness, even a stuffy nose, they do not have care and need to stay home or make other arrangements.
- Many providers are forced to choose between contact with their extended families and ongoing employment due to their increased exposure to COVID.

Stories of Success

- Childcare providers across the State have connected in unprecedented ways to learn from each other and develop strategies to meet challenges head-on. Groups are coming together independently such as Childcare Counts in Windham County, Upper Valley Strong, and Bridging the Childcare Divide in Chittenden County, or have been convened by regional childcare coordinators, Building Bright Futures, or Let's Grow Kids.
- Shared Services models have been effective in helping groups of providers improve efficiency and share back-end functions to operate sustainably.
- Communities have identified strategies to expand childcare access and availability. Examples include a community-based initiative in Randolph to develop a childcare program for the region and an initiative in Whiting where a private provider partnered with the school district to create a program in the newly vacant Whiting School. The Rotary Club in Rutland created a grant to support childcare and educational programming.
- Many participants shared the value of incorporating preschool into the k-12 system in Vermont. Wells Village preschool acquired a grant to expand the pre-k program to full day and hired an early education coordinator to conduct outreach, organize playgroups, and connect families to resources.

Ideas for the Future

■ Publicly Funded Universal Childcare for All Families

Increase investment to support universal childcare for all children and families – make a "game-changing" and systemic investment and transformation to support early education. Childcare should be seen as an essential need and public good. Addressing this today will save money in the long-run in many service/education/care arenas and could be a magnet to attract young families to Vermont if we get it right (* this issue came up over 25 times--in forums focused on childcare, education, business recovery, community unity, and more. Subsequent frequency numbers will be listed without this explanation.)

- ■ **Develop the Childcare Workforce**

Recruit staff and teachers to the early care and education field through incentives, loan forgiveness, and addressing the low pay and lack of benefits in the industry. Celebrate early education providers as essential teachers and support for our young children. (*5)

- ■ **Create Innovative/Alternative Childcare Models**

Work with childcare providers and communities to develop alternative or innovative models including partnerships with higher education institutions, community groups, employers, and others to fill community needs. Develop local coalitions of education, schools, service providers, community leaders, and others to identify space and innovative solutions for care. (*4)

Education

Needs/Challenges

- Schools face ongoing resource challenges, but are increasingly expected to fill gaps in other social services (food, health care, mental health support) without the support they need.
- Disparities in student access to technology perpetuate educational inequities due to differing home situations and access.
- Many teachers are in vulnerable age brackets and also may lack technological skills to feel comfortable with remote learning.
- The ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic poses a major planning challenge for officials and administrators.
- The financial viability of the State's higher education system is an ongoing concern.

- Public schools are often siloed from early childhood education providers. There should be more partnership and integration.
- We need to build better connections between educational institutions and potential employers. School to job pipelines continue to be narrow or non-existent in some places.
- The inconsistency between different schools' re-opening/COVID response strategies poses planning difficulties for parents, administrators, and major employers.
- Wearing masks all day at school creates a barrier to student participation in 3rd space programming. Online/hybrid learning doesn't provide the same social development as in person.

Stories of Success

- Teachers and administrators stepped up in unprecedented ways across the state to reopen schools safely in support of Vermont's youth and families.
- Schools and out of-of-school-time program providers have created unique and innovative partnerships to provide more outdoor learning opportunities. They have identified creative solutions to outdoor programming or socially distancing including partnerships with community spaces or tent companies.
- Afterschool programs have stepped up in creative ways to fill in gaps left by school closures. In Rutland City, Castleton University partnered with Rutland City Schools and the City Parks and Recreation Department to offer in-school tutoring

and afterschool activities. The Boys and Girls Club in Rutland patterned with Barstow and Fairhaven Schools to offer childcare support.
- The Virtual Teen Speak program at the Blake Memorial Library offered a platform for youth to share their experience and what they would like to see in their community.
- Some communities have identified ways to improve access to career training and learning opportunities. CCV opened up online courses for free to Vermont high school students. Canaan Schools has expanded their career training program which is allowing students to access safe experiential learning as schools reopened.

Ideas for the Future

- ■ **Financial Support for School Reopening**

Support educational institutions for bringing infrastructure up to speed with requirements, repairs, ventilation, PPE and to support a shift to online learning or other innovative models for learning outside of the classroom and one-on-one tutoring. (*4)

- ■ **Invest in Higher Education and Workforce Development**

Direct state and federal support for workforce development to establish a stronger pipeline from school to careers with high needs (nursing, trades, support services). (*6 – both in education and business recovery forums.)

■ **Extend Subsidy to Support Alternative Models and School-Age Children**

Expand the childcare subsidy program to support families with school-age children trying to find care to fill gaps when schools are closed. (*2)

■ **Develop Community Partnerships to Support Students**

Connect schools to community partners that can support outdoor learning, tutoring, mental health, physical health, access to the internet and devices to connect, or other ways to support and supplement learning. (*2)

Business Recovery

Needs/Challenges

- The lack of affordable broadband access is an impediment to business for the business and the consumer.
- The digital literacy & online skill sets of business owners varies; many business owners need additional support to move business online.
- Convenient online markets continue to draw money out of the local economy.
- It is difficult to gather accurate and comprehensive data about how local businesses are faring.
- Tourism-based businesses are particularly hard hit.
- Outdoor adaptations are seasonally dependent. There is uncertainty about the future, which limits investment in local businesses.
- Child care, workforce housing, workforce development, and transportation continue to pose major challenges for businesses finding and retaining workers.
- Many businesses are going to have to completely re-imagine their business models.

Stories of Success

- Communities and Regions have developed creative initiatives to promote local businesses and encourage buying local. Including:
  - Wilmington Works local coupon program
  - St. Albans Downtown Dollars
  - Island Pond Buy Local program
  - Randolph In Action's Local Business Directory
  - Newbury business directory booklet
  - Bradford Facebook Group dedicated to supporting local business and services
  - Downtown Brattleboro Alliance Love Brattleboro Campaign
- Communities have adopted new policies and supported business to create outdoor space for dining, retail, and safe gathering.
- Having a local Economic Development leader or staff to directly support business recovery has been valuable. Some communities went into the pandemic with this support while others have recently hired staffing. In Montpelier, a Recovery Navigator was hired specifically to support businesses in recovery and connect to resources.
- Businesses around the state have adapted quickly. Many have pivoted to take out, curbside, or even home delivery models. Communities around the State expressed gratitude and were impressed by the ability to businesses to adjust and continue to provide services to the community.
- The Working Bridges model coordinated by the United Way of Northwestern VT is an employer collaborative who supports employees with resource coordinators and financial coaches through life situations. It has been successful in Franklin County in supporting the workforce through COVID challenges. It is a model with the potential for expansion.
- Co-Working spaces have been able to reopen safely. They can offer an opportunity for businesses to expand their remove worker capacity.

Ideas for the Future

■ **Expand Technical Assistance and Financial Support for Small Businesses**

Connect businesses with technical assistance needed to navigate current loan/financing opportunities and to help them transition towards online sales and to safe retail/service environment. This should include retail, dining, tourism-based businesses, the creative economy, and more. Additionally, ensure businesses have financial support for ventilation upgrades, PPE, and technology necessary to safely operate. (*8)

■ **Invest in Training and Workforce Development in the Green and Digital Economy**

Develop programs to train workers in weatherization, renewable energy development, and equip workers with the tools to participate in the digital economy. This includes training to help to install and maintain fiber networks as we expand fiber to the home in Vermont. (*3)

■ **Expand Working Bridges Program Statewide**

Scale up the Working Bridges model of providing resource coordinators to help navigate workforce challenges and barriers. (*2)

■ **Develop Co-Working Spaces**

Develop co-working spaces for remote work and as central hubs for businesses to utilize shared equipment and materials for business operations, shipping, fulfillment services, and more. (*2)

■ **Develop Local/Regional Buy-Local Campaigns**

Work regionally to develop online buy-local guides and directories and to establish buy-local marketing/advertising campaigns. Gather businesses to work together collaboratively rather than compete. (*2)

Telecommunications

Needs/Challenges

- VT settlement patterns make open-market broadband buildout an economic non-starter. State or federal support is needed to finish last mile development.
- Small towns and local groups lack human resources and leadership to drive forward projects on their own. CUDs and local groups need additional support.

- We need to build awareness and educate the public about benefits of broadband development.
- The CARES funding deadline of December 31st is a major challenge for meaningful infrastructure buildout. Quick fixes in the short term will hamper better long-term solutions.
- Limited cell coverage is a challenge, with many communities completely unserved.

Stories of Success

- The DPS Public Hot Spot map and grant program allowed communities to develop creative solutions to providing Wi-Fi access to residents and visitors. DPS has deployed 95 Wi-Fi hotspots around the state and will deploy another 50.
- The development of Communications Union Districts (CUDs) around the state have provided a point of organization and coordination to move Broadband access forward. CUDs are

now meeting and coordinating on statewide solutions as well. The Central Vermont Fiber CUD has recently accessed significant funds to move their project forward.
- With the CUD formation, new partnerships, increased awareness, and new funding coming into the state, Vermont has an unprecedented opportunity to address this critical challenge.

Ideas for the Future

■ **Develop Broadband Infrastructure**

Develop Broadband as critical infrastructure for the future of the state. Support, fund, and assist CUDs, and bring in partners to represent needs and support progress in education, the arts, healthcare, libraries, and more. (*mentioned over 25 times in almost every forum topic – education, arts, housing, business recovery, telecommunications, entertainment.

Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation

Needs/Challenges

- The arts and humanities sector was particularly hard hit by the pandemic given the health restrictions on public congregation and the limited funding and partnership support available to cultural institutions.
- The sector has a higher proportion of gig workers, who are particularly vulnerable to economic downturn and received fewer support programs than contracted or salaried employees.
- Virtualized content is a highly competitive market, and difficult to monetize.

- Many customers lack the technology to access to virtual content.
- Many areas lack a centralized event calendar, or if one exists, it is underutilized. It's difficult for residents in more rural communities in particular to know about upcoming events.
- Decreasing volunteerism due to health concerns is a particular challenge for this sector.
- There is inconsistent guidance in some places about the safe use of recreational spaces and facilities.
- Seasonal adaptations may prove a challenge, as many successful pivots have relied on outdoor space.

Stories of Success

- Communities have found ways to repurpose outdoor gathering spaces and village greens to bring people together safely for community events. Examples include:
    - An outdoor art gallery at Kent Museum in Calais
    - Outdoor events at Middle Ground in Middlesex
    - Food Truck events at Currier Park in Barre City
    - The Farm to Form Fondo in the Islands
    - Drive-In concerts and movies by Higher Ground and Catamount Arts.
    - Movies on the Green in Craftsbury and Hardwick organized by a Hardwick youth group.
    - A series of parking lot concerts organized by the Vermont Jazz Center
- Libraries and other community groups adapted community programming to provide virtual content. Artists have also adapted to stream content directly to their audience.
- Community art projects have helped to engage artists and connect to the broader community. Examples include:
    - Painted Pallets around the community in Wallingford
    - Handwashing stations in downtown Brattleboro featuring local art
    - Barn Quilts around Randolph organized by the East Valley Community Group
- The recreation sector is "booming." People have a renewed interest in getting outside. Assets like trails, bike paths, and rail trails have been essential.

Ideas for the Future

■ Develop Local/Regional Arts and Recreation Coalitions

Develop local or regional coalitions to advance arts and recreation as the center of community life. Utilize arts, entertainment, and recreation to connect and unite the community. (*3)

■ Ensure Federal and State Relief Funding for Arts Organizations and Artists

Recognizing the value of the arts and entertainment to our communities, ensure that any state or federal aid programs include artists, arts organizations, and cultural institutions. (*3)

■ Incentivize Opening Private Land for Recreation

Encourage private landowners to open up land for recreation by providing tax breaks through the Current Use program. (*1)

Addressing Racial Inequity/Building Community Unity and Inclusion

Needs/Challenges

- Unwillingness to explicitly name, confront, and disrupt white supremacy culture. People of color are fearful for their safety.
- Cultural divisions have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Not everyone is experiencing the same "truth." Effects of the pandemic felt disproportionately by certain groups: lower-income, people of color, older adults.
- Social isolation is leading to serious mental health deterioration in some folks. Substance abuse is on the rise.
- Local civic and cultural education is absent from school curricula. Students of color face discrimination and violence.
- Many cultural pillars of unity and public congregation spaces are closed due to health restrictions.
- The pandemic has widened the disconnection between different age groups/generations.
- Leadership is lacking on a municipal and regional level to address systemic racism in local planning.
- Traditional views of Vermont identity are often very narrow and homogenous. We need to rethink the narrative of what it means to be a Vermonter.
- Farmworkers are an overlooked group of essential workers who received little state support initially.
- There is a need to critically re-think local leadership structures, eliminate barriers, and encourage a broader diversity of civic participation.
- Investment in de-escalation training is needed. Vermont gun-ownership is a concerning context for rising racial tension.
- Many expressed how meaningful action can lead to fatigue and exhaustion.

Stories of Success

- Organizational leaders in the Burlington areas have come together to make a shared commitment to addressing racial justice as a public health emergency.
- There are a handful of cities and towns in Vermont leading the charge on addressing racial equity. This is an opportunity to connect and share their learning and work.
- The Rutland School District issued a mandatory equity framework for all of their staff.
- The Rutland County Restorative Justice Center has been working to establish a cross-geographic partnership to pool best practices and resources that will be published when complete.

Ideas for the Future

▪ Develop Inclusion Commitments/Statements

Every group/individual/organization should leverage their own social capital to address and dismantle systemic racism. Local community groups, business groups, and other organizations should do the internal work to recognize and acknowledge systemic racism in their arena of work and develop inclusion commitments and action statements. (*1)

▪ Redesign Public School Curricula and Support Services

Public school curriculum should include historical inequities and issues around systemic racism. Additionally, particular attention, resources, and support should be committed to support the mental, emotional, social, and educational needs of youth of color and New Americans. (*2)

▪ Develop and Improve Data Collection

Collect accurate data that breaks down data sets by race in order to fully understand the current challenges and underscore the reality of the problem. (*1)

▪ Demonstrate State Leadership on Tackling Racial Inequity

State action in a leadership role on tackling systemic racism and racial inequity beyond statements and speeches. In particular, Vermont should lead on providing accessible State services through translation and in culturally appropriate ways. (*2)

▪ Incorporate Equity into Town Planning

Address racial inequities in the town planning process. Support communities with requirements and guidance around how to build principles of equity and inclusion in to their planning process and documents. (*1)

Attracting and Welcoming New Residents

Needs/Challenges

- Travel restrictions have galvanized "us" vs. "them" mentality, and led to rising xenophobia and unwelcoming acts or racist actions. Perceptions of Vermont tolerance are at an all-time low.
- New homebuyers are often perceived to be of a different economic status from many locals, contributing to class tensions.
- These cultural divisions often maroon new residents from the local community and therefore miss opportunities to engage them in the local culture.
- Youth are continuing to leave rural communities. Housing prices are higher, wages are lower than in neighboring states. Educational opportunities are also slim.

- Local economies are often much slower than elsewhere in the country, which makes attracting new workers difficult.
- Most job opportunities concentrated at the top or the bottom, with not a lot of mid-level jobs available.
- Need for comprehensive state marketing / tourism strategies and public investment to match it. Vermont has a lot of wonderful, undersold qualities.
- Spotty access to broadband & cell service is a deterrent for many potential new residents. Home values increase overnight if they get a high-speed connection.

Stories of Success

- The Stay to Stay program was very successful in Bennington and brought 8 families to the area.
- The Vermont Welcome Wagon in the NEK and Chittenden County has been a valuable success story to welcome new people and connect to locals.

- BDCC and other Windham/Bennington county partners have come together around a Working Communities Challenge Initiative to develop a strategic plan towards inviting and welcoming new Vermonters.

Ideas for the Future

▪ Develop a Comprehensive Statewide Strategy to Attract and Retain New Residents

Develop a strategy that includes boosting support and connection for remote workers, improves our childcare system and k-12 education, and boosts higher education to attract young people to the state. (*3)

■ **Create Local/Regional Welcome Packages**

Develop welcome packages that both help to welcome and connect new residents to the community and allow businesses to promote their products/services to newcomers. (*1)

Local Food Systems and Food Security

Needs/Challenges

- Large distributors are prioritizing locations with higher storage capacity, which poses a challenge to smaller, more rural food hubs.
- Local producers face difficulties in selling their products as markets close or are curtailed.
- There is a broad diversity of technological capacity and ability to pivot to online sales among local producers.
- Early days of the pandemic highlighted the fragility of long supply chains and the need for ongoing investment in local production and processing.
- Local producers must compete with convenient online delivery markets like Amazon.
- The dairy industry was hard hit with huge revenue losses and some shuttering for good. Milk prices are beyond local control.

- Short-term relief dollars were helpful, but don't address questions of long-term viability.
- Food waste continues to be an ongoing problem. How can local communities capture some of that waste and bring it back into the system?
- Nutritious local food remains more expensive than less healthy alternatives, and public nutrition education is needed.
- The charitable food system often limits the choice of ingredients and foods and leads to massive waste.
- Reimbursement for school meals, meals on wheels, and other federal programs is often not sufficient to cover the actual cost of a nutritious meal.
- Food insecurity, particularly among children, at an all-time high, but numbers of folks accessing food pantries often flat or declining. Stigma remains a pervasive barrier.

Stories of Success

- Universal School Meals and school meal delivery has worked well and has been essential to get families and children through this challenging time.
- There has been a significant increase in demand for CSAs and local food purchasing. Farms and businesses have ramped up production. Some communities have created new CSA or group purchasing models including the Northshire Grows CSA in the Manchester area and Green Mountain Farm Direct in the NEK. Both programs provide a CSA share and solicit donations and volunteer help to be able to purchase and deliver shares to more vulnerable community members.
- Community groups and organizations have stepped up to help identify food availability and distribute to those who need it. This includes both food shelf goods and prepared foods. Examples include:
  - Weekly food bags delivered to community members in Craftsbury
  - Food bags that were delivered alongside school meals in Mount Holly
  - The VYCC Health Care Share
  - The Veggie Van Go partnership between the hospital, schools, and the Foodbank in the NEK
  - Pop-up food pantries around the state

  - NEK Council on Aging delivering meals with over 100 volunteers around the Kingdom
  - The Grow a Row campaign organized by the South Hero Land Trust to purchase seedlings from local farmers to pass out to low-income families and all children in Grand Isle.
- The Everyone Eats Program has been a successful model to support restaurants and producers as well as improve access to meals for those who need them.
- Communities and regions are working to address food aggregation, storage, and processing challenges. For example:
  - The Center for an Agricultural Economy's JustCut program adapted to address food security needs in the community by sourcing food from area farms to process in their commercial kitchen and distribute.
  - Deep Roots Organic Co-op based in Johnson collectively markets products from area farms
  - The Bennington Regenerative Food Network has come together to explore collective strategies for food processing and distribution
- The Crop Cash program to triple EBT dollars at farm stands and farmers markets has been a critical way to support the working lands economy and families

Ideas for the Future

■ **Support Farmer Transitions/Diversification**

Provide funding to help farmers transition to new products or diversity their offerings, especially to local markets. Support should help to boost processing, distribution, storage, and equipment needed to successfully transition. (*4)

- ■ **Employ Universal School Meals and Meal Delivery**

Continue Universal School Meals and meal delivery post-crisis to continue to ensure children meet their nutritional needs. Meals should be provided year-round and include childcare programs as well. Additionally, continue to model investment in Farm to School programming to boost nutrition and support Vermont farms. (*8)

- ■ **Develop Food Distribution Hubs to Serve Rural Communities**

Create regional food processing/storage/distribution hubs to support profitable farms, value-added production, co-branding, and aggregate storage and distribution of food for local consumption and to capture regional markets. (*3)

Housing and Homelessness

Needs/Challenges

- Emergency housing for people experiencing homelessness will end, but demand will remain. Wait-lists are long for housing vouchers.
- It is difficult to purchase a first home/affordable home in Vermont. Prices are high and housing costs compound with others: heat, transportation, child care, etc.
- In smaller towns, a quality rental is difficult to find. This is a particular challenge in communities that have a college or university in their town.
- There is often a lack of water and wastewater infrastructure in smaller communities to allow for housing development.
- There are zoning barriers to the development of affordable/multi-household units.
- Certain housing infrastructure such as shared units and mobile home communities are more vulnerable than others to the pandemic.
- Long-term outcomes for renters and landlords are still uncertain. Unpaid rent remains a major issue and some expect the issue to become worse in the coming months.

- The December 31 deadline for CARES spending is limiting as major development can't happen before then.
- Vermont lacks a comprehensive long-term housing plans and instead relies on short-term fixes.
- Many properties are being purchased sight unseen by folks from metropolitan areas looking for an escape. This influx of demand puts pressure on an already narrow market.
- There's a broad diversity of experiences that lead individuals or families to become housing-insecure, so there's no one-size fits all solution. Housing solutions need to be comprehensive, cross-sector, and holistic.
- It is particularly difficult to find housing for people in transition or recovery – especially during covid challenges.
- The need is often invisible to those with the highest capacity to invest. We need to build public awareness of housing shortages and related challenges.

Stories of Success

- Several communities/regions have built coalitions or committees committed to addressing the housing challenge locally. For example:
  - Building Homes Together in Chittenden County is a strong coalition of partners monitoring housing development
  - St. Johnsbury developed a housing committee working to bring together and support landlords in the town and develop incentives for property improvement
  - The Springfield Supportive Housing Coalition assists families and individuals in Windsor and Northern Windham counties who were either homeless, or in danger of losing their housing, find permanent, affordable housing and receive at home case management for 6 months to 2 years.
- Creative partnerships have formed as a result of the pandemic and the incoming CRF funding that offers more flexibility than traditional funding streams. These include:
  - The THRIVE partnership in Washington County
  - A strong housing coalition in Addison County that has stepped up in unique ways to address challenges
- Service providers outside of the housing arena have begun to expand their services to support housing and home ownership. Examples include:

  - Opportunities Credit Union is employing several programs to support homebuyers including down payment grants, allowed forbearance of mortgages, and MoneySense financial counseling for those facing foreclosure and rental debt.
  - Washington County Mental Health has piloted the use of tiny homes to house individuals and families in transition.
  - Project Vision in Rutland, initially designed to address substance use disorder in the City, is buying foreclosed houses and turning them into low-income housing.
  - Neighborworks has a homeownership center where they offer a counseling and home improvement program
- Several organizations in Vermont provide services to help seniors stay in their homes including the SASH program and the Aging in Hartland initiative.
- New guidance from ACCD has been issued to support communities looking to remove housing barriers. Some communities, including Winooski and South Burlington, Burlington, Middlesex, and Hinesburg have adopted recommendations including form-based code, new administrative review processes, and inclusionary zoning that requires construction of affordable housing.
- The Rental Housing Stabilization Program has been a huge lifeline to many renters.

Ideas for the Future

■ Develop More Affordable Housing

Prioritize affordable housing development and work with communities/regions to address regulatory barriers, incentivize and encourage housing development, and partner with developers to increase the availability of affordable housing statewide. More funding should be available for affordable housing and the organizations that promote and develop it. (*14)

■ Support Rehab of Underused Buildings for Housing

Support and foster the redevelopment of vacant or underutilized buildings for affordable long-term and rental housing. Additionally, create a fund to support landlords who are maintaining and rehabbing older rental units. (*5)

■ Develop Local/Regional Housing Commissions to Address Need

Following the model in St. Johnsbury and other towns/regions across the state, communities should develop housing commissions with a diverse set of partners to identify and address housing needs. Offer funding to help these commissions develop housing plans for their town/city/region. (*3)

Transportation

Needs/Challenges

- COVID-19 health restrictions are an impediment to group transit, which leaves many people without transportation options.
- Transit cost challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19.
- Some fee-for-service carriers are struggling economically as ridership drops.
- There is a lack of representation of folks with lived experience in policy-level decisions. Barriers to participation in "public forums" remain high and create an echo-chamber.

- There is a need for public education and outreach about available transportation options.
- There is stigma associated with public transportation that we need to overcome.
- Many communities still lack any public transportation at all, and many hub towns remain unconnected.
- Often "green" choices are only available to the wealthy. Support is needed to allow lower income Vermonters to make sustainable transportation choices.

Stories of Success

- When Stagecoach cut back on senior services it opened up space to support other community needs such as transportation to critical services and food delivery.
- The Old Spokes Home Transportation Equity Coalition is working to make bikes accessible to everyone and to better advocate from a variety of transportation perspectives.

- The micro transit pilot project in Montpelier models how smaller buses and shared-ride vans could replace regular bus service.
- The electro-static sprayers used by GMT have been a successful tool to sanitize buses between rides.

Ideas for the Future

■ Improve Public Transportation

Expand public transportation routes and ensure that stops line up with employment, health, and child care needs. Bring together a coalition of public and private partners including education leaders, employers, health care providers, public and private transportation providers, and State leaders to identify concrete solutions and action. (*8)

■ Expand Walk and Bike Infrastructure

Focus funding and technical assistance on efforts to expand the availability of walk and bike paths in communities around the state and to improve the walkability and bike-ability of our downtowns and village centers. Conduct mobility audits across the state to identify the needs and develop a strategic plan to move forward. Additionally, programs that partner with local bike shops could be created to provide low cost bikes and ebikes to Vermonters. (*7)

■ Develop a Healthy Car Fund

Create community-based funds to support families when emergency car issues arise. This would support working families who are not eligible for programs like Good News Garage. (*1)

Meeting Essential Community Needs/Community Health

Needs/Challenges

- The pre-pandemic crises in child care, housing, transportation, and health care have been exacerbated by the pandemic. All these costs compound and overwhelm many families and individuals.
- Support agencies have struggled to pivot their service delivery models to accommodate ongoing health recommendations, particularly to serve older adults and more vulnerable populations.
- Unemployment and job losses continue to cause financial upheaval and insecurity for many Vermonters.
- There is a need for healthy emotional outlets and mental health supports. Substance abuse and adverse childhood experiences are on the rise. Medical and mental health care is increasingly difficult to access.
- Confusing and overlapping service territories are a barrier to many in accessing support. We need more centralization, single-door entry, and continuum of care services.

- It is difficult to collect accurate data. There are concerns about the accuracy of point-in-time counts and other metrics on which public policy decisions are based.
- Food insecurity is at an all-time high.
- There stigma associated with folks seeking support services. Doing so often runs contrary to traditional Vermont culture of "rugged individualism."
- There are political and ideological divisions about safety protocols which has created tension.
- Systemically racist structures continue to perpetuate inequities.
- There is decreasing volunteerism due to health concerns.
- Local response groups are often poorly integrated into existing support structures.

Stories of Success

- Community "mutual aid" or response teams quickly formed to help connect people that want to help with those that need help and services. These groups have formed in every corner of the state. Some got to work quickly and have disbanded while others continue to identify and address needs in their community as they shift through the recovery. These community response groups served many varying functions around the state including:
  - Addison County coordinated a huge mask-making effort led by the United Way.
  - Canaan Naturally Connected brought a mobile testing unity to the community to improve access to covid testing.
  - Many groups created phone trees or community directories to reach out across the community and identify needs and offer support.
  - Many groups partnered with local food banks, schools, or other providers to help to distribute meals and groceries.
  - In Addison County, a group that works with migrant farm workers had to adjust when volunteers were unable to provide rides to migrant workers to medical appointments and other needs. Instead, they were able to connect migrant workers with licenses to other migrant workers for rides.

  - Woodstock Area Relief Fund raised over $600,000 to support recovery activity and community needs.
- Several regions came together through more formal partnerships and structures to collect and share information and resources and coordinate response. These include the Lamoille County LAH2S-ROCC group, the Addison County Recovery Team, the Windham Region COVID-19 Community Response and Recovery Team, and WNOC-ROCC in Washington and Orange Counties. These structures have been key in the coordination of organizations and response to community needs.
- Communities have found ways to continue to connect and collaborate virtually through zoom meetings or "virtual community centers" that offer programming and regular coffee hours. Fairlee conducted a "community makeover" through virtual and safe in-person convenings to chart a path for creative projects to improve their Main Street.
- Many counties shared the benefits of unprecedented partnerships and connections to address critical issues such as homelessness and health issues. In particular, the communications function of these groups was key in building and sharing lists of critical resources from food and housing support to business recovery navigation and grant/relief programs.

Ideas for the Future

■ Develop Community-Based Hubs to Access Resources

Create community-based regional "hub and spoke" models to provide resources and support services in one central location. Hubs would be a place to connect to others, access childcare, connect to high speed internet, access food, and more. Hubs could be new developments or be located in current community centers such as libraries, churches, or town halls. (*4) (a model being tested in the NEK but came up elsewhere as well)

■ Support Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Recovery

Develop comprehensive strategies to support the mental health of Vermonters and address substance misuse. (*1)

■ **Cultivate and Support Local/Regional Emergency Response**

Continue to maintain, boost, and expand mutual aid/community response groups in communities around the state. When the pandemic hit, many local and regional mutual aid and emergency response groups developed to support their community. These groups made new connections and partnerships across sectors to respond to community needs and communicate the resources available.

■ **Boost Support for Community Organizations/Institutions**

Boost support for the work of local organizations such as community organizing groups, groups that support people with disabilities, libraries, Neighbor to Neighbor groups, Food Shelves, recovery networks/organizations, organizations that support New Americans, and other groups that support the immediate needs of their community. (*4)