

# COVID-19 Local Support and Community Action Team



## Interim Report to the Governor

The members of the Local Support and Community Action Team submit this Interim Report of findings, recommendations, and on-going actions to Governor Phil Scott. We recognize that some of these ideas are works in progress; others may need human, technical, or funding resources to move forward. We submit these preliminary ideas for your consideration and will look for your feedback as we work to support the power of local communities toward recovery.

## Action Team's Charge

The Local Support and Community Action Team is working to engage with local groups to learn what is being done on the ground in communities and what can be replicated and shared statewide. This team's focus is on identifying gaps in recovery efforts to ensure equitable distribution of resources, especially in rural areas and underserved populations. The Local Support and Community Action Team is learning from businesses, nonprofits, and community members about their needs and ideas for community and economic recovery. It will use what it learns in three ways:

- Build recommendations to the Governor, the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, and in some cases for Legislative Action;
- Share best practices and strategies for recovery between and among communities throughout Vermont; and
- Frame and implement efforts with a variety of partners to directly spur community and business recovery.

Simply put, this Team serves to gather information about local initiatives, validate and vet those efforts, and provide strategies to maximize our response for the benefit of all Vermonters. Toward these ends it is working to advance short-term, middle-term, and long-term recovery efforts.



# What We are Hearing from Vermonters



To fulfill the Governor's charge to identify gaps in services and to hear from Vermont's most vulnerable community members, the Action Team sought input from Vermonters toward a set of key priorities. The Action Team took public input in the following ways:

- **Action Team outreach** to key partners to solicit input and advice included the legislature, business leaders, non-profit organizations across many sectors, regional planners, social service providers, economic development organizations, congressional and federal agency leadership, and others.
- **Discussions with key constituencies** included local community response organizers, regional planners, and community and statewide COVID-19-response resource provider organizations.
- **A survey** of Vermonters, representing diverse sectors and interests across the state, including people connected to: working lands, equity and social justice, economic development, planning, government, housing, tourism, business, arts, education, finance, industry, religious, human services, and the environment.

## Key Themes Emerged from this Input, including:

- The recognition by Vermonters that the retail, restaurants, hospitality, tourism, lodging, vulnerable populations, and cultural organizations have been the hardest hit and need financial support and technical assistance.
- The critical importance of ubiquitous high speed broadband.
- The need for support for businesses and a statewide buy-local campaign – supporting business from crisis to recovery.
- The crucial need for food access and support for the local food system.
- Organizations and networks are adapting and responding best through communication, coordination, collaboration, service delivery changes, and education.
- Vermonters continue to innovate and offer a deep well of recovery ideas and visions for a post-COVID prosperity: from advancing broadband/technology for immediate needs (telemedicine, social services, remote work, and education) to adapting local food supply chains to meet emergency food needs today and in the future.
- The importance of being prepared in advance of any potential resurgence of new COVID-19 cases with clear protocols and communications for the healthcare and education systems, for personal protective equipment sourcing, for testing/tracking/quarantine measures, and to ensure public safety.



# Preliminary Recommendations



## Meeting Essential Human and Family Needs

### **End Family Homelessness in Vermont (Medium to Long Term)**

Vermont's COVID-19 response to homelessness has demonstrated that our State has the willingness and ability to keep vulnerable Vermonters safe when faced with a public health emergency. While most homeless Vermonters are single individuals, there is an opportunity to address and end family homelessness permanently so that the experience of homelessness does not traumatize the next generation and add to new cycles of poverty, pain, and need. The Action Team recommends that the State build a broad partnership to end family homelessness that invests in the housing supply, ongoing rental assistance, and the social services that can stabilize families and prevent future homelessness.

### **Activate Local Foods to Feed Vermonters (Short to Medium Term)**

Demand for food assistance has increased significantly since the pandemic hit Vermont. At the same time, restaurants and institutions are closed and Vermont farms are struggling with a limited market for their products. Vermont should develop a system to purchase local foods from Vermont farms and producers and redirect foods to Vermont households in need, or to institutions serving Vermonters in need, with food assistance or prepared meals. In the near term this effort can build on the "Shiftmeals" project, replacing FEMA MREs and boxed meal programs with local meals prepared with local foods by Vermont restaurants, "Farmers to Families" distributions, and other starting points to expand local foods and food security.

### **Support Childcare and Youth Programming (Short Term)**

Childcare is a critical foundation for families and is key to reopening our economy. While providing an essential service to families across the state, childcare and youth-serving programs face a daunting challenge to provide quality care in a safe environment to minimize the spread of COVID-19. To support re-opening this essential industry, Restart Grants and other services should be generous and flexible for programs that reopen, when they reopen, to support increased costs such as purchase of supplies, deep cleaning, structural changes to facilities, staffing, and lost income due to limited attendance. Vermont should allow providers to take the time they need to allow for transition to safe reopening and provide an additional round of funding for programs that are unable to open immediately. Funds allocated must be sufficient to cover operations for both child care, and afterschool and summer programs. Additional resources beyond the \$6 million currently allocated will be needed to support this transition.



# Preliminary Recommendations



## Driving Local Business and Economic Recovery

### **Support Restart Vermont Small Business Loan and Grant Program (Short Term)**

Feedback from across the state indicates that the retail, restaurants, hospitality, tourism, lodging, and cultural sectors have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many organizations in these sectors are facing immediate financial challenges and will not survive the crisis without direct financial assistance. By virtually consolidating existing regional and local loan funds and leveraging an additional \$15 million in Federal CRF, \$25 million could be available to support Vermont's small businesses and nonprofit organizations most impacted by COVID-19. History has demonstrated that Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprises experience disparate access to credit and business lending, and are often shut out of the entrepreneurship networks that help businesses thrive. For this reason, the State must take proactive efforts to ensure that financial assistance is made available to historically disadvantaged enterprises on an equitable basis, while taking action to remove systemic barriers that have historically led to inequitable access to resources.

### **Implement a Statewide Buy Local Challenge (Short to Middle Term)**

The imposition of the State's stay-home stay-safe order has led to an increased reliance on online shopping by Vermont consumers. As Vermont retailers begin to re-open, the State should be actively promoting efforts to encourage patronage of local small businesses. Specifically, the State should implement a program to encourage Vermonters to buy local as much as possible over the coming 12 months by setting a goal for themselves and inspiring others to follow their lead. This program would connect local merchants with residents through an online platform, and encourage Vermonters to track their purchases with these local merchants through this platform.



# Preliminary Recommendations



## Advancing Telecommunications Infrastructure for Community and Economic Vitality

### Expand Broadband Internet and Mobile Telecommunications Infrastructure (Medium Term)

The Brookings Institution [estimates](#) that up to 50% of American workers are working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, and expects that acceptance of telecommuting will persist long after the pandemic subsides. This dramatic shift in work and education culture will present a tremendous opportunity to reverse Vermont's demographic decline by retaining and attracting a new generation of workers who see value in living in less densely populated areas, and have flexibility to work remotely. Our ability to fully realize this opportunity is dependent on the State taking immediate and bold action to bring high quality broadband internet and mobile telecommunications infrastructure to every corner of Vermont. The pandemic has demonstrated how the future of healthcare, education, and economic opportunity rely on broadband as an essential utility, and has magnified the ways in which the digital divide further marginalizes disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. The State should address regulatory impediments and set up incentives for regulated utilities and other organizations to expand last mile internet and wireless telecommunications infrastructure to all Vermonters.





## Next Stage Actions for the Local Support and Community Action Team

### **Develop a Statewide Strategy and Campaign to Boost Local Business Spending**

The Action Team will partner with the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Chambers of Commerce, and others to develop a long-term statewide strategy to support, celebrate, and market local business spending. Elements of the campaign could include “Go Downtown” messaging to support downtown businesses, collaborative and coordinated marketing efforts, an online sales platform, the celebration of business leadership, and sharing best practices between communities.

### **Enhance Community Recovery Efforts with Recovery Visits and Supports**

The Action Team, the Vermont Council on Rural Development, the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, and the Regional Planning Commissions will work together to build and implement SWAT Team in-person or online Recovery Visits to towns and cities throughout Vermont: to engage citizens and leaders in collective recovery planning, to support local priority setting and action; to share best practices and models and tools between communities and regions throughout the state; and to provide encouragement and connections to technical or financial assistance to help local communities and regions build success in driving recovery solutions.

### **Develop Strategies and Infrastructure to Retain and Recruit Future Workforce**

The Action Team and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development will work with other partners to develop a coordinated plan to enhance and expand infrastructure and programs necessary to support Vermont’s future workforce in a post-COVID environment. This will include strategies to retain and recruit the next generation of Vermont’s workforce.

### **Establish Quantitative Recovery Measures and Metrics**

The Action Team and the Agency of Commerce and Community Development will develop baseline economic and social measurements and establish metrics to assess Vermont’s progress towards recovery.





The members of the Local Support and Community Action Team are dedicated to a recovery that enhances the quality of life and opportunities of all residents of the state. This report marks several key directions that can contribute to that recovery, but we recognize that it is only a starting point for our efforts; and that many arenas, from local foods and broadband to local commerce and equity, will require much deeper evaluation and the development of specific actions. We will work forward to frame a vision for recovery that includes everyone and connects to quantitative measures to mark our challenges and evaluate our progress. We appreciate your leadership, Governor Scott, and the tremendous diversity of leadership of all the people of the state who are stepping up today to help their neighbors, transition their businesses and organizations, and contribute towards recovery of our state and to the strong and dynamic future of Vermont tomorrow.

## Local Support and Community Action Team

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