



Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

Program Evaluation of Ramsey County Projects

March 2021
Health and Wellness Administrative Division
Research and Evaluation Unit

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Introduction

In May 2020, Ramsey County was given \$96 million under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to provide relief to residents due to hardships resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This report focuses on nine projects funded through the CARES Act. Although funding went to support initiatives beyond these projects, the Health and Wellness Administrative Division's (HWAD) Evaluation and Research Unit was assigned to evaluate these nine projects based on three priorities. Projects being evaluated:

- Further the county's strategic goals and have applicability beyond the pandemic.
- Enable the county to be accountable to its residents.
- Are part of a coordinated effort to mitigate racial or ethnic disparities in the county.

The nine projects are:

- **Food and Basic Needs** which provided home meal delivery to people unable to leave their homes due to COVID-19, support to food shelves and other organizations providing groceries and other necessities, and student and youth serving organizations that provided food to children and youth.
- **Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance** for rent, mortgage, utility assistance, or vehicle repairs to help residents maintain safe and stable housing.
- **Landlord Assistance Program** that reimburses landlords who have tenants unable to make rent payments due to COVID-19.
- **Homelessness and Housing Assistance** that provided hotel rooms and emergency shelter as well as respite shelter and medical care for residents experiencing homelessness who had COVID-19 or COVID-19 symptoms.
- **Workforce Development** that provided job and employment support to people who experienced job loss, a reduction in hours, were at increased risk due to health concerns, or faced an increase in barriers to employment as a result of the pandemic.
- **Small Business Relief** that partnered with the Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers, the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, and 14 outreach agencies to provide grants to small businesses, sole proprietors, and creative businesses.
- **Service Delivery Redesign** that provided in-person services at five county locations and navigator support to assist residents seeking county services.
- **Race Equity and Community Engagement Response Team: Masks for Everyone, Trusted Messengers, and Media Messaging** projects that provided masks and information on COVID-19 and county services targeted to communities of color, immigrant, and other communities that might not receive these through mainstream channels.
- **Early Childhood Initiative** that provided child development resources to low-income parents with young children impacted by daycare and early childhood program closures.

Click on the project title to link directly to that part of the report.

Report Organization

The first section of this report focuses on three overarching research questions.

- 1) Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act programming?
- 2) Did the projects achieve the outcomes the community was seeking?

- 3) How can Ramsey County better attract, retain, and support community partners with county contracts?

This first section uses data from all projects to provide a broad overview and synopsis answers to those questions. They are not meant to be exhaustive – detailed answers to these questions with aspects pertinent to individual projects are answered in the project-specific sections.

Following the overall CARES Act evaluation findings, each of the nine projects have their own chapter. These sections provide much more depth and specificity on individual projects, their outcomes and findings, research methods used, and recommendations. Each section frames its recommendations into two categories:

- 1) Short-term recommendations focused on residents' needs through recovery from the pandemic.
- 2) Long-term recommendations for improving the county's performance now and beyond the pandemic.

As a report companion, each project has a two to three-page executive summary describing the projects, what we learned, and recommendations. These are available on [the CARES Evaluation website](#).

Appendix A at the end of this report contains more detail about program policies, partners, and additional detailed data tables. [Appendix B](#) is a separate document that provides all data collection instrument details, such as survey and focus group questions.

Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES programming?

For the purposes of this report, “better off” is being defined as a positive change in circumstance, knowledge or skills, or behavior using Mark Friedman’s Results Based Accountability definition¹. A change in circumstance may be avoiding eviction or utility shut-off, saving a business at-risk of closure, moving from homelessness to stable housing, or receiving a hot meal when there were few other options. Most of the “better off-ness” related to Ramsey County’s CARES Act programming falls into these changes in circumstances. A change in knowledge or skills may be related to learning about COVID safety, improved knowledge of employment resources, or understanding how to successfully partner with the county in a contract relationship.

Another aspect of residents being better off is whether programming targeted those most vulnerable to the impacts of COVID. At the time that CARES programs and relief were being planned it was unknown who would be most impacted. Very little was known about the virus in April and May of 2020. However, Ramsey county made assumptions that historical trends and data in overall vulnerability would hold true. Funds and services were planned to target communities of color, those lacking transportation, and low-income communities. To determine who was most vulnerable to COVID, we used the Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index and rates of COVID infection and hospitalization by race/ethnicity, age, and gender.

To answer the question “Were Ramsey County residents better off due to CARES programming?” this section of the report looks at:

- The proportion of services going to communities who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.
- Receipt of services or assistance through the lens of the Results Based Accountability definition of “better off.”

Social Vulnerability Index

The CDC uses the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) to help planners better prepare communities to respond to emergency events, including pandemics. Social Vulnerability refers to the socioeconomic and demographic factors that affect the resiliency of communities. A focus on the social determinants of vulnerability helps explain why people with similar levels of exposure to a disaster may experience different impacts. Each census tract is assigned a score between 0.0 and 1.0 based upon the percentage of people in that census tract who are below poverty, unemployed, have low income, lack a high school diploma, are aged 65 or older, are aged 17 and younger, have a disability, are single parent households, are a racial or ethnic minority, speak English “less than well,” do not have a private vehicle, experience crowding in their living space and the percentage of housing units that are multi-unit, mobile homes, or are group quarters.² In general, score over 0.50 are considered vulnerable and scores over 0.75 are very vulnerable.

The SVI for Ramsey County is available on [Open Data Ramsey County](#). Of the 137 census tracts in Ramsey County, 28 (20%) were considered vulnerable with a score between 0.50 and 0.74 and 61 (45%) were considered very vulnerable with a score of 0.75 or higher. Most of the very vulnerable tracts are in Saint Paul, including Frogtown, Downtown, the West Side, the Greater East Side, Dayton’s Bluff, Payne-Phalen, the North End, parts of Union Park and Summit University near interstate 94, and West Seventh near Downtown, and the most southern tip of Highland

¹ <http://raguide.org/>

² CDC’s Social Vulnerability Index. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. <https://svi.cdc.gov>.

neighborhoods. Parts of Maplewood, Little Canada, and New Brighton were also considered very vulnerable.

COVID-19 Cases

As of February 22, 2021, there had been 42,653 known cases of COVID-19 infection in Ramsey County which is eight percent of the total Ramsey County population. Table 1 shows COVID-19 case rates by race/ethnicity, age, and gender. Black, Asian, American Indian, and Hispanic people were more likely than White people to become infected with COVID-19 and more likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19. Figure 1 shows the disparity ratio between White people and other races/ethnicities in COVID-19 infection and hospitalization. Black people were 1.58 times more likely, Asian people were 1.80 times more likely, American Indian people were 1.50 times more likely, and Hispanic people were 2.22 times more likely than White people to be infected. While people of multiple races were less likely than White people to become infected, they were 1.59 times more likely to be hospitalized. Hispanic people were 3.72 times more likely than White people to be hospitalized.

While infection rates were highest among people ages 18 to 24 years old (12%), hospitalization was much more likely among older people than young. Nearly one in three people ages 75 and older, 23% of people ages 65 to 74 years, and 12% of people ages 55 to 64 years old were hospitalized for their COVID-19 infection, compared to two percent of people ages 18 to 24 years old. (Table 1)

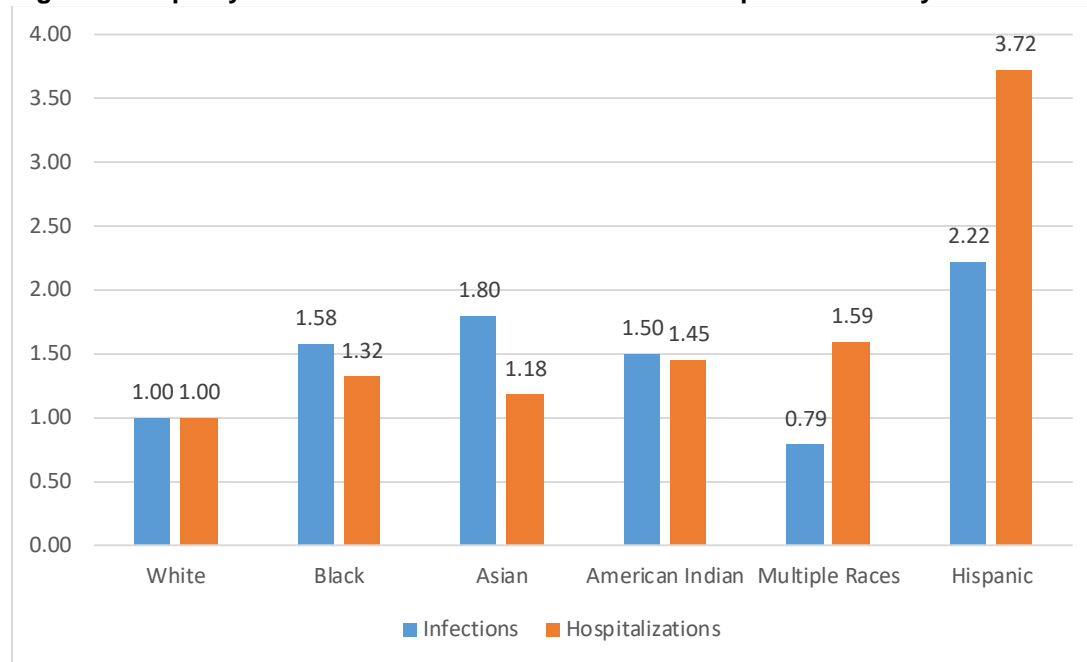
Table 1: COVID-19 Infection and Hospitalizations by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Age

	Total Population ³	COVID-19 Cases	% Infected	Hospitalized	% Hospitalized
Race/Ethnicity					
White	361,226	19,370	5.4%	1,462	7.5%
Black	64,535	5,455	8.5%	543	10.0%
Asian	78,233	7,552	9.7%	674	8.9%
American Indian	2,606	210	8.1%	23	11.0%
Multiple Races	20,057	849	4.2%	102	12.0%
Other Race⁴	1,064	706	66.4%	198	28.0%
Hispanic	40,748	4,843	11.9%	312	6.4%
Gender					
Male	265,450	20,328	7.7%	1,512	7.4%
Female	278,992	22,070	8.0%	1,716	7.8%
Non-binary/third gender/Unknown	Not collected by Census	191	n/a	2	1.0%
Age					
Less than 18	127,038	5,345	4.2%	79	1.5%
18 to 24 years	54,266	6,350	11.7%	136	2.1%
25 to 34 years	90,568	8,867	9.8%	312	3.5%
35 to 44 years	66,675	6,470	9.7%	306	4.7%
45 to 54 years	62,344	5,338	8.6%	387	7.2%
55 to 64 years	66,813	4,856	7.3%	567	11.7%
65 to 74 years	44,300	2,832	6.4%	641	22.6%
75 and older	32,438	2,594	8.0%	805	31.0%

³ Population data are from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey.

⁴ COVID-19 race data included unknown with other. This was not a mandated field so these data should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 1: Disparity Ratios in COVID-19 Infections and Hospitalizations by Race/Ethnicity



CARES Funding Impacts and “Better off-ness”

Through the lenses of “better off-ness” as defined by Results Based Accountability and quantitative analysis using COVID-19 infection and hospitalization and the SVI, there are significant areas where county residents were better off due to CARES programming.

- Nearly 8,000 Ramsey County residents received home-delivered meals, over 22,000 deliveries were made to homes from local food shelf partners, and over 46,000 meals were delivered to students and youth by local school districts or youth programs.
 - Survey respondents were overall very satisfied with the experience of the home meal delivery service, rating it an average of 4.6 out of 5 stars. Respondents indicated the meals included a balanced mix of fruits or vegetables, grains, and protein, rating it an average of 4.4 out of 5 stars. Respondents reported that meals included foods they liked to eat and were comfortable eating, rating it an average of 4.2 out of 5 stars.
 - The majority of people who were able to access food shelves, receive meals and food from schools, and receive home delivered meals were people of color and lived in zip codes aligned with census tracks of high vulnerability. We did not have addresses of people so were unable to align service addresses with exact census track. Food delivery was able to reach seniors, people with disabilities, and those who could not leave the house due to COVID-19 risks.
- More than \$10 million dollars in direct financial assistance was provided to 4,551 households to ensure housing stability through Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance for rent, mortgage, utility shut-off, or transportation. Distribution of these funds went disproportionately to Black and American Indian households, which are two groups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 infection. Seventy-two percent of recipients lived in areas with high vulnerability and 15% in areas considered vulnerable according to the CDC’s Social Vulnerability Index.

- More than \$8.2 million dollars were provided to landlords on behalf of 2,212 tenants, 62% of which lived in areas of high vulnerability and 19% of which lived in vulnerable areas.
- Nearly 1,000 people experiencing homelessness were sheltered in hotels and emergency shelters developed as part of this project and 276 people received COVID-19 respite care.
 - Of the 648 people included in the evaluation period, 27% were housed in permanent housing. People 60 years and older were more likely to be housed than younger people.
 - People served were generally reflective of the overall homeless population (which is disproportionately Black and American Indian) in the county in terms of race/ethnicity, but these programs reached more females than shelters historically have. In interviews, female hotel residents felt safer in these settings than they have in traditional emergency shelters. Additionally, women were provided hotel rooms early in the response to provide increased space at shelters for men.
 - Eighty-six percent of interviewees indicated that their overall satisfaction rating as very good, 14% felt somewhat satisfied, and no client interviewed for this evaluation indicated a less than satisfied rating. In addition, high numbers of clients secured new or renewed financial benefits, although not as much for Medical Assistance.
 - To support its shelter work, the county hired more than 458 people using emergency funds. These are living wage jobs with benefits. Managers worked to hire people who had or were experiencing homelessness for these shelter staffing positions. More than three-quarters were people of color with 61% being Black, 8% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 2% American Indian.
- The six Workforce Development areas, in addition to the TechPak program, provided direct workforce development services to more than 6,000 residents. The actual number of Ramsey County residents served is higher than what is reported due to data collection gaps. There were limitations in gathering data on all service recipients. However, it is clear is that, youth and residents of color were reached by the programming offered. Youth and Young Adults accounted for nearly 60% of the total residents served by the CARES Workforce Development Services. Black, Indigenous, and residents of color (BIPOC) represented nearly 90% of the residents served.
 - The TechPaks, in particular, helped residents find and maintain employment, participate in education or certificate programs, ensure their children were able to do remote schooling, and helped recipients stay connected to their social networks.
- \$15 million in financial assistance was provided to 1,210 small businesses. Rounds 1 and 2 included the 828 businesses that are covered in this report. Forty-four percent of businesses in Rounds 1 and 2 were BIPOC-owned businesses. The total number of BIPOC-owned businesses in the county so we are unable to say whether this was an equitable distribution.
 - Despite this relief, half of respondents to the survey reported that these funds did not resolve their crisis. More help is needed. BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely to have experienced closures due to emergency orders, had been operating less than four years, and had lower revenues than White-owned businesses prior to the pandemic all of which contributed to more challenges in recovery and an uncertain future.
- About 1,300 families receiving the Minnesota Family Investment Program or living in a family emergency shelter with pre-kindergarten children received vouchers to Lakeshore Learning to support child development while in-person child development programs were closed. About three-quarters were families of color.

- Another important impact is that on contracted vendors. The county contracted with more than 200 organizations to provide CARES programming to the community. These funds not only went to support participants in programs but also provided income and funding to these organizations to sustain them through the pandemic.

Discussion and Recommendations

Overall, the answer to the question, “Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES programming?” is a resounding yes. Whether looked at geographically or demographically, the majority of people served and dollars spent went to communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Through creative approaches to contracting, such as Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQ) with open scopes, flexibility, and adaptability, the county was able to provide more services to more people.

However, there are communities where funds and services did not have as much reach and communities that will have a slower recovery. Many people applied for programs and were not able to receive them, sometimes due to funding limitations (like Small Business Relief) or not meeting federal COVID-19 eligibility criteria (like Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance). Others were not aware of programs or found out too late to apply. Cultural and language barriers exist. A lack of trust in government is a factor, as well.

As the county transitions to a focus on recovery and planning around the American Rescue Plan Act, we recommend these things to build on successes under the CARES Act and increase reach into areas that were not as better off as others:

- **Focus on tech equity.** The pandemic has increased our reliance on the internet and the need for not only access to the internet and computers, but the need for digital literacy. These are likely to remain in some fashion for the long term and change the way we relate and communicate. The TechPaks were very popular and used by recipients to not only gain access to work, education, and job opportunities, but to maintain social ties, access medical care, and human services. Continue focus on increasing equity around technology access and literacy.
- **Continue to diversify how the county shares information.** Build on successes in the trusted messenger model. Partner with groups with expertise in different cultures and communities on how to best get information to all residents in a way they trust.
- **Continue to and increase community involvement early in planning.** Seeking community input and leadership in what goals the county is trying to achieve and getting creative and diverse voices early in the design can help overcome barriers to access and better understand unintended consequences of different policy choices.

Did the projects achieve the outcomes the community was seeking?

One of Ramsey County's strategic priorities is [Advancing Racial and Health Equity and Shared Community Power](#). According to the county's strategic plan:

"Ramsey County's vision for a vibrant community where all are valued and thrive is dependent on being a community where all residents can experience fair outcomes including the highest level of health and wellbeing and opportunities for advancement and growth. Many of the communities and residents impacted by county programs and services have not historically had a voice in planning and implementation. Ramsey County must assess and modernize long-standing structures and legacy systems to better meet the emerging needs of all residents. Ramsey County must develop, identify and use a broad range of strategies grounded in sharing power to ensure all residents and communities, especially racial and ethnic groups who are experiencing inequities, have a voice in realizing beneficial outcomes across the county."

While intentional community engagement and shared leadership has been a strategic priority for nearly five years, emergency response to a disaster like the pandemic stresses all systems, including existing community engagement infrastructure. An emergency also creates new opportunities to engage with different communities and develop new relationships. It can force innovation and creative ideas in order to respond to new and challenging problems. Community input and shared power was recognized as being very important if the county was to meet the needs of residents in this unprecedented time.

This question is not an easy yes or no question. At the time the county received the CARES Act funding and services were being planned it was the early days of the pandemic. The focus was on providing a response and quickly getting support dollars into the hands of people who needed them. Everyone lacked the information needed to truly articulate outcomes, let alone from a community perspective. Most CARES Act programming did set broad goals and stated intended outcomes that were shaped by a variety of things from community input to federal requirements to public health guidance. We cannot line up specific community-driven goals to specific program outcomes, at least in part due to the uncertainty at the time programs and services were being planned and launched.

Instead, we will answer the following questions:

- What were community priorities regarding CARES Act funding and how did we know?
- In what ways did community priorities shape programming and services? What were the barriers to incorporating community priorities?
- What did we learn that can improve community engagement post-COVID?

Methods

To answer these questions, we examined multiple data sources. First, we reviewed recordings and transcripts from [town halls](#) held in April and May 2020. These town halls were convened by the Race Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT). We reviewed the following town halls and listened for overall themes and specific asks by community members attending:

- Emergency Assistance and Emergency General Assistance (May 11)
- Contractor and Provider Services (May 15)
- Employment Programs and Assistance (May 18)

- Housing Stability Services and Response (May 19)
- Business and Community Restoration (June 18 and June 23)

We also reviewed needs assessment reports and other community engagement documents that were created prior to the pandemic that informed the response. These included the [Food and Basic Needs Security and Distribution Needs Assessment and Design Recommendations](#) report, the [COVID-19 Equity Action Circle 2020-2021 Recommendations](#) report, the [Ramsey County Accessible Service Delivery and Facilities: Community Engagement Results](#) report from December 2018, and meeting notes shared by project teams from internal meetings and other meetings with community members. Like the town hall review, we looked for overall themes and specific asks or priorities.

We conducted interviews with project leads of Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance, Landlord Assistance, Workforce Solutions, Small Business Relief, Housing and Homelessness, and RECERT in February 2021. The interviews asked about their recollections of what community told them was important, how they knew and types of community engagement or outreach they did when planning their CARES programming, how that information may have impacted their decision-making, barriers to implementing community input, and what they learned about community engagement during the pandemic response.

Limitations

While no major limitations were noted, there are some important limitations to the data to be considered. The first is important to this study, but important in the larger context of community engagement as well. Who is “community?” Residents? Vendors? Community organizations? People accessing services? All of the above? Community in the context of this report is limited to people and organizations that were able to attend and to share at specific meetings or events. This is a selection bias limitation.

Additionally, there may be recall bias. Interview respondents may recall information incorrectly. Staff who have worked in these positions since March, during a turbulent and emotional time, may have difficulty remembering specifics about that time. There could also be interpretation bias. The data collector could misunderstand the respondents’ meaning.

Discussion and Results

What were community priorities regarding CARES Act funding and how did we know?

In April 2020, the Race Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT) was formed by the county to help inform the county’s response and provide links between operations, planning, and the residents the county serves. As mentioned in the introduction, RECERT hosted a series of town halls in April and May (as well as ongoing town halls past that time) to help gather community input and priorities for CARES spending and pandemic relief. These town halls were a major source cited by nearly all projects when asked how they knew what community priorities were. In addition to the town halls, Food and Basic Needs held multiple community planning sessions in conjunction with the development of a needs assessment.

Leaders also sought input from other existing community groups that they worked with prior to the pandemic. Existing advisory councils, community advocacy groups, and groups like Heading Home Ramsey (the continuum of care for homelessness) and Ramsey United (Financial Assistance Services’ client engagement group) were tapped for input. Leaders held individual, informal meetings with key community leaders.

Leaders also relied on information gathered through community engagement and relationships they had done prior to the pandemic. Drawing on learnings about needs and gaps pre-pandemic helped them understand critical gaps and needs of specific communities that would only be exacerbated by the pandemic.

There were priorities specific to individual projects, but there were also priorities expressed in nearly all town halls and other engagement activities that spanned across project areas and funding streams. In nearly all documented meetings, attendees expressed the need for:

- A holistic approach to community need. Rather than viewing need through the lens of workforce or basic needs and food, community wanted to view a person or family holistically and ensure programming shared information and addressed all the support needs of a person.
- Getting information to everyone. Attendees cited the need to ensure information about services was shared through community channels that people trust, in multiple languages, and through a variety of ways of sharing information rather than relying on traditional communication channels.
- Building on and supporting existing community organizations and services. Attendees wanted to amplify and grow small community organizations that already had relationships with people needing services rather than create government programs that would be temporary.

Table 2. Summary of Community Priorities, Outreach, and Response (on the next page) summarizes the community priorities, including those unique to program areas. Examples of priorities specific to program areas include increased flexibility, higher grant amounts, and double issuances for Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance (EA/EGA); addressing the needs of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and homeless youth for Housing and Homelessness; ensuring sole proprietorships and creative businesses were included in Small Business Relief; and prioritizing Black men and young people in Workforce Solutions supports.

Table 2. Summary of Community Priorities, Outreach, and Response

	Community Priorities	How Did We Know?	Changes	Barriers
Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase use of SNAP • Enhance existing systems • Holistic approach • Outreach to cultural communities • Communication plan • Provide whole family meals through schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement sessions and resulting needs assessment • Relationships with existing partners and previous outreach around food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open EPIQ that did not set scope, asked organizations to tell us what their community needed, how can we support them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA rules regarding SNAP and school food programs • Procurement rules that don't allow coaching after an organization submits a contract proposal
RECERT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for communication plan to vulnerable communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food engagement sessions • Equity Action Circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created trusted messenger and media messaging programs in response to Food and EA/EGA meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing, spending deadlines • Staff capacity • Procurement rules that don't allow coaching after an organization submits a contract proposal
EA/EGA and Landlord	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility around rules • Double issuances • Raise EGA cap • Why different verification rules for landlords than EA recipients? • Communication plan • Holistic approach with food and shelter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town hall • Ramsey United (FAS engagement group) • Equity Action Circle housing committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hired temps to increase staff capacity • Outreach to people previously denied • Double issuances, waived 12-month rule, increased cap, waived affordability rules • Food information flyers in mailings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State statutes regarding EGA • Staff capacity • Infrastructure gaps
Small Business Relief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for immediate, fast support • Small business support • Gig workers, sole proprietorships, and creative businesses • Overwhelmed with confusing information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses calling and writing • Existing groups like Saint Paul Chamber, East Team • Town halls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updated website to provide accurate, timely information on all business relief programs • Second round broadened to include gig workers, creative, and sole proprietors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff capacity • Infrastructure to support • Funding limits

Table 2. Summary of Community Priorities, Outreach, and Response, Continued

	Community Priorities	How Did We Know?	Changes	Barriers
Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic approach to employment, food, and shelter • Technology gaps and support • Needs of black men and young people • Scholarships • Amplify existing programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town hall • Existing relationships and informal meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce Innovation Board (WIB) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open EPIQ that didn't dictate model, let organizations say what they could do • Broad definition of workforce supports • Targeted organizations to apply who work with young people and African Americans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CARES guidelines and rules • Procurement rules that do not allow awards based on race • Timeline to execute programs too tight • Staff capacity
Homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase capacity to provide shelter • Clear referral process, how to access shelter • Needs of unsheltered • Needs of youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town hall • Heading Home Ramsey • Existing advocacy and community groups • Policy action groups • Cross jurisdiction engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed Bethesda, Provincial House, Luther, and Mary Hall shelters • Developed referral process with providers • Temporary youth hotel program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDC guidance around safety had to take precedence • Staff capacity • Had to hand-off youth program to providers due to capacity

In what ways did community priorities shape programming and services? What were the barriers to incorporating community priorities?

One of the biggest ways community priorities shaped programming and services were through the use of Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQ) that did not have a defined scope. Rather than proscribing methods, specific approaches, or programs, which is how government typically does business, Food and Basic Needs, RECERT, and Workforce Solutions used EPIQs with open-ended scopes, a process that was created specifically for the pandemic response. This provided space for community organizations to tell the county what their community needed and how county financial support could help them meet that need. This not only allowed organizations to address the specific needs of the community they serve and support trusted organizations, but also provide financial support to small agencies during a time of stress. Within the limits of funding and CARES Act requirements, nearly all of these proposals were approved allowing the county to reach a more diverse audience and provide a broader array of services than it otherwise could.

Another direct response to community priorities was the trusted messenger and media messaging project. In July 2020, RECERT contracted with 12 community agencies and individuals who prioritized a media platform to distribute COVID-19 messaging and communications to a targeted community and 15 trusted messengers and community agencies to provide outreach, engagement, resource connection and referrals around COVID-19 messaging as well as community and county services. This project was created in response to attendees at town halls and other events emphasis on the need to get information to all communities in a way they would trust. There is a full evaluation of this effort later in this report.

A holistic approach is more difficult to define and to realize. Existing county structures, funding requirements, and staff capacity can be barriers to truly providing holistic services. Although the county was not able to fully implement this vision, there are examples of projects trying to work toward it. Workforce Solutions intentionally used a broad definition of workforce supports in its EPIQ process that allowed it to contract with programs supporting mental health and arts or outdoors programs for youth that encourage longer-term workforce readiness. FAS included flyers in its mailings informing clients of other programs and services. Food and Basic Needs' home delivered meals programming sent information to recipients about other COVID-19 relief and support programs. The Service Delivery Redesign navigators were created as a single door to access most county services. The county website was re-organized to highlight COVID-19 resources and information.

Program areas also made changes or planned their services differently in ways unique to that program or community priorities in that area. This is not an exhaustive list of the program changes made based on community priorities and input but provides an overview and examples of places directly impacted by community. FAS hired temporary workers to increase their staff capacity to process applications in a timely manner and called people who were previously denied assistance under old eligibility rules. Their Landlord Assistance Program was created as an additional support for renters and a means to spend CARES money before the deadline of December 30, 2020.

Housing and Homelessness created a more transparent referral process that included a path to emergency shelter for those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The initial hotel program was only open to people staying in existing emergency shelters as people working in that area were trying to create space in shelters for social distancing. As the number of encampments grew over the summer, community groups prioritized the need for a referral process that would include people living in the camps. Emergency shelters at Bethesda Hospital, Luther College, Provincial House, and Mary Hall were created to increase capacity to serve all people experiencing homelessness, as well as additional day shelter capacity through Freedom House which opened in January 2021.

Community Economic Development (CED) and their Small Business Relief project re-designed their website to focus on the various relief programs available through the state, county, and federal governments in response to confusing and sometimes conflicting information business owners were receiving. They also expanded the program to include sole proprietorships, gig workers, and creative businesses in response to community feedback.

Barriers

There were many things community wanted, but the county could not or did not do. The most common reason for not acting on a community priority were federal or state statutes or rules. For example, in the Food and Basic Needs engagement sections, community members wanted to increase SNAP payments, advertise SNAP, and to use SNAP at online grocery stores. Some of these changes, such as use of SNAP at online grocers and a temporary increase in SNAP payments for some recipients, were approved at a federal level during the pandemic. But Ramsey County does not have control of these program aspects so was unable to act on them independently. Another example is the use of Workforce Development CARES dollars for scholarships. Colleges and universities also received CARES money for scholarships and Ramsey County could not approve contracts that would “double dip” funds. These are things that the county and state can advocate for but were not able to be acted on directly. Community members questioned why landlords did not have the same verification requirements as tenants applying for EA/EGA, but EA/EGA requirements are in statute whereas the Landlord program was not.

Ramsey County procurement also have rules that are either in statute or are board of commissioner policies; many of which were designed to encourage transparency and fairness in contracting. Attendees at the Workforce town hall prioritized services for Black men. Contracting laws do not allow race-based contracts so this was not able to be acted on directly. Workforce Solutions did intentionally seek out organizations that target Black men in their services but could not specifically contract for that. Attendees at several town halls wanted organizations to be able to support one another and work together, with larger or more established organizations partnering with small organizations. Once an organization submits a solicitation response, the county can no longer coach or assist that organization on proposal requirements until a contract is in place.

Other barriers were related to capacity, time, and staffing. With CARES money some departments experienced a nearly doubling of funding. Others saw large demand increases that happened faster than they could hire and train additional staff, including administrative staff to manage contracts, make payments, or plan services. RECERT staffing, beyond the Racial and Health Equity Administrators, is provided by other departments whose staff use part of their time to support RECERT initiatives. Without the dedicated administrative staff that many departments have, some barriers arose from time constraints and having to develop capacity to execute a contract and other administrative tasks.

The Landlord Assistance Program administered by FAS was a completely new program. Not only were they under time constraints – money had to be spent by December 30 – their staff was already overwhelmed with demand for their regular programs. Small Business Relief had similar constraints. Their very small staff had a short time to get millions of dollars to small businesses. Homelessness and Housing knew that youth were a priority to community but had to make choices about where to spend staff time and internal capacity. There was a short-lived hotel program for youth, but leadership ultimately decided that they could not support everything and worked with community organizations to help homeless youth.

What did we learn that can improve community engagement post-COVID?

The biggest lesson learned was the importance of existing relationships in a crisis. Nearly all project leaders cited the value of existing relationships as critical in their program response. Having

relationships with existing advisory councils, advocacy groups, individuals, and community organizations allowed project leaders to quickly galvanize people more broadly to attend community engagement events. People were able to reach out to their networks, who in turn reached out to their networks, to bring more people to the table.

Not only did existing relationships help with broadening networks, but leaders saw the trust already established in these relationships as important to the honest conversation they were able to have that improved their programs. New relationships were developed, and leaders saw urgency and a shared purpose as key to developing these new relationships. Additionally, respondents were aware of the need to not continually tap the same people and organizations and the importance of expanded networks and new ideas.

All interview respondents stressed the importance of having an authentic relationship that are not transactional. The county cannot just “extract” information from community experts without giving back. Everyone cited the need to be honest and transparent. They sought relationships that had feedback loops, accountability to community, and reciprocity. Many desired the ability and saw the importance of co-creation of policies and programs, rather than bringing a completed idea or project to community and asking for input. Community members need to be involved in the initial planning, goal setting, and shaping of services. Several people mentioned the value of having program recipients involved in shaping program policy and how they learned “how things really work” that allowed programs to be more accessible and responsive. They also valued a reiterative process where community input and involvement were able to shape and change programs midstream.

Centralized support for community engagement was appreciated, as well. Although existing relationships and community groups were extremely important, the logistical support provided by RECERT was instrumental. It allowed greater reach and scope, as well as decreased duplication and going to the same groups or individuals multiple times by different county staff.

Finally, all respondents saw the importance of having people with decision-making ability within the county attending or being directly engaged with community members. They felt it was important for leaders to hear directly from community as well as leaders being a visible part of the process. Having decision-making directly involved cut down on time to make a decision, helped leaders understand community needs, and helped to guide future decisions.

How can Ramsey County improve its vendor and contracting processes post-COVID?

Several projects examined how Ramsey County promotes contract opportunities, solicits proposals, and provides support and technical assistance to vendor agencies. Food and Basic Needs, Workforce Development, Small Business Relief, and the RECERT Trusted Messenger and Media Messaging projects examined these community and business relationships. This section examines common themes across all these projects. Each of the above report sections explores particulars to that project; see those sections for details specific to projects.

Cross-analyses of focus group and reflection session data were conducted to identify common themes and answer three questions:

- How can Ramsey County improve its contracting and procurement processes to support new or small vendors, particularly organizations led by people of color and women?
- What kinds of support and technical assistance are needed to help vendors be successful?
- How can Ramsey County improve its relationship with new and existing vendors and community agencies?

Methods

For the Food and Basic Needs, Workforce Development, and RECERT projects, focus groups and reflection sessions were held with vendors and Ramsey County staff involved in the contract and procurement process. Separate groups were held with vendors and staff to facilitate honest feedback. Focus groups and reflection sessions had questions or focus on unique aspects of each program, but also included common questions about overall experience, process improvement, improved partnership, and support and technical assistance.

Evaluators held four focus groups for the Workforce Development project in December 2020 with five to 15 participants in each, representing 36 organizations and one conversation with staff. Twenty-five people attended one of four focus groups with Food and Basic Needs vendors in January 2021 – one with home delivered meals vendors, one with schools and youth meals vendors, and two with food shelf vendors and one with staff. The RECERT Trusted Messenger and Media Messaging reflection sessions were held in October 2020. Two were held for the Trusted Messenger contracts with 16 participants and two with the Media Messaging vendors with eight participants. Also, in October, two reflection sessions with county employees were held and attended by 25 staff. For more details about each, refer to that project's section of the report.

For Small Business Relief, individual interviews were conducted with 12 of the 14 partnering outreach organizations. These interviews included questions specific to that project, but also had questions similar to those in the focus groups.

Focus groups and interviews were transcribed using Otter transcription software, reviewed for accuracy and clarity, and then coded in Dedoose qualitative analysis software. They were coded first by theme and evaluation question by multiple evaluators and analyzed for their specific project. Finally, major themes from all projects were organized into a formal Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations matrix by evaluators from all projects.

Focus group/reflection session questions are available in [Appendix B](#).

Limitations

While no major limitations were noted in the research process, possible limitations to the data must be considered, and include the following:

- Respondent bias: Respondents may formulate their responses to please the interviewer or withhold information that the respondent feels could be damaging to someone or something associated with the project. Concerns about this limitation is especially prevalent in this study as the respondents are Ramsey County employees and thus are dependent on the position for their employment and are correspondingly intimate with the topic and have strong emotional connection to it. In order to mitigate this issue to the greatest extent possible, the research team read a short statement at the outset of each interview, assuring the respondent of their anonymity and encouraging frank dialogue.
- Recall bias: Respondent may recall information incorrectly, which is a common and documented issue in observer reliability and self-reported data. Staff who have worked in these positions for the past six months, during a turbulent and emotional time in history, have thoughts and opinions about their roles that are influenced by emotion, which influence how they perceive their jobs and positions within the county structure.
- Interpretation bias: The data collector could misunderstand the respondents' meaning. While the use of video recording mitigates this issue to some extent by enabling full review of the interview and transcribing of the conversation, there is still potential for the research team to have misinterpreted a respondent's intended meaning.

Discussion

How can Ramsey County improve its contracting and procurement processes to support new or small vendors, particularly organizations led by people of color and women?

In a very practical vein, vendors across all projects wanted more information at the beginning of the process. CARES Act funding was exceptional in many respects and all projects were brought together very quickly, but noting that, vendors wanted more information on the solicitation process. They suggested things like video guides describing the process, education events to learn what should be in a proposal, and checklists of required documents and supporting materials. They cited the desire for pre-program launch meetings that are recorded for those who could not attend that provide an overview of the funding, its restrictions, the county's goals and aims for the project, and an opportunity to network with other potential vendors. Clearly communicating the evaluation criteria of proposals so organizations could understand what needs to be in a successful proposal was also seen as important.

They did, however, place great value on being involved and engaged earlier in the process. With the timing of CARES funding, this was difficult. Many expressed the desire for pre-program launch sessions where community organizations could shape the Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQ) and help determine the project's goals. The Food and Basic Needs planning group conducted community meetings that led to a needs assessment that eventually resulted in the three contract areas. This is an example of partnering and engaging early to hear from the community and potential vendors about what the goals of the project should be.

They also saw these early engagement sessions as networking opportunities to learn about other organizations, develop partnerships with each other, and build synergy among organizations. Both large and small organizations saw value in these networking and pre-proposal events where partnerships between larger or more experienced organizations and small or new organizations could be built. This "mentor" role was seen as a space where small organizations could benefit from the experience of larger organizations.

Particular to very small or newly formed organizations, was the desire for advanced payments. For start-ups that lack capital and operating funds this was critical. The county has not typically done advance payments due to accountability to funding requirements. If money is paid up front and then not used as intended, this could create accountability problems or result in the county not being reimbursed if the funds are from the state or federal government and have spending restrictions.

What kinds of support and technical assistance are needed to help vendors be successful?

Many focus group participants had very positive things to say about the help and guidance they received from contract managers and other county staff regarding invoices, payment, and required reporting. They appreciated the responsiveness and patience of county staff. Across all groups they talked about the benefit of having a single point-person to go to with questions.

The invoice process was a commonly cited challenge – understanding how to submit invoices, how to itemize and bill for services correctly, and understanding expectations and needs upfront. Some small organizations had never done invoicing and lacked the infrastructure to do it correctly.

The cohort model used in the Workforce Solutions Community Innovation and Inclusion Fund (CIIF) and the RECERT Trusted Messengers and Median Messaging projects was seen as valuable by participants. Having a cohort of similar organizations, centered around a shared goal, allowed them to learn from each other, share emerging best practices, and receive direction from the county as a group.

Focus groups attendees also provided feedback on required reporting throughout their contract. Many questioned the need for some of the detail requested and wondered how it would be used. Some found forms confusing and this resulted in poor data quality for some projects.

How can Ramsey County improve its relationship with new and existing vendors and community agencies?

A successful and popular approach were EPIQs that provided the goals of the project but allowed organizations to tell the county how their services could help meet those goals. Government procurement processes (broadly, not just Ramsey County) tend to be very prescriptive. Organizations appreciated the flexible approach to determining scope and saw great value in it. It allowed them to address particular community needs, build their capacity and build on existing services, and fill gaps in their service provision rather than shape their organization to meet a pre-defined program or need. Defining the expected outcomes and having organizations inform the means to achieve them was preferred over defined means.

Central to improving relationships was the move to a relational mode of contracting and procurement. Rather than a transactional mode focused on the exchange of goods and services, this model places value on relationship development and capacity building.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

As the county learns more about the American Rescue Plan (ARP), in the short-term the county should:

- **Develop video and written materials in multiple languages that provide education and information on the procurement process.** Include checklists of required supporting documents. Provide information on how to support proposals, what the county is looking for when reviewing proposals, and what to expect throughout the process. Provide information

about third party organizations that provide technical assistance with solicitation and proposal writing.

- **Provide new vendor orientation sessions and written orientation materials.** At these sessions, provide vendors with a single point of contact, information and support on how to submit an invoice, and a packet with all required forms and documentation, as well as clear instruction on how to use them. Workforce Solutions held and recorded orientations for vendor cohorts and may be a model to replicate.
 - Use a cohort model where applicable. This creates efficiencies for the county when holding orientation information, but also creates space for networking and relationship development within the cohort.
 - Hold on-going cohort meetings to share information, build two-way communication, and share learnings between organizations and the county.
- **Carefully consider the purpose of reporting requirements.** All required reporting should be clearly and directly related to its purpose. Is it accountability to contract requirements? Is it for future planning or evaluation? Is it for greater understanding of need? Have clear instructions and definitions of data. Consider when an internet form or database should be developed to facilitate easier reporting and ensure data integrity.
- When possible and particularly with new funding opportunities, **hold pre-launch engagement sessions.** As part of a more community centered approach, hold pre-launch sessions that engage the community in shaping the project's approach and goals. Allow time for networking and building connections. Share what the county is looking to accomplish and create space for defining different approaches to doing that.

Long-term Recommendations

- **Consider how and under what circumstances advance payments can be considered.** Develop clear criteria for when this can be used in ways that still meets accountability requirements.
- **Examine ways the county can serve as a connector and facilitate relationships between community organizations.**
- **Use open scope requests for proposals where possible.** The open-ended EPIQ process was very popular. It enabled the county to get a more diverse range of ideas and services that were able to meet a broader array of community needs. It was also an important capacity builder as it allowed organizations to build on existing strengths and existing programs and services. Have clear goals and aims for the project but allow vendors to propose the means to achieve them.

Food and Basic Needs

Introduction

In response to the increased need for food access during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Ramsey County allocated \$10 million of federal CARES funding for food and basic needs, which included funding for home-based meal delivery, food shelves and basic needs, and school meals for youth. In funding food shelves, districts and youth programs, Ramsey County's goal was to bolster already existing program areas, seeking partnerships with organizations that were already providing services to residents as well as contracting with new vendors to provide these services. CARES funds were distributed to contracted community partners between August and December 2020. Ramsey County contracted with 35 community partners in the following three contract areas:

Home-based meal delivery

The home-based meal delivery (HDM) contracts established meal delivery for eligible Ramsey County residents through contracts with eight community partners. This was a new program area for the County that was not in existence prior to the start of COVID-19. In order for residents to be eligible for meal delivery, they needed to be impacted by COVID-19 and homebound. The program allowed individuals to receive up to 21 meals delivered to their home per week. Eligibility was documented by community partners each month. Meals were expected to be nutritionally sound and culturally-appropriate to meet the recipient's needs.

Food shelf and basic needs for food programs, food shelves, or food banks

The food shelf and basic needs for food programs, food shelves, or food banks (referred to as Food Shelf) contracts with community partners allowed for the purchasing of supplies, food, or staffing needed to expand food programs with 21 community partners. The purpose of this funding was to support already existing Food shelf programs or other community organization that could reach underserved community members with food and basic supplies.

Emergency food and meals for youth and students

The emergency food and meals for youth and students contracts supported meals for youth. Ramsey County contracted with six school districts and youth programs to provide this service. In order to be eligible, organizations needed to be a School Food Authority (SFA) through the USDA with experience serving youth and students. Youth needed to be 21 years old and under and enrolled in a school program.

The goals of the CARES funding were to (1) make strategic investments to expand and enhance the free food supply and distribution network; (2) prioritize the communities, individuals, and families most at risk for COVID-19; and (3) prioritize communities, individuals, and families who lack access and transportation due to COVID-19. Service delivery in these areas ensured that individuals and families affected by COVID-19 had access to nutritious and culturally responsive groceries and basic needs supplies that could be picked up at designated areas or delivered to residents at home.

These three Food Access contract areas were evaluated throughout 2020. In addition to these contract areas, State Health Improvement Program (SHIP) funding was also used to support winter farmers markets in 2020 and 2021, including the New Brighton Farmers Market and the Saint Paul Downtown Farmers Market. Funding was used to purchase social distancing supplies and physical barriers, signage related to COVID-19, hand sanitizing/washing stations, and personal protective equipment (PPE), such as face shields and masks, to provide a safe shopping experience for vendors and consumers. This funding for farmers markets was not included as part of this evaluation.

Evaluation

The Food and Basic Needs evaluation will answer the following questions:

1. Did Ramsey County address the Community Needs Assessment priority areas?
2. Did the CARES funding that was distributed expand and enhance the free food supply and distribution network?
3. Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of food access expansion?
4. Are Ramsey County residents getting connected to social services?

Methods

The evaluation team reviewed contract management documentation, surveys of residents who received home-delivered meals, county social service utilization, and vendor focus groups to answer the evaluation questions outlined above. [Appendix B](#) provides all survey and focus group questions.

Monthly Contracted Vendor Report Review

The evaluation team worked closely with contract managers to draft, review, and collect information from food contracted community partners in monthly vendor reports. These reports were reviewed regularly by contract managers and evaluation team members to monitor monthly progress and engage in regular communication. The reports collected information about accomplishments, challenges, Ramsey County assistance, community outreach efforts, number of individuals served (if applicable), race of individuals served (if applicable), and zip code of residents served.

Home-based Meals Satisfaction Surveys

The primary goals of the satisfaction survey were to determine: (1) overall satisfaction with the home-based meal delivery experience; (2) feedback on the nutritional balance of delivered meals; (3) feedback on the cultural appropriateness of delivered meals; and (4) understanding of Ramsey County services available to residents.

Between September 2020 and December 2020, eight HDM organizational partners participated in distributing over 4,800 surveys to eligible recipients. Vendors were provided with Ramsey County permit-stamped return envelopes and satisfaction surveys in English, Spanish, Somali, Hmong, and Karen to include with meals delivered to households. The survey included instructions for completion and mailing the completed survey back to Ramsey County. Survey completion was voluntary and meal delivery was not in any way impacted if residents chose not to complete the survey.

Surveys were collected through February 4, 2021 to accommodate organizations who mailed surveys to recipients in January for meals delivered through the end of December. Between September 2020 and February 2021, 639 surveys were returned, representing a 13% response rate. Twenty-seven surveys were returned in other languages (4%), where 26 were Somali and one was Spanish. Surveys were returned from seven meal service delivery providers. Some recipients who received meals for more than one month may have returned more than one survey during this time period, as providers were asked to include surveys every month.

County Food Programs Data Review

The evaluation team reviewed monthly Minnesota Investment Program (MFIP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) enrollment numbers, broken down by race/ethnicity, for 2020 in comparison to 2019 enrollment numbers. Food insecurity corresponds with a lack of income. The SNAP and WIC programs have a long history of use in the United States and are known to be effective at helping families improve their access to food.

Vendor Focus Groups

The evaluation team conducted focus groups with contracted vendors to understand what worked well and what improvements could be made to the overall contracting process. A total of four focus groups were conducted in January 2021. Each focus group lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted via Zoom. There was one group for vendors involved with home-based meal delivery, one for school delivered meals and youth program vendors, and two for food shelf vendors. All vendors were invited to participate in the focus groups. A total of 25 people participated in the vendor focus groups. Focus group sessions discussed the application process, program goals and impact, county supports, and future opportunities.

Limitations

- Contracting process timeline: The timeline between a community partner submitting a proposal and receiving an awarded contract took time during an already short period of fund distribution between August and December. This resulted in a shorter program service delivery period for community partners.
- Monthly vendor reports: There is some missing data from organizations for some months due to organization staffing changes or a lack of data collection infrastructure. Community partners were contracted with throughout August and December 2020 on a rolling basis, resulting in different periods of collection for different vendors. Food shelf and youth community partners often served individuals beyond Ramsey County, and their data includes non-Ramsey County residents due to their data collection infrastructure and program services, which are not intended to only serve Ramsey County residents.
- Recipient personal identifying information: We did not collect personal identifying information from survey respondents and, therefore, cannot make definitive statements about who received services or match to other administrative databases to identify other benefits received. This was done to ease the administrative burden on vendors and because some potential recipients may have been reluctant to share that information and decide not to receive services.

Results

Vendor Monthly Reports

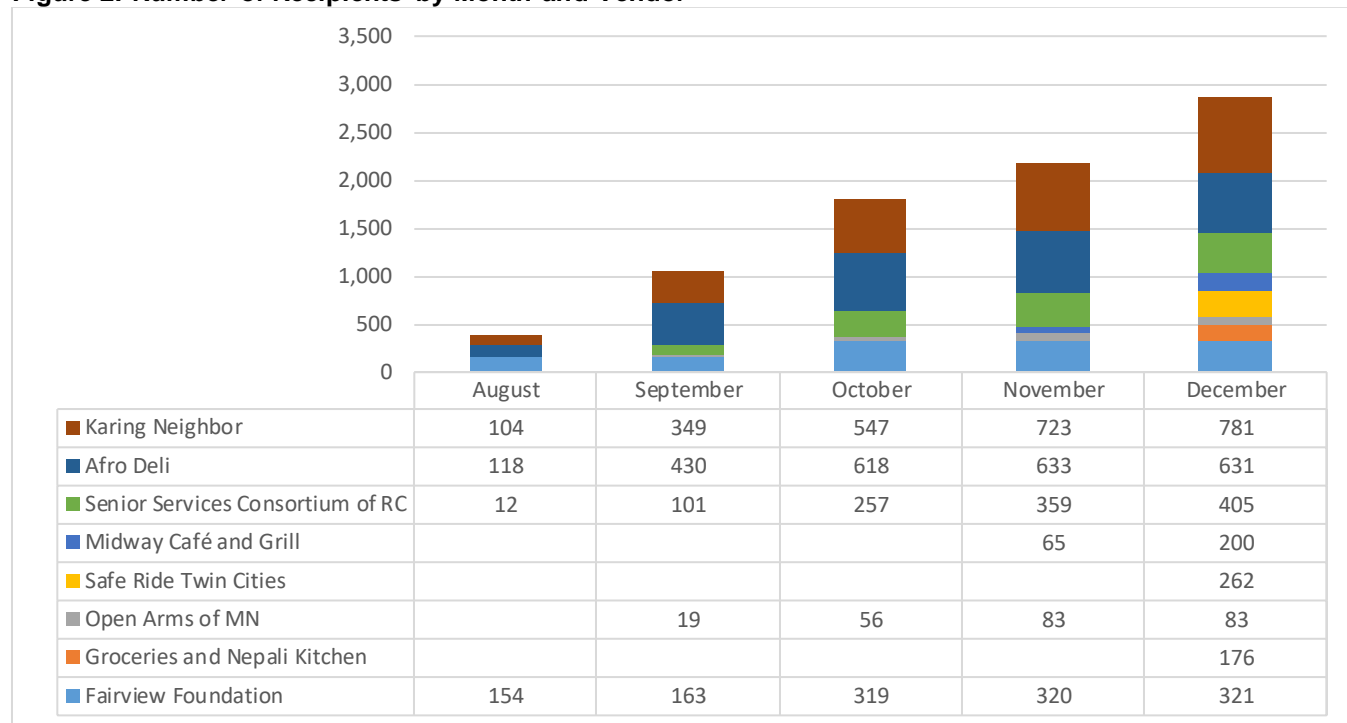
As part of the contract management process, Ramsey County collected monthly reports from 35 contracted community food partners, across the HDM, food shelf, and youth contract areas. Monthly reports collected the number of recipients served each month, race of individuals served (where available), and zip codes of individuals served each month.

Home Delivered Meals

Ramsey County contracted with vendors to provide for meal delivery to eligible Ramsey County residents that were homebound. Meals were expected to be nutritionally sound and culturally appropriate to meet the recipient's needs. Organizations needed to document eligibility for individuals, documenting how they were homebound and impacted due to COVID-19. While some of the vendors were already in the business of meal delivery, others started offering the service due to the pandemic and available county resources. Contracted vendors were required by the program to determine eligibility monthly for recipients. Some residents may have received meals over more than one month and are included in each month of their eligibility. A list of all vendors and populations served is in Appendix A1: Food and Basic Needs

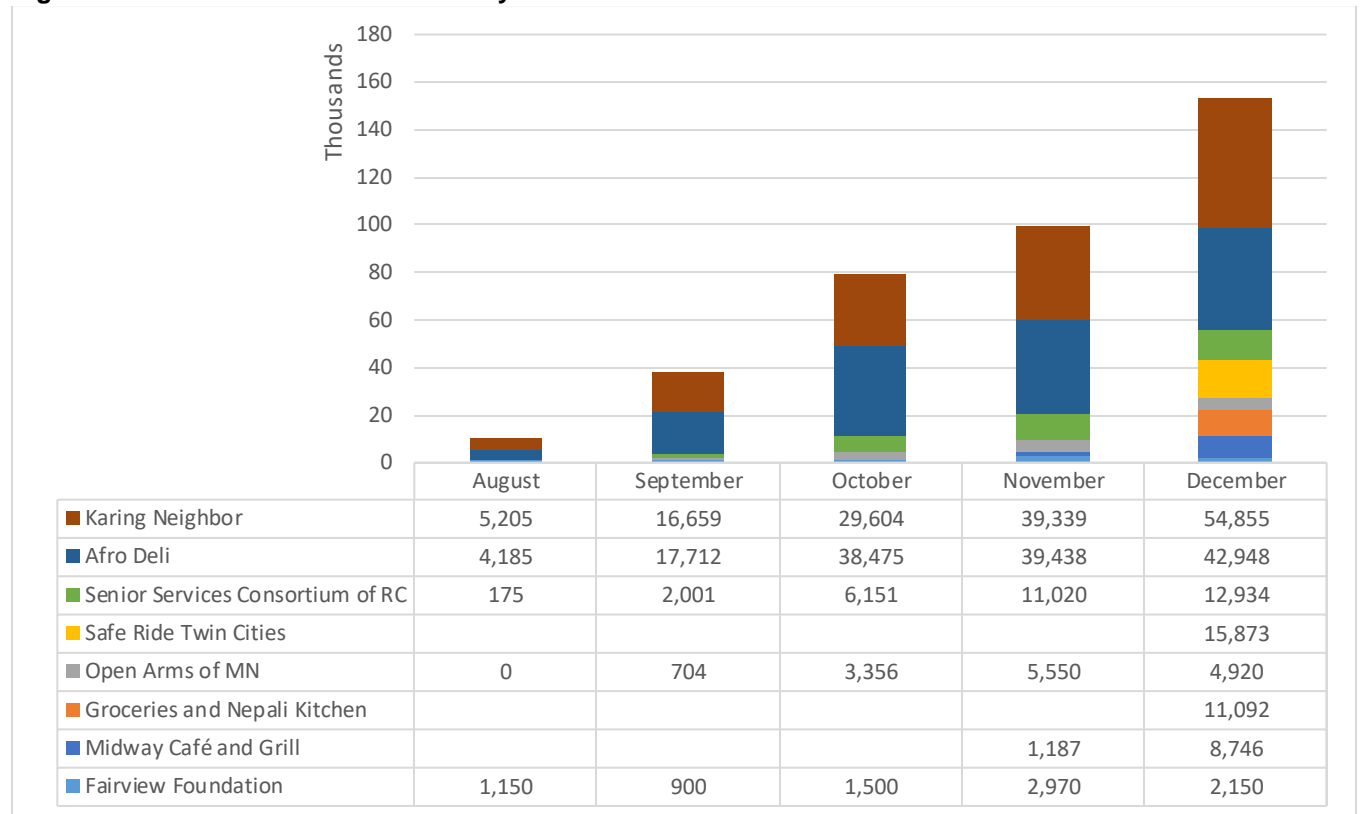
As shown in Figure 2 the number of recipients who received home-delivered meals overall increased during each month of the program. At the end of the five-month period, a total of 7,651 Ramsey County residents received home-delivered meals. Applications were received from community partners on a rolling basis between August and December of 2020, resulting in rolling contract start dates.

Figure 2: Number of Recipients by Month and Vendor



Over 345,000 meals were delivered to Ramsey County residents from August through December 2020. These meals were provided by eight different vendors offering a variety of foods to recipients. Afro Deli and Karing Neighbor delivered the most meals, with each delivering over 142,000 meals during this time period. As illustrated in Figure 3, the number of meals delivered increased steadily from month to month. Of the vendors who contracted with Ramsey County to deliver meals, some participated all five months while others participated for one or two months.

Figure 3: Number of Meals Delivered by Vendor and Month



Race

Averaged across the five-month service delivery period for all organizations, more than three out of four HDM recipients (76%) were people of color. Partner organizations collected race and ethnicity for eligible individuals every month. Residents who received meals for more than one month are included for each month of eligibility. More than one-third (36%) of residents receiving home-delivered meals were Black or African American and over one-quarter (27%) were Asian/Pacific Islander. Fewer recipients were Hispanic/Latinx (8%) or American Indian or Alaska Native (6%).

Geographic Areas Served

Meals delivered to residents took place across 23 zip codes. Zip codes with the three highest number of deliveries were 55106, 55104, and 55117. Zip code data was documented monthly on [Open Data Ramsey County](#).

Food Shelves

Food shelf and basic needs for food programs, food shelves, or food banks contracted with 21 community partners. This contract provided funds for purchasing supplies, food, or staffing to expand existing food programs. Organizations were contracted on a rolling basis between August and December, resulting in different contract start dates and different data collection periods.

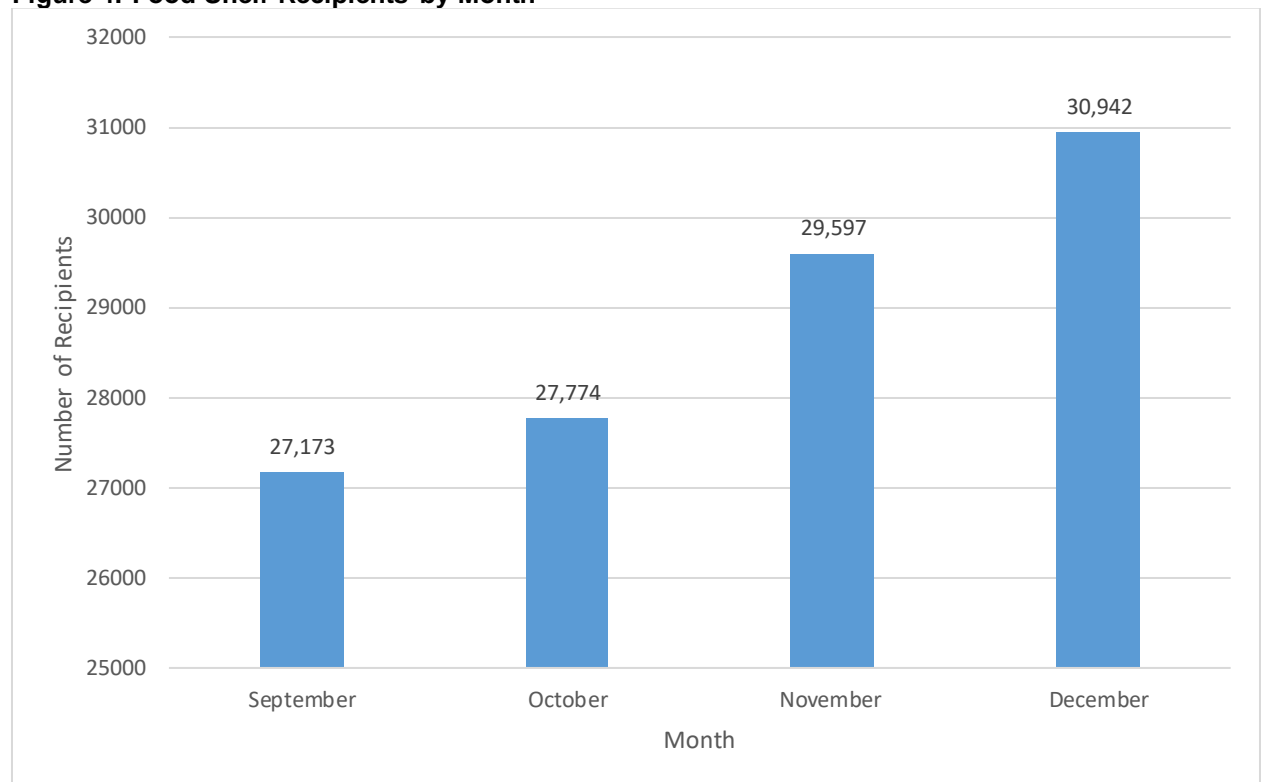
Food shelf community partners provided services to residents from across the state. The number of individuals served, race, and zip codes represent all program participants and are not limited to Ramsey County residents. For many organizations, Ramsey County CARES funds were just one of many funding sources organizations may have received access to in response to COVID-19 and allowed organizations to expand their services. The organizations that participated served unique areas of the

county and populations in many instances. A list of all vendors and population served are in Appendix A1: Food and Basic Needs

The number of recipients served each month steadily increased between September and December 2020, expanding program services on the part of community partners and additional organizations the county contracted with over this time period. Food shelves in Ramsey County served over 115,000 residents from September through December 2020 according to submitted monthly reports. Appendix A1: Food and Basic Needs provides a table with recipient counts by organization.

Food shelf contracted organizations provided food and basic needs through distanced pick-ups at their sites. Seventeen organizations also offered food and basic needs delivered to homes, representing 80% of contracted partner organizations. Between September and December, partner organizations provided over 22,000 home deliveries. The number of home deliveries steadily increased during this time as additional organizations were contracted with throughout this period.

Figure 4: Food Shelf Recipients by Month



Race of Food Shelf Users

Partner organizations collected race data for individuals served as part of their monthly vendor reports. Organizations had different levels of infrastructure to collect race data. Some organizations did not collect race data from participants in order for recipients to feel more comfortable to use services. As a result, some organizations did not collect race data and data that was reported had large numbers of missing data. Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution.

Averaged across the four service months, almost a quarter of reported race was missing (23%). More than half of recipients served (56%) were people of color. One quarter of recipients (26%) were Black or African American and one out of five recipients were White (21%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (19%).

Geographic Areas Served

Food shelf organizations collected zip codes from residents served. Many organizations, however, were not able to collect this data or had missing data. Food shelf organizations also served residents from across the state and were not limited to Ramsey County residents. Zip codes were collected from 14 food shelf organizations, from 110 zip codes across the state. The following zip codes were most represented: 55117, 55102, 55104.

School District and Youth Programs

Ramsey County contracted with six school districts and youth programs that served youth under 21 years old. Youth contracts supported and expanded emergency food and meals to youth and students impacted by COVID-19. Services provided meals, groceries, and/or basic needs supplies, providing service delivery at home or through onsite, distanced pick-ups. In order to be eligible to receive funding, organizations needed to be a Minnesota Department of Education and USDA-approved school nutrition program with experience serving youth and students. Funds supported expansion of meals and services through their usual USDA pathways and were not used to replace USDA reimbursable expenses.

Applications were reviewed on a rolling basis, therefore contracts started between October and December of 2020. Three school districts participated in the program: Roseville Area Schools, Saint Paul Public Schools, and White Bear Lake Area Schools. In addition to the school districts, youth meals were also provided by Change, Inc, Youthprise, and YMCA of North.

Over 44,000 youth received services through districts and youth programs. The number of youth who received school delivered meals increased each month and most significantly in December when Saint Paul Public Schools started their contract with the county. Saint Paul Public Schools had the widest reach, in December serving over 25,000 youth. One month of Saint Paul Public Schools meals made up over half of all school-delivered meals over the four months of the program. Districts and youth programs may have served the same youth month after month—the total represents youth that may have received services over more than one month.

Schools and Youth Programs provided services through distanced pick-up and deliveries to homes. Distanced pick-ups were not documented the same way by districts and youth programs. Districts provided multiple options for distanced pick-ups for youth.

Race

Districts and youth programs documented race data from youth served on their monthly vendor reports. Youth may have received services for more than one month and may be counted in multiple months. Four organizations were able to collect and provide race data on their recipients. According to reports from these programs, four out of five youth (79%) that received meals through the program were people of color. Over one-quarter of youth served were Black or African American (27%) and the same was true for Asian/Pacific Islander youth (28%). Fourteen percent were Hispanic/Latinx, 6% Multi-racial, and 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native.

Geographic Areas Served

School districts and youth programs collected zip codes from youth receiving services. Not all organizations were able to collect data, and organizations that did collect data had missing data. Organizations that delivered meals to siblings in the same household may have counted only one zip code. Zip codes were collected each month and may have involved youth that received service over time for multiple months. Districts and youth programs served youth from across the state and were not limited to Ramsey County residents. Zip codes were collected from five organizations. Youth were

served in 57 zip codes across the state. The following zip codes were most represented: 55106, 55117, and 55119.

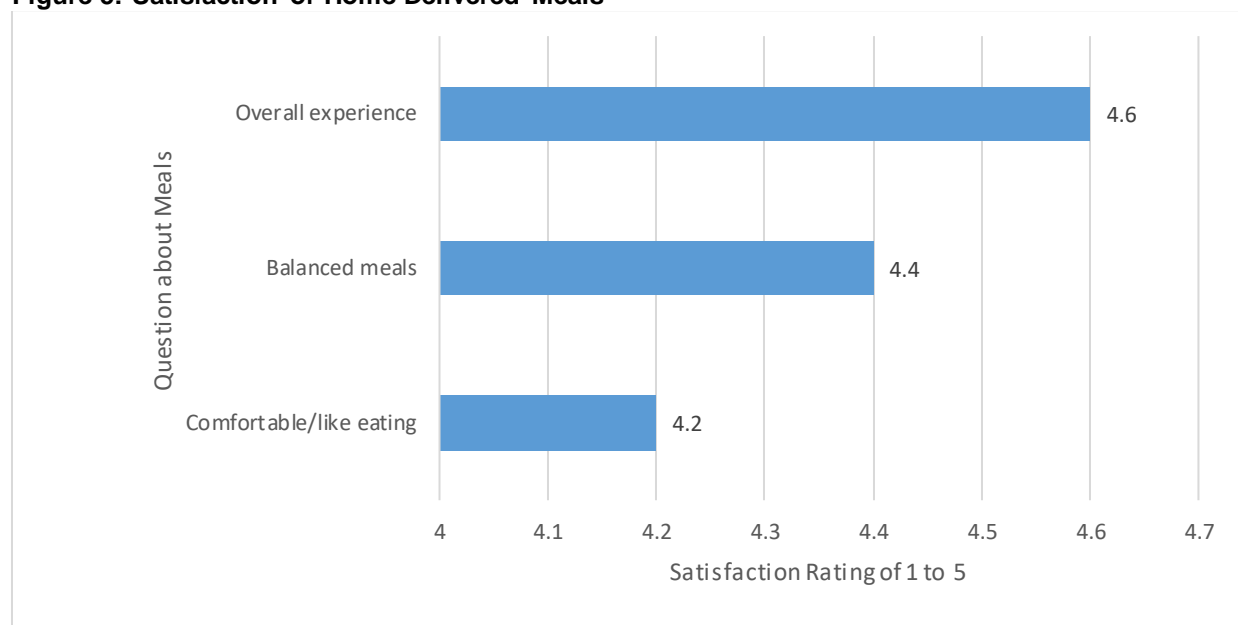
Home Delivered Meals Satisfaction Surveys

Between September 2020 and December 2020, home-delivered meals (HDM) organizational partners included a satisfaction survey with the meal delivery once per month. The primary goals of the satisfaction survey was to determine: (1) overall satisfaction with the home-based meal delivery experience; (2) feedback on the nutritional balance of delivered meals; (3) feedback on the cultural appropriateness of delivered meals; and (4) understanding of Ramsey County services available to residents.

Meal Satisfaction

Overall, survey respondents were satisfied with the experience of the home meal delivery service, rating it an average of 4.6 out of 5 stars. Respondents felt the meals included a balanced mix of fruits or vegetables, grains, and protein, rating it an average of 4.4 out of 5 stars. Respondents felt that meals included foods they liked to eat and were comfortable eating, rating it an average of 4.2 out of 5 stars.

Figure 5: Satisfaction of Home Delivered Meals



Communication about meal delivery service

Recipients were asked how they learned about the program. Nearly half of the respondents reported they learned about the home-based meal delivery service from friends, family or neighbors (47%), followed by community organization (24%) and Ramsey County staff (18%). Other responses included print newspapers, newsletters, or flyers, housing office staff, or other individuals unable to be categorized (Table 3)

When asked if they received information about county services, most respondents indicated that they received information about Ramsey County programs available for residents with their meal (73%). However, 71% of those saying they received information indicated they did not contact the county regarding the services available. Residents that did contact services were asked what kind of assistance they were seeking. Most residents indicated they were seeking assistance in obtaining food

(58%), followed by assistance with income (16%), help with COVID-19 testing (14%), and help with housing (11%).

Table 3: Satisfaction Survey Questions- Communication

Q4. How did you learn about the home-delivered meal service?	Number	Percent
Total	762	100.0%
Friend, family, or neighbor	359	47.1%
Community Organization	183	24.0%
Ramsey County staff	141	18.5%
Social Media	18	2.4%
Healthcare	15	2.0%
School	16	2.1%
Other	30	3.9%
Q5. Did you receive information about Ramsey County services with your meals?	Number	Percent
Total	624	100.0%
Yes	456	73.1%
No	168	26.9%
Q6. If you answered yes in Q5, did you contact any services?	Number	Percent
Total	593	100.0%
No	423	71.3%
Yes	170	28.7%
Q7. If you answered yes in Q6, what kind of help were you looking for (check all that apply)?	Number	Percent
Total	256	100.0%
Help with food	148	57.8%
Help with income or money	41	16.0%
Help with COVID testing	36	14.1%
Help with housing	28	10.9%
Other	3	1.1%

Demographics

On average, there were 3.3 individuals living at a home, with households ranging between one and 12 people. Most respondents (58%) received meals through the delivery service for less than two weeks and a third (32%) for two to four weeks. Respondents were well represented across race. The greatest number of respondents were Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (38%), followed by White (32%) and Black (21%). Respondents were also represented across every age range. Approximately one-third reported being 70 years or older (29%), followed by residents between 60-69 years old (24%) and 50-59 years old (14%). (Table 4)

Table 4: Satisfaction Survey Questions- Demographics

Q9. How many individuals live in your household?	Number	Average
	565	3.3 (range: 1-12)
Q10. How long have you received meals through the delivery service?	Number	Percent
Total	616	100%
More than four weeks	66	10.7%
Two to four weeks	195	31.7%
Less than two weeks	355	57.6%
Q11. Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Total	546	100%
Hispanic	16	2.9%
Non-Hispanic	530	97.1%
Q12. Race	Number	Percent
Total	657	100%
White	213	32.4%
Black	140	21.3%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	14	2.1%
Asian and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	252	38.3%
Other	38	5.7%
Q13. Age	Number	Percent
Total	624	100%
18-29 Years old	46	7.3%
30-39 years old	82	13.1%
40-49 years old	75	12.0%
50-59 years old	89	14.3%
60-69 years old	148	23.7%
70 years old or older	184	29.4%

Vendor Focus Groups

A total of four focus groups were conducted with food vendors. One for vendors involved in the home delivered meals program, one for vendors delivering school and youth meals, and two with vendors involved with local food shelves. In total 25 people participated in the sessions. The participants were asked questions about the solicitation process, the goals and impacts of the program, technical assistance and supports from the county, and future opportunities.

Solicitation Process

According to home delivered meal vendors, the process went smoothly overall and was what was expected. Vendors commented that it was quick and that communication with the county was good. One issue with the process that was mentioned was that it would have been helpful to know up front how much detail was appropriate to include in the solicitation response. While school meal vendors agreed that the process was not difficult, they mentioned that the budget portion of the solicitation made it feel like a double step. They also reported that the timeline was tight for school districts and the reporting created an additional burden for staff. Feedback from food shelf vendors was similar to school delivered meal vendors. They thought the solicitation process was not overly difficult, but they expressed the same challenges mentioned by school meal vendors. Food shelf vendors also asked

what outreach had been done by the county to inform community groups about the program. One vendor mentioned they heard about it in a very roundabout way.

Service Design, Implementation, and Impact

When vendors were asked if the goals of the project aligned with the needs of the community all vendors agreed that overall, they were aligned and impacted intended communities. School delivered meal vendors reported that the flexibility of the contract allowed them to align their efforts with their program. Vendors who were involved with home delivered meals mentioned that this contract enhanced their ability to meet their goals of serving the community. Food shelf vendors discussed how this program allowed them to provide more culturally appropriate food choices to families. They also appreciated the opportunity to develop partnerships with local community groups and grocers.

"I would say this grant definitely helped us meet our goals, and that it really helped facilitate some partnerships that probably wouldn't have been created without the funding. I mentioned Saint. Paul public housing, we historically may have not had a reason to intersect previously. But now, because we got this funding, and we serve the east side, they stepped up to the plate in terms of the need. So it was just this beautiful kind of choreography-like situation. We had funding, they had a need and so we were all brought together."

Vendors were asked what impacts they saw on the intended communities. Those involved with home delivered meals mentioned that this contract was extremely helpful for the seniors they served because this population was more isolated than usual with COVID-19 restrictions in place and family members were unable to come to their homes to assist with meals. Food shelf vendors reported expanding the communities they served beyond what they had done in the past or even hoped to be able to do.

"I think that was just generally a huge success for us is to be able to execute this project for so many more people than we would have been able to otherwise and to get such nice feedback that it really felt like a treat for them and not just a relief effort."

When asked about what was not as successful as they would have liked, home delivered meal vendors reported that there needed to be changes to the program that allowed for whole family services. They were able to service adults 18 years old and older which left many families in a bind if they did not have food services in place for younger children in the home. Home delivered meal vendors commented that it would have been helpful if tips for delivery services would have been covered by CARES funds and well as being able to deliver cooked meals to people in addition to groceries.

"We had families who did apply and were receiving food but weren't able to receive food for the younger people in their family unit. So they were under 18 and although we were able to make the connections with the schools, there's this disconnect of getting service, but there was an unmet need in a household that should have been met by other services."

Technical Assistance and Support

Vendors across all groups reported that the timeline from invoice to payment was timely and what they had expected. They also all commented on how wonderful county staff were to work with regarding response time, flexibility, and overall helpfulness. When asked what supports were the most helpful, home delivered meal vendors mentioned flyers, templates, and email reminders from their contract manager. School delivered meal vendors reported that having invoice spreadsheets and formulas in

advance was helpful. Food shelf vendors commented on the flexibility and willingness of their contract manager to make last minute changes as extremely helpful.

“We had a lot of questions and a lot of stumbles and I don’t think we would have been able to get over it without the support of the staff in Ramsey County.”

When asked about supports that were missing, vendors who were new to the process shared they would have appreciated more support getting started. Vendors also said it would have been helpful to have an information sheet provided by the county about other services available to residents since many of the people they are serving could benefit from additional services as well.

Future Opportunities

Vendors were asked how the success of programs such as this should be measured. They were also asked if they have recommendations for Ramsey County for providing services like this in the future, as well as partnering with vendors moving forward.

- Vendors across all three areas agreed that one measurement of success should be the number of people served. Another mentioned that all available funds should be spent on services to the community stating that, “quantity matters as much as quality.”
- Several vendors stated that the county should continue to collect feedback from the community via surveys.
- Vendors suggested more notice and lead time for future solicitations along with fewer reporting requirements. Food shelf vendors recommended the county host information sessions for vendors to understand how the process works and what working with the county looks like.
- They also suggested Ramsey County works to help community organizations connect and work with one another. According to vendors, there are many opportunities where community groups could collaborate or share ideas that could improve services across several programs at once.

Discussion

Did Ramsey County address the Community Needs Assessment priority areas?

Prior to the CARES funding announcement, Ramsey County conducted a [Food and Basic Needs Assessment](#) to plan for the impact of COVID-19 on residents and identified the following priorities to guide the County’s food access response:

- Amplify and connect community to school food programs to feed the whole family
- Connect community to financial assistance and benefits
- Connect community to existing and new food and essential services.
- Ensure individuals/households who are homebound have access to food and essential services.
- Amplify food and basic needs distribution sites and alternatives
- Provide a centralized location and administrative coordination of community and business efforts, communications, donations and volunteers,
- Increase capacity and access to public gardens, including equipment and materials
- Partner with community and county partners to meet food needs of individuals who are homeless
- Increase transportation options for community
- Throughout response track usage, anticipate demand, provide continuous improvement recommendations, and performance metrics in partnership with community.

Through the three CARES Food contract areas, including home-delivered meals, food shelves, and districts and youth programs, the county met the identified priorities established in the Needs Assessment. Organizational partners included local businesses, non-profit organizations, and school districts. Ramsey County provided informational handouts on county services available to residents and maintained a website that provided information on food resources available for residents. Delivery programs for residents who were homebound were increased through the home-delivered meals, expanded food shelf delivery, and district and youth program delivery options. Usage was tracked across all three contract areas and regular communication was maintained between county staff and organizational partners. Home-delivered meal organizational partners also provided services to the county's homeless population. Increased capacity and access to public gardens was the only priority that was not met through the county's work, which may have been due to the growing season not coinciding with the contract period of August through December.

Did CARES funding that was distributed expand and enhance the free food supply and distribution network?

Although the program did not have data on the number of people served by food shelves, food banks, and meal deliveries prior to the pandemic and this funding, there are several indications that the distribution was both enhanced and expanded by CARES funding. Focus groups conducted included a majority of vendors involved in the program in all three areas of food distribution. During focus groups, vendors who were already providing these services to the community reported the funding allowed them to expand the services they were currently providing to a greater number of people. The funding also created an opportunity for new organizations to enter the food supply and distribution work.

Food delivery was a new service offered by the county as a result of the additional funding. This allowed for individuals most vulnerable to COVID-19 to receive much needed food and meals without the risk of going to pick things up in person. People with disabilities and seniors who regularly had family or home care assistance with groceries or meals in their homes benefitted greatly as these in-person visits were not able to take place due to pandemic restrictions. In addition to expanding the reach of the services, vendors also reported the funding allowed them to enhance the products and services they could offer and deliver to residents. Vendors reported they had enhanced offerings of more culturally and ethnically specific foods as well as an increase in fresh produce available to residents.

Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of food access expansion?

Insight on whether residents are better off comes from monthly report data, satisfaction survey results, and focus group discussions. According to monthly vendor reports, nearly 8,000 Ramsey County residents received home-delivered meals, over 22,000 deliveries were made to homes from local food shelf partners, and over 46,000 meals were delivered to students and youth by local school districts or youth programs.

Survey respondents were overall very satisfied with the experience of the home meal delivery service, rating it an average of 4.6 out of 5 stars. Respondents indicated the meals included a balanced mix of fruits or vegetables, grains, and protein, rating it an average of 4.4 out of 5 stars. Respondents reported that meals included foods they liked to eat and were comfortable eating, rating it an average of 4.2 out of 5 stars.

During focus group sessions, vendors shared examples of how residents are better off as a result of the program. One area highlighted was the home-delivered meals option available through this program. This addition was extremely beneficial to individuals who were homebound during the pandemic and

unable to have in-home assistance from community or family members. Several vendors reported that they were able to increase their capacity to provide food and basic needs items due to this funding.

Another way in which residents are better off was explained as an increased understanding and connection with other organizations and neighborhoods. Vendors talked about learning about other local organizations and collaborating to better serve the community. They also mentioned they were able to work with and educate local providers about the needs and preferences of the surrounding community which influenced the foods and supplies stocked and available to residents in the area.

Are Ramsey County residents getting connected to social services?

Identifying information was not collected by vendors. The benefits of not collecting personal information were that more people could be served who may be uncomfortable sharing that information and easier administration of the programs. On the other hand, we were unable to match data from users of food and basic needs services to other administrative data bases to see who enrolled in programs such as SNAP or WIC. It is unknown how many people were connected to other social or community services as a result of this project.

In the HDM satisfaction surveys, residents stated that they had received information about county social service programs with their meals. However, most respondents did not contact any of the services for additional follow-up. It is unclear why residents did not connect with services. This might be a potential area to explore in the future.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

- **Continue the home delivered meal program through the emergency response.** Home delivered meals have been a critical way for vulnerable populations to receive food, particularly for people who cannot leave their homes due to risks associated with COVID-19.
- **Explore a home delivered meal program model that would support entire families.** Future funding opportunities should consider how food, meals, and basic needs can be delivered to eligible households rather than individuals to better serve entire families.
- **Provide more information to potential vendors on proposal solicitation process.** Organization partners and county staff suggested facilitating information sessions on the proposal solicitation process. This could help organizations unfamiliar with the county's contracting process and requirements. Additional communications like videos could be posted on the Ramsey County website for vendors to access as needed.

Long-term Recommendations

- **Provide more opportunities to connect people to ongoing food and basic needs resources, such as SNAP, WIC, and financial assistance resources.** When the home delivered meals program ends, work with vendors to help people receiving meals get connected to ongoing food help. Conduct outreach through trusted messengers, home delivered meals vendors, food shelves, and others to provide information about these resources and how to apply. Leverage county navigators to help recipients learn about ongoing benefits and other benefits such as financial assistance or assistance related to age or disability.

- **Facilitate ways to connect community organizations with each other.** During the vendor focus groups, organizations recommended that the county consider facilitating connections between community organizations receiving contract funds. Organizations established best program practices and made connections with local food distributors that they would have liked to share with fellow partner organizations. Delivery services were also one place where organizations could potentially review best practices for delivery services or delivery service partners to contract with.
- **Continue to offer open-ended Requests for Informal Quotes and other Requests for Proposals.** Stating a goal or intended outcome with flexibility in how to meet that was a strength of this project. Vendors appreciated the open-ended nature of the Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQ) as it helped build their capacity and build on existing strengths. It also allowed organizations to tailor services to meet needs of particular communities.

Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance

Introduction

The CARES Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance project serves families and individuals with the goal of preventing serious hardship or immediate threat to physical health and safety from emergency financial needs. Fifteen million dollars of CARES funding was allocated to prevent homelessness, loss of housing, and prevent utility shut-off. A portion of these funds were used for rent or mortgage arrears, damage deposits, utility assistance, or car repairs for financial losses related to the pandemic for families and individual applicants. This report does not include those who received support through the Landlord Assistance Program.

Prior to the pandemic, Ramsey County offered Emergency Assistance/ Emergency General Assistance (EA/EGA) to people facing a financial crisis. Eligibility criteria were expanded to meet the needs of the pandemic. Since April 2020, some recipients received assistance using funds from state and federal sources that were available prior to the pandemic and would have been eligible under old guidelines. Others became eligible due to the expanded eligibility criteria and were assisted with federal CARES funding. This report looks at the program experience during the reporting period without differentiating who received funds from which source. See Appendix A2: Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance for further program description.

Throughout the report, the term CARES EA/EGA is used to describe the program. It includes combined application results for Emergency Assistance, Emergency General Assistance, and expanded eligibility processed through the Community Action Programs of Ramsey and Washington Counties (CAPRW). In this chapter, recipients are reported by race and ethnicity, with immigrant subgroups for Black and Asian people. Immigrant subgroups are defined as first generation immigrants. Applications by Black people and Asian people are broken into immigrant subgroups using nationality data known to MAXIS, the Financial Assistance Services administrative database. African Americans and Asian Americans are people with no nationality data known to MAXIS, who are US citizens, and identify as either Black or Asian, respectively. Immigrant groups are defined by a combination of nationality data known to MAXIS (regardless of citizenship), spoken language, and chosen racial group. Hispanic ethnicity is reported as a separate variable.

Evaluation Questions

At the outset of the project, there were four questions:

- Are Ramsey County residents better off due to CARES EA/EGA assistance?
- Were evictions prevented due to receipt of these funds?
- Do Ramsey County residents who receive these funds experience greater housing stability?
- Did the project serve those most vulnerable to COVID-19?

Due to the eviction moratorium and the lack of Housing Court data, the second question will not be evaluated.

Methods

Analysis of Application Data

Application data were pulled from both the state MAXIS system and Ramsey County Expanded CARES SharePoint database for the time period April through December 2020. Application denial data were pulled by date of application, while payment/approval data were pulled by benefit date. The SharePoint database was used to track the Expanded EA/EGA CARES applications. Use of this database started in August 2020.

Telephone Survey

The telephone survey was designed to understand whether recipients are better off as a result of the EA/EGA/CARES benefit, to understand a person's experience with the application process, and to seek their recommendations for program improvement. Respondents received a \$20 gift card for participating in the survey. A representative sample of recipients was developed to follow-up by telephone four to six weeks after their benefit was approved. The sample size was 360⁵ and a stratified sampling approach was used⁶. The sample size of 360 was calculated based on a population size of 5,655 and requiring a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence interval. To assure inclusion of people of diverse race/ethnicity and immigrant groups, oversampling of groups was used for those who the predicted sampling size was less than 10 people.

A minimum of three telephone call attempts, and up to 10, were made to reach people in the sample. If a person did not answer the phone or declined to participate, they were replaced by another recipient of the same race/ethnicity/immigrant subgroup. TTY and Language Line were used when interpretation was required. Telephone calls were made in between September and December 2020. See [Appendix B](#) for survey questions.

Comparison Population Served and Most Vulnerable

Address and zip code data were geocoded to census tract and then compared to the Center for Disease Control's [Social Vulnerability Index](#) (SVI) to identify whether services were provided to communities considered most vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic.

Limitations

The survey approach has some limitations. The first limitation is that it relies on phone numbers. Therefore, results may under-represent people who do not have stable phone access. Another possible limitation is because the survey process was conducted during a public health pandemic and periodic civil unrest. In this environment respondents had experienced a significant crisis or emergency. Respondents may have expressed self-report bias, meaning they respond more favorably because they have received a benefit from the person who is asking them for their feedback during a continuing crisis. There may be interpretation bias where the interviewer misunderstood the respondents' meaning. Also, the survey sample does not represent all months of program operation and may be affected by seasonality issues. Results should be considered with caution.

Results

This section of the report summarizes data from program applications and participant surveys. Application data form the basis of understanding if the program served the most vulnerable. The volume of applications, who applied for benefits, and characteristics of approved or denied applications is described. Telephone survey findings form the basis of understanding participant perceptions of outcomes such as timely receipt of benefits, housing stability or decreased stress. The survey provides a picture of participant experiences with the application process and recommendations for program improvement are highlighted.

⁵ The recommended sample size for the target population, assuming a confidence interval of 95% and margin of error of 5%, was 360.

⁶ A stratified sampling approach was used which means the population was divided into smaller groups based on race/ethnicity/immigrant subgroup and a random sample was taken from each group based on size in population. To assure representation of smaller groups, oversampling was used.

Application Data Results

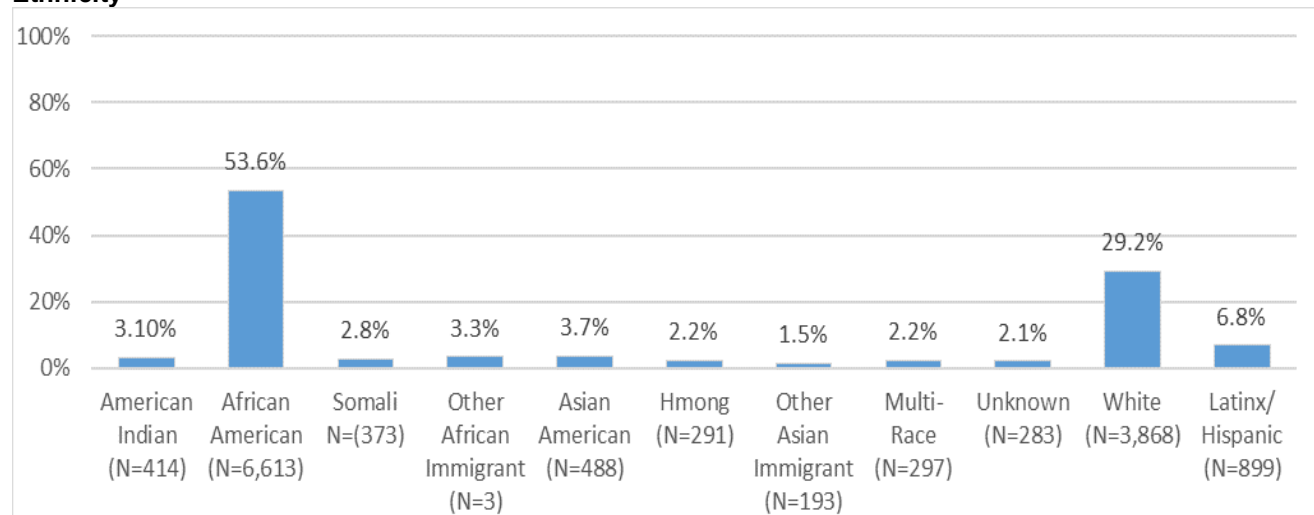
Application Volume and Demographics

There were a total of 13,255 CARES EA/EGA applications between April and December of 2020. About 19% of applications were made in the first quarter of the project, 37% in the second quarter of the project, and 43% in the last quarter. This represents an increase 126% increase in applications from first quarter to last quarter. Compared to the same time period in 2019, there was a 40% increase in applications.

Close to three-fourths of applications were made by women (74%). About half of the applications were from people ages 25-39 years (48%) and a third between 40-59 years of age. Eight percent of applications were from people over 60 years of age, while 12% of applications were made by people under 25 years of age.

Fifty-four percent of the applications were made by African American residents with additional applications by residents who are Somali immigrants (3%), Other African Immigrants (3%), Latinx/Hispanic (7%), American Indians (3%), Asian Americans (4%), Hmong Immigrants (2%), multi-race (2%), White (29%) and unknown race (2)%.

Figure 6: Applications between April and December 2020 – Race with Immigrant Subgroups, Hispanic Ethnicity



Application Approvals and Denials

Thirty-four percent of applications were approved (N=4,551) and 66% were denied (N=8,704). Application approvals and denials were examined by race/ethnicity, age group, and gender. Figure 3 highlights within race rates of approved and denied applications. For example, there were 414 applications submitted by American Indian residents, and of those applications, 34% were approved and 66% denied. Similar to previous years, results vary by race/ethnicity and immigrant subgroups. African American applications were more likely to be approved than other groups. American Indian (34%), Latinx/Hispanic (35%), and Multi-race rates of approval were similar to the overall rate of approval (34%). Groups less likely to be approved compared to the overall rate of approval include Asian American (25%), Hmong immigrants (21%), Other Asian Immigrant (9%), Somali immigrants (26%), Other African Immigrants (26%), Whites (30%), and unknown race (30%).

Further, compared to White people in poverty, Black people were 3.5 times more likely to and American Indian people were 2.7 times more likely to become eligible for CARES EA/EGA than White people.

Latinx/Hispanic and Asian people were less likely to become eligible for CARES EA/EGA than White people (9% less likely and 72% less likely, respectively). (Figure 7)

Figure 7: Application Approvals and Denials within Race/Ethnicity with Immigrant Subgroups

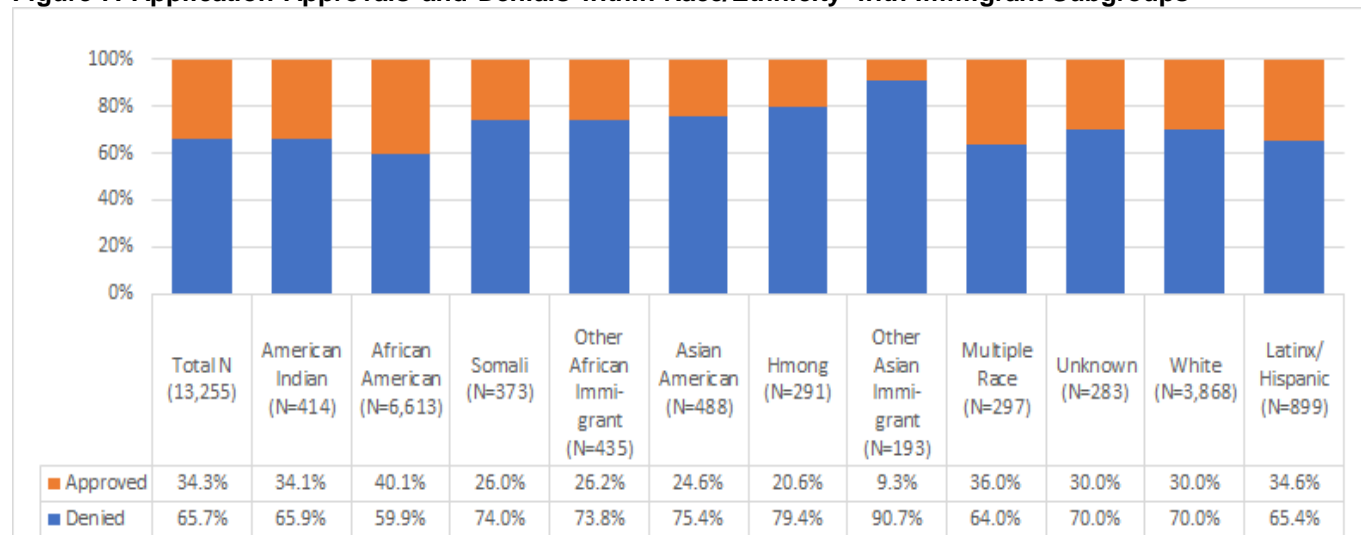


Table 5: Approved Applications Compared to People in Poverty According to 2015-2019 American Community Survey by Race/Ethnicity

	Approved Applications	People in Poverty	Percent of Race/Ethnicity	Disparity Ratio
Total	4,551	82,343	5.5%	
White	1,160	28,146	4.1%	1.00
Black	2,863	19,893	14.4%	3.49
Asian	198	17,414	1.1%	0.28
American Indian	141	1,268	11.1%	2.70
Multiple Races	107	5,061	2.1%	0.51
Other/Unknown	82	2,312	3.5%	0.86
Hispanic/Latinx	311	8,249	3.8%	0.91

The rate of approval for applications submitted by women (36%) was six percentage points higher than males (30%). People under the age of 25 had a lower rate of approved applications (29%) compared to older age groups: 25 to 39 years of age (35%), 40 to 59 years of age (35%), and 60 years of age and above (37%).

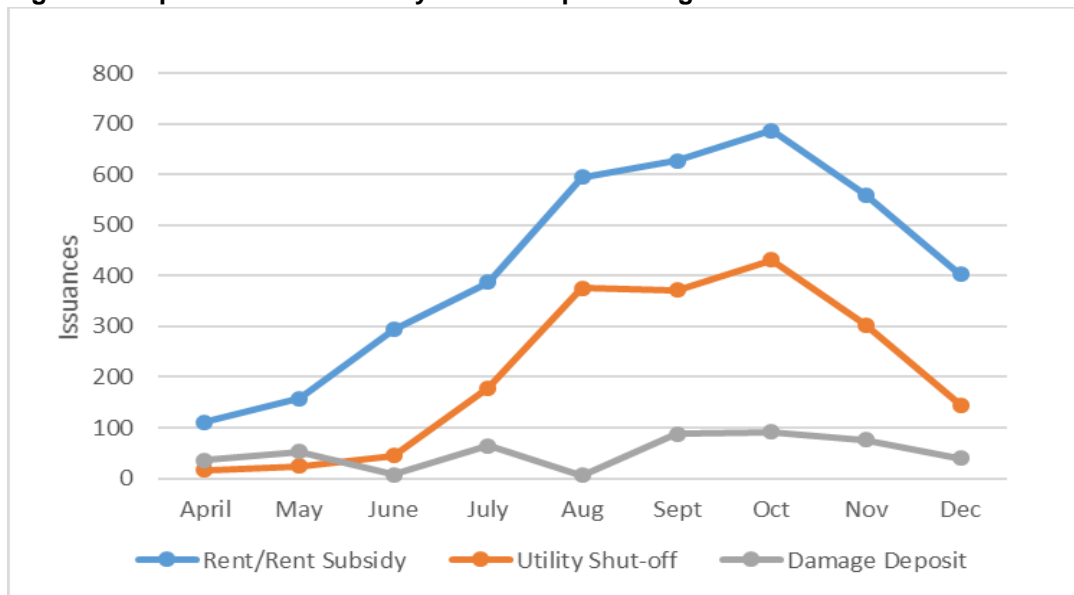
Issuances/Payments for Emergency Assistance

Once an application is improved, payment is authorized for the emergency assistance. Over 90% of the issuances for emergency assistance were in three areas: rent/rent subsidy (57%), utility assistance (28%), and damage deposit assistance.

The remaining issuances were for car repair (2%), mortgage/mortgage subsidy (1%), and other emergencies (3%). Between April and October, issuances for rent increased over 500% and began to taper to first quarter levels by December 2020. A similar trendline is seen in issuances for utility assistance. The volume of issuances for damage deposits was fairly stable over the course of the

program period. Further analysis of payment data by race, age group, gender and zip code can be found on [Open Data Ramsey County](#).

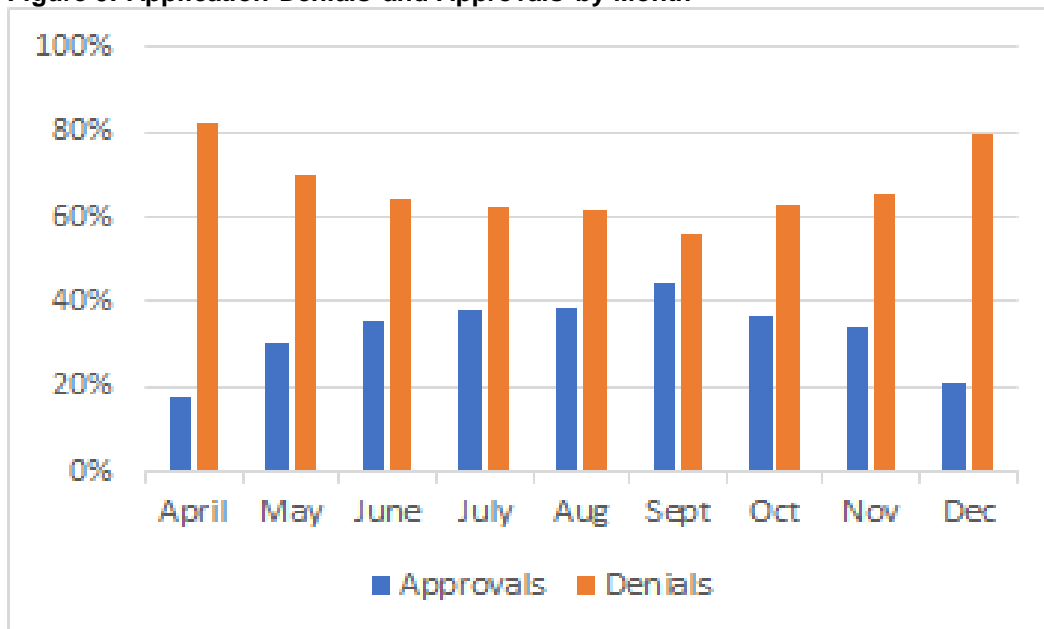
Figure 8: Top Three Issuances by Month - April through December



Application Denials

Overall, there were 8,704 denied applications between April and December 2020. In the first six months of the program, denial rates steadily dropped from 82% to 56% as approvals increased. Denial rates began to increase the last quarter of the program from 63% to 79%.

Figure 9: Application Denials and Approvals by Month



Reasons for Denial

Between April and December 2020 there were 8,704 applications denied and 9,531 application denial reasons. An application can have more than one denial reason and consequently the number of application denials will not match the number of denial reasons.

Denial reasons range from an incomplete application to not having an emergency as defined by the program. Common reasons for a denial considered not an emergency are for bills not covered under EA/EGA policies, such as garbage or internet, when someone is not named on the lease, or when a payment plan with the landlord is in place. Eighty-five percent of denial reasons fell into three areas:

- Not having an emergency as defined by program (41%)
- Application process/verification was incomplete (38%)
- Resources (income & assets) were enough to resolve emergency (7%)

The volume of denial reasons increased from quarter one to quarter three of the project by 103%. There were 2,090 denial reasons in the first quarter of the project and 4,234 denial reasons in the last quarter. There were fluctuations in the proportion of denial reasons by quarter. Fluctuations in some categories were due to program exceptions and expanded eligibility decisions made over the course of the project. Denials related to not having an emergency as defined by program decreased from the first quarter (52%) to the last quarter (40%). Denials due to incomplete application/verifications fluctuated up and down, while denials related to resources generally stayed the same. (Table 6)

Table 6: Top Three Denial Reasons by Quarter

	Overall (April-Dec)	Quarter 1 (April-June)	Quarter 2 (July-Aug)	Quarter 3 (Sept-Dec)
Number of denial reasons	9,531	2,090	3,206	4,234
Did not have emergency as defined by program	40.6%	52.1%	34.5%	39.6%
Incomplete application/verification	37.5%	26.1%	46.2%	36.7%
Resources (income & assets) were enough to resolve the emergency	7.2%	5.5%	7.4%	8.0%

Telephone Survey Results

Respondents

Three hundred and sixty-two program recipients completed the survey. The sample was stratified by race, by immigrant subgroups and Hispanic ethnicity. Groups where the size of the population was small were oversampled to assure their voices were included in the sample. A goal was set to reach a minimum of ten respondents in each group. The goal was not met for two groups: Other Asian Immigrant (5) and Somali immigrants (9). In the following tables and figures, percentages for these two groups should be interpreted with caution.

When comparing the respondent group to the overall population served, the following groups were somewhat over-represented in the sample: American Indian, Somali immigrant, Other African Immigrant, Asian American, Hmong immigrant, Other Asian Immigrant and Multi-race. Larger groups in the population were somewhat under-represented including African American, White and Latinx/Hispanic.

Table 7: Survey Sample Compared to Service Population

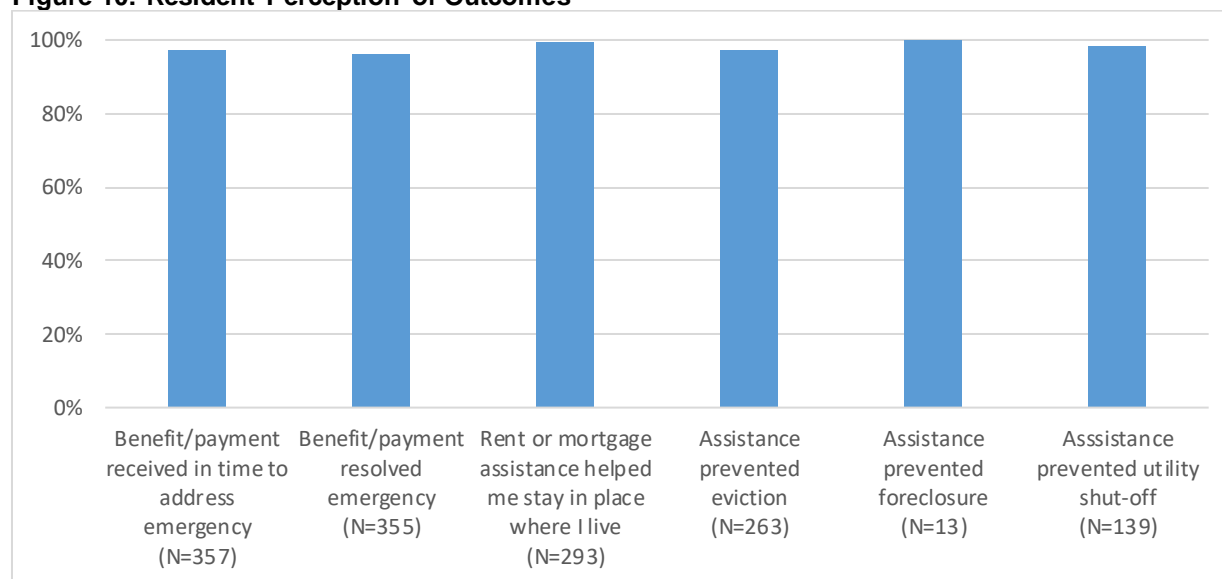
	Population	Survey Sample
Total	4,551	362
African American	58.2%	54.1%
White	25.5%	19.6%
Latinx/Hispanic	6.1%	5.0%
American Indian	3.1%	4.1%
Asian American	2.6%	4.1%
Hmong Immigrant	1.3%	3.0%
Multiple Races	2.4%	3.0%
Somali Immigrant	2.1%	2.8%
Other African Immigrant	2.5%	2.8%
Other Asian Immigrant	0.4%	1.4%
Unknown	1.9%	0.3%

Perceptions of Outcome

Survey respondents were asked about their perceptions about outcomes from timeliness of payment to housing stability. Results were generally positive with some exceptions. Overall, 97% of respondents received the payment/benefit in time to address their emergency situation and 96% said the payment/benefit resolved the emergency for which they contacted Ramsey County.

In terms of housing stability, people who had received rent or mortgage assistance reported the assistance helped them stay where they live (99%), prevented an eviction (97%) or prevented a foreclosure (100%). Also, most people who had received utility assistance for things like electricity, heat, water, or sewer (97%) said that the assistance received prevented their utility from being turned off. When looking at the outcome results for each race/ethnic group, some results were not as positive as the overall results.

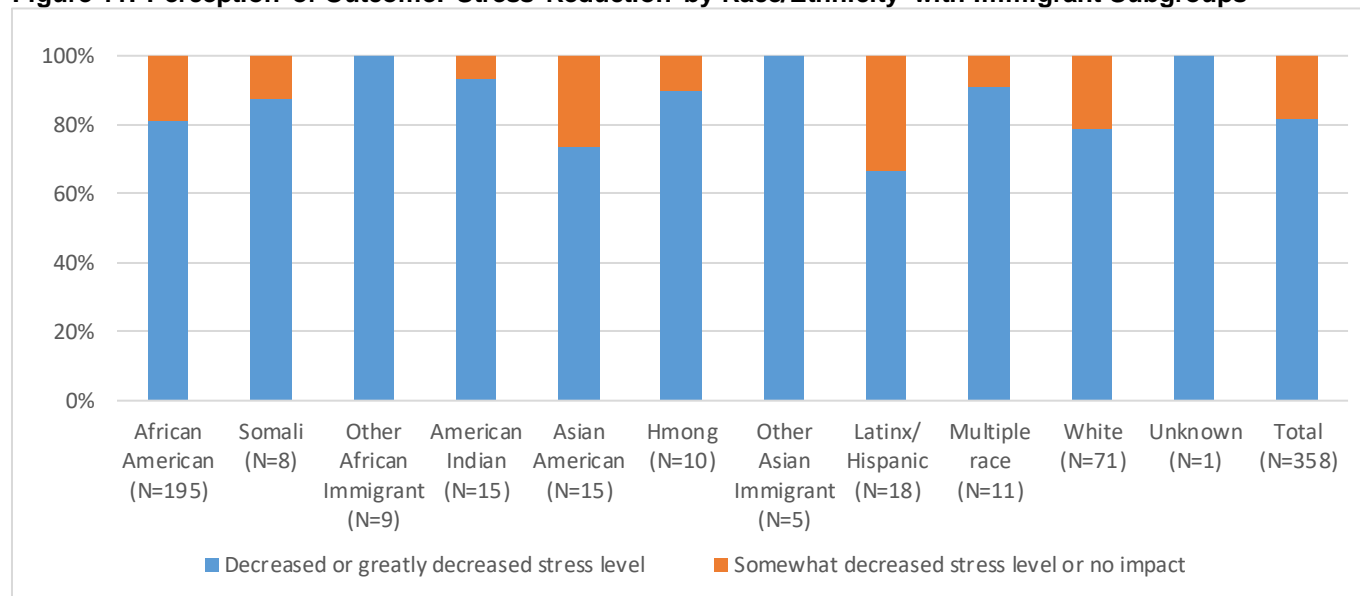
Figure 10: Resident Perception of Outcomes



When outcomes were examined by race and ethnicity, there were four outcomes where all results were above 90%, and two outcome areas where results for some groups were less positive. In terms of the timeliness of payment, four groups had a less positive perception of the outcome: American Indian (87%), Other Asian Immigrant (80%), and Somali Immigrant (89%), and Latinx/Hispanic (89%). In the area related to helping to prevent eviction, the results for one group were less positive: Hmong Immigrant (71%).

Recognizing the stress related to financial emergencies, survey respondents were asked if the assistance received impacted their stress level. Eight out of every ten people said the assistance greatly decreased or decreased their stress level, while 18% of respondents said the assistance somewhat decreased their stress level or had no impact. Of this later group, a few people commented that their continuing stress were related to factors such as not working, application issues, having stressful matters in their lives and fear of COVID-19. When examined by race and ethnicity, 90% or more of the following groups reported stress decreased or greatly decreased: American Indian, Other African Immigrant, Hmong, Other Asian Immigrant and Multi-race. Less than 90% of the following groups reported stress decreased or greatly decreased as a result of receiving emergency assistance: African American (81%), Somali (88%), Asian American (73%), Latinx/Hispanic (67%) and White (79%). Some groups had N's under 10 and percentages should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 11: Perception of Outcome: Stress Reduction by Race/Ethnicity with Immigrant Subgroups



How did you hear about emergency assistance at Ramsey County?

People heard about emergency assistance from multiple sources from family and friends to online resources to community and county resources. There were 375 responses to this question and all survey respondents answered the question. Some people had more than one response. Over half of the responses fell into three areas: family and friends (25%), person had received emergency assistance before (18%), and case or county worker (10%). Other ways people heard about emergency assistance were through online/internet/social media (9%), community/community organizations (8%), landlord/ property manager (7%), or people who had used emergency assistance in the past (7%). The remaining responses (5%) heard about emergency assistance through their work, from people or

services they were in contact with (teachers, lawyers, utilities), news outlets or city or state information sources. (Table 8)

Table 8: How Did You Hear About Emergency Assistance at Ramsey County

	Number	Percent
Total responses	375	100.0%
Family/friends	93	24.8%
Have received before	68	18.1%
Case or county worker	36	9.6%
Online/internet/social media	34	9.1%
Community/community organization	29	7.7%
County information/website	28	7.5%
Landlord/property management	27	7.2%
Other people who used emergency assistance	27	7.2%
Knew about it	14	3.7%
Newspaper/radio	6	1.6%
Work	5	1.3%
City/state	3	0.8%
Teacher	3	0.8%
Lawyer	1	0.3%
Utilities	1	0.3%

How did you apply?

A person could apply for assistance in three ways: online, over the phone, or by completing a paper form. Overall, 44% of respondents applied online, 23% applied over the phone with assistance of a staff person, and an additional 33.5% completed a paper application. When examining this question by race with immigrant subgroups and Hispanic ethnicity, over 40% of the following groups completed an online application: African American, American Indian, Asian American, Hmong Immigrant, Multi-race, and White. In this survey, groups less likely to apply online include: Somali Immigrants, Latinx/Hispanic, Other African Immigrants, and Other Asian Immigrants.

Seventy percent or more of the following groups completed paper applications or completed an application over the phone with a staff person: Other African Immigrant (70%), Other Asian Immigrant (80%), and Somali (88.9%). Percentages for groups with small N's in the survey population should be interpreted with caution.

Ease of Getting an Application

Participants were asked how easy or difficult it was to actually get an application. Overall, 91% reported it was easy or somewhat easy to get an application, 2% said it was neither easy or difficult, and 7% reported it was somewhat difficult or difficult. The groups where less than 90% reported it was easy or somewhat each to get an application were: Hmong Immigrants (73%), Other Asian Immigrants (80%), Latinx/Hispanic (83%), Somali Immigrants (78%), Other African Immigrants (78%). Percentages for groups with small N's in the survey population should be interpreted with caution.

Table 9: Ease of Getting an Application

	Total Number	Somewhat easy/Easy	Neither easy or difficult	Somewhat difficult/ Difficult
Total	360	91.1%	1.7%	7.2%
African American	194	93.8%	1.0%	5.1%
American Indian	15	93.3%	0.0%	6.7%
Asian American	15	93.3%	6.7%	0.0%
Hmong Immigrant	11	72.6%	0.0%	27.3%
Other Asian Immigrant	5	80.0%	10.0%	10%
Latinx/Hispanic	18	83.3%	0.0%	16.7%
Somali Immigrant	9	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%
Other African Immigrant	10	80.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Multi-race	11	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
White	71	92.9%	1.4%	.6%
Unknown	1	0.0%	0.0%	100%

Fourteen respondents commented on circumstances making it easy to get an application: some called in and worked with responsive staff who either mailed out an application, offered a phone interview or answered questions (n = 7). Others picked up application or used drop box (n = 4), while others accessed a link in an article referring to the application (n = 1). Other factors contributing to the ease of getting an application was knowing how to use a computer (n = 1) being proactive in calling the county (n = 1) and other (n = 2).

“I called the information line. They sent the form. Done. Easy.”

“Once you know where to get it, it’s easy. People don’t know...the funding out there.”

Of those who reported some level of difficulty getting an application, seventeen shared a comment about their circumstances or factors contributing to difficulty in getting an application including: the general process of getting an application (n = 2), physical or mental health issues (n = 3), language barriers (n = 2), first time applying (n = 1), COVID-19 (n = 2), difficulty with Ramsey County online page (n = 1), paperwork requirements (n = 2), and lack of or poor follow-through (n = 4).

“Process getting application hard to find where to get it. It kept bringing me to main page of Ramsey County. It said - call Financial Worker. It was impossible to get a call back. Found link finally to download form.”

“It was difficult until I found out I could fill out paper form and email or fax. The online form is not user friendly to me. It’s a long process. Some questions different than what’s on the paper form.”

Did you receive help from someone to complete the application?

Overall, 42% of survey respondents received help from another person to complete the application. For those people who did receive help, seven out of ten people sought help from Ramsey County staff, 12% from a family or friend, 7% from a case manager, and 1% from staff at a community agency. Of those 9% who responded “other,” people said they sought assistance from landlords or rental offices,

teachers, or other social workers or case managers. Compared to all respondents, Hmong and Somali Immigrant respondents were more likely to receive assistance in completing application.

Were calls returned promptly?

Over half (57%) of respondents said their calls were returned promptly, 22% most of the time, 16% sometimes, and 5% said their calls were not returned. On average, 79% of calls were returned always or most of the time. Four groups fell below this average by at least five percentage points: Latinx/Hispanic (72%), Hmong Immigrants (70%), Other Asian Immigrant (60%), and Somali Immigrants (56%).

Table 10: Were Calls Returned Promptly?

	Number	Always/Most of the Time	Sometimes/ My calls were not returned
Total	353	79.0%	21.0%
African American	192	79.7%	20.3%
American Indian	15	86.7%	13.3%
Asian American	15	80.0%	20.0%
Hmong Immigrant	10	70.0%	30.0%
Other Asian Immigrant	5	60.0%	40.0%
Latinx/Hispanic	18	72.2%	27.8%
Somali Immigrant	9	55.6%	44.4%
Other African Immigrant	10	80.0%	20.0%
Multi-race	11	100.0%	0.0%
White	67	79.1%	20.9%
Unknown	1	100%	0.0%

How would you rate the ease of the application process?

Survey respondents were asked to rate the ease of the application process. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents said the application process was easy or somewhat easy and 16% reported the application was difficult or somewhat difficult. Respondents in four groups (Hmong Immigrants, Other Asian Immigrant, Latinx/Hispanic, Somali and Other African Immigrants) had 20% or more people who reported the application was difficult or somewhat difficult.

Table 11: Ease of Application Process

	Total Number	Easy or Somewhat easy	Neither Easy or Difficult	Difficult/Some- what difficult
Total	358	82.4%	1.9%	15.6%
African American	193	84.4%	1.6%	14.0%
American Indian	15	93.3%	0.0%	6.7%
Asian American	15	93.3%	0.0%	6.7%
Hmong	11	45.4%	18.2%	36.4%
Other Asian Immigrant	5	80.0%	0.0%	20.0%
Latinx/Hispanic	17	76.5%	5.9%	17.6%
Somali	9	77.8%	0.0%	22.2%
Other African Immigrant	10	70.0%	0.0%	30.0%
Multi-race	11	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
White	71	80.3%	1.4%	18.3%
Unknown	1	0.0%	0.0%	100%

Eighty-nine people shared comments about the ease or difficulty of the application process. Some respondents had more than one comment. Comments were about communication issues, experiences with the application and requirements, feedback about staff, and factors impacting one's ability to complete the application process.

There were 55 comments about communication. Respondents commented on timely e-mails or telephone calls from workers and helpful front desk staff (n = 9). Others commented on communication challenges (n = 38) such as reaching a worker, delays or number of days it took to get a response after sending e-mail or leaving multiple voice messages, or a delay or not hearing outcome of application from program. Some people found communication poor or confusing between and/or among staff, the recipient or landlord (n = 7) and one person felt the need to call the program continually to assure follow-through by staff (n = 1).

In terms of the application process, some described the process as smooth and easy (n = 3), while other people noted challenges with the volume of paperwork and obtaining required information such as verifications of work or bank accounts or processing time (n = 11). Several people commented on application issues such as locating the online application, receiving the form late, unclear where to send/deliver application, navigating the process, difficult or confusing questions on the application, having to resubmit application, or wait time (n = 13).

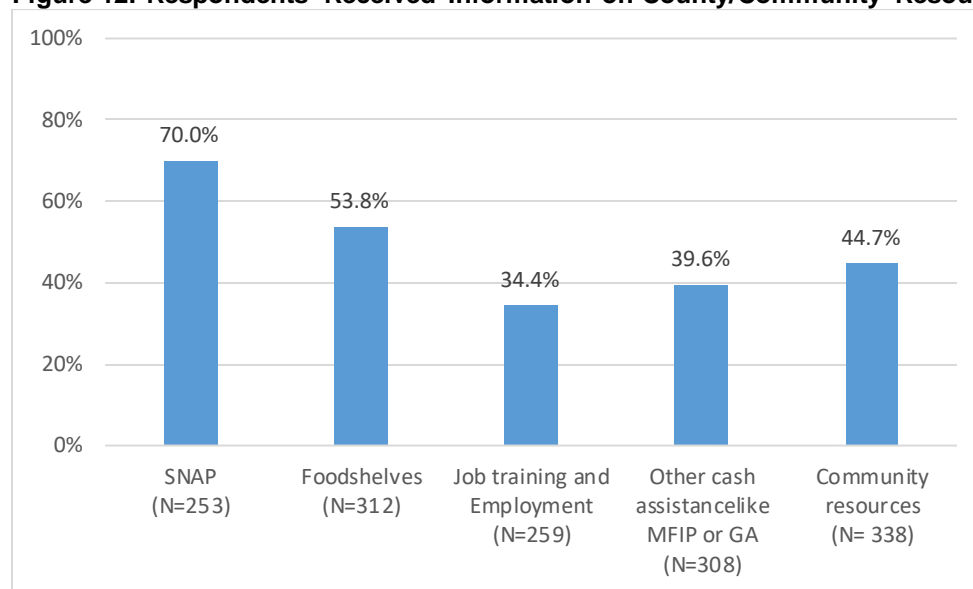
Respondents also commented about workers (n = 6) and supervisors (n = 6). Workers were described as great, amazing, and made it smooth/simple or good. One person commented on a rude worker. Often supervisors were called when there were delays in hearing back from a worker or concerns about processing time. Supervisors were described as helpful by several respondents.

Other factors contributing to difficulty or concerns with the application and process when a person was a first-time user, spoke a second language, or had health or mental health issues (n = 7).

Did you receive information about other county or community resources?

Respondents were asked if staff provided them with information about county or community resources such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), food shelves, job training/employment, or other cash assistance. Seventy percent of respondents reported receiving resource information on SNAP (70%), food shelves (53%), job training or employment (34%) or other cash assistance like the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) or General Assistance (40%), or Other Community Resources such as United or other community resource (47%).

Figure 12: Respondents Received Information on County/Community Resources



Survey respondents were asked an open-ended question about what other resources would have been helpful to receive as one applied for emergency assistance. There were 350 people who provided comments. Resources that were identified to be helpful included: SNAP/ or food shelves (12%), other available resources (10%), rent/housing assistance (9%), medical (4%), car repairs (4%), employment (3%) and 55% said no other resources were needed.

“The staff down there were pretty helpful, pointing me to other agencies I didn’t know existed. Referred me to an information person.”

Staff Responsiveness and Respect

Program recipients were also asked their level of agreement with two statements: *EA staff answered my questions* and *EA staff treated me respectfully*. Overall, respondents across race and ethnicity had a high rate of agreement with both statements (98%).

Fewer respondents disagreed or somewhat disagreed with the statement *EA staff answered my questions*: Somali Immigrants (11%), Hmong Immigrants (9%) and African Americans (2%).

And, fewer respondents disagreed or somewhat disagreed with the statement *EA staff treated me respectfully*: Hmong Immigrants (9%), Latinx/Hispanics (6%), and African Americans (3%).

Recommendations for Improvement

People were asked about their recommendations to improve Emergency Assistance or the application process. Two hundred and twenty-two people (61%) provided feedback. Recipients recommendations were made in the following areas: communication improvements, response times, modernization of processes, accessibility, ease of process, policy or practice recommendations, or appreciative comments about the program. Please note that some individuals made more than one comment and the number of comments do not match the number of respondents.

Table 12: Themes – Resident Recommendations for Program Improvement

Themes	Number	Percent
Total	243	100%
Appreciative comments about staff, program and overall service	84	34.6%
Improve communication/customer service	55	22.6%
Improve timeliness – responding to email/phone communications, application process/decisions	36	14.8%
Modernize and improve ease of process	36	14.8%
Improve accessibility: awareness of resources, where/ how to access application options, accessibility for people with specific language and health needs	18	7.4%
Policy/program recommendations	13	5.0%
Other	2	0.8%

Respondents shared both appreciative comments about the program or staff and recommendations for program improvement. About a third of comments in this section were appreciations for the program and staff. Two-thirds of responses were recommendations for program improvement and fell into three, somewhat overlapping areas: communication/ customer service, modernization of the process, and improved response times to voice and e-mail communications as well as application processing.

Appreciative Comments

Thirty-five percent of responses were appreciative comments about the staff, the program, and the benefit received. In addition to general appreciations of the program, recipients shared their thoughts about a variety of factors from getting a quick response, the clear application process, an easy process online or over the phone and responsive workers who were described as going above and on top of things. A sample of the appreciations from program recipients are highlighted below.

“Everything was great. Amazing worker!”

“Everything went really smoothly. My landlord badgered me. I was upset. Emergency Assistance staff were really helpful!”

“The application came promptly in mail. In light of COVID, my experience with applying was smooth and wonderful. I am grateful. Overall, good experience.”

“They help people when the can. I give them a 9 out of 10. They helped me. I had no problem.”

“My opinion... they are on the top notch. They are doing what they should be doing. Answered all questions, did application over phone. Told me it could take 1-2 weeks, they responded in a few business days.”

"Everything was great. A life saver. I wouldn't change anything. All looking good."

"Staff went above and beyond to help."

"None really. All easy. I had no problem at all. I e-mailed most of stuff in. My apartment manager she faxed an e-mail in. Got in timely manner."

"Staff returned calls quicker than in the past."

"The staff down there were pretty helpful pointing me to other agencies that I didn't know existed. Referred me to an information person."

Some of the same topics people were appreciative of were also discussed by others as areas of concern. The top themes for improvement fell into three, somewhat overlapping, areas of recommendations: communication/ customer service, modernization of the process, and improved response times to voice and e-mail communications as well as application processing.

In terms of communication, people expressed general concern about the difficulty in reaching a worker and the lack of answering telephone and email messages. Others recommended clearly communication regarding application directions, required documents, processing timelines, and simply better overall communication. 8Several recipients recommended improving outreach to the community about the service. Examples of communication related comments include:

"Have better communication via telephone or more forms of communication."

"Listen to the person to what they are going through and try to be consider to person's problem If could be you in this situation. Try to be understandable not disrespectful. If you have advice try and help person out."

"There should be better communication around the form and what needs to be turned in. Once we finish the online form we get letter in mail and that's about it. I got a call from intake worker. It's hard not staying in communication and knowing where you are in process when landlord breathing down neck. Some landlords are not going to be as easy going as mine or lenient as mine is."

"Inform what documents are needed for each of the different assistance offered."

Modernization of the process was the second top recommendation theme. Program recipients want to be able to see (online) whether their application was received, progress of their application, and identification of what is missing and necessary timelines. Others recommended simplifying the process by reducing required paperwork and simplifying the questions on the application. Single recommendations were made for a helpline to answer questions, preloading person's information for those who have received EA/EGA in the past and sending notifications when some requirements were missing.

"Make it easy to see where [application is] at and what's missing. Knowing what else is needed to turn in. We didn't know all that needed to be turned in. Had to contact office to find out."

"I think because with COVID, I think process has improved a lot. Allow pics and email, that part was helpful. Turn-around time or quick follow-up. This time I mailed to CHS, It would be nice to know that it was received [the application], and that a worker had it. and give me time frame...like, you'll be contacted in x business days."

"The online application shows [that the application was] submitted but when assigned to a worker nothing shows where in the process [the application is]."

"If they don't receive document by a week before end date, please remind person they didn't receive it. I know lot applications. Let us know if you didn't get paper or email."

"Find easy portal to send application and see where application and/or payment is in process. Way easier. See if it is pending. Sometimes calls don't get returned. It would be helpful to see where you are in the process. Also, my landlord rent said taken care of but I never received any notification if approved or denied."

"Keep it the way it is. Is was really simplified compared to what it used to be. Nothing. Keep it simplified. People under stress as it is. Can be a lot of paperwork. The urgency of COVID, they knew it was an emergency, they responded quickly and kept it simple."

"The application online is difficult so applied over the phone. It needs to have a separate category for EA."

The third top area of recommendation was a call to make improvements in the timely response to emails and phone calls. Not knowing if an application or document was received was noted as bringing stress and anxiety to an already stressful situation. Other parts of the process where recipients recommended improving timeliness included getting applications sent out, getting a case worker, responding to landlords, and speeding up processes with additional workers.

"Be more prompt returning calls. Need follow-up."

"Unable to get through to staff by phone. It took 2-3 weeks. The timeline was good for 30 days so it left about one week."

"Not having longer wait times. Like past date when people get evicted."

"Give updates [to application progress] in a timely manner."

"I think everything is good. When you are behind it rent, it is stressful when is landlord is calling for rent. It's stressful waiting for a decision, not knowing. Landlord wants to know if you are going to get it. It's a process. I understand. The time it takes to go through process and get decision made is stressful. Not sure what can be done about that."

Additional recommendations were made for specific policy and practice recommendations from making assistance available more than once a year to providing preventative intervention. Additional policy or practice recommendations are highlighted in the following table.

“Of we are going to do programs and help people, make sure they are flexible enough and sustainable to meet needs of people who need it the most. No one should be getting denied if resources are available. There is a break down, a gap, between the community and the distributor of resources.”

Recommendations were made about improvements in accessibility for those whose primary language is not English. Language accessibility needs to be addressed upfront when a person is identifying how to access an application and throughout the application process. Recipients also recommended assuring the application process is accessible by phone and by US mail for those without internet or ability to utilize technology due to health issues. Others recommended simply making the online process more available and accessible.

Table 13: Summary Resident Recommendations - Themes

Themes	Number
Communication and customer service recommendations	55
• Respond to voice and e-mail messages/follow-up	17
• Provide clear application directions and clarify what documents or steps required	9
• Provide person-centered customer service that shows understanding/ empathy/ respect/ professionalism with applicants	15
• Address staffing level to allow workers to answer phones and not be overloaded	3
• Inform recipient and community about EA and other resources	4
• Overall better communication with person applying for benefit	7
Modernize and improve ease of process	36
• Provide status/progress of application including receipt of application, what documents are needed/have been received, what is missing, approved/denied	13
• Reduce paperwork overall including private information and required statements	9
• Simplified application including easier application questions	7
• Make it easier online	3
• Other improvements: helpline call in, preload from previous applications, notifications if something missing, form should indicate if interpreter needed	4
Improve responsiveness/timeliness to voicemail/email messages and application process/decision	36
• Improve response time - client voice mail or e-mail communications and provide timely updates	11
• Speed up the response time for processing application and making decisions	20
• Improve speed of sending out application, getting a case worker and responding to landlord	3
• Speed up process with more workers	1
• Inform people when you will contact them	1
Policy and Practice Recommendations from Program Recipients	13
• Provide preventative intervention	1
• Offer assistance more often, EA two times a year	3

• Increase baseline for family of three with disabled spouse	1
• Examine criteria around requiring eviction letter	1
• Provide more monetary resource	4
• Examine complicated policy 30-day grace period and 50% rule	1
• Have only one worker on a case	1
• Have workers do research before talking to client	1
• Assure program is flexible enough and sustainable to the needs of the most vulnerable	1
Improve accessibility	17
• Continue allowing email of documents instead of faxing	4
• Address language barriers: where to get application, understanding application	4
• Make process accessible to people without internet or ability to utilize technology	2
• Keep phone and paper application process	3
• Make online process more available and accessible	4

Discussion

Are Ramsey County residents better off due to CARES EA/EGA?

This question is answered using the Results Based Accountability⁷ lens which defines ‘better off’ as a positive change in circumstances, knowledge, or skills. Two levels of information will be shared to answer this question: application data about the receipt of emergency assistance by Ramsey County residents and telephone survey data about resident perceptions of whether their circumstances changed as a result of benefits received.

Application data tells us a few things about why Ramsey County residents may be considered better off due to receipt of emergency financial assistance.

- *The program criteria were expanded, and more people received benefits.* Between April and December of 2020, 4,551 applications were approved representing 4,226 households. The volume of people served and the number of approved applications both increased by about 40% when comparing data from April through December 2020 to the previous year.
- *Approved applications in all race and immigrant subgroups increased which indicates the county was able to reach many communities.* Approved applications by African Americans increased from last year to this year, although there was variation in the percent of change by race and immigrant group. There was a 40.5% percent change upward in approved applications made by African American residents and for other groups including: Somali Immigrants (110%), Other African Immigrants (103.6%), American Indians (6.1%), Asian Americans (140%), Latinx/Hispanics (60.1%), Multi-race (59.7%), Whites (46.8%), Unknown race (183.3%). This may be as a result of higher community needs due to the pandemic and perhaps more targeted outreach into communities (trusted messengers, targeted media/social media, town halls) as the program unfolded.
- *Over \$10 million dollars were issued, putting important financial resources into the community.* CARES, state, and federal sources were approved for issuances to Ramsey County residents in the following areas: rent or rent subsidy (\$7,275,102.44), utility assistance (\$1,513,909.00), damage deposits (\$383,356.33), car repair (\$258,201.87), transportation (\$1,728.21),

⁷ www.raguide.org

mortgage/mortgage subsidy (\$283,388.24), replacement checks (\$52,540.10), shelter (\$584,273.60), temporary housing (\$283,388.24), and other (\$22,226.01). (Source: MAXIS and SharePoint)

Program recipients were asked for their perceptions about program efficiency and effectiveness, and overall, the responses were positive. The results were from a sample of program participants and may not represent all participants.

- *Overall, survey recipients reported benefits were received in time to address the emergency.* Generally, participants were positive in their perceptions about the timeliness in receiving a benefit. Overall, 97% of respondents received the benefit in time to address their emergency situation. While most groups had over 90% reporting they received their payment in time, four groups were less positive and had between 80 and 89% reporting they received the benefit in time: American Indian, Other Asian Immigrant, Somali, Latinx/Hispanic.
- *Overall, survey recipients reported the benefits received resolved the emergency across all race and immigrant groups.* Ninety-six percent of the sample said the benefit resolved the emergency for which they contacted Ramsey County. Over 90% of all groups reported the benefit or payment resolved the emergency for which they were contacted.

Do Ramsey County residents who receive these funds experience greater housing stability?

An offshoot of the first question, this evaluation question targets one aspect of being better off – housing stability. With the eviction moratorium and in the absence of housing court data, we rely on survey data to help answer this question. Three survey questions provide some insight into whether people experienced greater housing stability.

- *Individuals and families who received rent/mortgage assistance or subsidy were able to stay in the place where they live.* Ninety-nine percent of the survey respondents who had received assistance in past due rent/mortgage assistance or rent/mortgage subsidies said the funds helped them stay in their housing. Over 90% of all groups reported positively.
- *Individuals and families who received rent/rent subsidy said their assistance prevented an eviction.* Ninety-seven percent of respondents who had received assistance in this area reported the assistance prevented an eviction. Results across all groups were over 90% with one exception; only 71% of Hmong respondents reported the assistance prevented an eviction.
- *Individuals and families who received mortgage assistance/subsidy reported their assistance prevented a foreclosure* and results across all groups were over 90%.
- *Individuals and families who received utility assistance reported the assistance prevented a utility shut-off,* and results across groups were over 90%.

To answer the question, are people better off as a result of the CARES EA/EGA initiative the answer is a qualified yes. Over 4,200 people received benefits to offset rent, mortgage, utility or car/transportation and other emergencies during the pandemic between April and December of 2020. While we do not have direct evidence from data sources that an eviction or foreclosure were prevented, for example, results from the survey of program recipients indicate that 1) participants overall have positive perceptions of the efficiency and effectiveness of the program, and 2) some race and immigrant groups experience less positive outcomes.

Did the project serve those most vulnerable to COVID-19?

This question looks at the percentage of services going to communities who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. We do not have a one to one corresponding dataset to tell us if the CARES EA/EGA services reached those in Ramsey County who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Regardless of the pandemic, eligibility rules limit the services to those who are financially vulnerable, so EA/EGA use reflects poverty in Ramsey County and poverty rates by race/ethnicity.

Infection rates and EA/EGA use

We do know from our local COVID-19 infection data, that eight percent of the population in Ramsey County has been infected and that there are disparate rates of infection by race and ethnicity. For example, Black people were 1.58 times more likely to be infected, Asian people were 1.80 times more likely, American Indian people were 1.50 times more likely, and Hispanic people were 2.22 times more likely than White people to be infected. Compared to White people in poverty, Black people were 3.5 times more likely to and American Indian people were 2.7 times more likely become eligible for CARES EA/EGA than White people. While Hispanic people and Asian people were more likely to become infected with COVID-19, they were less likely to become eligible for CARES EA/EGA than White people (20% less likely and 73% less likely, respectively). These eligibility rates follow historical trends with Asian and Hispanic people less likely to receive EA/EGA but show that in the pandemic the county did not provide as much financial support to those communities through this program.

Social Vulnerability Index

A proxy measure for understanding if the project served the most vulnerable to COVID-19, is to *broadly* compare where the CARES EA/EGA population lives against a Ramsey County map of communities who are considered very vulnerable using the Social Vulnerability Index for Ramsey County.

Vulnerability scores take into account, by census tract, the percentage of people in that census tract who are below poverty, unemployed, have low income, lack a high school diploma, are aged 65 or older, are aged 17 and younger, have a disability, are single parent households, are a racial or ethnic minority, speak English “less than well,” do not have a private vehicle, experience crowding in their living space and the percentage of housing units that are multi-unit, mobile homes, or are group quarters.⁸

Most of the very vulnerable tracts are in Saint Paul, including Frogtown, Downtown, the West Side, the Greater East Side, Dayton’s Bluff, Payne-Phalen, the North End, parts of Union Park and Summit University near interstate 94, and West 7th near Downtown, and the most southern tip of Highland neighborhoods. Parts of Maplewood, Little Canada, and New Brighton were also considered very vulnerable.

While imperfect, we can report the percentage of CARES EA/EGA recipients who lived in geographic areas considered very vulnerable, as a proxy measure for determining if CARES EA/EGA services reached the most vulnerable to COVID-19. Seventy-two percent of CARES EA/EGA recipients lived in areas with a SVI index considered very vulnerable and 15% lived in areas considered vulnerable. Seventy-four percent of CARES EA/EGA dollars were provided to recipients in areas of high vulnerability and 14% were spent in vulnerable areas. Based on this, the majority of people served and dollars spent went to communities most vulnerable due to COVID-19. For a map showing the geographic distribution of funds, please see the [Open Data Ramsey County](#).

⁸ CDC’s Social Vulnerability Index. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. <https://svi.cdc.gov>.

How can the program be improved?

A secondary evaluation question addressed program improvement. Survey respondents provided significant feedback about their experience with the application process and recommendations for improvement. Recipient recommendations for improvement fall into four areas.

Improve communication and customer service

Survey respondents consistently expressed the need for more and prompt communications from financial workers. At a time of great stress, the inconsistency of return calls or emails increased resident stress. A person-centered customer service approach that demonstrates empathy and respect for applicants and their life circumstance was also noted by respondents.

Simplify the application process

Simplifying the process can be achieved by reducing paperwork including required documents/documentation and simplifying the application formats. Many forms and requirements are mandated by the Department of Human Services, but not all.

Provide clear program and application information

Recipients want information readily available in the following areas: where to access online or paper applications and directions, clear step by step application directions, timelines, list of required supporting documentation for each type of assistance, how to get help with completing an application over the telephone, how to get questions answered quickly when completing an applications, and clear guidelines on how to obtain in-person assistance for people who may speak another language, lack technology or have specific health needs requiring additional assistance.

Modernize the application process through the use of technology

Recipients want to be able to easily find out information about where their case is in the application process. Recipients want to see improvement in getting the following types of questions answered directly through an online portal. Was the application received? Has a worker looked at the application? What is missing from the application? What supporting documents are required to complete the application? How to get required documents to the program when technology or transportation is challenged? Have supporting documentation been received? When will the application decision be made? When and how will the client be informed of the application decision? Have other parties like landlords or utility companies been informed of the application decision?

Survey findings also suggest the need for improvements in outreach planning and information/resource sharing.

Expanded outreach

Recipients hear about emergency assistance in numerous ways from word of mouth, family, and friends; from their own personal experience; from county workers; through online/social media; and community organizations and others such as landlords, utility companies and teachers. Outreach plans can be improved by developing a network of partnerships or community channels that work directly with our communities through trusted messengers, community organizations, landlords or property management, religious institutions, utility companies, schools and other professionals/workers in housing, mental health, health and employment areas. Outreach plans can be improved by assuring multiple language formats, and nuanced or non-traditional outreach methods.

Provide uniform and routine resources and information

While in the application process, respondents received varying levels of resource information about SNAP, housing, food shelves, other cash assistance programs, like the Minnesota Family Investment Program or General Assistance, and community resources like United Way. Resource and information sharing can be improved for people who are approved and denied for emergency assistance, by sharing broad resource information at the time of application.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made recognizing the passage of the American Rescue Plan (ARP). City, county, and state jurisdictions are partnering in planning the Emergency Rental Assistance program (ERA) that will provide rental and utility shut-off assistance to both tenants and landlords through a common application process. It will not provide mortgage assistance. Ramsey County will have two distinct programs, a county/city of Saint Paul tenant program and a metro-wide landlord program. The recommendations below address short-term recommendations for the ERA program and the ongoing EA/EGA programs through Ramsey County's Financial Assistance Services Department (FAS). Long-term recommendations are provided for FAS's EA/EGA programs.

Short-term Recommendations for the ERA Tenant Program

Going forward, the ERA tenant program will use the common application available in multiple languages, provide resident support through field navigators or trusted messengers who have strong credibility and connections in our communities. The program will assist residents who experience financial hardship due to the coronavirus outbreak, have incomes less than 80% of the area median income, and/or are at risk of losing housing or are experiencing housing instability. Based on findings in this report, the following recommendations are made as partners move forward with implementation of the tenant program.

- **Provide organizational support for outreach and awareness** on eligibility criteria, what types of emergencies are covered by the tenant program, and how all residents can access the new program.

In the last year, Ramsey County's EA/EGA eligibility criteria expanded as did the types of emergency situations covered. Communications clarifying the tenant program eligibility criteria and how it is different or the same from the county administered program may be useful. Some residents who have applied through CARES EA/EGA may need clarification.

FAS has been a long-time provider of EA/EGA and residents will likely reach out to county workers for support or guidance. Survey results suggested residents hear about EA/EGA in many informal and formal ways from county workers, family and friends, landlords and property managers, those they are connected to in community such as teachers, lawyers, utility companies or community organizations and online or more traditional news outlets. To improve access for all residents, use non-traditional and traditional outreach methods in multiple languages is recommended. Particularly target Hispanic/Latinx and Asian communities.

- **Define staff working relationships between Ramsey County and tenant program administrators and field navigators throughout program implementation.** Ramsey County FAS has been a primary access point for residents in meeting emergency needs and facilitating application processing over many years. Building opportunities for information exchange and problem-solving during the application process is recommended.

- **Assure the application process has supports in place** for residents who may not have technology availability, have application questions, or need additional language supports.
- **Provide residents with mechanism (online or through administrators) to find out where their application is in the process**, what is missing from their application and when they can expect an application decision.
- **Provide residents with resource information on other available emergency assistance.**

Short-term Recommendations for Ramsey County's continuing Emergency Assistance

In the short-term, the EA/EGA program should consider these recommendations to improve awareness of services, customer service and availability of resource information.

- **Continue to organizationally support and expand outreach and awareness** of EA/EGA to improve access for all residents in multiple languages and using traditional and non-traditional outreach methods. Collaborate with RECERT's Trusted Messenger partners to get the word out about the changed eligibility criteria so communities know that people who have been denied in the past and may be eligible now. Particularly target Hispanic/Latinx and Asian communities.

Update the Ramsey County website to provide clear application instructions, timelines and due dates, and a clear list of supporting documentation. Consider the needs of people who speak a language other than English, have specific health or disability needs that require additional assistance, and those who lack technology. Leverage Ramsey County navigators and Trusted Messengers to reach these populations.

- **Provide organizational-level support to assure timely staff response** to applicant email and telephone calls and person-centered service.
- **Provide information on other county and community resources at the time of application.** This was done in some instances, but not all. Include in regular communications information about community resources and other available assistance that will support long-term financial stability.

Long-term Recommendations

In the long-term, the EA/EGA program should consider these recommendations to improve service to residents.

- **Advocate to state and federal government to continue the expanded eligibility criteria** to meet the continuing needs of residents beyond the pandemic emergency response.
- **Identify ways the application and process can be simplified.** Advocate to the Minnesota Legislature and the Department of Human Services to simplify the application and other forms. Identify internal processes and forms that are unnecessary or overly complicated.
- **Modernize the application process using technology** to offset the burden on FAS staff and applicants. Leverage the Human Services Technology Modernization project to create an online user interface that allows applicants to readily find out where their application is in the process, what has been received/reviewed, what supporting documentation is required with timelines, and when and who will be informed of application decision.

- **Provide organization support to provide uniform resources and information** to applicants experiencing an emergency in areas such as housing, food, employment, transportation, child-related, county services and community resources and services. Share the language accessible resources and information tools with applicants, community partners and residents.
- **Examine the reasons why Asian and Hispanic people are more likely to be denied for emergency assistance.** These groups are less likely to apply overall and are also more likely to be denied. This has historically been the case as well as in the last year. Look at denial reasons using administrative data and seek community input from Asian and Hispanic residents and organizations that serve those communities to better understand what prevents them from meeting eligibility criteria.

Landlord Assistance Program

Introduction

On March 23, 2020 Governor Walz issued Executive Order 20-14 which suspended evictions in Minnesota. On September 4, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) signed a declaration ordering a temporary halt to residential evictions nationwide. Many residents of Ramsey County, while protected from eviction, did not make rent payments due to income loss from the pandemic. Therefore, landlords and property owners did not receive rent payments. In response, Ramsey County used Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds to support landlords impacted by loss of revenue. The goals of this program were:

- To provide a one-time grant to landlords who have experienced lost revenue to cover rent and late fees.
- To stabilize the rental market for landlords and housing for renters by maintaining affordable and sustainable housing in Ramsey County and preventing mortgage defaults or property loss.
- To increase community partnerships/relationships with landlords in order to stabilize rental market and/or build/maintain housing stability for renters, while increasing program efficiencies in Ramsey County's response to those in need of emergency assistance.

Landlords in Ramsey County who experienced loss of revenue due to COVID-19 between March 1, 2020, and December 30, 2020, were eligible to apply for assistance. Eligible landlords included individuals/sole proprietors or self-employed individuals, corporations or limited liability companies, and non-profit housing developers. The target populations for the two rounds of funding were as follows:

- Small landlords owning no more than 50 units; units can be spread across multiple properties.
- All other landlords, including small landlords who did not apply in first round, in Ramsey County.

Landlords could apply for up to \$20,000 in lost rent and late fees per unit; the county could limit number of units funded based on availability of funds.

Evaluation Description

Overall, Ramsey County measures the effectiveness of CARES-funded projects against two overarching questions: (1) Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES programming? and (2) Did the project achieve the outcomes the community was seeking? These two overarching questions were applied to the Landlord Assistance Program through the application of the following four key study questions:

- Are Ramsey County landlords and renters better off as a result of the landlord assistance program?
- Was the rental housing market stabilized and were landlords able to prevent default on their mortgages or loss of their properties?
- Did the project serve the most vulnerable to COVID-19?
- How can Ramsey County better partner with land-lords post-pandemic to support low-income renters and housing stability?

Methods

In order to answer the evaluation questions, landlords who received the assistance grant were sent an online survey, two focus groups were conducted, and application data were used to determine tenant census tracts served by the program. Survey and focus group questions can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Application Data

Application data were collected through a SharePoint site. The data included all applicants, the grant amount, the units they were applying for, and both business and residential address.

Surveys

Online surveys were emailed to 588 landlords who received an assistance grant. A total of 126 responded to the survey for a response rate of 21%. The survey asked recipients about their rental properties, how they learned about the grant, the impact of COVID-19 on their business and expenses, and their plans for their residential rental business moving forward. Respondents were offered a \$10 gift card for completing the survey.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted with landlords who received assistance funds. A list of 45 landlords was randomly selected from the application database and sent an email invitation to participate in the focus group sessions. Respondents were offered a \$25 gift card for participating. Of the 45 landlords invited, 11 agreed to participate. The focus groups were conducted via Zoom in early February and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes each. Questions addressed included whether landlords believe they are better off because of the relief grant, how well the application process worked, what challenges they encountered and recommendations for working with Ramsey County in the future.

Limitations

The survey was accidentally sent to all landlords who applied for the program, including those who did not receive a grant. A follow-up message was quickly sent that asked those who did not receive a grant to disregard the survey, but some people may have replied who did not receive a grant. Additionally, with a response rate of 21%, the survey is likely not representative of all applicants. Focus group attendance was low. We invited 45 landlords, but only 11 attended. Considering the low attendance at the focus groups and survey response, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Results

Application Data

In order to receive assistance, landlords completed an application with information regarding their tenants who were behind on rent payments. Landlords could only apply for assistance to cover rent payments for the period between March and December 2020. Grants were awarded based on need, with a maximum amount of \$20,000. The county received a total of 910 applications from landlords for assistance. Of the applications received, 676 were approved (75%) to receive financial assistance. Since landlords were allowed to submit applications for more than one tenant, the applications approved represented 2,212 tenants in Ramsey County.

A total of \$8.2 million was issued to support landlords and tenants. The average grant size per landlord was \$13,323 and the median payment was \$7,866. Per tenant, the average was \$3,736 and the median payment was \$2,730. For more payment information and a geographic distribution of payments, see [Open Data Ramsey County](#).

Application data was used to determine if those most vulnerable to COVID-19 were the residents who received the assistance. Tenant addresses were geocoded using Geographic Information System (GIS) software to identify census tracts which were then matched to the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) for each tract. Each census tract is assigned a score between 0.0 and 1.0 based upon the percentage of people in that census tract who are below poverty, unemployed, have low income, lack a high school diploma, are aged 65 or older, are aged 17 and younger, have a disability, are single parent households, are a racial or ethnic minority, speak English "less than well," do not have a private vehicle, experience crowding in their living space and the percentage of housing units that are multi-unit, mobile homes, or are group quarters.⁹ In general, scores over 0.50 are considered vulnerable and scores over 0.75 are very vulnerable. Of the 2,212 tenant addresses, 59 (3%) were unable to be geocoded so were not included in this analysis.

Sixty-two percent of tenants whose landlords received assistance lived in areas with high vulnerability scores, meaning they were most vulnerable to impacts of COVID-19 and other disasters. Nineteen percent of tenants lived in areas considered vulnerable with scores between 0.5 to 0.74 and 20% were in areas not considered vulnerable.

Landlord Survey Results

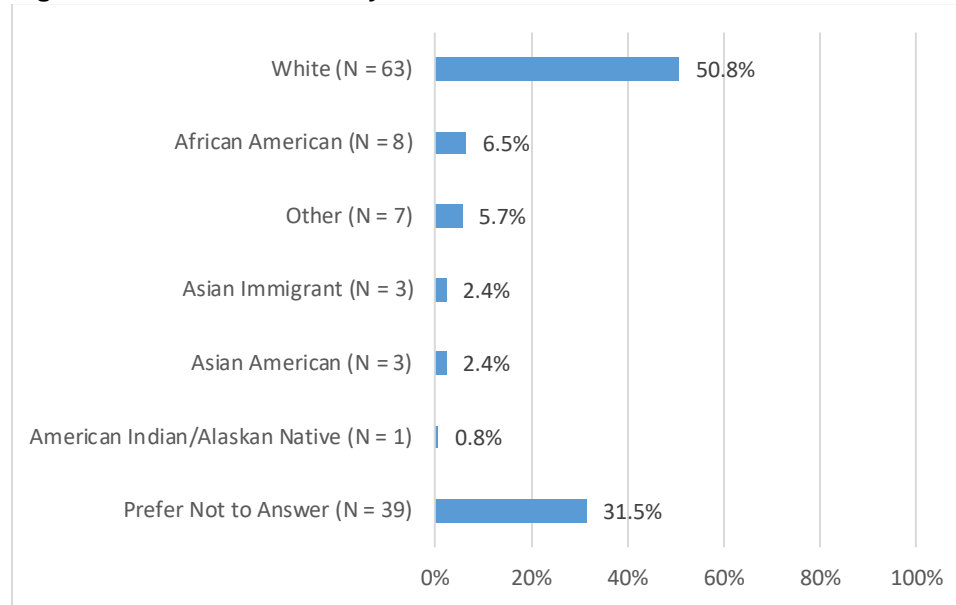
Online surveys were emailed to 588 landlords who received funds through the Landlord Assistance Program. The survey included questions about their residential rental business, the application process, finances and resources, and future plans. A total of 126 people responded to the survey for a response rate of 21%.

Race and Ethnicity

When asked how they identify their race or ethnicity, half said White. Nearly one-third (32%) indicated they prefer not to answer. Only 12% of landlords who responded to the survey identified as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). More than three-fourths (77%) of landlords who responded to the survey identified as non-Hispanic/Latinx, 4% said they identify as Hispanic/Latinx, and 19% chose "prefer not to answer." (Figure 11)

⁹ CDC's Social Vulnerability Index. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. <https://svi.cdc.gov>.

Figure 13: Race and Ethnicity of Landlords

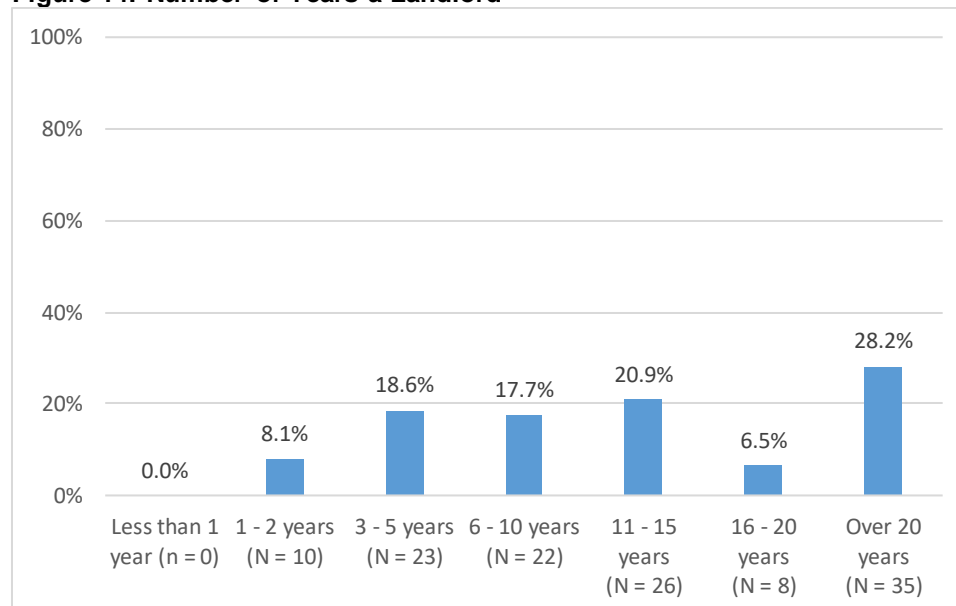


Business Description

Landlords were asked a number of questions about their residential rental business on the online survey. Questions included how long they have been a landlord, the type of business they have, and the number and type of properties they manage.

When landlords were asked how long they have been in the business, 28% of landlords who responded to the survey said they have been a landlord for over 20 years. Slightly fewer (21%) have been a landlord for 11 to 15 years, 19% for three to five years, 18% for six to 10 years, 8% for one to two years, and 7% for 16 to 20 years. (Figure 14)

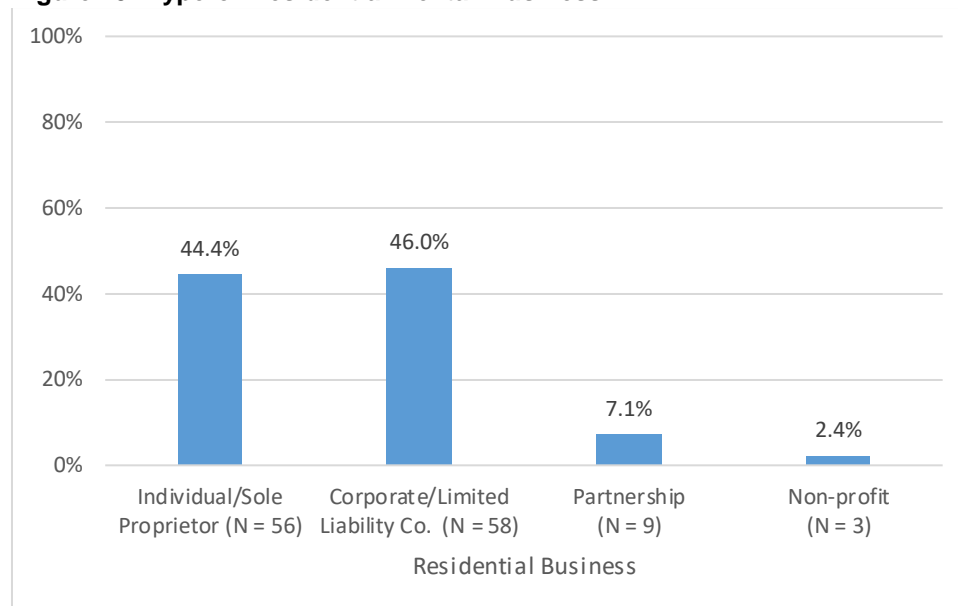
Figure 14: Number of Years a Landlord



When asked how many units they own/manage, 41% of landlords reported they own/manage five or fewer units and 39% indicated they own/manage more than 50 units. Significantly fewer indicated they own/manage somewhere between 6 and 50 units (20%).

As illustrated in Figure 15, the majority of landlords indicated their residential business was a corporate/limited liability company (46%) or an individual/sole proprietor (44%). Only 7% describe their business as a partnership and 2% as a non-profit.

Figure 15: Type of Residential Rental Business



When landlords were asked to indicate all the types of residential dwellings they own/manage, the greatest numbers indicated they own/manage single family homes (56%) and/or multi-family homes (50%). Thirty-eight percent reported they owned/managed apartments and 18% said they have a townhome. Fewer than 10% of respondents indicated the following types of rental dwellings: condominiums, accessory residential unit, mobile home, co-operative or duplex (indicated in other category).

Table 14: Residential Dwelling Type Owned/Managed

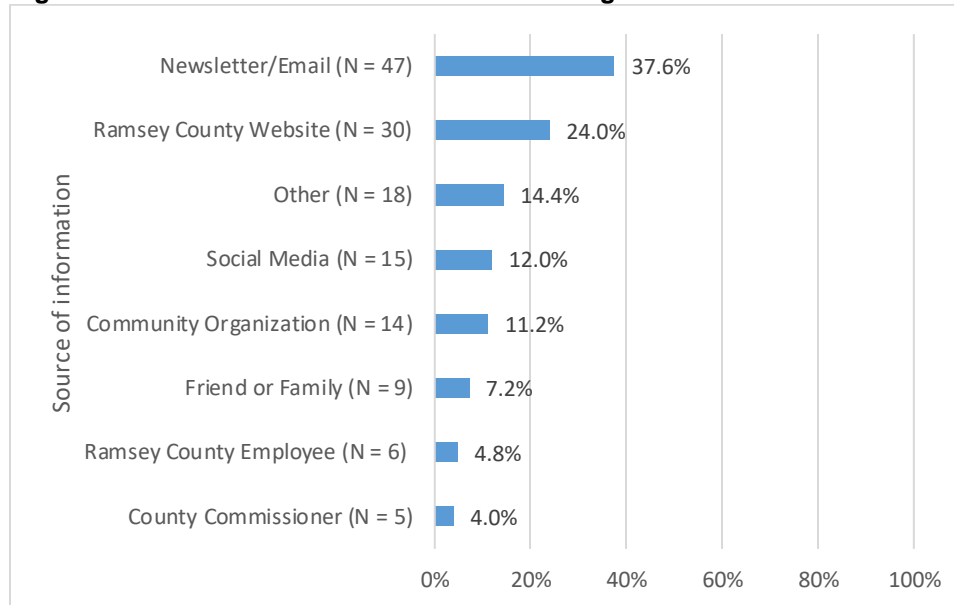
Residential Dwelling	Number	Percent
Total	126	*does not equal 100%
Single family home	71	56.4%
Multi-family home	63	50.0%
Apartment	48	38.1%
Townhome	23	18.3%
Condominium	11	8.7%
Accessory residential unit	1	0.8%
Mobile home	1	0.8%
Co-operative	1	0.8%
Other	4	3.1%

*Respondents were asked to check all that apply; therefore, percentages do not equal 100%.

Program and Application

Survey respondents were asked how they learned about the Landlord Assistance Program. As shown in Figure 16, more than one-third (37%) said they learned about it via e-newsletter or email communication. Twenty-four percent reported they learned about the program from the county website. Fewer respondents mentioned social media (12%) or a trusted community group/organization (11%). Seven percent or fewer reported they heard about the program through a trusted community member/family member (7%), a Ramsey County employee (5%), or a County Commissioner's communication (4%).

Figure 16: How Landlords Heard about the Program



When asked about the ease of the application process for the Landlord Assistance Program, the majority of landlords (57%) reported they thought the process easy with 31% indicating it was somewhat easy and 26% saying it was very easy. Twenty-seven percent thought the process was somewhat difficult (19%) or very difficult (8%). The remaining 16% said they were neutral on the issue of ease of the application process.

The survey gave landlords an opportunity to provide recommendations to the county regarding the application process. Of the 126 landlords who completed the survey, 85 provided a comment or recommendation about the process. Approximately one-fourth (21%) of those who provided a recommendation mentioned the need for better communication during the process.

"It would be easier if there was one point person (liaison) who could follow our process. We received calls from some who said we were approved, then, emails from others who said our application was still in process."

"I was told I would receive a confirmation that my application was received, and I did not. I had to follow up to make sure it was received. I am a landlord living out of state, so I don't hear of programs and resources unless I get an email or something is mailed to me."

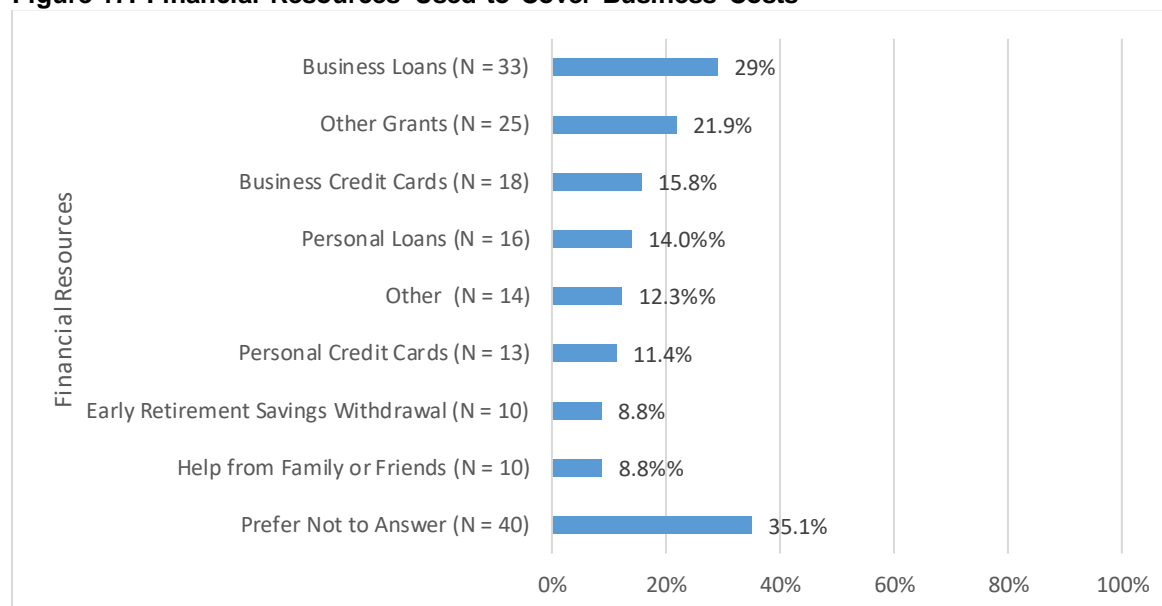
Other recommendations included reducing the amount of paperwork or required documentation, having an online option for the application and checking on application status, as well as making the application less complicated by clarifying language and program requirements.

Finances and Resources

The survey asked landlords several questions about finances and resources including how they have covered their business costs, rent concerns of tenants, and Emergency Assistance Program resources available through Ramsey County.

Landlords were asked what financial resources they have relied on to cover business costs since the pandemic began. As shown in Figure 17, business loans were mentioned by 29% of landlords, 22% reported other grants, 16% reported they relied on business credit cards, 14% said personal loans, 11% relied on personal credit cards and 9% mentioned help from family or friends, or early retirement withdrawals. More than one-third (35%) replied I don't know/prefer not to answer.

Figure 17: Financial Resources Used to Cover Business Costs

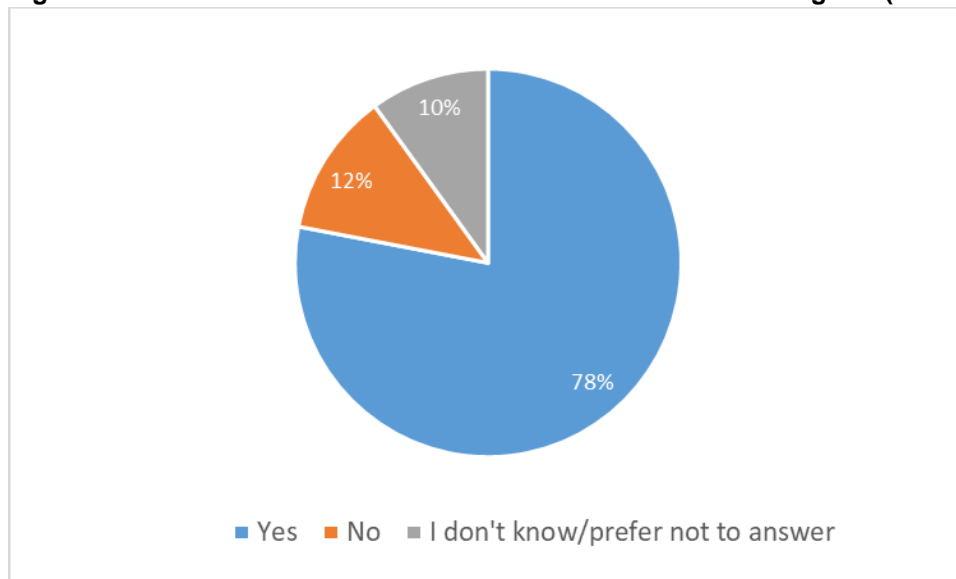


Nearly all of the landlords who responded to the survey indicated that at least one of their tenants have expressed concerns about not being able to pay rent (98%). Approximately one-third (33%) reported that less than a quarter of their tenants have expressed concerns, 21% reported that between one-fourth and half have expressed concerns, 16% said between half and three-fourths, and 29% reported between half and all of their tenants have expressed concerns about not being able to pay their rent. In addition to concerns about paying rent, 48% of landlords reported they have tenants who expressed a need to end their lease since March 2020.

When landlords were asked if they are familiar with Emergency Assistance Program resources that are available to individuals through Ramsey County, 62% reported they were, while 35% said they were not aware of the available resources. The survey also asked landlords if they would prefer their tenants apply directly for assistance or if they would rather apply on behalf of their tenants. Sixty percent indicated they would like to apply, 25% said tenants should apply, and 15% replied I don't know/no preference.

Approximately two-thirds (65%) of survey respondents reported they have not received information from Ramsey County regarding other resources or services available to landlords or tenants. However, as illustrated in Figure 18, when asked if they are better off after receiving a grant from the Landlord Assistance Program, 78% of landlords reported they were, while only 12% said they were not. (10% indicated they did not know or preferred not to answer).

Figure 18: Landlords Better Off due to Landlord Assistance Program (n=126)

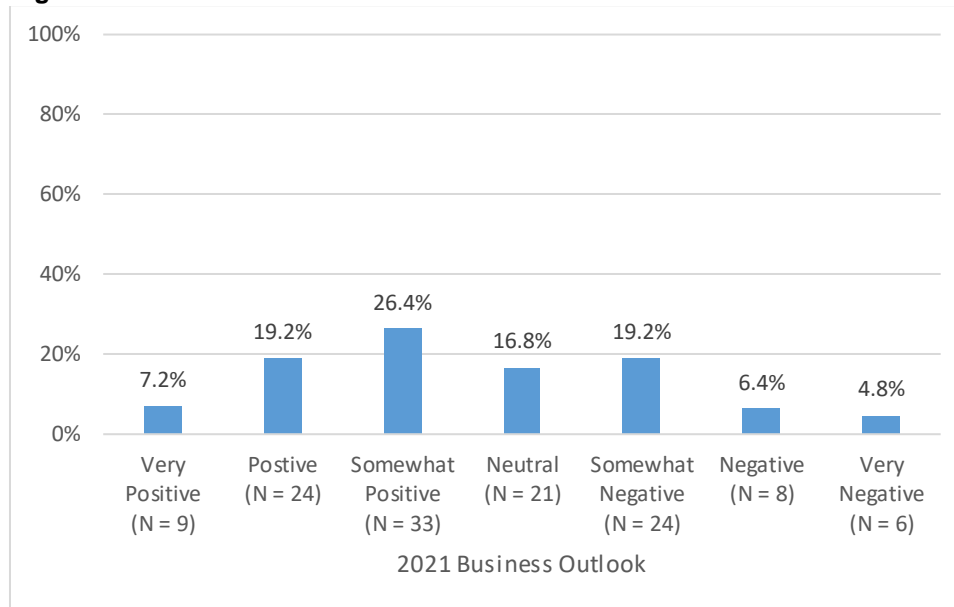


Future Outlook

Landlords were asked questions about their business plans for 2021 as well as working with Ramsey County moving forward. When asked how they would describe the outlook on the health of their residential rental business for 2021, slightly more than half (53%) reported it was positive, 17% said neutral, and 30% reported their outlook was negative.

When landlords were asked if they intended to continue their residential rental business, the vast majority (79%) said yes, while only 4% said they do not intend to continue. Seventeen percent said they did not know or preferred not to answer the question.

Figure 19: 2021 Business Outlook



Landlords were asked if they have suggestions for how Ramsey County can better support landlords such as themselves. Landlords provided a number of suggestions including:

- Continue providing funds during this time.
- Continue allowing landlords to file for assistance for their tenants.
- Allow evictions for tenants who are able to pay or are in violation of their rental agreement (aside from not paying rent).
- Improve communication with landlords (informing them of the assistance program, during the application process, regarding additional resources and services).

When landlords were asked if they intended to continue their residential rental business, the vast majority (79%) said yes, while only 4% said they do not intend to continue. Seventeen percent said they did not know or preferred not to answer the question.

Focus Group Results

A list of 45 landlords was randomly selected from a database containing names of all landlords who received assistance from the county. These landlords were invited to attend one of the two focus group sessions conducted in early February. A total of 11 landlords responded and participated in the focus groups. The sessions lasted approximately one hour and were conducted on Zoom. The focus group questions focused on the application process, whether the goals of the program were aligned with the needs of the community, to what extent the funding was helpful, the timeline from application to payment, supports from Ramsey County, future plans for their business, and ideas for working with the county moving forward.

Application Process

Overall, landlords reported that the application itself was simple. However, several mentioned the challenge of acquiring additional documentation such as tax forms, property purchase dates, and tenant delinquency notices. These challenges were expressed by landlords managing one or two units, as well as those with hundreds of rental units. Getting tenants to sign documents confirming the need for assistance was also challenging according for several landlords. In fact, there were lengthy

discussions during both sessions about the challenge of getting their tenants to communicate with them at all during this time. According to one participant, landlords with fewer units who do not have computers had to meet with tenants one-on-one in order to obtain all the required documentation. Landlords who owned or managed a large number of properties reported that the requirement of entering data for each tenant individually made the process burdensome.

“Speaking on behalf of a larger organization... I think that our obstacles and challenges might be different than a smaller property manager. What was challenging for us was a couple of things... requiring a copy of the resident lease and delinquency notices was challenging because we were doing this for about a dozen properties. You know, at each property, there could be 20 or 30, people behind in rent. So, requiring that the property manager, find that lease and all those delinquency letters and upload them to us at central office to submit was really challenging. ... having to enter info for each unit separately, in the portal was really challenging because we were doing it for hundreds of units.”

Service Design, Implementation, and Impact

Evaluators asked landlords whether they believed the Landlord Assistance Program aligned with the needs of the community. Landlords reported that people who needed the relief benefited from the assistance. However, several also mentioned that many more people could have used the relief and that there were tenants who were covered by the assistance who did not really need it. Some landlords indicated there is a need for more accountability regarding tenants' ability to pay rent. Two landlords reported that tenants of theirs had a payment plan in place and were ready to pay their rent. However, when other tenants were told the landlord received assistance for their rent they shared this information with neighbors who then stopped paying rent.

“I don't know, sometimes I'm worried that the money isn't going to the right place, but as a landlord, it was a pretty tough year for all of us, with all the people not paying. So, we'll take what we can get.”

There was also discussion about the impact of the eviction moratorium on the process. Several landlords expressed concerns that tenants who were able to pay their rent chose not to because they knew that there would be no consequence imposed if they did not pay due to the moratorium. They also reported that even though the landlord assistance funds have ended, renters are under the assumption that they still do not need to pay their rent. Some attendees were confused about the moratorium and under what circumstances they could evict tenants for issues like property damage or unauthorized people staying in the unit.

When landlords were asked what the relief funding helped with and what challenges they faced despite the funding, most landlords said the relief covered most of what they needed.

“So this was really affecting our ability to pay a fee to our central office to be able to support administrative and management staff. This helped us not only, you know, be able to keep residents, give them relief, but it helped us to help those properties be able to have the cash to pay to our central office to help our operations continue as well.”

A few mentioned that neither maintenance nor utilities were covered by the relief funds and many landlords still struggled with paying for upkeep. There was also concern expressed about 2021 and whether they would be able to sustain their properties without additional assistance.

Technical Assistance and Other Support

Landlords were asked about the time period from application to payment. All the landlords in the focus groups reported that they were pleased with the turnaround time from when they submitted their applications to when they received payments. When asked about the supports they received from the county and in what ways they were helpful, the only support that was mentioned specifically was the portal.

However, when asked how the county could have been a better support, there were several suggestions provided by landlords in both focus groups. Improved communication was mentioned by several landlords as an area that better support was needed. Landlords referenced a lack of communication about the program from the beginning. Many wondered how the county informed landlords about the program and whether the dissemination of information reached all communities equally. They also reported long waits for responses to questions about the process. One landlord said that by the time she heard that she was approved she had already received her first check. Another support that landlords would have appreciated was a resource list detailing services available to residents that they could pass on to their tenants as well as a direct deposit option for payments.

Future Plans and Opportunities

When asked about their plans regarding their business and working with tenants, several landlords reported they have already sold, or are in the process of selling, some of their properties.

“We actually are starting to sell some of our houses. Because we just we can't keep doing this. We can't keep hoping that there's going to be more help coming forward. The eviction thing is really, really a big deal. I mean, we've had a couple of tenants that need to go because of issues, I mean, big issues, and we're unable to evict them even on that, because of that. So, we're actually starting to sell most of our houses in Saint Paul.”

Others said they are planning to reach out to tenants individually to set up payment plans. A couple of landlords stated plans to meet one-on-one with all their tenants who are struggling to pay their rent. Another landlord reported she plans to include a list of resources and services available when she sends tenants delinquency notices.

“One of our plans is to work with tenants on a one-on-one basis. So, make sure that they can become self-sustainable, and not codependent to the resources that are available now. Because if they become codependent to the resource that's available, the debt will get worse.”

Landlords had several suggestions as to what the county could do to support and partner with landlords. A couple of landlords focused on the need for a restorative process that helps to improve the relationships between landlords and tenants. They would like to see a process that invests in long-term housing stability.

“I think we try to develop a more restorative justice, conflict resolution process that really looks at what is really happening, versus that the absoluteness of from either the perspective of property owners or renters. We have people and institutions out here that can help guide us through this.”

Another suggestion made was the more that landlords can apply directly in the name of their tenants the better. Several stated they would prefer to apply for the assistance themselves rather than depend on their tenants.

Discussion

Are Ramsey County landlords and renters better off as a result of the Landlord Assistance Program?

One of the goals of the Landlord Assistance Program was that Ramsey County landlords and renters would consider themselves better off as a result of the program. Renters experienced benefits from the eviction moratorium that was put into place in Minnesota in March 2020 due to COVID-19 and then extended by a national moratorium by the CDC in September. While the moratorium helped renters by preventing eviction due to an inability to pay their rent, renters were encouraged by landlords to continue paying rent or seek financial assistance that is available through county or state services. Many renters went months without paying rent. Assistance to landlords was made available through CARES funding in Ramsey County in November. Landlords were able to apply for funds to cover unpaid rent between March and December, 2020. According to survey results, when landlords were asked if they are better off after receiving a grant from the Landlord Assistance Program, 78% reported they were, while only 12% said they were not (10% indicated they did not know or preferred not to answer). In addition, 2,212 tenants received support through their landlord in addition to those served through Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance.

Was the rental housing market stabilized and were landlords able to prevent default on their mortgages or loss of their properties?

Ramsey County hoped the assistance to landlords would help to stabilize the rental housing market and make it possible for landlords to avoid defaulting on their mortgages or losing their properties. Landlords who participated in focus groups were asked if the assistance they received through the program covered their needs. While landlords reported that the assistance covered most of their expenses, there were concerns for ongoing maintenance and utility expenses if tenants continued not paying rent.

Another question asked of landlords to determine the stability of the rental housing market was regarding the outlook on the health of their residential rental business for 2021. Slightly more than half (53%) reported it was positive, 17% reported it was neutral and less than one-third (30%) described it as negative. Finally, they were asked on the survey if they intended to continue their residential rental business and the vast majority (79%) said yes, while only 4% said they do not intend to continue. However, it is worth noting that focus group results indicated several landlords have sold some of their properties or have plans to do so in the coming year to minimize financial losses.

While the landlords who received grants benefitted, the scope of the program was too small to stabilize the rental market broadly. With 676 approved applications, benefitting 2,212 tenants, this program reached only a small number of landlords potentially needing assistance. Survey and focus group data indicate quite a bit of uncertainty about their future prospects. This program was helpful, but did not have evidence of impact on the rental market more broadly.

Did the project serve the most vulnerable to COVID-19?

The majority of tenants whose landlords received assistance lived in areas considered vulnerable or very vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. Application data was used to determine if those most vulnerable according to the CDC's Social Vulnerability Index to COVID-19 were the residents who received the assistance. Of the 2,212 tenant addresses, 62% of tenants whose landlords received assistance lived in areas with high vulnerability scores, meaning they were most vulnerable to impacts of COVID-19 and other disasters. Nineteen percent of tenants lived in areas considered vulnerable with scores between 0.5 to 0.74 and 20% were in areas not considered vulnerable. Application data did not include other data on tenants, such as age, race/ethnicity, or gender so we are unable to make comparisons in this area.

How can Ramsey County better partner with landlords post-pandemic to support low-income renters and housing stability?

Landlords were asked on the survey and in focus groups how Ramsey County can better partner with landlords post-pandemic to support them, low-income renters and housing stability. There were several suggestions provided by landlords:

- Landlords said they would like to be informed about additional available assistance through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) moving ahead since their financial challenges are ongoing and they anticipate ongoing inconsistent income.
- Landlords reported overwhelmingly that they prefer the option to apply for assistance on their tenants' behalf rather than have tenants apply directly if additional assistance is available.
- Allow evictions for tenants who are able to pay for rent but are choosing not to due to the moratorium. Also allow eviction exceptions for people in violation of terms of their rental/lease agreements (outside of paying rent).¹⁰
- Improve communication with landlords (informing them of the assistance program, during the application process, regarding additional resources and services).
- Engage landlords and wide-spread community in larger discussions about housing stability and restorative practices.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made recognizing the passage of the American Rescue Plan. City, county, and state jurisdictions partnered in planning the Emergency Rental Assistance program (ERA) that will provide rental and utility shut-off assistance to both tenants and landlords. It will not provide mortgage assistance. The recommendations below address short-term recommendations for both the new ERA program as well as recommendations for Ramsey County in its broader work to ensure housing stability. Ramsey County will have two distinct programs, a metro-wide landlord assistance program and a county/city of Saint Paul tenant program. However, a common application will be created and used for both programs.

Short-term Recommendations

With the passage of the ARP and Ramsey County's participation in the ERA program, Ramsey County will be collaborating with Hennepin, Anoka, Dakota, and Minneapolis and Saint Paul through the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA) to create a centralized program. This effort will allow

¹⁰ The current eviction moratorium does allow evictions for some lease violations unrelated to payment.

programs to consolidate administration of the program and simplify the application process and payments. In addition, we recommend that the county:

- Ensure that **the online portal for the common application process** allows applicants to apply online and upload required documents, check the status of their application, and check issuance.
- **Develop a packet of information landlords can provide for tenants** with information about financial support for rent payments, other county services, and other community supports such as food shelves.
- There is confusion around the details of the eviction moratorium among landlords and tenants. Some landlords were concerned that they could not evict tenants for lease violations not related to payment. **The county should partner with trusted messengers and utilize town halls to provide information to landlords and tenants about the eviction moratorium** and what is and is not allowed under the law.

Long-term Recommendations

This program was put together quickly to meet immediate needs in the community and to meet spending deadlines of the CARES Act. In addition, while this evaluation provides some information, it had low survey response rate and only 11 landlords participated in focus groups. Both factors make long-term recommendations difficult. This was the first time the county engaged with landlords in this way and there is a lot to be learned about how the county, tenants, and landlords can better partner to support housing stability and affordability. Recognizing these things, in the long-term we recommend:

- **Intentionally engage with tenant groups, landlords, and housing legal experts to design longer-term solutions to housing stability.** The county needs to be mindful of unintended consequences of providing different types of rent relief and the interactions between new program and existing programs like Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance. A working group made up of landlords, tenants, and other legal expertise in rental law and policy would allow the county to take a thoughtful approach that fills gaps and avoid unintended consequences that could negatively impact the long-term goal housing stability.
- Communication and trust between landlords and tenants were cited as ongoing issues for landlords. **While the county has not traditionally had a role in what some landlords called a “restorative process” to repair communication breakdowns and mistrust, the county should consider how it can support community organizations who do this work.**

Homelessness and Housing

Introduction

Ramsey County served those experiencing homelessness throughout the pandemic and aligned resources to protect health and safety. They did this by prioritizing the immediate need for sheltering the most vulnerable to COVID-19, while continuing to support and sustain efforts led by community partners. Under the direction of the Incident Management Team, the COVID-19 Homeless Planning Team identified and operated shelter sites with the services needed to support people during the pandemic. This report highlights the efforts to support adults without children. The county also stood up shelters and supported families experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, but that work is not within the scope of this evaluation.

The immediate goals of the response were to (1) establish the Ramsey County COVID-19 Respite (RCCR) facility with isolation and quarantine to shelter homeless individuals that were symptomatic or tested positive for COVID-19, and (2) provide adequate temporary shelter space to enable existing shelters to reduce capacity by fifty percent, allowing residents to physically distance. Ramsey County also stood up a team of shelter staff and social service specialists to provide wrap-around services for people in respite and temporary shelter to ensure safety and well-being, public health, stability and housing security, and equity.

The response planned to promote resident safety and well-being by:

- De-populating shelters to support social distancing.
- Providing appropriate wrap-around services to clients in temporary shelter.
- Supporting the unsheltered in social distancing and well-being.
- Increasing the number of people connected to mainstream benefits.

The response planned to promote public health for the homeless population by:

- Providing access to respite facilities for people who are homeless and symptomatic.
- Providing clients access to COVID-19 tests.

The response planned to use prevention efforts to promote stability and housing security for these outcomes:

- The system experiences low exits to homelessness from the COVID-19 hotel/respite.
- Increase the number of people connected to housing during/post COVID-19.

The response planned to promote equity in the overall homelessness response for these goals:

- Client referrals into temporary shelter or respite were reflective of homeless population.
- Providing updated information related to COVID-19 were equitably shared throughout the homeless community (sheltered and unsheltered homeless).

Evaluation Methods

Throughout the project the evaluation team monitored the response and provided regular feedback to operations and logistics. The evaluation team also tracked the outcomes of the COVID-19 response, focusing on the wrap-around services provided to clients in the temporary shelters, including public assistance benefits and housing referrals.

Process Evaluation

The evaluation team used intake data, service data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and exit data to monitor key data elements. This helped the operations team identify gaps, make course corrections, and ensure an equitable response. The questions driving the process evaluation efforts were:

- How well is the COVID-19 temporary hotel shelter working?
- How well is the COVID-19 respite working?

Weekly data reporting through the [COVID-19 Respite and Hotel Homeless Shelter Dashboard](#) continued through the duration of the COVID-19 response. The total number of clients disaggregated by race, ethnicity, age, and gender were included to monitor equity in the response.

Outcome Evaluation

Beyond simply understanding who experienced homelessness during the response, the success of the overall COVID-19 response to homelessness focused on the how well residents were supported in the areas of safety and well-being, public health, stability and housing security, and equity. The key evaluation questions were:

- Who experienced homelessness during COVID-19?
- How well was the county able to prevent exits to homelessness and support stability among clients that were in temporary shelters during the COVID-19 response?
- Were clients able to access wrap around services while in temporary shelter?
- How well was the county able to support people who are unsheltered during the COVID-19 response?
- Who used the respite facility? Was COVID-19 testing available for homeless clients at the respite facility?

Administrative Data

The evaluation team used several sources of qualitative and quantitative data to determine the success of the response. Sources of data include HMIS; the Social Services Information System (SSIS), which is an administrative database for Ramsey County Social Services Department; MnChoices; NextGen electronic health records; and MAXIS, the Financial Assistance Services administrative database. Administrative data was supplemented through tracking efforts of outreach workers and county staff on Excel spreadsheets for data not collected in the administrative databases. Respite data were collected by staff in the Public Health department using a logbook and the data was stored in a relational database. Quantitative data is disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and age.

Client Interviews

Ramsey County evaluators conducted in-person interviews with 49 residents of the hotel shelters between November 2020 and February 2021. All interviewees were in the hotel shelters for at least four weeks in 2020. Qualitative and quantitative questions were asked to understand the lived experience of clients in the hotel setting, the services provided, and their overall satisfaction with the program.

COVID-19 safety protocols were created and successfully implemented at Mary Hall, Best Western Capitol Ridge, and Best Western Como hotel shelters. Interviewees were randomly selected from the list of clients generated from HMIS. The list of potential interviewees was reviewed to ensure gender, race, and ethnic diversity was represented in the data. The list was also reviewed by hotel site supervisors to advise the evaluators on any accommodations the interviewees may need,

including translation, emotional support, or gender or culturally- specific interviewers. One person was interviewed by a Ramsey County Community Corrections evaluator who is a native Spanish speaker. The results were translated into English by the that evaluator and included in the data set presented here.

The interview questions and COVID-19 safety protocols were developed by evaluation staff. The questions were constructed to accommodate client's range of abilities, while maintaining the conversational nature of the interview format. County staff shared input on the phrasing of questions and response options. The final tool was tested with two hotel shelter residents using the "think aloud" technique and revisions were made based on the feedback received. The testers of the interview protocol and the interviewees received \$25 gift cards for their participation. Interview questions are provided in [Appendix B](#).

Limitations

The data collection methodology has the following limitations to the results for public assistance benefits and housing entries:

- Data on public assistance benefits does not include people who entered sheltered after December 1, 2020. They may have had different outcomes. Additionally, benefits data were examined through February 2021, so benefits opened after that date were not included.
- Missing from approvals for new benefits are those who were not income eligible, which could be due to unemployment benefits or other assets rather than a lack of case management support for the application process.
- Some clients may not have informed the staff and case managers of their eventual housing outcomes, and the results in this report could understate success.
- We cannot necessarily attribute all the outcomes to this new intervention through hotel shelters and related wrap-around services. Some homeless people may be familiar with the public assistance and homeless coordinated entry systems to apply for these services on their own.
- This evaluation does not include additional hotel rooms for families, which were not recorded on HMIS.

The count of people receiving social services, such as mental health supports, is most likely an undercount. Our understanding of how many people received social services is tied to if and how the services were documented and shared with the county. For instance, *ad-hoc* mental health services described were not documented in any county data collection system. Also, while some services were on hold due to COVID-19, many community partners were involved in supporting the health and safety of hotel shelter residents, clients staying in respite, and unsheltered residents in 2020. Social service usage was limited to those who received services through the county and whose use was entered in administrative databases.

Most of the clients that evaluation staff interviewed were enthusiastic about being interviewed. Ramsey County was thanked for the program and for valuing their perspective. As has been reported in research and in the [evaluation the Re-directing Users of Shelter to Housing](#) (RUSH) by Ramsey County evaluation staff (2018), there are limits to self-reported data. While clients are the most part honest in their responses, the fact that they have received benefits from county may lead them to respond more favorably to Ramsey County staff that are asking for their feedback. There can also be interpretation bias on the part of the research staff who may have misinterpreted someone's meaning.

Results

The results section summarizes information collected about the clients of the hotel shelter and respite programs, including services and benefits they received. It also describes the results of the in-person interviews to illuminate client experiences in the program. Descriptive data was collected and shared on the community's efforts to support people living unsheltered during the pandemic.

Results from Administrative Databases

Ramsey County opened COVID-19 respite sites and contracted hotels starting in mid-March 2020 to lower density in shelters for single adults and provide assistance with public benefits and housing referrals. The public benefits and housing portion of the evaluation covers people who resided a cumulative total of at least seven days among the two types of sites for single adults and first entered before December 2020, thereby allowing more than two months to measure their subsequent results. None of those who met these criteria stayed only in respite. As a result, 648 hotel shelter clients are included in the evaluation outcomes, while more than 250 are excluded who first entered after November 30, 2020 or stayed less than seven days.

The racial composition of the hotel shelter clients compared to the January 2020 point-in-time (PIT) count of 931 single adults in all of the county's emergency shelters and surveyed unsheltered clients has nearly the same percentages of African Americans and Whites. Table 15 shows the unduplicated count of homeless persons in hotel shelters by race and ethnicity.

Figure 20: Percent of Clients First Entered March Through November 2020 and Homeless Singles, January 2020

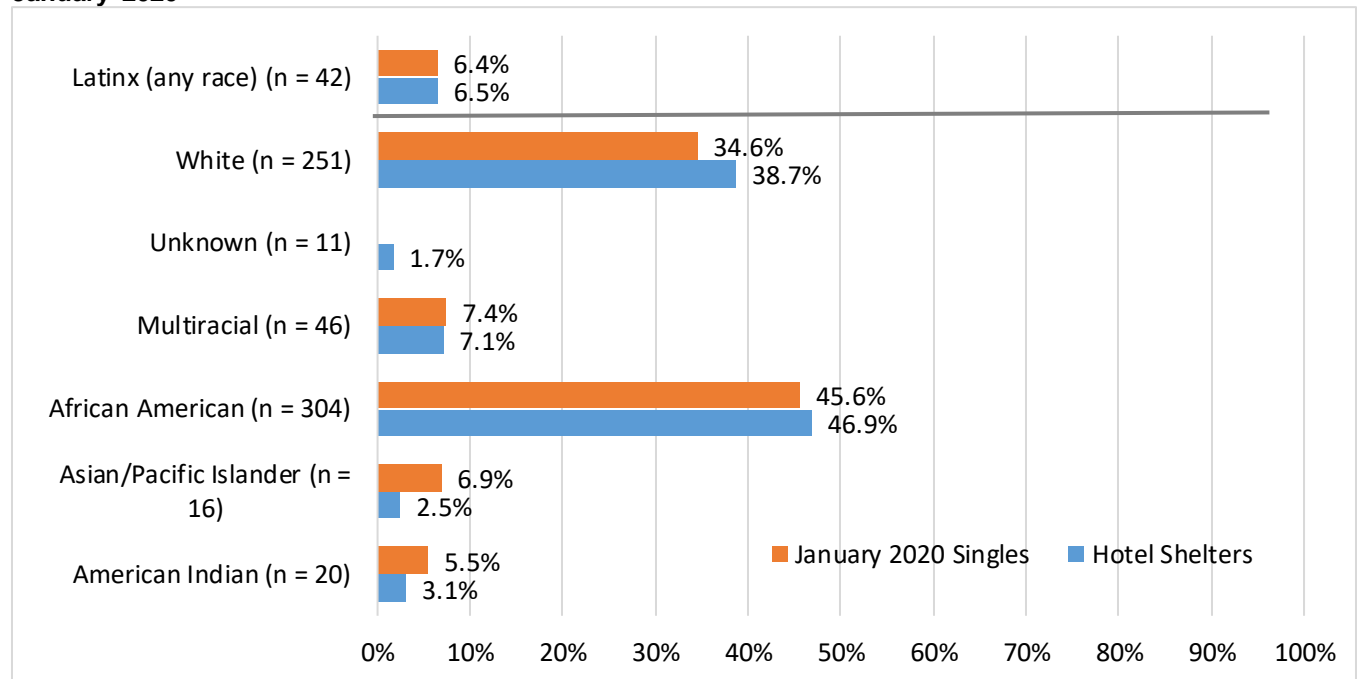


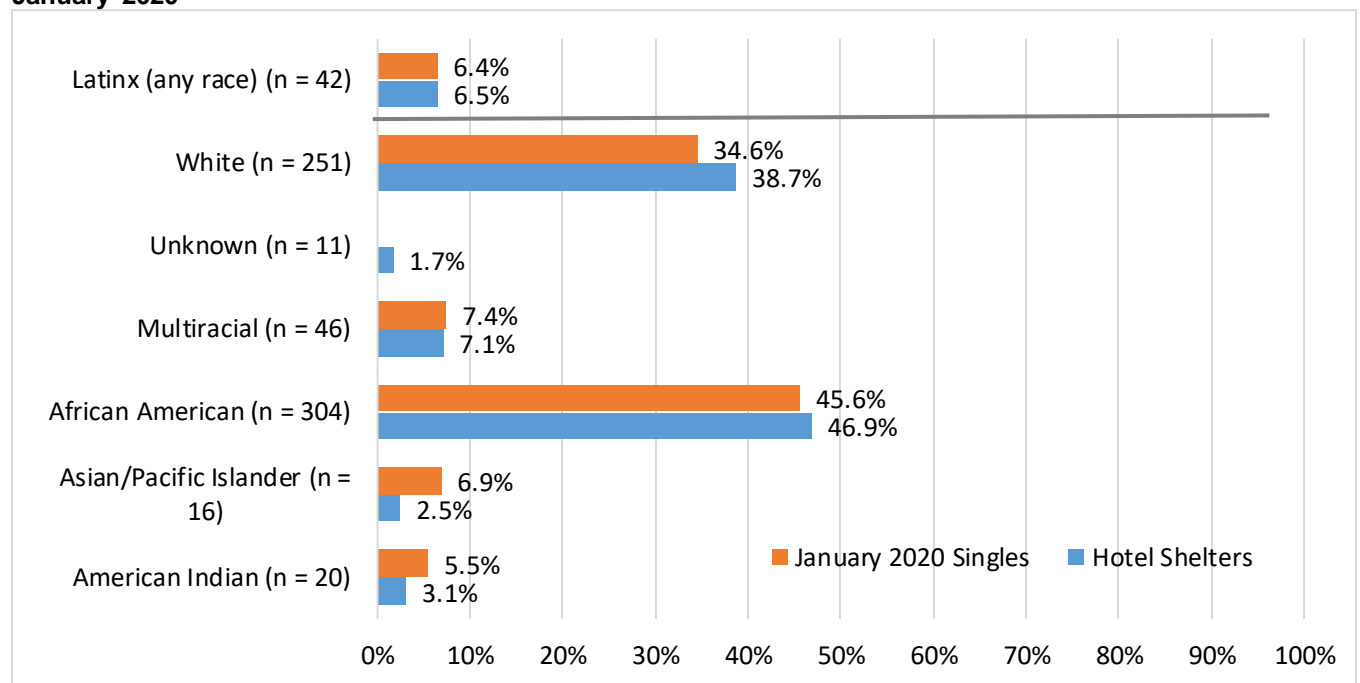
Figure 20 shows the percent of clients who entered hotel shelters as compared to overall counts of single people experiencing homelessness.

Table 15: Unduplicated Count of Hotel and Respite Clients First Entered March Through November 2020 and Point-in-Time (PIT) Homeless Singles, January 2020

Race or Ethnicity	Hotel/Respite Clients	Percent	Percent of County's Homeless Singles, January 2020
Total	648	100.0%	100.0%
American Indian	20	3.1%	5.5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	16	2.5%	6.9%
African American	304	46.9%	45.6%
Multiracial	46	7.1%	7.4%
Unknown	11	1.7%	n/a
White	251	38.7%	34.6%
Latinx (any race)	42	6.5%	6.4%
People of Color	406	62.7%	n/a

Nearly half of the hotel shelter clients reported their race as African American. White was the second most reported race at 35%. Asian/Pacific-Islander, American Indian, Hispanic/Latinx of any race, and Multiracial each made up less than 10% of hotel and respite clients.

Figure 20: Percent of Clients First Entered March Through November 2020 and Homeless Singles, January 2020



African Americans make up 46% of people in the PIT count from January 2020, nearly the same as the 47% in the hotel shelter clients included in this evaluation. Whites are a higher proportion of those in hotel shelters (39 percent) than the 35 percent in the county's 2020 PIT count. Asians and Pacific Islanders, in contrast, made up a smaller portion of the hotel shelter population at less than 3% compared to 7% in the PIT count. American Indians had a similar difference with only 3% compared to 6% of the January 2020 PIT. Nearly 2% of the hotels shelter clients did not report a race, which potentially could raise the percentages of any of the racial groups if known.

The percentage who were Latinx in the hotels or respite is nearly identical (7%) to the 2020 PIT count (6%).

Table 16 shows age groups by gender. Females were overrepresented in hotels as compared to their proportion in the PIT count; females were 24% of the PIT yet were 33% of the hotel/respite population.

Table 16: Unduplicated Count of Hotel and Respite Clients First Entered March Through November 2020, Age and Gender

Age Group	Female	Other	Male	Total	Percent
Total	212	6	430	648	100.0%
Under 20	5	2	4	11	1.7%
20 to 29	26	1	35	62	9.6%
30 to 39	51	0	66	117	18.1%
40 to 49	50	1	80	131	20.2%
50 to 59	45	2	140	187	28.9%
60 to 69	27	0	93	120	18.5%
70 and Older	8	0	12	20	3.1%
Percent of Total	33%	1%	66%	100%	

Public Assistance Benefits

The benefits managed at the county level for this evaluation include federal programs for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medical Assistance (MA), and the Minnesota Family Investment Program¹¹ (MFIP), plus state specific programs for General Assistance (GA), Diversionary Work Program, and Minnesota Supplemental Aid (MSA).

To measure whether clients received increased benefits, the very first entry into a hotel or respite was compared to the data benefits began. The evaluation divides between those who were already receiving a benefit at the time of entry to those who were approved to start a benefit after entry. About two-thirds (67%) were receiving food, cash, or medical benefits on the day they first entered a hotel or respite. The indicators for improving the lives of the hotel clients are the new benefits approved on or after their first entry date. Table 17 below shows the total who did not have benefits as of their first day and the rate at which benefits were approved.

Table 17: Hotel Shelter Clients Without Public Assistance Benefits When First Entered and Then Obtaining Approvals by Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Clients Without Benefits Upon First Entry	Approvals on or After First Entry	Percent Obtaining Benefit Approvals
Total	217	90	41%
American Indian	5	0	0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	0	0%
African American	97	54	56%
Multiracial	11	4	36%
Unknown	10	1	10%
White	89	31	35%
Latinx (any race)	16	3	19%

¹¹ Minnesota's federal Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) program.

Among the 217 not receiving a benefit at the time of entry, 41% (90) had a benefit approved on or after initial entry. Of those 90, half had their new benefit approved within two months. The racial groups other than Whites and African Americans are too small to draw conclusions. African Americans were most likely to obtain benefits after shelter entry (56% compare to 35% of White people). Of the 431 who were already receiving benefits at entry, at least 95 percent had a renewal after entry to sustain their benefits (based on public assistance data available by the first of February). Since some benefits are not renewed for several months, the new approvals do not necessarily mean the benefits will end for those without a recorded approval.

Focusing just on SNAP and GA, the results are very similar to all the benefits grouped together above. Forty-one percent (97 of 235 people) without these benefits at first entry received new approvals for SNAP or GA afterwards. Including those already eligible for SNAP and GA, three fourths (76 percent) had renewed existing benefits.

Only 5% of clients (35 people) were receiving MA at the time of first entry. Just nine new people started MA afterwards. Approval for MA not only provides people with health insurance, being eligible for MA enables people to become eligible for other services and benefits.

Ramsey County partnered with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) [Social Security Advocacy](#) team to help assist clients with housing documentation requirements and applying for benefits through the Social Security Administration. Between June 1, 2020, and January 31, 2021, (eight months) DHS staff received 183 Ramsey County homeless client referrals pertaining to Social Security benefits. Of the 183 clients, the team provided proof of Social Security Administration (SSA) benefits for 91 homeless clients, which is a needed verification to get into Housing Support or housing managed funded by the US Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Eighty-five (out of 183) clients were screened for Social Security disability benefits (Supplemental Security Income) with 79 clients being referred on to a DHS contracted Social Security advocate for assistance with applying for SSA benefits.

The above results only describe the timing of approvals compared to first entries into the COVID-19 hotel and respite program. They do not necessarily mean that the wrap-around services at those location alone provided the assistance to apply and receive benefit approvals. Clients may have applied on their own previously or were served by other support agencies.

MnChoices Waiver Case Management

MnChoices is an assessment and case planning tool that determines eligibility for long-term or chronic-care needs. The assessment determines eligibility for eight services and financial support programs that includes: home and community-based services waivers (e.g. Elderly Waiver, Community Access for Disability Inclusion, Brain Injury), Alternative Care, and personal care assistance services. Waivers are funded through Medical Assistance.

Forty hotel shelter and respite residents were open to a waiver during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over half (21 people) had a new waiver open as a result of an assessment while they were in the program. The nineteen other clients were assessed before entering the hotel shelters. Most residents (85%) opened to a new waiver were between the ages of 55 and 74.

Mental Health Services

Ramsey County mental health professionals provided formal case management services, crisis and stabilization, and informal mental health support for hotel shelter residents during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (see for Table 18 an overview). County mental health leadership and planners also

met with mental health vendor organizations. They encouraged vendors to engage with homeless clients, offered help to find clients that may be homeless, and shared information about the new housing resources available.

Thirty clients were opened in the county's mental health Targeted Case Management (TCM) while in the hotel shelters in 2020. Over one hundred clients residing at the hotel shelters had TCM services that were established before the pandemic. While most of these clients were assigned to TCM services, a handful of clients were receiving Assertive Community Therapy or Community Recovery Team services.

Twenty clients received services from the county's crisis or stabilization during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In-person or phone-based crisis services address the current crisis that a client is experiencing and provides referrals to stabilization services or other longer-term supports. Crisis and Stabilization staff were also on-site to provide support during six homeless encampment closures and on-call during three other closures.

Table 18: Mental Health Services in 2020

Mental Health Services	Number of Clients	Percent
Total	648	100%
Open to Targeted Case Management before entering hotel	107	16.5%
Open to Targeted Case Management while in hotel	30	4.6%
Accessed Crisis or Stabilization while in hotel	20	3.1%

Ad-hoc mental health services were another key area of support for hotel shelter residents. At the beginning of the pandemic many services were on hold and the Twin Cities was experiencing social unrest as the result of the death of George Floyd while in police custody. The previously empty streets in Saint Paul were full of demonstrators angry about racial injustice and the Governor's COVID-19 restrictions. At the same time, most social workers were providing services remotely. This COVID-19 precaution unintentionally limited access to homeless clients without reliable communication tools.

To fill the gap in mental health services, six county mental health TCM staff provided in-person mental health support to all hotel shelter residents. This helped improve access to mental health services at a time when clients needed it the most. In fact, many of the residents that staff worked with were not county TCM clients. Services began in June 2020 and lasted through November, when a staff person met with a client that tested positive for COVID-19. The program intended to shift to telehealth, but a lack of technology and a decision to hire a permanent mental health provider ended the service.

In June 2020, TCM staff provided services three times per week for three hours per day. Two staff were available at each shift and they each saw on average two to three residents per shift. In some cases, residents sought out staff on a weekly basis to check in. In mid-summer, they decreased their services to two hours a day, the time split each week between Best Western Capitol Ridge and Best Western Como, allowing staff to also attend to their caseload of TCM clients.

Hotel shelter residents had a variety of needs. Some residents were lonely and just wanted someone to talk to. In some cases, they were experiencing issues in their personal relationships, in other cases they were feeling overwhelmed with being homeless. Staff also did referrals to psychiatry, therapy,

Community Alternatives for Disability Inclusion (CADI) waiver services, adult mental health case management, and other specific resources.

Wrap-around Services

Wrap-around services were added months after the hotel shelter program started, but they ended up being key to successful housing placements and benefit obtainment. County planners coordinated a large team of staff and partners to implement the wrap-around services. Planners worked closely with the DHS, Financial Assistance Services, county navigators; and leveraged AmeriCorps and community providers to act as housing and benefit navigators and engaged housing providers and landlords to secure housing for 176 clients.

The housing and benefit systems are difficult to traverse. Clients face many barriers in these systems (see Figure 21 for more information). Navigators were able to guide clients through completing benefit and housing applications, setting up appointments, and then connecting them with housing providers. County staff and housing providers were able to use Housing Stabilization Services (HSS) and Housing Choice Section 8 vouchers from the Public Housing Authorities to make the hotel shelter program's wrap-around services successful. The Veteran Services Office, RUSH, Outside-In, and HSS providers were key partners in this work. Housing providers have access to direct assistance funding which was used for security deposits, applications fees, furniture and any other barriers that may be preventing someone from accessing housing. CARES contracted providers included More Doors, Emma Norton Services, Person Centered Housing Consults, Catholic Charities, Start Today and MN Care Counseling.

Figure 21: Navigators Identify Barriers to Housing

The top barrier has been criminal history, including recent warrants and felonies which prevent landlords and voucher programs from accepting people for housing. Also, many clients have income levels that make them ineligible for benefits but is not enough for an apartment. According to one navigator:

"Having fluctuating income or having too much income for programs, but not enough for housing. A lot of the residents have unemployment, but the amount varies often and could end abruptly so it's not enough to get them in housing. A lot of the guys work temp jobs but it's not consistent enough for housing costs."

Navigators also commented that there is "not enough affordable housing," and this compounds because people do not favor shared housing options. There are also not enough options for shared housing for those with significant criminal history, and not enough vouchers for people with SSI. Other barriers include past evictions, mental health, lack of reliable cell phones, and inability to pay for transportation.

HSS is a new Medicaid-funded service designed to help people with disabilities and seniors find and maintain housing. Individuals in hotel shelter programs, who did not have existing case management, were referred to this service so they could receive assistance finding housing. To qualify, the individual must be on Medical Assistance and have a Professional Statement of Need signed by a Qualified Professional. Ramsey County partnered with four HSS providers and a Qualified Professional to assist with the application process. As of January 2021, navigators referred 64 individuals to partnering organizations. Of those, DHS approved 38 applications and an additional 21 were pending approval. The remaining five referrals were not submitted due to client not completing the application process.

The new service did not start until July 1, 2020, so access to the program has only been available for a short time. The data collected was from our partnering HSS organizations. It is possible that hotel shelter guests were able to access this service outside of our partner organizations. For instance, MnChoices is also an entry point for housing stabilization services.

Exits from Hotels

There are many reasons why clients leave the hotels, respite, and shelters in general. The homeless response staff record those exit decisions as best they can, which depend on whether they had time to interview the clients and obtain information upon leaving. Of the approximately 500 exits through the end of January 2021, about one-third were discharged for various rule violations, including drugs and behavioral problems. About 21% of those exiting reported entering some type of permanent housing, including family homes as well as supportive housing. Another 13% left voluntarily or completed their stay without a specified reason. About 6% transferred to hotels or other shelters. Over one-fourth have no record of their reason for leaving. These exits reasons do not represent what clients may have found later after the exit, only what staff could determine at the time clients left.

Entering Permanent Housing

For a more definitive record of exits to housing beyond the reasons gathered at the hotels, two sources were available. One is the HMIS that tracks programs statewide serving current or formerly homeless programs. Some clients also utilized agencies and case managers that helped them find various types of housing, including private market, public housing, and supportive housing for homeless.

Like the analysis of public assistance benefits, the cohort for evaluating housing outcomes are the 648 persons entering before December 2020, excluding those who stayed a combined total of less than seven days in the hotels or respite. The date entering a program is the indicator for “housing” although people may physically move-in later due to waiting for an opening or deciding on other options for their housing. Roughly two-thirds of the first housing entries were derived from HMIS and the other third from collected reports from those helping clients with housing referrals. To allow a minimal time period to gauge the impact of referrals and case managers to work with clients on their housing options, those entering hotel or respite since December 2020 were not included in the evaluation results. For the cohort reviewed for housing (who entered before December 2020), the results known by mid-February 2021 may understate housing entries as more time passes. Another limitation is that not all housing entries result in permanent move-ins, as clients choose other arrangements or leave permanent housing again for various reasons.

Overall, over one-fourth (27%) of the 648 in the cohort entered some type of housing program, and over half started housing less than four months since first entering a hotel or respite shelter. Over half (56%) of the 176 known housing entries were accepted into programs with housing supports or long-term housing. Almost 14% reported obtaining subsidized senior housing or Housing Choice Section 8 vouchers. At least 19% entered other types of permanent or transitional housing designated for homeless people recorded on HMIS. The remainder found other types of housing, including their own housing, assisted living, and other supportive housing arrangements.

Table 19 below shows the housing entry rate by racial and ethnic group based on all the hotel shelter clients within each group. The highest group was Hispanic/Latinx, with 36% of the 42 total clients entering a housing program. While the American Indians had relatively a high percentage entering housing, the total of 20 first arriving at hotel and respite sites before December are too low to compare reliably with the others. Such small cohorts can result in widely varying results due to just a few individuals. African Americans and Whites entered housing at rates nearly identical to the overall average of 27%.

Table 19: Percent of Hotel Shelter Clients by Race and Ethnicity Entering Permanent Housing Programs

Race or Ethnicity	Total	Entered Housing Program	Percent Entered
Total	648	176	27.2%
American Indian	20	7	35.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	16	4	25.0%
African American	304	83	27.3%
Multiracial	46	11	23.9%
Unknown	11	3	27.3%
White	251	68	27.1%
Latinx (any race)	42	15	35.7%
People of Color	406	107	26.4%

Table 20 shows the rate of entering a housing program by age, where those in their 40s had the highest rate at 36%, slightly higher than those age 60 and older at 34%. Those under 40 entered housing at much lower percentages.

Table 20: Percent of Hotel Shelter Clients by Age Entering Permanent Housing Programs

	Total Clients by Age	Entered Housing Program	Percent Within Age Groups
Total	648	176	27.2%
Under 30	73	10	13.7%
30 to 39	117	20	17.1%
40 to 49	131	47	35.9%
50 to 59	187	51	27.3%
60 and Older	140	48	34.3%

Respite

Respite is a dedicated facility that allows people experiencing homelessness a place to isolate or quarantine if they are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. The facility itself changed three times in 2020. Respite started in Catholic Charities Mary Hall with 134 beds. As the need to shelter people grew and the number of people in respite remained in the low, in mid-July respite was moved to Boys Totem Town with 70 beds. Mary Hall became one of the main shelters in the Ramsey County response rather than a respite site. In mid-December, respite was moved to a wing of the Bethesda Hospital facility with 32 beds, which also provided shelter beds for single males.

Two hundred and seventy-six clients were admitted to respite in 2020. Use of the facility varied over time, ranging from seven people at the end of March, up to 72 people in April, and then use dropping throughout the summer. Use peaked in November with 79 people accessing respite throughout the month, and then decreasing into the year 2021. See Figure 22 below for more details. Figure 23 shows race and ethnic identities of clients accessing respite in the year 2020. Most of the clients that used the respite facility in 2020 identified as Black (34%) or White (42%), and ten percent of clients identified as American Indian. Eight percent of clients reported their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latinx.

Figure 22: Clients in COVID-19 Respite by Month

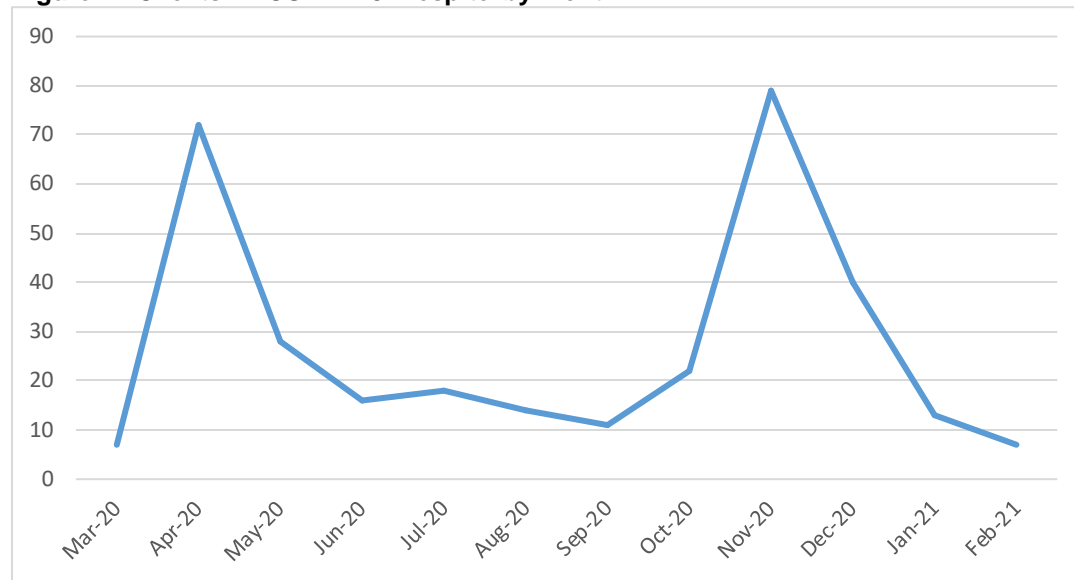
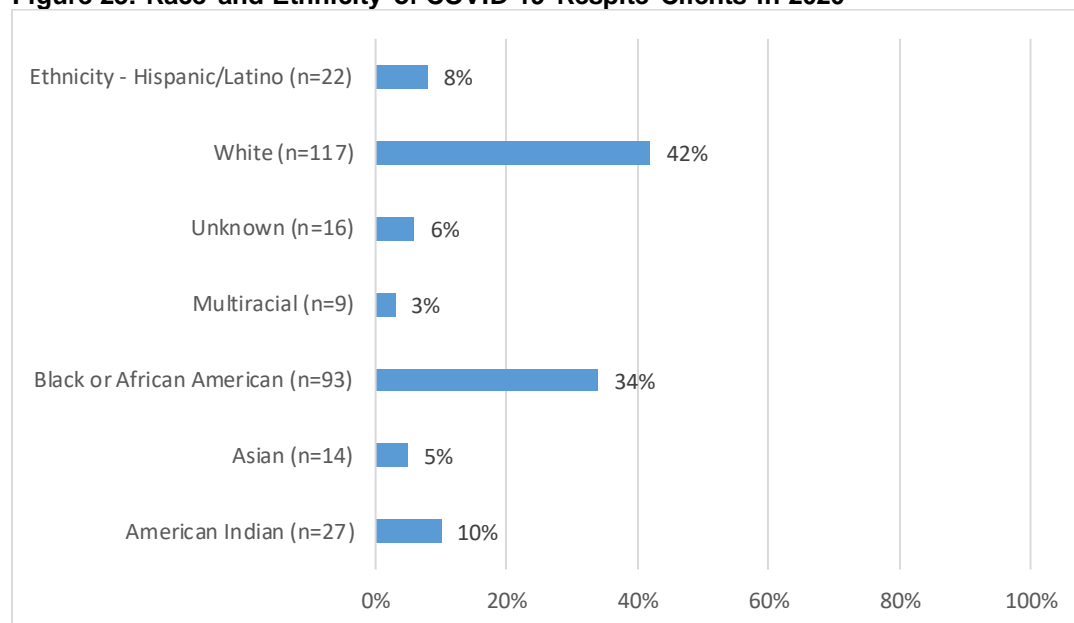


Figure 23: Race and Ethnicity of COVID-19 Respite Clients in 2020



One hundred and ninety-five people in respite had symptoms of COVID-19 in 2020. Most of the respite clients were tested for COVID-19. A test status was recorded for 188 people. Of these people, 77 percent of clients were tested with certainty and 10% were marked as having a test pending. Pending was used in the records to indicate a variety of situations, including if the client was tested prior to admission but did not have the result. Of the 145 people that were symptomatic and confirmed as tested, 47% tested positive for COVID-19.

Client Interview Results

Interviews were conducted with 49 clients staying at Mary Hall, Best Wester Capitol Ridge, Best Western Como, and Bethesda.

“I am so tired of living on the streets. You get no rest and you are worried about everything. Being in a safe place lifted the weight off my shoulders. You forget that you are important, too.”

Demographics of Interviewees

All the clients interviewed were currently living in a hotel shelter and had stayed at either Mary Hall (37%), Best Western Capitol Ridge (37%), or Best Western Como (27%) for at least four weeks in 2020. Some people were interviewed during their stay at Bethesda, but all had previously stayed at one of the other sites. The race and ethnicity of the sample mirrors the hotel shelter population for people who identify as Black, as 45% of the interview sample and 47% of all hotel residents. White people were slightly under sampled, as 27% of the interview sample and 39% of all hotel residents in 2020. Other racial identities were slightly oversampled in order to get more than one interview represented. (Table 21)

Table 21: Race and Ethnicity of Interviewees and All Hotel Shelter Clients

Race	Number in Interview Sample	Percent in Interview Sample	Total Number in Hotels	Total Percent in Hotels
Total	49	100.0%	648	100.0%
American Indian	4	8.2%	20	3.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	6.1%	16	2.5%
Black	22	44.9%	304	46.9%
Multiracial	5	10.2%	46	7.1%
Unknown	2	4.1%	11	1.7%
White	13	26.5%	251	38.7%
Ethnicity				
Hispanic/Latino	9	18.4%	42	6.5%

Females were 35% of interviewees, and males were 65%. These percentages are similar to the total hotel shelter population in 2020, where females are 33% and males are 66% of all clients.

As Table 22 shows, the interview sample included clients ranging in age from 25 years old to 74 years old. Half of the clients were over 55 years old. A strong representation for this age group was important because they were the initial focus of the hotel shelter program, as they were seen to be most at-risk for serious complications or death due to COVID-19.

Table 22: Age Ranges of Interviewees

Age Range	Number	Percent
Total	49	100.0%
25-34	8	16.3%
35-44	5	10.2%
45-54	12	24.5%
55-64	18	36.7%
65-74	6	12.2%

Interview Findings

In the interviews, hotel shelter residents were asked to reflect on their experience in the hotel shelter in the areas of safety, communication, services, culturally responsive support, overall satisfaction, and their use of respite. As interviewees described their lives in the hotel shelters, they also shared insight into their circumstances before entering the program. Interviewees described a wide range of

experiences (see Figure 24 for a composite story) prior to staying in the hotels that impacted their lives, housing situations, and perspectives on the hotel shelter program.

Figure 24: A Composite of Interviewee's Circumstances Prior to Entering the Hotel Shelter

A handful of clients are working and saving money for rent, determined to stay as independent as possible. Some clients are recently homeless because a job loss or medical issue and then experienced a subsequent loss of housing; many people lived in their car or slept on friend or relative's couch recently. A few people moved during the pandemic from another state, and one fled violence from another country. Others shared a loss of personal relationships or social networks that left them without shelter or a support network. Some interviewees revealed that they grew up using government support systems, and others said they never thought they would be homeless. Many of the interviewees have been homeless for many years and living in the hotel has helped them feel safe, stabilize their lives, and think about the future. On the street people experienced violence, some sense of community in encampments, but also felt very isolated and looked down upon by mainstream society.

Client Satisfaction

While interviewees came from very different life circumstances prior to the hotel shelter program, they expressed some similar experiences and levels of satisfaction with the county's hotel shelter program. These similarities also extend to the type of support services they received. Nearly all the interviewees received help with housing navigation and referrals.

Staff helped many clients secure financial assistance, transportation, and basic needs. Some received help getting employment, in fact, a couple of people got jobs working at other shelter sites. Ramsey County staff also connected clients with physical and mental health resources or helped them navigate the paperwork associated with these services.

"If you have a pulse, they are talking to you about housing."

"I learned about housing vouchers and staff help connect the dots with people that could help me."

Generally, clients appreciated the help accessing services. As shown in Table 23, most clients (90%) are very satisfied with the services they received at the hotel shelter, with very few rating services somewhat satisfied (6%) or not satisfied at all (4%). When clients were asked why they rated the services as they did, most mentioned Ramsey County and housing specialists as being "very helpful" and "supportive in my goals." The people who were "somewhat satisfied" or "not satisfied at all" had either not received much help with services or wanted more choice in housing options. One client wanted more explanation about the housing programs available to him so he could have input on which option with which to move forward. A handful of female clients shared that they were dissatisfied with the housing placement offered to them and turned it down. The most common reason for turning down a placement was that the neighborhood was unsafe. Additionally, some reported that the staff treated them differently after they turned down their first placement.

"...having services in the evening was helpful. I'm very satisfied because staff checked in with people and always got back with me as soon as possible."

Table 23: Client Satisfaction with Services

Satisfaction Rating	Number	Percent
Total	49	100.0%
Not satisfied at all	2	4.1%
Somewhat satisfied	3	6.1%
Very satisfied	44	89.9%

When asked to consider the hotel shelter program, nearly 86% of interviewees reported that it was “very good” and the remaining people (14%) described it as somewhat good (see Table 24 below). Most expressed that they were very appreciative of the opportunity to stay at Mary Hall, Best Western Como, or Best Western Capitol Ridge. The safety and stability at the hotel shelters allowed interviewees to shift from survival mode to a place where they felt safe and supported to attend to their health and explore opportunities for their future.

“You are not used to getting respect and being treated like a person. And not having to worry about things. Here you get to sleep and wake up to food.”

“It’s the simple fact of what the staff are trying to do for the homeless. They try man, to break that cycle that you get in.”

“I’m very satisfied because I accomplished a whole lot for me, where before I was here but not feeling like a person. I have credentials. I have my ID I have my Social Security card I got a lot of stuff that I have accomplished.”

Table 24: Client Rating of Overall Experience at the Shelter Hotels

Rating	Number	Percent
Total	49	100.0%
Not good at all	0	0%
Somewhat good	7	14.2%
Very good	42	85.8%

Beyond the long-term shelter and support services, interviewees identified at least one, and often multiple, staff people as a key element to creating a welcoming environment. Clients described brief but regular and positive interactions with staff, such as a greeting or casual check-in, as creating a sense of belonging. Clients valued that staff did these things that “acknowledged [their] humanity,” after feeling “ignored” and “isolated” as homeless. They felt seen and heard at the hotel shelters. Staff were described as, “kind and supportive like family,” “like my kids,” and “always there for me.”

“It’s great. I got what I needed: Three meals a day, a case worker, good relationships with staff. Staff here treat you like a regular human being. Like, they talk to you in the hall.”

“I had a couple of internal issues which I have trust issues about because of the situation I have been through. I know letting myself become vulnerable helped. I found two or three staff members and they helped me open up to get rid of a lot of stuff....They got me to a psychologist, a social worker, all that stuff.”

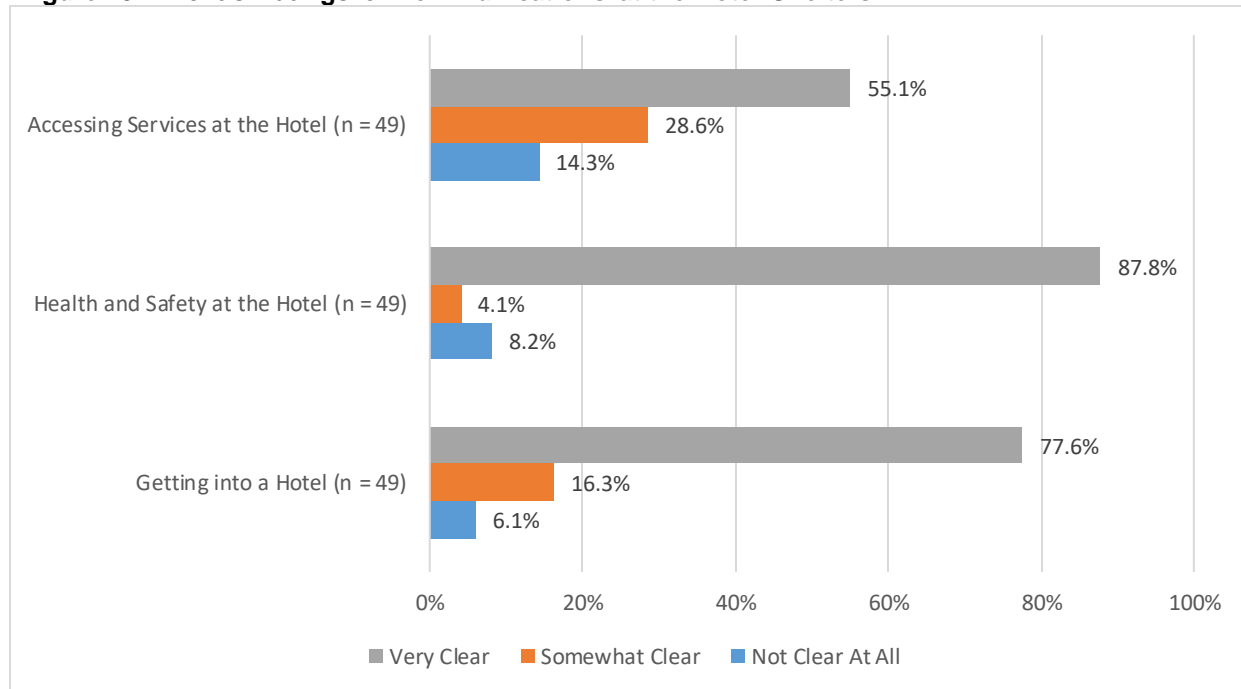
“I’m grateful to be here and staff don’t just treat it as a job.”

Communications

Clients were asked about the clarity of communications in the key areas of: accessing the hotel, health and safety, and accessing services in the hotel shelters. While the majority had a good understanding of how to get into the hotel program (rated very clear by 78%) and the COVID-19 health and safety guidance (rated very clear by 88%), there was less agreement with the clarity of how to access services at the facilities. Just over half (55 percent) of clients interviewed said that it was very clear to them how to access services at the hotel shelters, 29% rated communication about available services somewhat clear, and 14% said that it was not clear at all. Some clients offered reasons for their moderate to low rating, such as: they had to initiate conversations with staff about services, services were not posted or easily found, and the times of services were not accessible for people who work during the day.

"I've had to keep going down to ask for things, when I do, questions answered. They are in a timely fashion. Otherwise, if I didn't ask them (staff), I'd probably would still be sitting here with nothing."

Figure 25: Client's Ratings of Communications at the Hotel Shelters

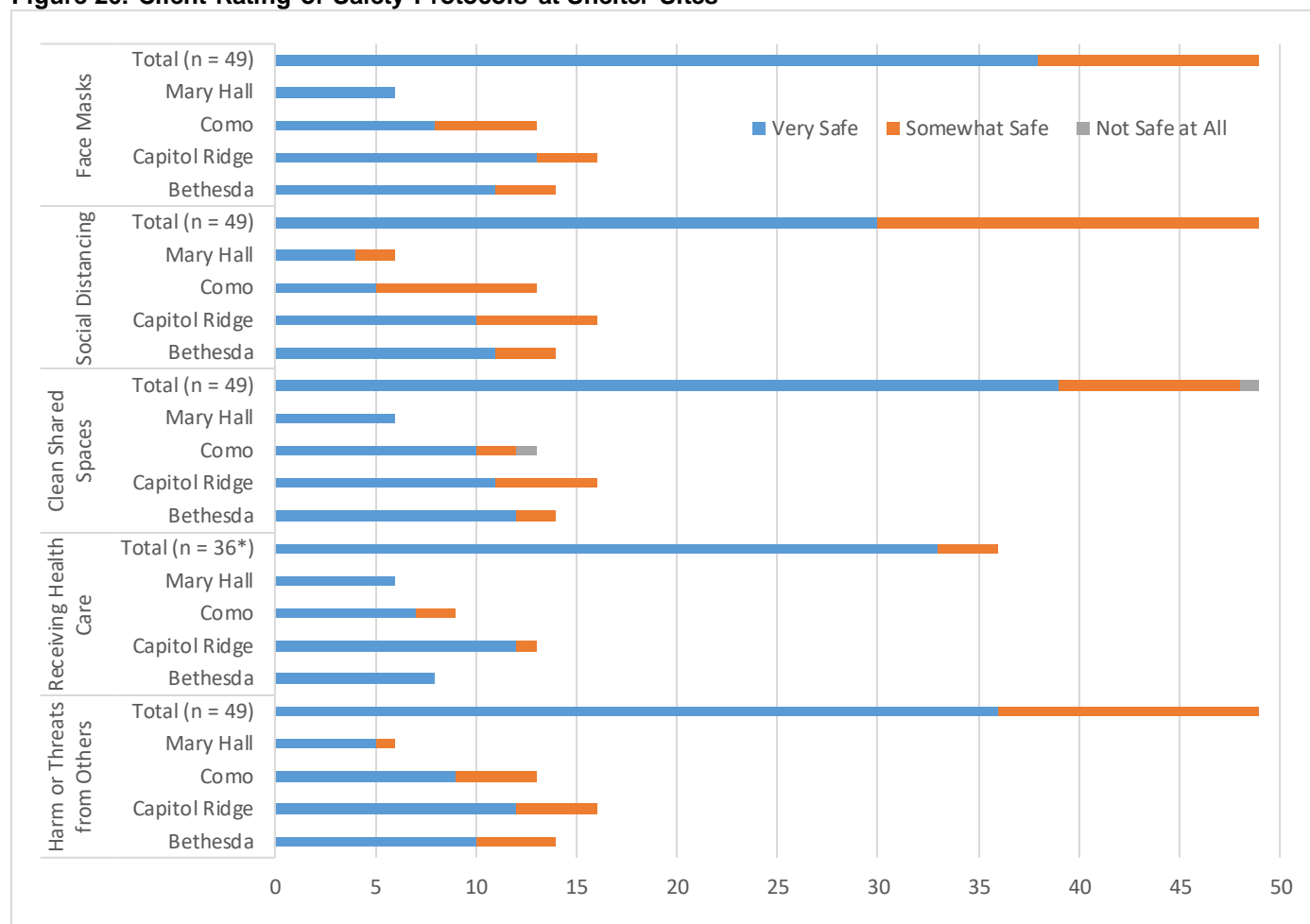


Safety

One goal in the development of the hotel shelter program was to ensure that clients felt safe while accessing the program and adhering to the State of Minnesota's COVID safety protocols. Clients were asked to rate their level of safety as it relates to people wearing face masks, social distancing, clean shared spaces at the hotel shelters, receiving services for physical or mental health care, and experiencing harm or threats from others.

Clients were asked to rate their sense of safety as it relates to Ramsey County staff, contractors, providers, and other clients adhering to safety guidelines around wearing face masks. Seventy-eight percent of clients indicated that they felt very safe, while twenty-two percent stated that they felt somewhat safe. Clients discussed the challenges of implementing face mask protocols due to people having difficulty breathing as a result of a health condition and other clients who are experiencing a mental or behavioral health crisis who may have difficulty following these safety measures. (Figure 26)

Figure 26: Client Rating of Safety Protocols at Shelter Sites



* Note that 13 people did not receive health care so did not respond to this question.

Social distancing measures were implemented within the hotel shelter program by informing clients upon intake of safety standards, posting social distancing information in common areas, and providing clients with reminders on protocols. When clients were asked to rate their sense of safety as it relates to county staff, contractors, providers and other client's adherence to social distancing guidelines, 62% indicated that they felt very safe. Thirty-eight percent stated that they felt somewhat safe and no clients interviewed for this evaluation mentioned that they did not feel safe.

Clients were also asked about their level safety navigating shared spaces in the hotel shelters and the level of cleanliness. Clean shared spaces are defined as: elevators, dining areas, hallways, shared bathrooms and common spaces for gatherings. Eighty percent of the clients indicated that they felt very safe in shared spaces. Some clients expressed that observing staff cleaning regularly and providing reminders to other clients helped to enhance their level of safety in common areas. Other clients discussed concerns with people not following elevator capacity limits, changes in observable cleaning practices, and people not social distancing while in the dining areas.

Clients were asked about how safe they felt while accessing health care services while staying in the hotel shelter program. This would include staff and providers following COVID-19 guidelines while engaging clients and the ability for services to be delivered in areas that provide enough space for

social distancing, while adhering to privacy standards. Some clients interviewed were already connected to services or they were not seeking health care services during their time at the hotel shelters. Sixty-seven percent of clients stated that they felt safe receiving services. Six percent felt somewhat safe engaging with staff and providers for health care services and commented that some providers get too close to them physically while engaging for services.

Hotel shelter clients were asked to rate their level of safety as it relates to experiencing harm or threats from others. Seventy-three percent indicated that they felt very safe and 27% stated that they felt somewhat safe. Clients commented that having a hotel room where they could lock their doors and keep their personal items secure positively influenced their level of safety. This option is not available to Mary Hall clients, due to clients not having access to the keys for their rooms. Others discussed the need to screen clients with higher behavioral health needs to ensure the safety of everyone, training staff in de-escalation techniques and ensuring the policies on drug and alcohol use were being followed by clients.

Cultural Responsiveness

Ramsey County's [Advancing Racial Equity Policy](#) is a guide to improving racial equity and inclusion in services. It is aimed at reducing racial and ethnic driven disparities and ensure equitable access to services and opportunities. As part of this evaluation, hotel shelter clients were asked about the county's cultural responsiveness in the development of the hotel shelter and respite programs.

Some people expressed that having a diverse workforce is very helpful. Clients also thought it was important to have shelter staff who understand and are respectful to the client's life experiences. A few clients suggested that staff should take time to build trust with clients to inspire conversations about their cultural needs. Some staff are engaging with clients around their cultural needs, as one client from rural Minnesota expressed, "I feel more accepted here than in my own community." These experiences of connecting with staff may depend entirely on the employee's engagement style and not a clearly defined standard operating procedures created to address a client's cultural needs.

Most people expressed that their expectation of the service system and county staff was to only resolve their housing crisis. As one client expressed, "I was not expecting a cultural response from the county" and another echoed, "They (staff) have never asked, I don't think the system is set up that way; it's set up for general questions." Others commented that they chose not to engage staff on such personal matters, or they were focused on accessing services to resolve their housing crisis and didn't consider it as a priority. These findings indicate that there may be a disconnect between the county's racial equity goals of providing culturally relevant services and operationalizing these goals in a manner that clients understand.

Feedback on Respite

Seven of the 49 people interviewed stayed at the county respite facility, most stayed at Boys Totem Town (BTT), and a couple stayed at Mary Hall. All the people who stayed in respite were male and over half identify as Black, while others identify as multiracial or White. Their ages ranged from 33 to 65 years old.

"Respite was weird psychologically because it was a correctional facility and there were no locks on the door. But they took good care of us. It was cool because I knew many of the staff from Mary Hall."

All the respite clients remarked that they felt safe and supported in their recovery. While there was concern about using shared bathrooms, they were pleased with the wellness checks and room service that staff provided. A few residents commented that BTT felt uncomfortable because of its institutional environment. Table 25 summarizes the feedback clients shared about their experience at respite.

Table 25: Summary of feedback on Mary Hall and Boys Totem Town as Respite Facilities

Concerns	Positive Feedback
Boys Totem Town was like a jail.	Liked that they already knew some of staff at BTT, because they were at Mary Hall before
Concerned about congregate living and shared bathrooms; some conflict with other residents.	Felt safe in Respite
It was psychologically stressful. BTT felt like a correctional facility environment.	Limited resident capacity; room service; staff wellness checks.
Miscommunication on diagnosis; unclear coordination between respite and shelter.	Safe; staff were supportive

Unsheltered Response

In January 2020, it was estimated that 306 single adults in Ramsey County were sleeping in unsheltered locations ([Point-in-Time count](#)). This number increased in late March 2020 when the fear of COVID-19 drove people out of crowded congregate shelters and into places not meant for human habitation, such as: encampments, public transit, vehicles and other and public or private spaces. An executive order preventing cities from clearing or managing the growth of encampments also influenced the high number of people residing in camps in Saint Paul neighborhoods and the surrounding suburbs.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, county staff convened with homeless street outreach providers and a mobile health care program to respond to the needs of the unsheltered population. One element of this design was to coordinate existing county departments, City of Saint Paul and non-profit organizations to assist in mitigating the potential for the spread of COVID-19.

- Street Outreach: provided updates on public health guidelines and assisted with referring clients into emergency shelter programs.
- Ramsey County Sheriff's Department: provided 150-250 meals daily and transportation to Catholic Charities Opportunity Center.
- City of Saint Paul: environmental waste management, mobile restrooms and opening city park space to reduce encampment capacity for social distancing purposes.
- Ramsey County Mental Health Crisis: assisted in providing support for people at three encampment closures and remained on-call to support any further de-population efforts where people were sleeping unsheltered.

Street outreach staff expressed that they faced two major barriers with the development of the hotel shelter program. First, with the new 24-hour shelter program with services, Ramsey County created a formal intake process that did not depend on a lottery system. While this was an improvement, the policies and practices that guided this process created unintended barriers to unsheltered people accessing the hotel shelter program. The policy required people to successfully stay in emergency shelter for seven days prior to be eligible for the hotel shelter program. Second, housing providers began working directly with the hotel program to secure housing for hotel clients and bypassed people who were on the Coordinated Entry Priority List for housing placement, which includes people who are unsheltered that have been waiting for housing. This shift in policy and practice impacted the unsheltered population and their outreach providers at the beginning of the pandemic leaving them out of valuable opportunities for 24-hour shelter and permanent housing. By mid-summer these concerns were resolved. Street outreach staff reported that between December 2020 through February 2021, 239 unsheltered clients were referred into the hotel shelter program (People, Inc., 2021).

Discussion

In just over seven months, Ramsey County worked with community partners to shelter nearly 700 people in 24 hour a day facilities (1,100 in first 12 months) at local hotels (starting with Double Tree, and Intercontinental Hotel, and moving to Best Western Como Park and Best Western Capitol Ridge), Catholic Charities Mary Hall, Luther Seminary, and the former Bethesda Hospital. The county also maintained a COVID-19 respite facility, provided support to unsheltered providers, and offered many clients wrap around services, including housing, benefits, and social services.

Who experienced homelessness during COVID?

The clients entering the hotel and respite shelters before December 2020 and staying at least seven days matched the racial composition of the overall homeless single adult population from January 2020. However, the hotel shelters operate in a county-wide environment where the homeless population has a huge disparity by race relative to the general population. African Americans comprised the biggest proportion of the shelter population at 47% far higher than the estimated 13% of the total Ramsey County population. While Whites are a slightly higher proportion of the hotel and respite shelters at 39% compared to 35% of all homeless singles, the general county-wide percentage is far higher at 67%.

The hotel shelter client population deviated from the homeless population of single adults in January 2020 in that the hotel shelters served a higher proportion of females (33% of hotel shelters compared to 24% of homeless singles). Two factors may have impacted this overrepresentation of females in the hotel shelter system. First, female clients from the Catholic Charities shelter were moved into the hotel shelter program to create more capacity for males at that facility. Second, there was a shortage of shelter beds for females prior to the pandemic. The hotel shelters aimed at not only sheltering clients from Catholic Charities, but also expanding the number of beds to meet the need of female clients.

How well was Ramsey County able to prevent exits to homelessness and support stability among clients that were in temporary shelters during the COVID-19 response?

The program was successful in providing stable shelter and permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. It provided 24-hour shelter for hundreds of people for months. In mid-December the program added 170 beds by opening the Bethesda and Luther Seminary shelters. This ensured there was a bed available to anyone experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Despite the limitations of COVID-19, the efforts to house people were more successful than anticipated. The 176 clients (over one-fourth of those in a hotel shelter before December) entered a permanent housing program after first their first entry, much higher than the goal of 100. Given that some clients have not yet exited by February 2021 and that one-third of exits were discharged for various rule violations and behavioral problems, a significant portion of the hotel and respite clients were therefore less amenable to wrap-around services and planning for their discharge planning. Based on reports from housing referral staff, many seniors entered permanent housing at nursing homes, assisted living, and subsidized senior housing.

An important part of this success were strategic partnerships with housing providers, an increase in Housing Choice Section 8 vouchers from the Public Housing Administrations, and additional resources from the Housing Support Program. Housing Support direct referrals from Coordinated Entry worked with these new resources to quickly move clients out of the hotel shelter and into permanent housing. There are limits to this success though, since vouchers and housing that is affordable for the hotel shelter population are in short supply or not available at all.

Housing Choice Vouchers

Ramsey County partnered with Saint Paul Housing and the Metropolitan Housing and Redevelopment Authority (Metro HRA) to connect eligible clients to 39 Housing Choice Section 8 Vouchers. Housing Choice Vouchers allow people with disabilities to pay only 30% of their income towards housing. One eligibility requirement of the HUD program is that people over the age of 62 are not eligible for the voucher. This did have an impact to those who might have been able to find housing except for that they were over the age limit. For those that were eligible, the targeted population has Supplemental Security Income and case management to help them find housing. Of those who received the voucher, 16 successfully found housing, and 10 are still looking for housing. The remaining found another housing option or left the hotel program before completing the application process.

Several documents are required before someone can be approved for a voucher or subsidized housing. The county partnered with DHS Social Security Advocacy team and the county navigator team for assistance with providing verifications of benefit and income information required by state and federal housing programs. Even with DHS and Ramsey County verifications, there were still landlords who will only accept Social Security (both Social Security Income and Supplemental Security Income) verifications from the Social Security Administration office. This has been an unnecessary barrier for clients because DHS and Ramsey County have access to systems that can verify Social Security income. Requiring a specific document from SSA has been difficult and as a result people with disabilities are being turned down for housing opportunities for which they would have been eligible.

Housing Support

Housing Support was used in two distinct ways in the hotel shelter program. It was used to help pay for room and board while the client was in the hotel and it was one of the housing programs people used to pay for rent. To help leverage funding, the County trained navigators on how to complete Housing Support applications with eligible clients. From June to December 2020, up to 185 clients were approved for Housing Support bringing an additional \$475,000 to our programs. Connecting to Housing Support in the hotel also helped clients connect to other benefit programs, such as SNAP and GA.

Over half of those who found housing at exit utilized the Long-term Homeless Housing Support program. Clients targeted for the program met the definition of Long-term Homelessness, had no income or GA, and had completed Coordinated Entry assessments. A key to success was direct referrals from Coordinated Entry to Housing Support providers immediately after assessment was completed. This new approach to referrals improved the process for clients by decreasing the time they were waiting for housing. The intentional referral model helped housing case managers start the engagement and housing search process right away. They then partnered with navigators who helped complete required documentation. Both Housing Support programs are dependent on having a Qualified Professional sign an eligibility form for clients. The hotel shelter programs need embedded Qualified Professionals who can sign the form quickly so that benefits are not delayed.

Elder Housing Program – Catholic Charities

Catholic Charities' Homeless Elders program provides case management services to those aged 60 and older who are experiencing homelessness. The team provides support to hotel guests ages 60 and older, providing resources and consultation during office hours, as well as providing housing case management services to several guests. The team has moved 28 individuals out of the hotel and into housing and is working on housing with an additional 14 currently. The guests who moved out moved to the following destinations:

- site-based subsidized housing (14),
- market rate housing (6),
- community with voucher (4), and
- assisted living (4).

The Homeless Elders team uses a person-centered approach when working with clients, working with them each as an individual to work through the barriers they may have to housing. The team was able to be on site in-person from the beginning of the program as well, which helped build relationships and work through the barriers, including but not limited to: eviction history, rent owed to former landlords, criminal history, and red tape associated with many housing programs. They continue to support the program by having staff on site four days per week.

There were additional partners who helped clients find housing in the community. Agencies include the Veteran Services Office, RUSH, Outside-in, and Housing Stabilization Service providers. Ramsey County Planners, hotel staff, and community partners meet weekly to review cases and develop housing plans. Navigators helped community partners complete paperwork and set up appointments. Community partners helped clients find housing, shared resources, and provided their expertise during case consults.

Were clients able to access wrap-around services while in temporary shelter?

Providing services on-site was an effective and welcome approach at the hotel shelters. It was straightforward for the clients and it was easier for providers to connect with them. Ramsey County and its partners were successful in providing some wrap-around services, including financial benefits and social services, to hotel shelter clients.

Benefit navigators were key to this success by acting as guides for clients as they traverse the systems. Based on the approvals, including renewals, for public assistance and entries into housing, clients were able to access wrap-around services while in shelter. About 500 of the 648 clients in the group evaluated had their benefits either renewed or restarted if they were not eligible at the time of their first entry, and two-fifths of those without benefits obtained new approvals. The new benefits were predominantly food assistance and General Assistance.

However, very few were on Medical Assistance at the time of entry (35) and only nine became newly eligible after their first entry into the hotel or respite shelters. Since Medical Assistance determines health and chronic conditions relevant to eligibility to housing programs and other assistance, extremely few improved during or after entry into the hotel and respite shelters. This clearly is a place to explore and expand access.

Meetings with Social Security Advocacy specialists were also an important element to navigating the application process for many clients. Social Security Income and Supplemental Security Income for people with disabilities have the potential to be important benefits for increasing client income, providing a more predictable funds and opportunities for housing stability. Starting in January, Ramsey County coordinated with a Social Security Advocacy agency to meet with clients in the hotel. This has helped to connect clients who would be eligible for Social Security and Supplemental Security Income but need additional assistance to complete an application. It also helps clients who are approved for GA and/or Housing Support and are required to apply for Social Security within 30 days or risk losing benefits. The number of those referred to Social Security Advocacy agencies are high, and the waiting list is long. Eligible clients need more time than the required 30 days to have an opportunity to complete a successful application with an advocacy agency.

Mental health services were among the many services that were provided formally and, on an *ad-hoc* basis, at the hotel shelter sites. So, while the formal records indicate that 24% of clients were open with Ramsey County mental health Targeted Case Management or received crisis or stabilization services, many more were likely served by *ad-hoc* efforts and informal partnerships. Clients would benefit from a stronger and more regular presence of social services, such as mental and chemical health.

How well was Ramsey County able to support people who are unsheltered during the COVID response?

While Ramsey County was creating and staffing an infrastructure to shelter hundreds of people who needed to leave established shelters for social distancing purposes, private community-based agencies were coordinating efforts to support people experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Outreach workers from People, Inc. and RADIAS Health partnered with public and private partners to provide public health guidance and services, masks, hand sanitizer, toilet and hand-washing stations, access to meals, transportation, and connections to services and shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020.

Ramsey County coordinated meetings among the unsheltered partners throughout the year. Communications and meeting frequency met the needs of community partners supporting for the unsheltered. Ramsey County's success on de-populating established shelters did create barriers for unsheltered people. With the new 24-hour shelter program with services, Ramsey County created a formal intake process that did not depend on a lottery system. Unfortunately, the policies and practices that guided this process created barriers, such as requiring people to stay in emergency shelter for seven days prior to being referred into the hotel shelter program. There are people in the unsheltered population who avoid emergency shelter due having very traumatic experiences in shelter, congregate living can cause psychological strain, and rules may limit a person sense of freedom.

By early summer, efforts were made to ensure the safety of the unsheltered population due to civil unrest, this included developing a process for easier access to the hotel shelter program. As encampments began to increase, Ramsey County coordinated with the City of Saint Paul and community partners to further improve the process. Between December 2020 and February 2021 outreach providers completed 239 referrals into the hotel shelter program (People, Inc., 2021).

Who used the respite facility? To what extent was COVID-19 testing available for homeless clients at the respite facility

Two hundred and seventy-six people stayed in the COVID-19 respite in 2020. Client numbers were low most of the year but peaked in April and November. Three quarters of clients identified as White (42%) and Black or African American (34%). Black or African American clients were underrepresented in respite compared to the overall homeless population among single adults, and American Indians were overrepresented at 10% of respite. Only 186 people were recorded as symptomatic during their time in respite. Over three-quarters of all people staying in respite who had symptoms of COVID-19 were tested. While the staff were not able to test all symptomatic clients as they had aimed to do, they were able to most of the clients.

Are hotel shelter clients better off?

Evaluators were tasked with answering the question: are people better off as a result of Ramsey County's efforts to support the homeless population during the COVID-19 pandemic? To understand the depth of this question, it's best to step back and imagine yourself sitting in a large overcrowded homeless shelter with all of your worldly possessions stuffed into a backpack, while hearing the news about COVID-19 and the rapid spread of this potentially fatal airborne virus.

Hotel shelter clients were asked, what they were worried about when they first heard of the COVID-19 pandemic? Most of the interviewees discussed fears revolving around living in crowded emergency shelters, sleeping outside, job loss, family, personal health, loss of social network, and loss of resources due to organizations shuttering their doors as a result of the State of Minnesota lockdown orders. People were very fearful and literally thinking about the fundamental human instincts for survival such as: health, safety, food and sanitary conditions.

Oftentimes, when thinking about the homeless population, our natural instinct is to say, “We need to get them housing” or discuss the broad menu of wrap-around services that are needed in their lives. These are very important needs to resolve a homelessness, although these are system-level measures that only lead to assumptions of determining if someone is better off.

To answer this question, we heard how people were feeling when they first heard about the COVID-19 and how they are feeling after entering into the temporary hotel and respite programs. As we learned, people were not feeling safe and their primary concern was to get to a safe place where they could resume working with providers on health care, housing, employment, and get their basic needs met or start receiving new services.

So, are people better off as a result of the implementation of the hotel shelter program? Eighty-six percent of interviewees indicated that their overall satisfaction rating as very good, 14% felt somewhat satisfied, and no client interviewed for this evaluation indicated a less than satisfied rating. In addition, 176 clients placed in permanent housing, surpassing the stated goal of 100, and high numbers of clients secured new or renewed financial benefits, although not for Medical Assistance. This evaluation indicates that residents who are experiencing homelessness are better off as a result of Ramsey County’s efforts in the development of new hotel shelters, supporting the unsheltered population, providing COVID-19 safety information, personal protective equipment, and providing supportive services so people can resolve their housing crisis.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

This evaluation identified several opportunities that, if pursued, would benefit the well-being and stability of people experiencing homelessness:

- **Facilitate the creation of new affordable units, supportive housing units, and advocate for more Housing Choice vouchers** throughout the county. Single adults are interested in efficiency and one-bedroom apartments.
- **Maintain a 24-hour shelter with individual rooms. Assign staff to work on housing and services.** Benefit Navigators should meet with people seven to 10 days after entry into the program to start the benefit application process.
- **Expand on-site services at shelters and add mental and chemical health services.** Consider a specialized shelter or wing at a shelter that focuses on clients with higher level needs.
- **Partner with Workforce Solutions to provide employment services** at shelter sites. Many people are looking for work or are underemployed. Develop work from home options for this population.
- **Develop housing programs to help people who are working, receiving unemployment, Supplemental Security Income, or need financial support only.** Metro HRA and Saint Paul Public Housing Authority could contribute to this solution by increasing the Housing Choice Section 8 Vouchers available for this group.
- **Advocate for an increase in housing vouchers for those who over the age of 62** to align with the need.

- **Continue the strategic use of Housing Support** to bring in more funding for the shelter program and exit people into housing through Coordinated Entry direct referral. The following improvements are also recommended to improve the process:
 - Identify a Qualified Professional who can sign the Professional Statement of Need quickly, which is key to a successful HSS application. The application cannot be submitted to DHS without a completed form. Consider using this model for specific populations, which could include shelter and homeless outreach programs.
 - Encourage DHS to increase their capacity to process more HSS applications. HSS is a great opportunity for people with disabling conditions, and without case management, to receive help to find housing.
- **Greatly increase the number of people on Medical Assistance.** Only 6% of clients were on Medical Assistance (MA). Deploying Financial Assistance Services staff to be on-site at the hotel shelter programs will help clients apply for MA. It promotes client well-being and expands their access to other services. For instance, increasing the number of people on MA will open access to Stabilization Services and some services connected to MnChoices. Navigators are unable to refer individuals to HSS until they are approved for Medical Assistance. This can delay access to HSS by weeks.
- **Create a strategy to increase access to all benefits.** The strategy could include:
 - Connect clients to Housing Support, this will help to increase the number of those who access SNAP, GA, and other housing programs. Dedicate Financial Workers to the hotel shelter program to process Housing Support applications to increase enrollment.
 - Review those who have been in the program the longest to see if they were able to access and maintain benefits.
 - Follow-up within six months to see if clients were able to maintain benefits and housing.
- **Streamline the income and benefit verifications** for subsidized housing programs. More support needed from MN Housing and HUD to reach out to housing programs as to what forms can be used as acceptable verifications.
- **Assign at least one planner to coordinate** the navigator staff and housing partners who are supporting clients in benefits and housing acquisition.

Long-term Recommendations

- **Prioritize data quality and timely data entry.** This impacts funding, planning, prioritizing services and housing, monitoring and the ability evaluate the system effectively.
- **Housing and wrap-around services need to be part of the design** of a shelter program. This will promote effective and efficient services for clients.
- **Examine the disconnect between Ramsey County advancing racial equity policies and the hotel shelter operations** to identify ways to promote a more culturally responsive service model. Examples include:
 - In the planning process, departments should consider who would be negatively impacted by an action and provide alternative options to ensure equity in service delivery.
 - Implement standard operating procedures and provide training for operations staff to ensure a consistent level of care for clients across shifts and locations.

- Work with staff, contractors, and providers to implement questions in the intake process that help them better understand the cultural needs of clients.
- **Measure client-level efforts to advance racial equity** in the homeless services system.
- **Develop an emergency crisis response plan specifically for unsheltered residents.**
- **Explore the Medical Assistance data** to understand why a low number of clients in the hotel shelter program were enrolled.
- **Implement an in-depth case review** to understand why the younger clients under 40 are entering housing at lower rates.

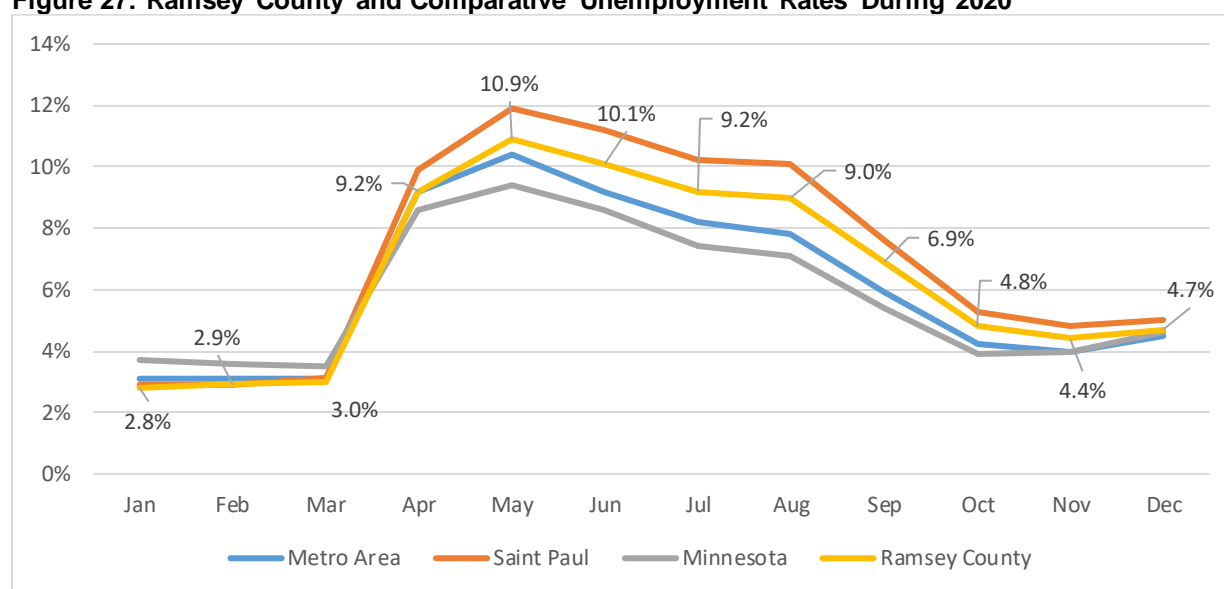
Workforce Development

Introduction

Workforce Solutions (WFS) received \$15 million, or 16% of the total direct allocation of federal funds through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. WFS developed a series of Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQs) to solicit requests from community agencies.

Agencies were asked to provide resources for programs targeting employment services for most severely COVID-19 impacted communities with the CARES allocations. The purpose of these contract opportunities was to address and help mitigate the economic and workforce gaps of Ramsey County residents most impacted. Ramsey County's economy was hurt more by COVID-19 than the state of Minnesota or the seven-county metro area. Figure 27 provides the unemployment rates from the beginning of 2020 through the end of the year.

Figure 27: Ramsey County and Comparative Unemployment Rates During 2020



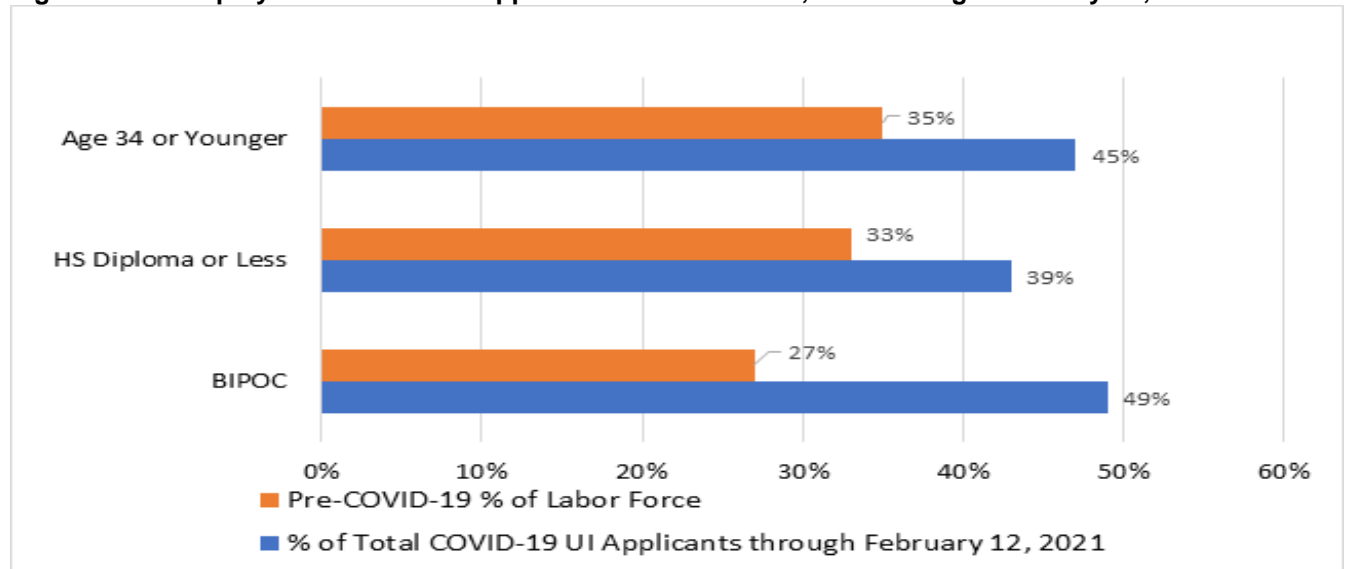
The unemployment rate in Ramsey County quickly moved from lower than the state or metro region during the first quarter of 2020 to a rate more than two percentage points higher than the state from May until September, when the rates began to narrow through the end of 2020. Although the narrowing unemployment rate is a positive for Ramsey County, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) attributes much of Ramsey County's lower unemployment rate to people leaving the labor force and no longer actively looking for work.

In partnerships with DEED, WFS's system of workforce services is offered through Minnesota CareerForce. WFS prepares job-seekers to be competitive in the local job market. Career development & coaching services include assessments, basic skill development, occupational skills training, job search support & placement. WFS helps people reach economic self-sufficiency, thus improving their and their families' quality of life.

The economic impact from COVID-19 disproportionately impacts black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) communities, as well as people with disabilities, veterans, and under-employed youth. People are experiencing reduction in hours and job loss. This, in turn, impacts security with regard to future job opportunities, increased risk to COVID due to health concerns, and lack of health insurance coverage. Organizations that focus on ending racial and other socioeconomic disparities were particularly

encouraged to apply. Figure 28 illustrates the disproportionate economic impacts of COVID-19 on BIPOC communities, younger residents and residents with lower educational achievement.

Figure 28: Unemployment Insurance Applicants from March 16, 2020 through February 12, 2021



The rates at which Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); high school diploma or less; and age 34 or younger residents experienced unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic stand out as the most disproportionately impacted cohorts. Those age 34 or younger applied for unemployment insurance at a rate about 10 percentage points higher than their pre-COVID-19 representation in the labor force. Residents with a high school diploma or less the applied for Unemployment Insurance at a rate about six percentage points higher than their pre-COVID-19 representation in the labor force. For BIPOC communities, the disproportionality is much wider. Prior to the pandemic, BIPOC residents represented about 27% of Ramsey County's labor force, but from early in the pandemic accounted for nearly 50% of applications for unemployment insurance. With this information, the county turned to the Workforce Solutions Department to administer CARES Workforce Development programming.

Workforce Solutions organized opportunities into two groups, each with three identified strategies for closing gaps resulting from COVID-19. These opportunities included those not normally provided through existing programs, current funding sources, or potentially new funding allocations. More than 120 proposals were submitted through the procurement process, with most being funded by early August to start delivering services.

Goals and key outcomes of the programs varied across the strategies, but all CARES funding was intended to close the gaps in services resulting from or exacerbated due to COVID-19. In accordance with the CARES Act funding requirements, all programming ended by December 30, 2020.

Several structures and projects engaged early in the pandemic to bring community voice to the County's decisions about how to use CARES dollars during the planning and delivery of CARES funded programming.

- **Workforce Innovation Board (WIB):** One of the most significant is the Ramsey County WIB which is made up of 51% businesses and has direct oversight over much of the work Workforce Solutions is responsible for as well as indirect oversight on other areas. The WIB stood up a one-year strategic plan including an Equity Committee just prior to the pandemic. In addition,

with the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the WIB established a new Workforce Recovery Task Force. Both groups took deep dives on the racial equity impacts of COVID-19 and are evolving throughout the pandemic.

- **Youth Works!:** Another area where WFS has deep community connections is around youth work. In the year leading up to the pandemic, WFS created a network of community partners to advise the development of programming work. This group quickly pivoted in response during COVID-19 to amplify community outreach efforts both to reach young people and also organizations that provide supports to them. This group also hosted virtual youth convenings to share information with youth and youth providers.
- **Ramsey County Workforce Ecosystem:** Ramsey County has a robust and diverse workforce ecosystem. It is the role of WFS to be in regular and collaborative contact with these organizations. Ongoing cultivation of relationships with these critical parts ensures that Ramsey County leads in being a convener and connector. Throughout the CARES process, WFS relied on that ecosystem to identify needs, provide program feedback and assist with pivots as needed.
- **Leveraging other organizations' events:** A variety of other organizations are hosting events with community and those events are being leveraged to enhance services. Some of the network of partners include: Youthprise, RightTrack Program, the Suburban Ramsey Family Collaborative, Eastside Funders, Sundance Family Foundation and more.
- **Existing program participants and families:** Leadership leaned on information gathered through previous engagement efforts and program evaluations to develop initiatives for the CARES dollars that fit with what the community needs and wants. The many efforts lean on previously documented information and results from existing participants who are primarily people of color.

WFS sought to achieve four primary goals with the development of CARES programming. Those goals align with Ramsey County's ongoing effort to attract, retain and support community partnerships, and are:

1. Ensure there are places of access, in person and virtual, for residents to connect with employment resources.
2. Work toward closing some of the tech gap for residents who lack technology and digital literacy.
3. Invest in community-based organizations including supporting the pivoting of more training opportunities online. The state also moved quickly on these efforts to ensure resources and programs are available to all residents whether they are enrolled in one of our programs or not.
4. Provide gap services for youth/young adults in partnership with community stakeholders

CARES strategies and target populations included the following:

- **Learn, Earn, Lead** - Partnering with community youth (ages 14-19 years) employment providers to pivot programming that would fill existing service gaps for at-risk youth to ensure they receive critical development opportunities during the summer despite COVID-19.
- **Young Adult Transition Program** - Providing culturally-specific quality summer or fall employment and early career transition services to young adults (ages 18-24 years) in Ramsey County impacted by COVID in the areas of: mentorship, financial literacy, leadership skills, entrepreneurship, healthy relationships, cultural identity, and wellness.
- **Generation Future: Youth Life Skills** - Providing services and training to youth (ages 16-19 years) in areas of workforce development, learning, and life skills. Career exploration and pathways (learning kits, virtual coaching, etc.)
- **Community CARES Employment Services** - Providing employment and career services targeting specific populations impacted by COVID-19 including justice-involved, seniors,

culturally specific, veterans, and people with disabilities. Funding was provided in the areas of curriculum, coaching, career tools, engagement, job placement, and training referrals.

- **Virtualization of Training** - Transformation of current workforce skill-building curriculum to digital platforms and providing those virtual training opportunities to residents most impacted by COVID-19.
- **Community Innovation and Inclusion Fund (CIIB)** - Open to non-profits or fiscally-sponsored organizations where the mission is rooted in the culture(s) and identity(ies) of individuals served and the services incorporate the values, traditions, and worldviews of BIPOC communities most impacted by COVID-19. Projects that promoted and accelerated racial healing, equity, and inclusion were particularly encouraged to apply for funding. These applicants were supported in a cohort model by the Center for Economic Inclusion (CEI).

Contract award amounts by strategy and organization are available at [Open Data Ramsey County](#).

Evaluation Questions

The CARES Projects Evaluations address three questions:

- Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES workforce development programming?
- Did the project achieve the outcomes the community was seeking?
- How can Ramsey County better attract, retain, and support community partners with county contracts?

Evaluation Methods

Several evaluation methods were used to answer the evaluation questions:

- Monthly progress reporting from community partners.
- Demographic reports of staff and residents served.
- Survey of program participants.
- Focus groups/listening sessions with community partners.
- Cohort feedback from organizations funded by the Community Inclusion and Innovation Fund (CIIF) with analysis from the Center for Economic Inclusion (CEI).

Program Reports from Community Partners

Data collected monthly from each contracted partner ensured that agencies are delivering what they'd agreed to deliver, and that agencies contracted receive the support and technical assistance necessary for their programs' success. WFS agency planners organized the monthly data into a database for monitoring and later evaluation purposes.

Vendor Focus Groups and Listening Sessions

Semi-structured focus group interviews called 'listening sessions' that were conducted over web conferencing platforms with program staff and administration representing various programs. These listening sessions each lasted for approximately two hours were held via Zoom in December 2020 and transcribed in January 2021.

Listening sessions were offered at varied times to accommodate schedules. Participants were asked to RSVP prior to each listening session. an attempt was made to keep the number of participants per session manageable (approximately 12 to 15 participants per session). A total of 36 partners attended one of the four scheduled reflection sessions with attendance ranging from five to 14 attendees.

The times and dates of the four listening/reflection sessions were:

- Monday, December 14, 2020, 4-6pm
- Friday, December 18, 2020, 1-3pm
- Monday, December 21, 2020, 2-4pm
- Tuesday, December 22, 2020, 9:30-11:30am

Questions between the four respondent groups were similar for each session but not identical and explore the main themes of the research questions identified above. Some respondents attended more than one session. Facilitation of the sessions was performed by Ramsey County evaluators who took notes and asked probing questions to illicit more response throughout each session.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary; each session lasted approximately two hours and were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were scheduled in advance and respondents were provided a copy of the interview questions so they could prepare responses before the meeting if they wished to. Copies of the questionnaires are provided in [Appendix B](#).

Interviews were transcribed with Otter transcription software and coded using Dedoose according to a code set developed by the research team prior to starting the analysis process. Three researchers participated in the coding process to enhance validity through comparison of analysis results. Finally, the results were organized into a formal Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations, to which both researchers contributed content; these data were combined with the quantitative data and organized into this report.

Participant Survey

A participant survey was conducted in December 2020 and January 2021. The survey was sent electronically to participants through an email from the organizations they received services from. Respondents were offered a \$10 Target gift card for completing the survey.

Surveys were provided in English, Hmong, Somali, and Spanish. The intent of the survey was to understand effectiveness of job counselor interactions. A total of 504 completed surveys are included in this analysis. Some respondents skipped some items, and other items had more than one option responses to reply. The survey questions are available in [Appendix B](#).

Limitations

Since we do not know the characteristics of the non-respondents, we cannot determine whether these responses represent the majority of program participants. The initial survey went out to respondents just before the new year and many of the responses came in only after several reminders were sent out to program participant by the program staff and administrators. We do not know what the motivations were of those who did finally respond, compared to the non-respondents. Therefore, these findings may or may not be reflective of most of those who received workforce services during the COVID-19 pandemic from WFS and CARES Act-funded programs.

The survey sample may therefore not be reflective of the entire group of those receiving the TechPak or other workforce development services.

Another limitation is that the qualitative data from the listening sessions included information from individuals who participated in more than one session. These individuals may have voiced the same concern or issue more than one time. There was no way to notate that possible duplication of voice. The qualitative data, therefore, cannot be assumed to be unduplicated. Many of the participants in

focus groups & listening sessions may have also been motivated to participate with hopes that their participation may increase the likelihood of future funding opportunities through Ramsey County.

Results

Partner Monthly Reports

Characteristics of People Served

This section provides demographic characteristics of people served, COVID-19 impacts, and outcomes of program participants as reported by partner organizations across six contracted Workforce Solutions (WFS) program groupings. There were a variety of ways in which this information was collected by each of the programs. Therefore, there may be some discrepancies in the totals. Program totals may include duplicates where individuals enrolled in multiple programs.

About 5,300 people were served across all programs. As shown in Table 26, 30% were served through Generation Future, 18% through Young Adult Transitions, 17% through Community Cares, 13% through CIIF, 12% through Learn Earn Lead, and 9% through Virtualization. The majority across nearly all programs were female, ranging from 49% to 56%.

Participants tended to be younger, overall, which is not surprising considering multiple programs targeted youth. Sixty-seven percent (3,566 people) of participants were ages 16 to 24 years and 15% (774 people) were ages 25 to 34 years. Generation Future, Learn, Earn, Lead, and Young Adult Transitions were aimed at younger people; only 1% of Learn, Earn, Lead and Young Adult Transitions participants were over age 34 and 4% of Generation Future were over age 34. CIIF, Community Cares, and Virtualization were more likely to serve older people with between 28% to 41% of participants older than age 34.

Overall, 42% of participants identified as Black or African American (2,210 people) and 24% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander (1,293 people). Eight percent identified as White, 2% as American Indian, and 4% as multiracial. Ten percent reported Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity. This varied by program. Black participants made up more than half of participants in CIIF, Learn, Earn, Lead, and Young Adult Transitions; while Asian people made up 68% of Virtualization participants.

Table 26: Contracted Partner Participant Demographics

	CIIF	Community Cares	Generation Future	Learn Earn Lead	Virtualization	Young Adult Transitions
Total*	688	907	1,612	647	502	959
Percent of Total Served	12.9%	17.1%	30.3%	12.2%	9.4%	18.0%
Gender						
Female	51.7%	49.3%	55.9%	54.3%	56.4%	56.2%
Male	46.1%	50.4%	42.9%	45.0%	42.6%	41.8%
Non-binary	1.9%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%
No Answer	0.1%	0.3%	0.1%	0.8%	0.6%	0.4%
Age Groups						
16 – 24	41.0%	17.0%	91.4%	96.9%	27.1%	93.2%
25 – 34	57.5%	37.8%	2.6%	0.8%	30.7%	4.3%
35 – 44	15.6%	16.5%	3.4%	1.1%	18.1%	0.7%
45 – 54	8.1%	11.8%	3.4%	1.1%	9.8%	0.0%
55 and older	4.2%	9.6%	0.1%	0.0%	13.5%	0.0%
No Answer	0.7%	3.4%	0.0%	0.2%	0.8%	0.0%
Race/Ethnicity						
Hispanic/Latinx	9.3%	1.3%	17.9%	7.0%	1.6%	11.1%
American Indian	4.4%	0.3%	1.5%	1.7%	0.2%	2.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	18.8%	7.5%	24.9%	24.9%	68.1%	20.0%
Black	55.7%	25.8%	40.6%	53.5%	18.9%	51.8%
White	4.1%	4.5%	8.9%	11.0%	5.4%	10.1%
Multiple Races	6.4%	0.9%	5.2%	3.7%	2.8%	4.1%
No Answer	2.2%	0.6%	1.0%	0.2%	3.0%	0.8%

* Due to minor discrepancies in data reporting, totals may not equal 100%.

COVID-19 Impacts and Reported Program Outcomes

Program participants were asked what impact COVID-19 has had on their employment. About one-third reported a change or loss of household income, 19% were uncertain about the future of their industry, 18% experienced job loss, and 13% had reduced hours. Thirty-eight percent reported some other barrier due to COVID-19. Participants could report as many as applied, so totals exceed 100%.

Respondents were asked what services they received by category as part of their participation in the program. They could select more than one option. The most often selected services, by order of occurrence were:

1. Education or training (67%)
2. Post-secondary, exploration, career guidance and planning activities (45%)
3. Support services (43%)
4. Mentoring activities (37%)
5. Financial support or activities (wages/stipends) (30%)
6. Community involvement and/or leadership development (24%)

Partner organizations were also asked to report outcomes associated with participation. These are reported by organizations and may not have a causal relationship with the services received. This evaluation did not examine whether outcomes were due to the intervention.

Fourteen of participants earned an education credential or a certificate while participating and 13% participants reported that they found employment. Nine percent entered an educational program, 8% saw increased work hours, and 4% reported increased wages. (Table 27)

Table 27: Workforce Program Participant COVID-19 Impacts, Services, and Outcomes

	CIIF	Community Cares	Generation Future	Learn Earn Lead	Virtualization	Young Adult Transitions
Total	688	907	1612	647	502	959
COVID-19's Impact on Employment						
Job Loss	31.3%	2.5%	15.1%	21.9%	17.3%	22.9%
Reduced Hours	31.8%	2.6%	9.5%	21.8%	10.6%	11.8%
Change or Loss of Household Income	53.2%	2.8%	23.3%	50.4%	54.4%	29.4%
Future Uncertainty in Industry	30.2%	5.7%	7.1%	32.1%	60.8%	14.5%
Other Barriers	27.2%	29.7%	42.3%	39.4%	61.4%	32.8%
Services Received						
Education or Training	60.2%	12.8%	86.4%	87.3%	98.8%	60.3%
Financial Support for Work	28.8%	1.1%	40.7%	69.2%	16.3%	22.5%
Community Involvement/Leadership Development	31.1%	1.7%	14.4%	82.7%	7.2%	25.2%
Post-Second Education Exploration, Guidance, Support	38.1%	9.7%	62.2%	52.2%	67.9%	37.0%
Mentoring	40.0%	2.9%	24.1%	85.2%	65.9%	41.6%
Support Services	42.0%	19.6%	46.3%	36.5%	66.7%	52.7%
Self-Reported Outcomes*						
Found Employment	12.1%	N/A	2.2%	6.0%	16.9%	4.6%
Increased Wages in Current Job	1.7%	N/A	0.1%	9.9%	0.0%	0.1%
Increased Hours of Employment	1.5%	N/A	2.9%	9.1%	0.2%	7.2%
Earned a Credential	1.3%	N/A	0.8%	2.0%	4.2%	0.9%
Earned a Certificate	6.0%	N/A	3.7%	2.3%	19.7%	3.4%
Entered Education Program	16.3%	N/A	2.2%	1.4%	7.4%	0.6%

**Community CARES outcomes were not collected as program participants could come and go from the career labs without reporting how their circumstances changed.*

TechPak Recipient Results from Partner Monthly Reports

TechPak, a partnership between Tech Dump, PCs for People, Literacy Minnesota, Saint Paul Public Library, and Ramsey County, brought computers, internet and digital literacy training into the homes of Ramsey County residents who have experienced economic impacts due to COVID-19. Most participants worked closely with a Digital Literacy Navigator who gave individual support with required digital literacy classes. Workforce training, job referrals and other employment resources were offered.

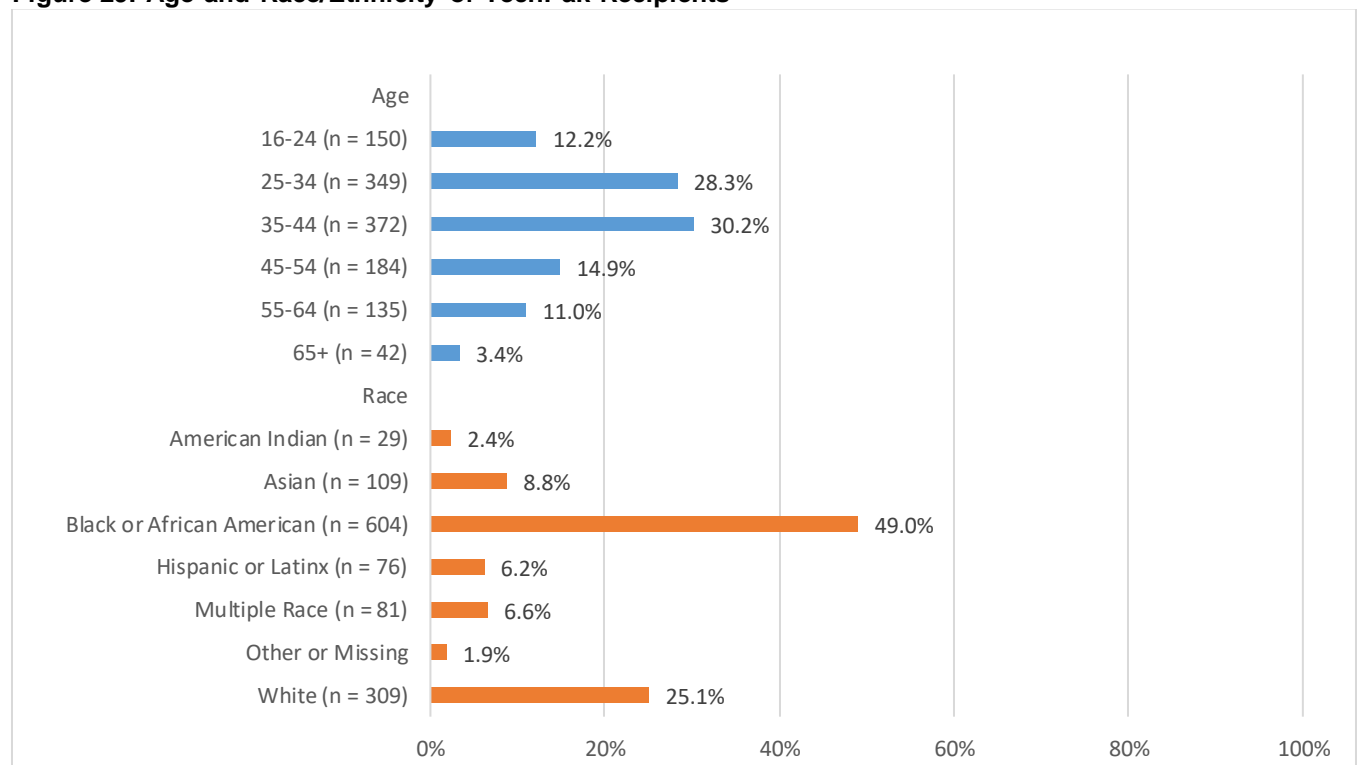
TechPak distribution was prioritized to residents with the most significant technological barriers and took place through Community Career Labs, and the following community partners: Ain Dah Yung Center, American Indian Family Center, Face to Face, Hmong American Partnership, JK Movement, Literacy Minnesota, Project Restore Minnesota, and Truce Center.

More information about TechPak can be found at www.ramseycounty.us/TechPak, including a social return on investment analysis conducted by Ecotone Analytics. That analysis projected that for each dollar of investment in TechPaks, \$2.40 is returned in social capital. This next section reports demographics and COVID-19 impacts of TechPak recipients, who may have also received other workforce services in addition to the TechPak.

Nearly half of the TechPak recipients reported their race as Black. White was the next most commonly reported race at 25%, and all other races and ethnicities were reported at less than 10% each. WFS continued to monitor the TechPak distribution process and recognizing a gap with the American Indian Community, provided 150 units directly to the American Indian Family Center (AIFC) as part of their workforce contract. AIFC then offered the pickup and digital literacy supports at their location.

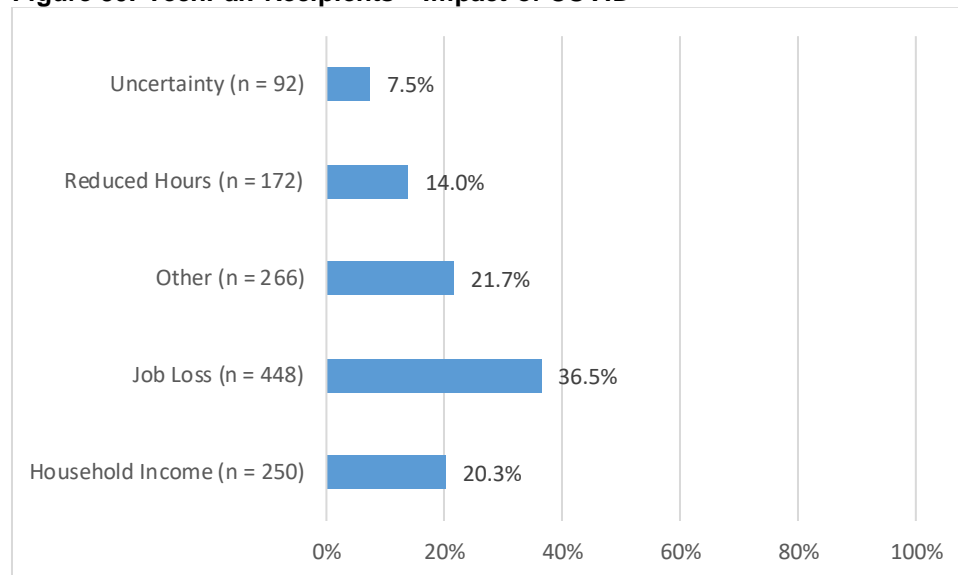
The TechPak recipients tended to be older than overall workforce programming participants; 60% were aged 35 years or older compared to 15% of all other programs. (Figure 29)

Figure 29: Age and Race/Ethnicity of TechPak Recipients



As show in Figure 30, 37% of TechPak recipients reported COVID-19 related job loss and 20% reported lowered household income. Recipients also experienced reduced work hours (14%), uncertainty about the future of their industry (8%), and other economic impacts (22%).

Figure 30: TechPak Recipients - Impact of COVID



Participant Survey Results

Surveys were sent electronically by program partner organizations to program participants. A total of 504 surveys were completed. Some respondents did not answer every question, so totals for each question vary.

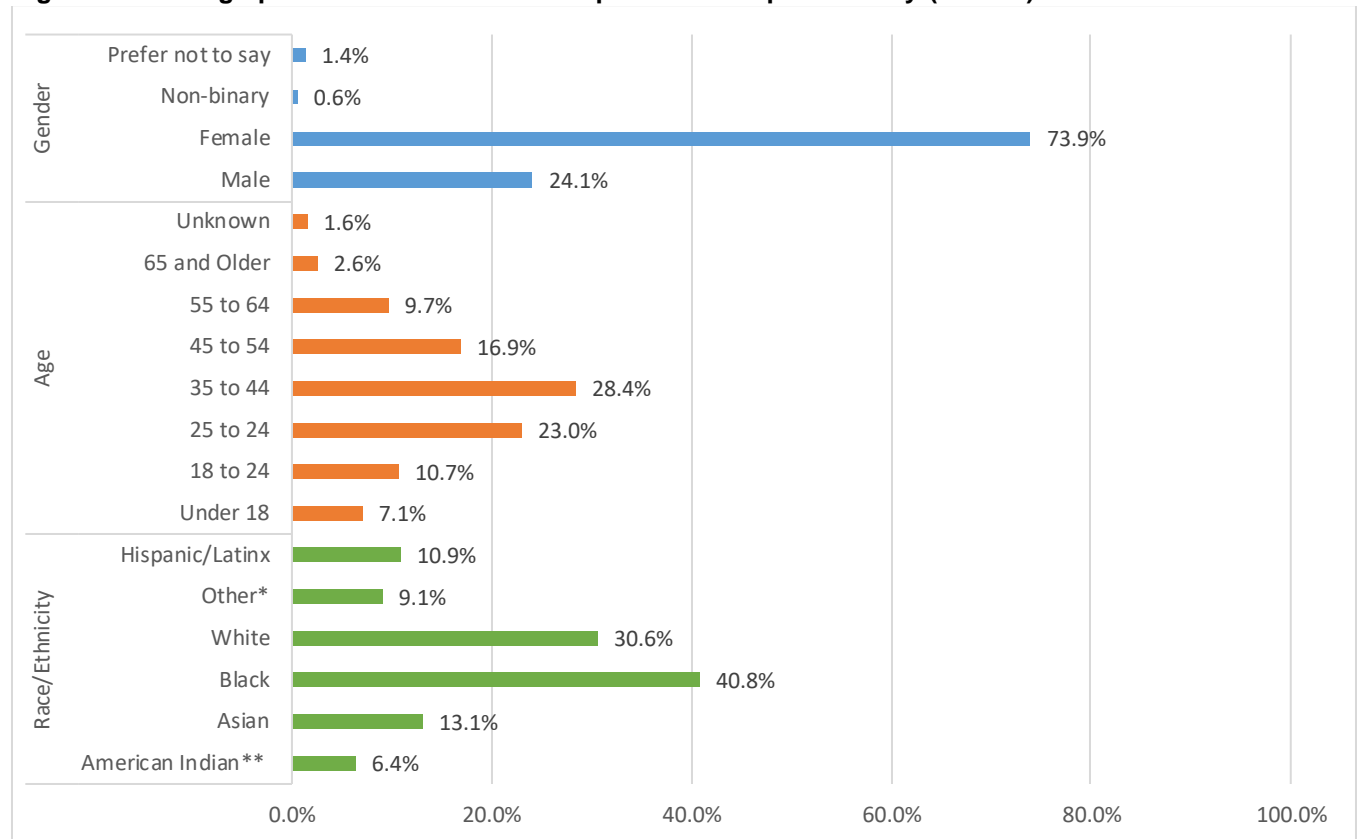
Respondent Demographics

Of the 504 respondents, African Americans made up 41% of respondents, Whites made up 31%, Asians made up 13%, American Indians made up 6%, and other or not reported made up 9%. Ethnicity, asked as a separate question, showed that 11% of respondents were Hispanic/Latinx.

More than half of the survey respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44. Another 18% were 24 years old or younger and another 17% were 45 to 54 years old. About 12% were age 55 or older at the time of the survey with more than 98% of respondents providing their age range.

Respondents were asked to indicate either male, female, non-binary/gender conforming/third gender, or prefer to self-describe as their response. Three hundred and sixty-five respondents (74%) indicated female, one hundred and nineteen respondents (24%) indicated male, seven (1%) indicated that they prefer to self-describe their gender. (Figure 31)

Figure 31: Demographics of Workforce Development Participant Survey (n = 504)



*Total number of respondents was 504; each respondent selected all that applied. Other includes Pacific Islander, people of multiple races, and those who preferred not to answer.

**Each respondent selecting American Indian or Alaskan Native, even if they also selected another race, is reported as American Indian or Alaskan Native.

The household size ranged from zero to 12 individuals per household. The five that reported a household of zero may have been homeless or just did not enter the response correctly. The majority of household in the survey sample have between one and four individuals living in the household (including children and adults). Four households in the sample had 10 individuals, and one household had 12 individuals living in the household.

Services Received and Employment Status

Twenty-six percent of survey respondents first heard about the services used from a friend, family member, or neighbor followed by 18% from a Ramsey County staff person, 17% from a community organization, 10% school or college, and 14% from another source. Of those selecting “Other,” most cited community organizations (17), social media (14), email from a program (12) and an internet search, TV or a news outlet (10).

Table 28: How Respondent First Heard About Services

	Number	Percent
Total Respondents	502	99.6%
Friend/Family/Neighbor	131	26.1%
Ramsey County staff	91	18.1%
Community Organization	84	16.7%
School/College	51	10.2%
Ramsey County Website	141	28.1%
Other	70	13.9%
Cumulative Responses	568	

* Respondents could choose multiple options, so the cumulative percent exceeds 100%, but the total number of respondents (502) represent 99.6% of the total completing the survey.

When asked about their job status through the pandemic, about a third reported that they lost their job and were not currently working. Nearly 20% had worked throughout the pandemic, 15% said they had not worked since before the pandemic started, 14% lost their job during the pandemic but found another one, and 6% were not working at the start of the pandemic but found a job during the pandemic.

Table 29: Change in Employment Status

	Number	Percent
Total Respondents	501	99.4%
I have worked through the pandemic	99	19.8%
I lost my job and am not currently working	161	32.1%
I lost my job but have found another job.	70	14.0%
I did not have a job when the pandemic started, but I found a job during the pandemic	30	6.0%
I have not worked since before the pandemic.	74	14.8%
Other	67	13.4%

The largest percentage (83%) of survey respondents indicated that they received a TechPak, followed by 16% who participated in Virtual Training. Less than 10% of the respondents participated in either Youth or Young Adult programming (8%), Community CARES jobseeker services (6%), Community CARES Career Labs (4%), or Other programming (8%).

Table 30: Workforce Services Received

	Number	Percent
Total Respondents	498	98.8%
Youth or Young Adult programming	38	7.6%
Community CARES jobseeker services	29	5.8%
Community CARES Career Labs	18	3.6%
TechPak	415	83.3%
Virtual Training	80	16.1%
Other	41	8.2%
TOTAL Services Received by Respondents	621	

Sixty-two percent of respondents used their TechPak to search for a job, followed by 56% who used it for education, 47% who used it to find other essential services, 21% who used it to access health care,

like virtual doctor visits. Twenty percent reported that they used their TechPak to do their jobs. Twelve percent did not receive a TechPak, and three percent had received one but had not yet used it.

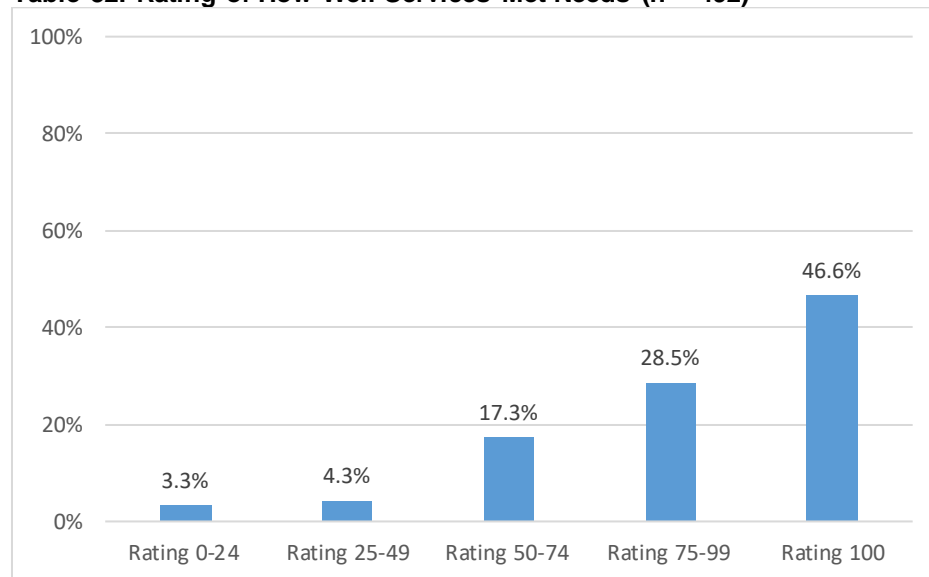
Table 31: TechPak Utilization

	Number	Percent
Total Respondents	499	99.0%
To search for a job	308	61.7%
To do my job	99	19.8%
For education	280	56.1%
For health care	105	21.0%
To find services (housing, food, cash assistance, transportation, childcare, clothing)	232	46.5%
Received a TechPak, but have not used it yet	17	3.4%
Did not receive a TechPak	60	12.0%
Other	34	6.8%
TOTAL TechPak Uses Recorded	1,135	

Perception of Services

Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of zero to 100 how well the services met their needs. The overall average rating was 84. Nearly half (47%) of survey respondents scored the services matching their needs a 100, the top score available. About 75% of respondents scored services matching needs at a 75 or higher, indicating a strong match between the services offered and the needs of those engaging in the services. Those rating the services match to their needs lower than a 50 totaled 8% of respondents. A total of 492 out of 504 respondents answered the question or 97.6%.

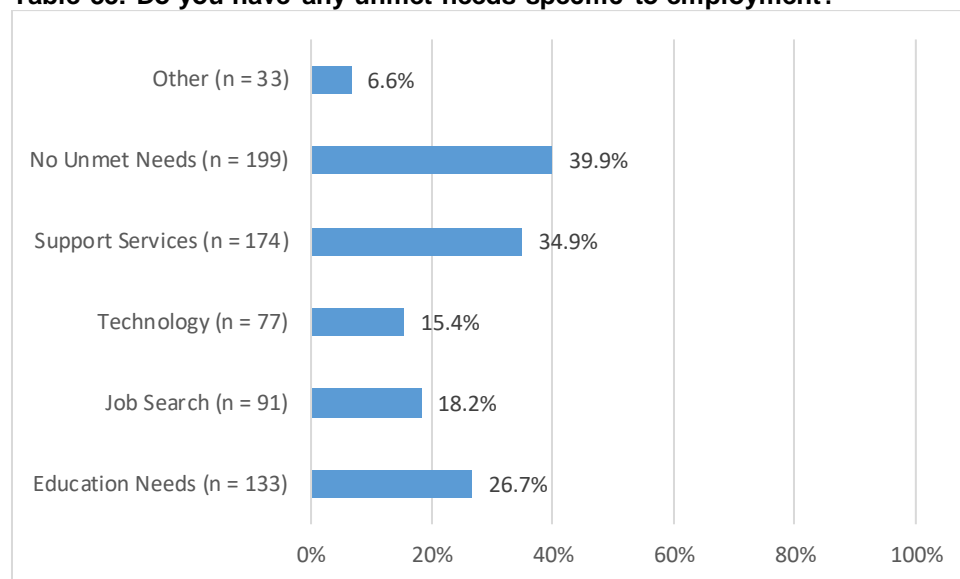
Table 32: Rating of How Well Services Met Needs (n = 492)



Respondents were asked to select all that apply to the question of unmet employment needs at the time of the survey. A total of 707 responses were provided by 499 respondents. Of those, about 40% reported no current unmet employment needs. About 35% reported support services as an unmet need, which are defined as housing, food assistance, cash assistance, childcare, clothing and transportation. An additional 27% reported education, 18% reported job search assistance and 15% reported technology as unmet needs at the time of the survey. The technology gap was filled at least in

part by about 83% of respondents receiving a TechPak. Those reporting other needs were offered the opportunity to explain. The other responses mostly focused on specific technology needs, including healthcare, personal protective equipment, and specific types of training.

Table 33: Do you have any unmet needs specific to employment?



Themes of Open-Ended Questions

When asked how the services they received will help them beyond 2020, respondents were given an open space to fill in narrative responses. A primary goal of the TechPaks and other Workforce Solutions' programming is aimed at assisting county residents in finding and maintaining gainful employment. In terms of finding, maintaining employment, or enhancing skills sets for future employment opportunities, respondents expressed much appreciation for the TechPak and enrollment in the program. This goal seems to have been met, and many open-ended comments made by respondents provide ample evidence of this.

Major themes from open-ended comments in the structured survey are displayed in the table below. The two open-ended questions included at the end of the survey, where most of the narrative responses were:

- How will the services you received help you beyond 2020?
- What else would you like us to know about services or resources you have used during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 34: WFS survey open-ended survey responses

Themes	Number of times mentioned	Percent
Total	206	
Employment Preparedness	91	44%
Educational Opportunities	39	19%
Accessing Basic Needs	38	18%
Safety, Security, Stability	26	13%
Future Plans and Recommendations	12	6%

Some of the more salient comments from survey respondents included the comments about how the TechPaks, in particular, improved their lives in many ways. This assists in answering one of our overarching questions related to whether or not Ramsey County residents are better off. This included not only enhanced abilities in finding employment, but also in accessing healthcare, education for themselves or their families, and accessing basic needs. These basic needs included such things being able to order food and medications online, pay electric, and water bills online, and stay connected to the larger community for psycho-social support.

Employment Preparedness

Some of those comments illustrating how the participation in the TechPak program helped them, include the following:

“It (the TechPak) has helped me prepare and understand working not only through a pandemic but helping me prepare for future jobs and opportunities for me.”

“It felt really good to have something to do, see other humans I don’t live with and enjoy the motivational speakers, right before the holidays. So, mentally my family enjoyed a happier me who felt proud to be able to provide for my family. I saved a lot of resources. I’m on the cusp of this new technology push due to my age and the classes helped familiarize me with that technology... with support. An important part of unemployment is the psychology behind it; depression and the factors that go with it. Who doesn’t need a pep talk after months of COVID, lack of a normal summer and impending holidays with more COVID. As someone on the spectrum, I like knowing my atypical voice is heard by a human in a department that could affect changes that are more inclusive for services to those on the spectrum.”

Several respondents indicated that they are learning new skills and/or earning new credentialing, certificates or degrees to make them more employable going forward, enhancing their existing job-seeking and job skills, starting businesses of their own:

“I am in the process of starting a small truffle/cookie/baked good business. I have found Ramsey County and Saint Paul Score offer a variety of helpful workshops and seminars that I am sure will be helpful with my endeavor.”

“Yes. I am at the point for preparing for exam. I hope to find a job with the QuickBooks skills that I have taken.”

“I had my resume updated so when I apply for jobs it will hopefully be a benefit,” and “This service helping us in many ways. I am using the PC for job searching, training, and improving my skills in different areas.”

“I work occasional contracts, business writing. This is work I must keep ‘finding’, as clients are generally not long-term. Being able to work from multiple locations, as I find space available, with the hotspot also received, helps me continue working at a level I can sustain.”

Educational Opportunities

Many respondents commented on their ability to start, continue or complete education for themselves or their family, especially assisting with their school-aged children. The TechPak enabled multiple respondents to access educational opportunities, including graduate education for some. Many indicated having been able to complete job skills trainings offered through DEED, complete online certificates, associate arts degrees, and bachelor's degrees:

"I will be able to use this computer to do my job and help my daughter with her distance learning when her computer glitches."

"The hot spot provided allows my children to do work remotely."

"I will be completing a degree and hopefully finding a stable job that works with my availability unless I can find childcare for my son with Cystic Fibrosis."

"My children have especially benefitted because they were able to have more computer time and resources which has lessened them from falling behind. It has relieved a lot of stress and services has definitely better prepared us as a family for the coming year."

Accessing Basic Needs

Numerous respondents indicated access to multiple other services, aside from employment and basic needs. Many noted how the TechPak helped across many areas of their and their families' lives. A surprising number of respondents indicated that having the TechPak allow them to "keep food on the table". Respondents used their internet access to find food shelves.

"As the new forms of internet access, my family is able to work successfully from home for the continuation of the pandemic and continue to build upon digital literacy skills that will help in future employment."

"And, internet access is vital for things like applying for services and the COVID vaccine. Helped us get back on our feet and helped us get new housing items, donated old items."

"The services I have used benefits me and my children in many ways. It helps me keep food on the table, helps me dedicate time to my children's growth instead of worrying about where our meals are coming from and how bills will be paid. It also opens the world of the internet to us by not limiting what we are able to do and view online due to mobile phone restrictions."

"The biggest thing I've been having issues with is finding enough healthy food for myself. This program has helped me so much by connecting me with food resources for my younger brother and I. I am more than grateful for the work everyone does to help us stay healthy at this time. I will continue to use your services for things such as job support as well as academic support. My counselor at Ramsey County workforce is amazing and I wouldn't trade her for anything else."

Safety, Security, Stability

Many survey respondents referred to an increased sense of safety, stability, and security for themselves and their families. A number of respondents commented on the ability that the participation in the TechPak program provided to them with regard to maintaining their connections with family, friends and religious/spiritual communities.

“Overall, I have been able to not only maintain but continue to advance my goals during the pandemic. It was challenging, but the support of the services I received provided a safety net and more, and knowing that you always have a kind, professional group to rely on allowed me to continue to take large strides toward the future I envision without fear of falling.”

“After stability of full-time employment, I will be using this to find a home and just keeping my options open and eyes open for the next best position or way to advance myself. Without the TechPak there will be many missed opportunities and that would make it unable to take a chance to change and have a better life. Thank you!”

“It allows us as a family to stay in the loop with the progression of society. I have helped my children (daughter/grandson) with their education. I have helped a community member access information. And empowered them to start using the internet to better their lives.”

“I will be able to continue my outreach work at church. I will continue to be able to check in on family members, especially the elderly family.”

Quite a few respondents indicated that having the TechPak allowed them to find COVID testing centers for themselves, their family and/or community members; to stay in regular communication with their health care providers; and to access resources in a no-contact, socially distanced way in order to keep themselves, and their families safer during the pandemic:

“It just allows me to find resources necessary during Covid.. Testing sites and now finding a Vaccination site. I was in a Lottery but wasn’t chosen and I wouldn’t have been able to find the resources without the device.”

“I am able to communicate with my doctor through email and messaging. Communicate with the pharmacist, and contact other resources as needed.”

Future Plans and Recommendations

Looking forward, some areas where respondents indicated that they would either need additional technical assistance and/or how to be able to utilize additional services moving forward and into the future; feedback areas for following up included the following:

“It helped set us up for a better future in these really tough times. It will continue to benefit our needs to survive and hopefully come out of poverty..”

“To have computer access from home will be so beneficial. Now I just have my phone. To have a large screen to view info will be very helpful.”

Workforce Solutions Contractors/Partners Focus Group Results

Participants' comments from the four listening sessions were categorized into major themes, based on the questions and probes which were asked during each of the four sessions. The most common themes were related to what the community wants or needs, future opportunities, partnerships, and what successful programming looks like. (Table 35)

Table 35: Themes from Listening Sessions

Theme	Number	Percent
What the community wants/needs	188	21%
Future opportunities	130	15%
Partners, partnering, partnerships	123	14%
Successful programming	105	12%
Contract process	63	7%
Technical assistance needs	57	6%
Coordination with others	56	6%
Innovation	47	5%
Application process	32	4%
Opportunity	32	4%
Budget	24	3%
Timing and delays	22	2%
Residents better off	16	2%
Payment(s)	3	<1%
Total	898	

What the community wants/needs

The participants indicated that they felt that they were better able to deliver what the communities they serve want and need through these enhancements to their existing programming during COVID-19. The amplification of existing programs was an area identified by community partners as something wanted to have happen with the CARES funding in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“First of all, trying to create programs that reach needed parts of our community. Secondly, being intentional about finding partners that serve the community authentically and with compassion, love and respect. Thirdly, for doing what you're doing in terms of trying to improve it.”

“The goals were well aligned with the community needs and with what we wanted to do.”

“The cohort model really helped to empower the youth because they felt there was a sustainability in their professional development journey outside of the program.”

Future opportunities

It was apparent that many of the participants were interested in future opportunities to partner with the county. Several respondents commented on the need for housing stability has to come before employment stability, and that both depend on the provision of emotional and mental supportive services.

"I'm spending more than the state Dislocated Worker Program allows me to spend it. I need to be really straight with you... The Dislocated Worker Program doesn't give me the resources that I need to help the people who are most impacted by COVID. That's why we need CAREs grants in order to afford to send people to train."

"Rental support and mental health funds lead to employment and maintaining the job."

"I'd love to see more entrepreneurship support and allow them to find opportunities outside of traditional 9-5 industries, especially as many of the youth were questioning how they can thrive in predominately white institutions."

Partners, Partnering, Partnerships

During each of the four listening sessions, participants expressed a desire to collaborate with the other organizations who they were meeting in the listening sessions.

"I think that there is probably a very great opportunity that might have been missed. Because not knowing what each other were doing, we could have maybe referred people to various services that are community based that the community would probably trust a little bit more. So that would be my going around next time and if at all possible, just more time for your application and implementation."

"It's the first time we're working with Ramsey County and it turned out really well. And they made it simple enough for us to be successful. So it worked out well."

As an acknowledgement that every organization has varying levels of experience working with funders, and that partnering therefore may present challenges, one respondent said:

"Not all these organizations are at the same level. All the organizations are at a different level and should issue the needs of the different organizations and it is at this different level."

Successful programming

Many of the listening session participants expressed that their programming was already successful, and that this opportunity provided the means to do even more.

"We help kids apply for college as well and financial aid."

"So the Ramsey County was full program came to connect our minority community. So, it's a great opportunity to partner with Ramsey county on this people during COVID are suffering the triple trauma of job loss, social isolation and civil unrest in the communities where they live."

"90% of our kids have gotten jobs within the last six months. Wow!"

"They're still working, and it's going good and being able to contribute to their family situation!"

Contract Process

Several respondents in several of the sessions indicated that they felt that the monitoring measures were put in place to fulfil someone's need to 'check a box', rather than for the good of the programs.

"Going forward is if it's possible, to really know how to use this network and the support needed, there should be more, when communicating with us, which you should be more explicit, to say this is what we are doing, because I know the messages we kept getting is more about trying to fulfill a kind of measure... It would be good for us to have the things clearly outlined. If you cannot read between the lines, you won't understand the purpose of our meeting every month. I know at this stage, there was a lot of information that we weren't getting was meeting the need of the people asking us the questions, but not our needs. For example, I'm a researcher and I know when you are collecting information for your research to evaluate a program for your own good, not for our own good."

"If I'm not able to get all my outcomes right now, I know it was a project I piloted, and I was able to get other grants to do it...it's the county and we have it started targeted a group, which is good. But we should get more support to really come out with our performance indicators, rather than fulfilling other people's need for evaluation results."

"It was flexible enough for us to help us meet a specific goal that we had with continuing to work with our parents during this distance learning and working at home and all that other kind of stuff. It really gave us an opportunity to continue our work."

Technical Assistance Needs

The smaller the non-profit or entity was, the more difficulty they seemed to have with technical assistance. The programs really ranged in size and scope, making it much more difficult for the smaller and newer programs.

"The biggest challenge for us was just the lack of maybe the amount of staff that we had to accommodate the amount of people that were here that really, from this neighborhood really needed a lot of hands on assistance when it comes to technology and being able to navigate their ways through trying to find jobs or housing."

"Is there any type of administrative support these organizations can get, where it's structured in a way where they're getting it done, but they're also learning how to do it at the same time? It's really hard to get it working with any smaller organizations to run the administration work, especially with limited resources, and then do the programs."

Innovation

Many of the listening session participants expressed much appreciation at being able to be more innovative in their programming than usual. Several respondents indicated that they were able to provide culturally specific programming and services, which they would not have been able to do otherwise:

"We focus specifically on just storytelling careers and that allowed them to interact with Southeast Asian arts practitioners who were able to work full time and learn

from them, as well as financial literacy, grant writing, healing, and leadership work plan for them to sit down and ask themselves kind of what resources and what community supports they need.”

“We are in a pandemic trying to help our community and especially for us, our program is focused on young folks 18 to 25. So even just trying to gather where the kids are, is hard enough. So I think having some patience and grace with how community works and the speed that we work, will help with trust, too...there's always a push to make us work faster work quickly to meet numbers and it's not how community works right now.”

Solicitation Process

Most of the comments regarding the solicitation process were positive. All of the participants, with the exception of one, agreed that they knew who to call in order to get their questions answered. They all (except for one) spoke very glowingly about the support they received the back office team comprised of county staff reassigned to support of CARES funded partners.

“The applications and the contracting process was generally straightforward. It took a little longer than I'd expected, but a reasonable amount.”

Regarding the contracting process and improvements that could be made, one respondent indicated:

“We sought creative ways to fulfill the requirements and if we had any questions, she (county staff) was really good at making sure that we were within guidelines to do what we want it to do.”

“We applied because we realized there were a lot of people who were earning more than on unemployment than they were when they were working but they were sitting at home.”

Discussion

Are Ramsey County residents better off due to CARES Act Workforce Development-funded programming?

This question is answered using the Results Based Accountability (RBA) lens which defines ‘better off’ as a positive change in circumstances, knowledge, or skills¹². RBA relates desired conditions of well-being for entire populations to the performance of programs, agencies, and service delivery systems. RBA also analyzes the critical data available to identify the key ‘drivers’ of programs performance and determine those actions that are most likely to ‘turn the curve’, thus moving measures and indicators in the right direction.

Overall, Ramsey County residents engaging in the CARES Act Workforce Development funded programming are better off. The six program areas, in addition to the TechPak program, provided direct workforce development services to more than 6,000 residents. The actual number of Ramsey County residents served is higher than what is reported due to data collection gaps. There were limitations in gathering data on all service recipients. However, it is clear is that, youth and residents of color were reached by the programming offered. Youth and Young Adults accounted for nearly 60% of the total

¹² https://portal.ct.gov/DCF/RBA/Home#_ftref1

residents served by the CARES Workforce Development Services. BIPOC residents represented nearly 90% of the residents served.

Programs delivered more than 13,000 services to more than 6,000 residents. In the first two rounds of the program, more than 1,200 TechPaks were provided to residents to help close the digital divide in Ramsey County. Nearly 300 CARES participants are known to have secured employment. An additional nearly 300 participants increased the number of hours worked or wages paid while actively engaging with CARES Workforce Development services.

These program outcomes likely understate the true impact as the total number of people engaging in career lab services and utilizing a TechPak. The precise effect that the service provided and whether or not it lead to finding or advancement their employment is unknown. What is known is that Ramsey County entered the COVID-19 pandemic with a lower unemployment rate than the state of Minnesota or the seven-county metro region. During the first two months of the pandemic the unemployment rate in Ramsey County surged to more than two percentage points higher than the state or region. By December 2020, the reported unemployment rate for Ramsey County recovered to nearly equal to the state and region.

A survey of more than 500 program participants found that about 84% felt the services they received matched their employment-related needs. Nearly 50% responded with a score of 100 on services matching their needs and about 75% scored the services matching their needs with a score of 75 or higher.

Summaries of the listening sessions with CARES community partners also included numerous accounts of residents improving their employment, health, education, housing, and overall well-being. The programs engaged residents in many ways that county programming does not traditionally offer. Although the pandemic presented many challenges for residents and community partners, it also brought with it many instances of innovation and cooperation.

Many challenges do unfortunately persist. Community partners expressed concerns about the short window of opportunity provided through the CARES funding. In some cases, the launch of programming took more time than hoped. Partners experienced challenges due to the COVID-19 restrictions on coordinating activities and engaging with community members who often did not have the technology necessary to fully participate. For those receiving TechPaks, technology was less an issue. The provision of TechPaks only “scratched the surface” of the tech inequity experienced by as many as 50% of residents residing in concentrated areas of poverty that existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many unmet needs remain among Ramsey County residents. Respondents were asked to select all that apply to the question of unmet employment needs at the time of the survey. About 35% reported support services as an unmet need, which are defined as housing, food assistance, cash assistance, childcare, clothing and transportation. An additional 27% reported education, 18% reported job search assistance and 15% reported technology as unmet needs at the time of the survey.

The technology gap was filled at least in part by about 83% of respondents receiving a TechPak. For many, the receipt of the TechPak had the effect of connecting them back to the communities they felt they had been cut off from due to the pandemic (I.e. connection to their shut-in elders, communication with relatives on another continent, attendance at weekly a religious service), thus, fulfilling the critical function of renewal of a sense of hope.

Did the projects achieve the outcomes the community was seeking?

What the community wanted was determined from several town hall meetings, existing relationships with employment and training service providers and networks, and with interactions with the Workforce Innovations Board.

Communities indicated that they wanted from the Town Hall meetings:

- Holistic approach to employment, food, and shelter
- Technology gaps and support
- Needs of black men and young people
- Scholarships
- Amplify existing programs

In addition to the broader town hall meetings, Workforce Solutions gathered information about what outcomes the community was seeking from enhancing resources already in process prior to the pandemic. There were:

- Ensure there are places of access, in person and virtual, for residents to connect with employment resources.
- Work toward closing some of the tech gap for residents who lack technology and digital literacy.
- Invest in community-based organizations including supporting the pivoting of more training opportunities online. The state also moved quickly on these efforts to ensure resources and programs are available to all residents whether they are enrolled in one of our programs or not.
- Provide gap services for youth/young adults in partnership with community stakeholders

Most of the CARES Workforce Development funding was invested directly to community-based organizations and focused on the needs expressed in the town hall meetings and from existing community networks. Workforce Solutions also supported additional career labs to ensure broader availability of workforce services would be available throughout 2020 as most traditional career labs were closed to the public.

Both qualitative and quantitative data collected illustrated that Ramsey County did what the community was asking for. The technology supports assisted in providing a holistic approach to employment, food, and shelter, particularly with the responses of the TechPak recipients, many of whom indicated that their abilities to access employment, food, education, shelter and medical care were enhanced.

The needs of younger people and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) were addressed as evidenced by the higher percentages of BIPOC individuals participating in the programs. Existing program amplification was also achieved, and this was expressed through many of the open-ended question responses to surveys, as well as through responses from partners in the listening sessions held at the end of December.

How can Ramsey County better attract, retain, and support community partners with county contracts?

As part of this evaluation, 36 of the Workforce Development CARES funded community partners engaged in focus groups, referred to as reflection or listening sessions. In reflecting on the CARES programming, community partners described how the process to submit proposals, contract, and deliver services during the COVID-19 pandemic worked for their organization.

Many community partners heard about the CARES opportunity from multiple sources, but also shared that other potential partners may not have learned about the opportunity if they were not yet connected in some way to the county or to the larger community-based organizations. Some partners also shared the challenges with the short turn-around to apply for service made it difficult for community organizations to develop partnerships.

Most of the comments regarding the application process were positive. All of the participants, with the exception of one, agreed that they knew who to call in order to get their questions answered. They all (except for one) spoke very glowingly about the support they received the county back office team comprised of staff reassigned to support of CARES funded partners. As the community partners described their experiences working with the back office, they mentioned their primary liaison by name and shared specific examples of how their interactions helped them to navigate the contracting and accounting processes.

The primary themes of their experiences mostly centered around quick responses, appropriateness of the information received and knowledgeable staff helping them navigate a process that many had not previously experienced. Shortcomings of the process were mostly centered around the challenges of completing the monthly reports on time, including their invoices and program participant data. It was not always clear to the partners what information they were required to gather, which led to some missing program data in this report. It was also shared that additional information about the people served was asked for late in the year when it was not easy for the partners to gather additional information on people they previously served.

Four key themes emerged about how community partners can more effectively be supported and retained. They are:

- CARES partners, especially the smaller organizations and those with little or no experience working with the county describe challenges with establishing appropriate accounting and reporting processes to provide the information the county requires.
- Partners felt that a team similar to Ramsey county's contract management team should be maintained to provide liaison and technical assistance to current and prospective community partners so that entry into working with the county is streamlined.
- Some community partners would like to see the county go even further and provide direct accounting and contract management support ongoing so that their organizations can focus on serving the needs of the community.
- Increased collaboration among the community partners is a need expressed by most community partners in the reflection sessions. Community partners would like the county to take a stronger leadership role in gathering community partners so the partners are better positioned to work together. These regular sessions could also include technical assistance and trainings to prepare community organizations to better partner with the county. This request is more urgent during an emergency response as many partners feel the need in the community is much greater than any organization alone can support. This is the one area where the community partners universally felt the county missed an opportunity early in the pandemic to enhance the CARES services.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

- **Opportunities for collaboration and networking** with other agencies doing similar work emerged as a priority from the reflection sessions. This is especially true for smaller community-based organizations who felt more collaboration would provide better and more timely information about the work their peers are doing. Improved coordination and networking could be used to fill gaps in service and create opportunities for inter-agency referrals.
- **Convene community partners in a pre-program launch.** This recommendation brought forward in each reflection session. WFS began this work of bringing community partners together prior to the pandemic, but in the ‘hustle’ of a fast launch of CARES some opportunities were missed to bring the partners together. Partners believe community would be better served with a more coordinated approach across all services.
- **Develop cohorts that include technical assistance.** The cohort model developed for the Community Innovation Inclusion Fund was appreciated and should be utilized more. Community partners would like to be involved as cohorts are developed. Partners feel they are better served when they are involved in the development of cohorts so that the information shared aligns with the needs of the member organizations.
- **Simplify the reporting and monitoring requirements** and be clear about all requirements prior to launching. Some organizations felt the monitoring requirements were too labor-intensive. The recommended replacing the monthly tallying with mid-point, quarterly, or bi-monthly reporting.
- **Develop and deliver more holistic, family-focused approaches to providing assistance.** This recommendation broadens the scope of what workforce development services traditionally offer, but aligns with how community organizations deliver services. (i.e. elders receiving home delivered meals are often caring for school-aged grand-children who also need to eat). In the workforce context, many unemployed parents during the pandemic were needed in the home to take care of children and supplement their education needs.
- **Focus more resources on improving Tech Equity.** The issue of tech equity in Ramsey County existed prior to COVID-19, but the pandemic further amplified the need for tech literacy, access to technology, reliable internet, and overall tech equity. Residents living in concentrated areas of poverty hit hardest by COVID-19 often lacked access to the most basic technology needed to access critical services during the pandemic. The success of the TeckPak program in delivering critical technology to those in need provides a roadmap for improving tech equity throughout the county.
- **Video/digital community engagement** particularly around solicitation of feedback, service delivery, input and training opened opportunities for community partners to engage with the county and with program participants more efficiently and more frequently than pre-pandemic in-person gathering. Though not a replacement for gathering in-person, the county now has additional tools to reach community partners and residents in ways that were not previously available and should leverage technology to further improve access and availability.

- Several respondents commented that the need for **housing stability** has to come before employment stability, and that both depend on the provision of emotional and mental supportive services.

Long-term Recommendations

- **Earlier engagement with community-based organizations** so as to be involved earlier on in the planning processes. Several felt that additional agencies were not contacted and should have been. They could have referred additional agencies doing the work to apply for funding had they been informed sooner.
- **Ability to collaborate with others** was expressed as a need, particularly for smaller community-based organizations. This is important not only for efficiency's sake, but also to be able to provide cross-referrals to clients needing additional services across the sectors.
- **Allowing more flexibility in the existing programming** to allow for culturally-specific, and ethnically appropriate programming is desperately needed. CARES achieved this in ways traditional funding often does not, but community expects more flexibility to better serve communities beyond CARES.
- **Have less onerous process (uptake) monitoring & reporting requirements** for contract awardees and focus more on outcome (results) measures. How much and in what ways one's life was impacted (quality) by the programming (i.e renewal of a sense of hope to go forward expressed by some TechPak recipients) may be just as important, if not more important than how many were impacted (quantity).
- **Consider creating and maintaining a county resource team dedicated to developing community resources.** Partners felt that a team similar to Ramsey county's contract management team (Back Office during CARES) should be maintained to provide liaison and technical assistance to current **and prospective community** partners so that entry into working with the county is streamlined. This resource could provide ongoing technical assistance to the community and serve as a direct connection between community and county program administrators.

Small Business Relief

In 2020, Ramsey County received funding from the Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which was used in part to fund the [Small Business Relief Fund](#) (SBRF). This fund disseminated \$14 million in financial relief to small businesses to combat challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional funds from the state were also distributed to support small businesses. The goals of the SBRF were to:

1. Provide direct financial relief to assist small business to sustain themselves over the next few months.
2. Stabilize small businesses, particularly businesses owned by Black, Indigenous, people of color, and women.
3. Develop long-term, sustained relationships with partners who support businesses owned by Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

Ramsey County's SBRF was administered by the Community and Economic Development (CED) team in partnership with the Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers (MCCD) and the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability. The latter two organizations in turn partnered with 14 culturally based community-based organizations (CBOs) to support outreach, education, and technical assistance for eligible small businesses to complete applications. Of these, eight organizations focus on a specific Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, including: Black/American Descendants of Slavery, African (e.g., Somali, Oromo) and Asian immigrant communities (e.g., Hmong, Karen), Latinx, and Native/Indigenous communities. Three partners focus on specific geographic communities (e.g., East Side community), two focus on arts/creative communities, and one focuses on women-owned businesses. However, nearly all of these partner organizations said that they will serve anyone in need, regardless of their racial/ethnic origins, geographic location, sex/gender, or other demographic affiliation.

This evaluation is focused on the SBRF grants administered using CARES funding during the first two rounds¹³ between July and December 2020 to some 830 businesses in Ramsey County. The first round sought to reach locally owned and operated small businesses with 20 employees or less with a physical establishment in the county. They had to have at least one employee in addition to the owner as of March 1, 2020; have been operating for at least six months prior to March 1, 2020; be licensed and current on property taxes; and demonstrate a significant loss in revenue since March 15, 2020.

In the second round, the target population was expanded to include self-employed individuals, sole proprietors, and creative businesses. Creative businesses include musicians, artists, crafters, and media; they must be based in the county; have been doing creative work prior to September 15, 2019, and derive a substantial amount of income from their creative work; and be able to demonstrate a financial impact from COVID-19. Additional funding rounds continued after the end of 2020 with state funding but are not considered within the scope of this study, which focuses on CARES-funded work.

A complete list of businesses that received funding, with funding amounts and geographic location, is available at [Open Data Ramsey County](#).¹⁴

¹³ Additional rounds of grants took place in 2021 with funding from sources other than CARES; the impact of those funds on Ramsey County small businesses was not evaluated within the scope of this study.

¹⁴ The grant recipient data on Open Data Ramsey County includes all businesses funded, including those who received a SBRF grant through state funds.

Evaluation Methods

This mixed-methods evaluation draws data from an online quantitative survey of fund recipients, interviews with representatives of the partner organizations discussed above, and review of background documents and reports related to this effort.

Overall, Ramsey County measures the effectiveness of CARES-funded projects against two overarching questions: (1) Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES programming? and (2) Did the project achieve the outcomes the community was seeking? As Ramsey County seeks to capture lessons learned for the post-COVID era, the evaluation will also consider how we can improve our partner relationships, as well as suggestions for expanded outreach to enhance these partnerships.

This evaluation also addresses the following key study questions specific to SBRF:

1. What proportion of grants went to businesses in owned by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)¹⁵? Did the grants reach businesses in these targeted communities?
2. What impact did the Small Business Relief Fund have on small businesses, particularly businesses in the targeted communities?
3. How can Ramsey County continue to support businesses during the pandemic?
4. What can Ramsey County learn from its partnership with MCCD and partnering outreach organizations to inform Community Economic Development's future business outreach and collaborations to support and sustain small businesses?

Survey of Fund Recipients/Businesses

A survey was developed that asked 33 questions of the funded businesses in the areas of:

- Impact of COVID-19 on their business.
- Impact of the SBRF on their business.
- Current and future business needs and outlook.
- Feedback for Ramsey County.

Separate surveys were administered to businesses who were funded under the creative application and those under the general application. Most of the questions were identical, with some changes to make the survey of creative businesses more applicable to that industry. A copy of the combined survey instrument can be found in [Appendix B](#).**Error! Reference source not found.**

The research and evaluation team worked with a contracted vendor to translate the general survey into Spanish, Hmong, Somali, Oromo, and Karen then had a separate translator translate the new version back into English, also known as a “back translation”. Staff then compared the back translation to the original English version and worked with the vendor to reconcile any issues with the translation.

An initial email was sent by Ramsey County's Community Economic Development Division to businesses who received funds during Rounds 1 and 2 (July to early December 2020) letting them know that the survey was coming. Email invitations were then sent to businesses in late January 2020 and two email reminders were also sent out. The web-based survey was open for approximately three weeks. Although the survey was translated into multiple languages, only four respondents completed

¹⁵ The term BIPOC is used to refer to business owners who self-identify as being a race or ethnicity other than White.

the survey in Spanish and none in the additional languages. It is anticipated that language barriers and computer access for business owners who speak these languages could have prevented them from taking the survey at all

Respondents were offered a \$50 dollar Visa gift cards as an incentive to complete the survey.

Survey Data Analysis

Analysis of the quantitative survey data was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Descriptive statistics were calculated for responses to the survey questions overall and the Chi-Square test of independence was used to determine if there was a significant difference in survey responses for different subgroups of businesses. Only results that are statistically significant at the level of $p \leq .05$ are shared in this report.

Interviews with Partner Organizations

Individual interviews were conducted with representatives from 12 out of the 14 partner organizations¹⁶ that supported MCCD and the Alliance with outreach and technical assistance in Rounds 1 and 2. These interviews discussed with partners the role they played in the grants-making process, the strengths and limitations of the program from their perspective, and strategies to improve future partnerships. Interviews were conducted virtually and recorded using MS Teams; they were transcribed using Otter and analyzed with Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, to identify patterns and themes among responses. The interview guide can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Reports submitted by MCCD and Subcontractors

Outreach Partners submitted periodic reports throughout the grants-making process to the Alliance. These reports summarized their progress in supporting outreach and business support activities for SBRF grant beneficiaries, including lessons learned for what worked and did not work in their outreach approach, reflections on that success or challenge, and anything surprising they observed or learned. The Alliance then submitted summary reports based on the outreach partner progress reports. Findings from the Alliance reports that support or contradict findings from the survey and interviews are referenced in the Partner Interview and Discussion sections of this report.

Limitations

Because this evaluation only surveyed businesses who successfully received the SBRF grant, the evaluation is limited in evaluating the SBRF program overall. Collecting information from all SBRF businesses in Ramsey County such as those who did and did not apply for the SBRF, including those who did not have applications approved would provide a better assessment of how accessible the SBRF grant was to businesses and the impact on businesses who received the grant compared to those who did not.

Other limitations that should be considered when interpreting these findings are:

- **Non-response bias:** Not all invited businesses participated in the survey and it is possible that there are key differences between the businesses that responded and those who did not.
- **Respondent bias:** Respondents may formulate their responses to please the interviewer or withhold information that the respondent feels could be damaging to someone or something associated with the project. Concerns about this limitation is especially prevalent in this study as the respondents are partners of Ramsey County and thus invested in maintaining strong relationships with the county. In order to mitigate this issue to the greatest extent possible, the

¹⁶ Two partner organizations did not respond to invitations to participate in an interview.

research team read a short statement at the outset of each interview, assuring the respondent of their anonymity and encouraging frank dialogue.

- **Recall bias:** Respondent may recall information incorrectly, which is a common and documented issue in observer reliability and self-reported data. Respondents who have worked on this project for the past six months, during a turbulent and emotional time in history, have thoughts and opinions about their experiences that are influenced and may be skewed by emotion.
- **Interpretation bias:** The data collector could misunderstand the respondents' meaning. While the use of video recording mitigates this issue to some extent by enabling full review of the interview and transcribing of the conversation, there is still potential for the research team to have misinterpreted a respondent's intended meaning.
- **Incentives:** Respondents were offered a \$50 gift card to participate in the online survey. They may have answered questions without much consideration or accuracy, with the intent to just get the incentive at the end. The research team tried to mitigate this by requiring answers to most of the survey questions (so respondents did actually have to give an answer). Respondents also have incentive to answer accurately in order to provide good quality data to benefit their communities and demonstrate their appreciation for the financial support received through the SBRF grant.

Results

Small Business Survey Results

Invitations were sent to a total of 828 businesses who received funding through the first two rounds of the Small Business Relief Fund grant (payments received between May and early December 2020). Overall, 557 businesses responded to the survey, a 67% response rate.

Survey Response Rate and Business Characteristics

Response rates were compared by the below business characteristics that were provided as part of the grantee data set as well as the businesses' survey responses.

- Whether business was funded through the creative or general application.
- Race/ethnicity of primary business owner.
- Gender of primary business owner.
- Whether business is in Saint Paul or suburban Ramsey County.
- Zip code of business.

Although there are observed differences in response rate for many characteristics, the only differences that are statistically significant are between creative and non-creative businesses and between businesses that are White-owned versus Asian or Black/African Descendant of Slavery (ADOS)/African-owned. These two are discussed below. Charts that compare the response rates by gender, Saint Paul versus suburban Ramsey County and zip code can be found in Appendix A4: Small Business Relief Fund

Creative businesses who received the SBRF grant had a higher response rate than general businesses (82% compared to 66%).

Table 36. Response Rate by Type of Application

Business Type	Population	Survey Response	Response Rate
Total	828	557	67.3%
General	756	498	65.9%
Creative	72	59	81.9%

Overall, there was over 60% response rate in all race/ethnicity categories. Black/ADOS/African-born and Asian had the lowest response rates. It is likely that language barriers and access to a computer for the immigrant businesses in these groups affected the response rate.

Table 37. Response Rate by Race/Ethnicity of Primary Business Owner

Race/Ethnicity	Population	Survey Response	Response Rate
Total	828	557	67.3%
Black/ADOS or African Born¹⁷	130	81	62.3%
American Indian/Native American	8	6	75.0%
Asian	178	107	60.1%
Hispanic/Latinx	22	21	95.5%
Multi-racial	24	17	70.8%
White/Caucasian	387	272	70.3%
Other¹⁸	0	4	n/a
Prefer not to answer	79	49	62.0%

Survey respondents were also asked about the following business characteristics which are summarized in Appendix A4: Small Business Relief Fund

- Industry type
- Business structure
- Business revenues in 2019
- Years of operation
- Number of employees

Responses to the survey questions were compared by all of the above characteristics. A number of statistically significant differences¹⁹ were found for the following types of businesses and profiles have been created to discuss these differences. These profiles can be found in Appendix A4: Small Business Relief Fund

- Creative businesses
- BIPOC-owned businesses
- Women-owned businesses
- Sole proprietors
- Businesses in Saint Paul

¹⁷ Data provided on grantees included Black/African American as a single category. In the survey, respondents could indicate whether they identified as either Black/African Descendant of Slavery or as African-born.

¹⁸ Other was not an option used in the SBRF application.

¹⁹ Statistically significant at the level of $p \leq .05$.

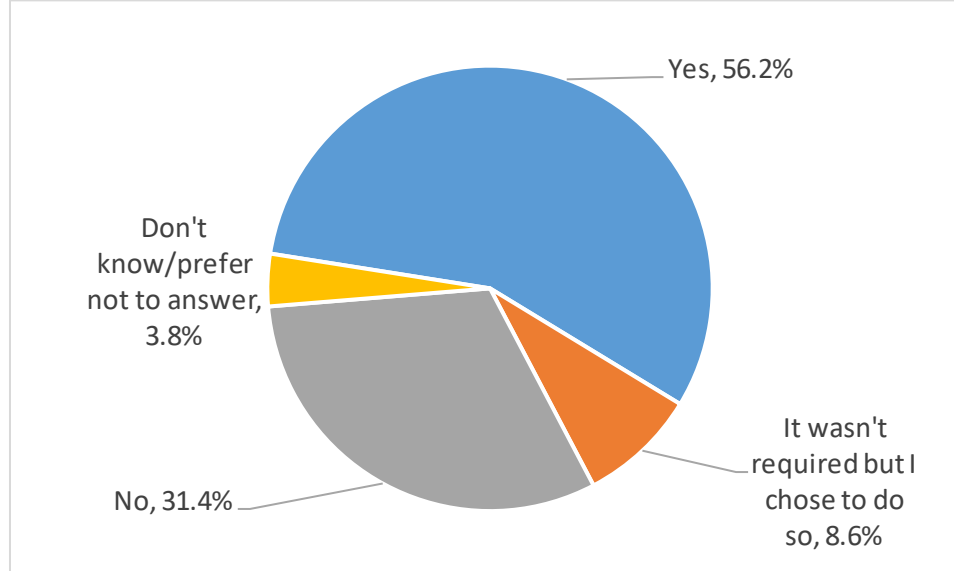
- Smaller businesses

Business Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Businesses were asked a series of questions related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their business. Adverse impacts were reported in a number of areas.

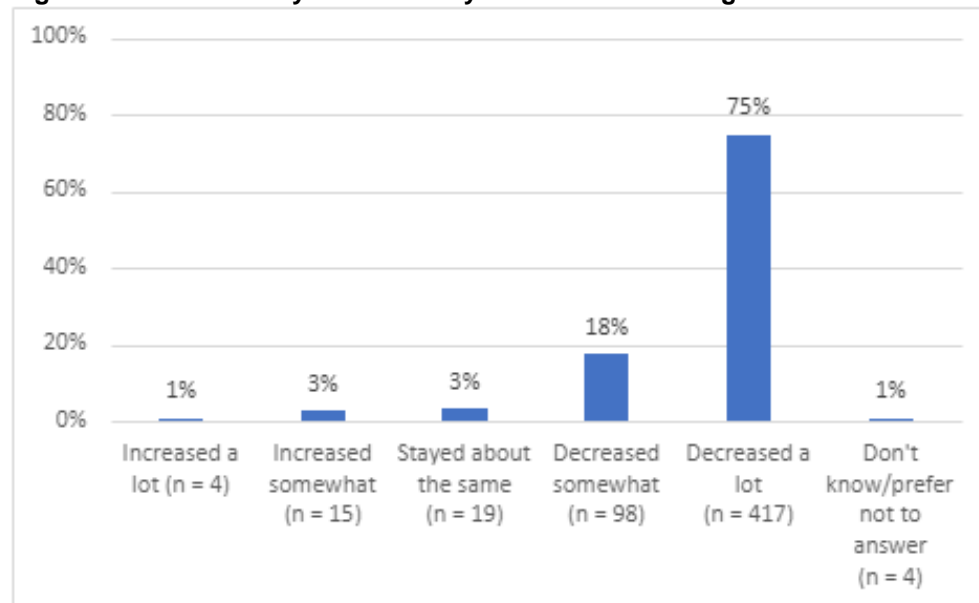
A total of 56% of respondents indicated their business was forced to close due to an executive order for COVID-19. An additional 9% reported that they chose to close at some point even though it wasn't required.

Figure 32. Was your business forced to close during an executive order for COVID-19?



Three-fourths of respondents (75%) report that their business's change in revenue has decreased "a lot" since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. An additional 18% report that their revenues have decreased somewhat.

Figure 33. How would you describe your business' change in revenues/sales since the start of COVID-19?



SBRF grantees were asked if they have had to rely on any financial resources to cover their costs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 40% of respondents indicated they had relied on other grants besides SBRF (45%), personal savings (44%), and business loans (41%).

The use of these resources may be more an indicator of the level of access the business had to each resource rather than the financial need of the business. Key characteristics are correlated to a business' access to other resources that may help them survive the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, some businesses have greater access to other grants and business-based financial resources (loans, savings, credit cards). Other businesses have had to dip into their own personal savings and rely on family or friends for help.

Table 38. Since the start of COVID-19, have you relied on any of the following financial resources to cover your business costs?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	557	100.0%
Other grants besides SBRF	248	44.5%
Personal savings	243	43.6%
Business loans	233	41.8%
Business savings	201	36.1%
Business credit cards	184	33.0%
Personal credit cards	152	27.3%
Help from family or friends	118	21.2%
Personal loans	85	15.3%
Early retirement savings withdrawal	29	5.2%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	7	1.3%
Other*	44	7.9%
None of the above	16	2.9%

**Other resources written in by businesses included Payroll Protection Program (PPP) loan, Emergency Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL), Unemployment benefits (including Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), grant from State of Minnesota and Go Fund Me fundraisers.*

About 10% of respondents indicate that there have been other factors besides the COVID-19 pandemic that have reduced their business's revenues in 2020.

Table 39. Besides COVID-19, have there been other factors that reduced your business' revenues in 2020?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	557	100.0%
Yes	58	10.4%
No	436	78.3%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	25	4.5%

Respondents who answered "Yes" were asked to describe the other factor(s). The most common factors reported by businesses include civil unrest and the general political climate.

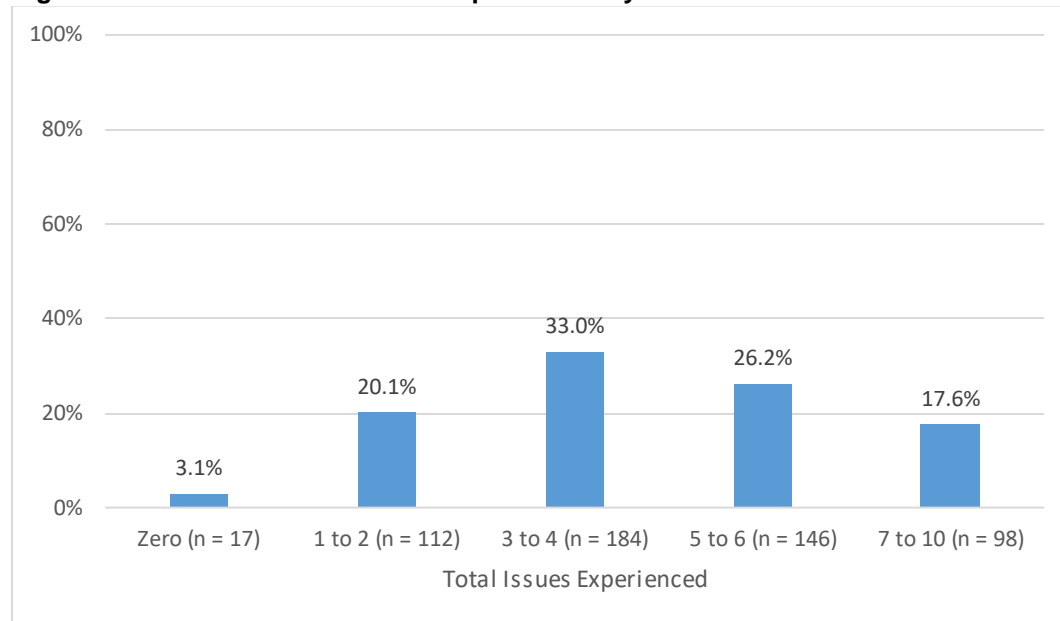
Issues Experienced and How SBRF Grant Helped

SBRF grantees were asked if they had experienced any of eleven potential impacts since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and to what extent the SBRF grant helped with each issue experienced.

These results are summarized in Table 40. Some items were included on both the General Business and Creative Business surveys where other items were specific to each survey.

Overall, 77% of businesses reported experiencing three or more issues in the table, with 54% experiencing five or more of the issues.

Figure 34. Total number of issues experienced by businesses



For the general businesses, the most common issues experienced were decrease or potential decrease in the number of: hours available to workers (62%) and hours their business is open during a one-week period (62%) as well as unplanned expenses due to COVID-19 (58%). For Creative Businesses, the most common issues experienced were shows, gigs, or events that were cancelled (90%), postponed (80%), and had loss of attendance (70%).

Table 40. Since the start of COVID-19, has your business experienced any of the following? If so, did the SBRF grant help?

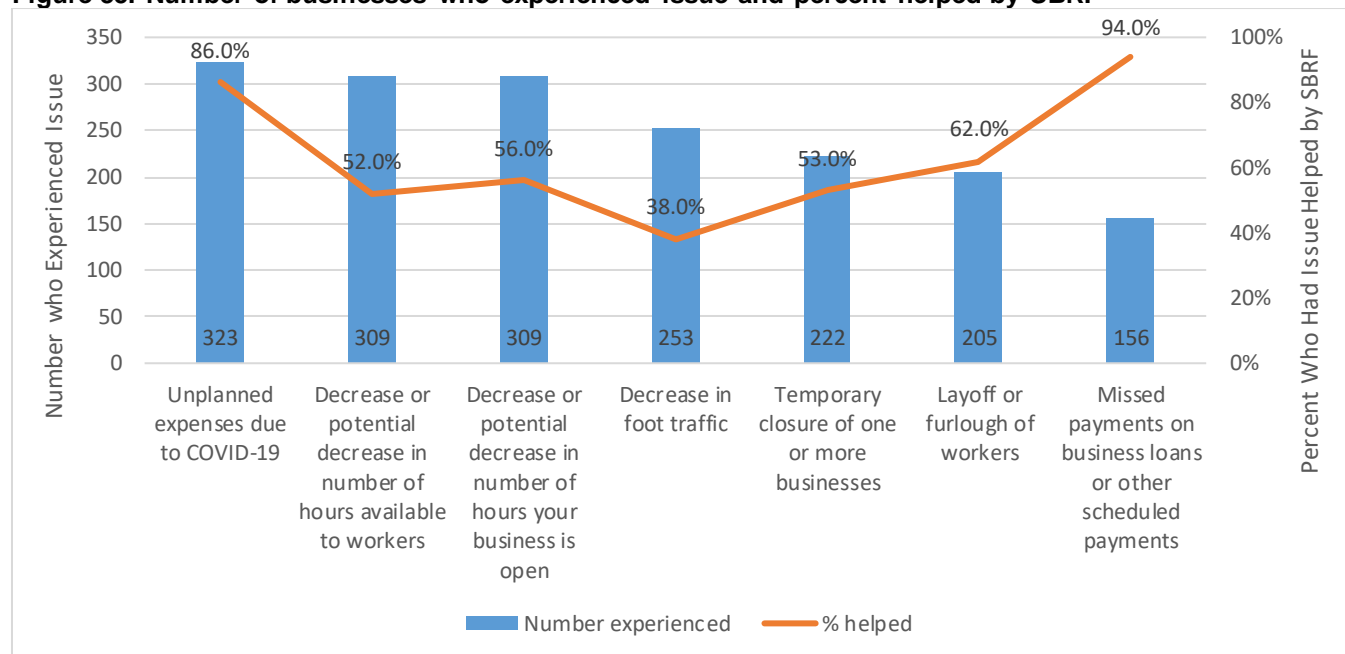
	Total Experienced				Did the SBRF Grant Help?		
	Number	Percent	Yes, to a great extent	Yes, to some extent	No, not very much	No, not at all	Don't know/prefer not to answer
All Businesses (n=557)							
Unplanned expenses due to COVID – e.g. PPE	323	58.0%	42.1%	44.3%	7.1%	5.3%	0.3%
Temporary closure of one or more business locations	222	39.9%	21.2%	32.0%	15.3%	23.9%	5.0%
Layoff or furlough of workers	205	36.8%	12.7%	48.8%	15.6%	17.1%	2.9%
Missed payments on business loans or other scheduled payments (rent, utilities, etc...)	156	28.0%	38.5%	55.8%	3.8%	1.3%	0.6%
Permanent closure of one or more business locations	26	4.7%	11.5%	26.9%	11.5%	46.2%	3.8%
General Only (n=498)							
Decrease or potential decrease in the number of hours available to workers	309	62.0%	13.3%	38.5%	20.4%	20.1%	4.9%
Decrease or potential decrease in the number of hours your business is open during a one-week period	309	62.0%	15.5%	40.8%	19.7%	17.5%	3.9%
Decrease in foot traffic (if storefront business)	253	50.8%	18.6%	19.0%	23.7%	32.0%	3.6%
Cancellation of customer orders/reservations made prior to COVID-19	202	40.6%	17.3%	30.7%	19.3%	27.2%	3.5%
Cancellation of business purchases planned prior to COVID-19	162	32.5%	18.5%	31.5%	19.1%	24.7%	3.1%
Eviction or potential eviction from business space/location	22	4.4%	27.3%	50.0%	9.1%	13.6%	0.0%
Creative Only (n=59)							
Cancelled shows/gigs/events	53	89.8%	32.1%	39.6%	9.4%	15.1%	0.0%
Postponed shows/gigs/events	47	79.7%	23.4%	44.7%	14.9%	12.8%	0.0%
Loss of attendance at shows/gigs/events	41	69.5%	22.0%	24.4%	31.7%	22.0%	0.0%
Loss of Residency/studio access	16	27.1%	18.8%	31.3%	43.8%	6.3%	0.0%
Loss of Income from corporate/individual donations/sponsorships	13	22.0%	15.4%	53.8%	15.4%	7.7%	7.7%
Loss of Income from private foundation/government grant revenues	11	18.6%	18.2%	54.5%	18.2%	9.1%	0.0%

For each issue experienced by a business, they were asked to what extent the SBRF grant helped with the issue. Figure 35 shows the most common issues experienced by businesses and the percent within those businesses where the SBRF grant helped with the issue either “to some extent” or “to a great extent.” Unplanned expenses and missed payments on business loans or other scheduled payments had the highest rates of being helped by the SBRF grant. Other common issues, such as decrease or potential decrease in number of hours available to workers and hours business is open had lower rates of being helped.

Of those who experienced at least one issue, 95% of businesses reported that they were helped to “some extent” or “a great extent” with at least one issue. Half of businesses (50%) reported they were helped to “a great extent” with at least one issue.

When looking at the number of businesses affected by an issue and the percent helped by the SBRF grant, the largest impact was found in the area of unplanned expenses. Across all survey respondents, 279 (50%) reported that the SBRF grant helped either to some or a great extent with unplanned expenses due to COVID.

Figure 35. Number of businesses who experienced issue and percent helped by SBRF



Positive Impacts of the Grant

For many businesses, the SBRF has had a huge impact for their survival during the pandemic. Below are just a few examples and additional business testimonials can be found in Appendix A4: Small Business Relief Fund

“We couldn’t have survived without the generosity from you and other organizations. We are very grateful for your grant.”

“I am very grateful for this support, it really served as lifeline for my business and helped it survive 2020.”

“Funds received to-date have been a godsend, especially since independent small businesses with no staff (besides the Principal) do not have access to MN unemployment benefits”.

For others, the SBRF grant has provided some relief, but there is an ongoing need for financial support:

“COVID 19 Hit the food industry very hard. I am very grateful for the help I received. Just keep in mind \$10,000. At this time will not go very far for financial help.”

“COVID-19 has decimated my business. I am struggling to stay open. I truly appreciate the grant funds but it only goes so far. Thank you for the help that you did provide!”

Business Improvements

Nearly half of respondents (46%) report that they made improvements to their business because of COVID-19.

Table 41. Has your business made any improvements because of COVID-19?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	557	100.0%
Yes	258	46.3%
No	222	39.9%
Don't Know/Prefer not to Answer	77	13.8%

By far the most common types of improvements were in adding personal protective equipment (PPE), COVID-19 safety equipment and safety procedures as well as improvements to technology, including online ordering systems.

Many businesses reported making changes that helped to make their business space safer for employees and customers, such as PPE, cleaning and safety procedures. A number also reported heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) improvements, sanitization products and procedures, adding plexiglass and other barriers, remodeling to allow for physical distancing.

“Sanitation stations, and barriers to protect workers and customers alike”

“We purchased negative air suction systems for each room.”

“We purchased PPE, plexiglass, and several hand sanitizer dispensers. We decreased seating to create space for physical distancing. We use a lot of sanitizing sprays”

The second most common improvement reported was in the area of in technology, including having online ordering for the first time:

“Capacity for video chat, hosting online meetings”

“I have a better online interface and can more easily interact with clients virtually”

"In general, and because of this grant, I have upgraded all my technology and learned how to use it effectively and creatively. I've been forced to learn how to integrate technology better and that's improved all aspects of my business."

"We have made online ordering part of our business model and have also embraced some new technology to help manage the business."

Other improvements included remodeling, purchasing new equipment, and improvements to shipping, delivery and pick up options/procedures.

Biggest Concerns for Business During COVID-19 Pandemic

Businesses were asked to describe their biggest concern for their business during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common concerns are discussed below.

Respondents reported a number of concerns that they continue to have about the success of their business as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. Many businesses have concerns that they won't survive or recover from the panic. A number talk about hopes to return back to "normal operations" while others believe they will face long-term and possibly permanent negative impacts on their business or industry.

"When do we decide enough is enough and close permanently? Are we foolish to believe we can weather this storm, taking on more debt everyday with no hope of returning to normalcy in the near future? Every single day, we lose money. But this is our life, our livelihood, our career, our hopes and dreams and blood and tears."

"Our biggest concern is if we will be able to stay open and continue to take care of our clients after 30 years in business. Wages and property taxes are the largest expenditures we face with uncertainty."

"That I'm not going to get back to work soon enough once the relief ends. I'm pretty sure I'm going to have to stop working as a creative."

"Our biggest concern is that we will not get "through to the other side" before we are unable to keep the business going. We will be forced to close our production. This is extremely stressful."

"That I won't be able to keep my doors open. I'm behind on rent, I have employees to pay, and my revenue has dropped over 50%."

"Will we ever be able to operate at 100% again."

"Not sure if sales will ever return to pre-pandemic levels."

"That our industry will be one of the last ones to make a recovery. It may take a while."

"I am very concerned about the duration of this pandemic. Business temporary closure due symptomatic worker and therefore, Long term survival of business is in question."

For a number of businesses, the health and safety of themselves, their employees and customers is the top concern. They tie businesses fully opening up to widespread vaccination.

“A return to in store interactions with customers after all the staff is vaccinated. We're still doing all of our business by phone or online, with delivery or 'no contact' pickup and drop off.”

“Continued safety of employees and customers/patients.”

“Covid-19 outbreak in place of business, not enough personal protection and having to close our doors permanently.”

“My biggest concern is how to protect my clients while still keeping the business going. It is very hard to decide what is best at this time.”

“When it will end and how I'll get my employees vaccinated.”

“Potential for customers to expose employees to Covid-19.”

A number of businesses are also concerned about the impact of current state mandates and restrictions and, for some that there could be another shutdown or additional restrictions put in place.

“If the new strains will create a new rise in cases since MN seems to have suddenly become very relaxed in prevention causing another shut-down. I would rather the state be overly smart in prevention rather than just letting things ease so easily.”

“My biggest concern during this pandemic is that the Governor may keep shutting down and preventing my business to open, therefore causing me to get evicted and lose my business altogether.”

“How many more times that the governor will shut us down, when I will be able to be open enough to be able to pay my obligations.”

“My biggest concern is the precedent set for future government ordered shutdowns with little to no aid to help businesses cover their expenses and revenue losses.”

Businesses also talked about the loss of customers and concerns that this loss may be permanent. In addition, a number of businesses talked about the reluctance or fear of residents in going to their businesses due to the COVID risk, regardless of the precautions taken by the business. The pandemic may be causing a long-term or permanent change in customer's behavior and they won't seek out personal services, in-person retail nor restaurants/bars in the future.

“Whether we can make it until things begin to open up again. When people will feel comfortable eating out again. Things are allowed to be open 50%, however, few people are ready to eat out”.

“I want people to feel safe in our office and trust that it is safe to be here. People are in pain and suffering, but afraid to come for appointments. This leads to irregular business and decreased cash flow.”

“That people will continue to be afraid to go out for a long time.”

“Long lasting change in cultural behavior that will affect people's buying behavior for years to come and hurt the bar and live music industry.”

Some businesses rely on employees going to their workplaces and have seen a significant reduction in traffic due to the move to remote work.

“People working from home is having a negative effect on my storefront.”

The bottom line for most businesses is being able to pay their expenses so that they are able to stay in business. Whether this is from improved income for their business or financial assistance depends on how much the business feels they can adapt their business while still retaining customers during the pandemic.

“Being able to make mortgage payments.”

“Being unable to pay rent.”

“Don't generate enough income to pay expenses.”

Other factors that were raised in businesses' concerns were the length of the pandemic and how they are forced to make decisions amid uncertainty.

Future Outlook and Business Needs

Respondents are not strong in their outlook nor projections of their business remaining open and retaining employees. Outlook for businesses is tepid with nearly half of respondents reported their outlook was either neutral (23%) or somewhat negative (25%). An additional 36% reported a somewhat positive outlook.

Table 42. Overall, how positive or negative is your outlook on the future of your business' revenues at this time?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	557	100.0%
Very positive	39	7.0%
Somewhat positive	198	35.5%
Neutral	130	23.3%
Somewhat negative	137	24.6%
Very negative	45	8.1%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	8	1.4%

General businesses have little financial cushion to fall back on and just over half (54%) projected they would only stay open for up to three months if they only had the cash they have on hand to cover expenses.

Table 43. How long could your business stay open with only the cash you have available right now to cover expenses? (General Only)

Response	Number	Percent
Total	498	100.0%
Less than 2 weeks	24	4.8%
2 to 4 weeks	59	11.8%
1 to 3 months	187	37.6%
4 to 6 months	99	19.9%
7 to 11 months	35	7.0%
One year or more	22	4.4%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	72	14.5%

General businesses with one or more employees are at risk of losing staff. Half of respondents indicated their staff numbers will either decrease a little bit (20%) or greatly (31%) if COVID levels stayed about the same and no additional funding was received within six months of the time of the survey.

Table 44. Within the next six months, if COVID levels stay about the same and no additional funding is received, what will be the change in your business' staffing levels? (General Only)

Response	Number	Percent
Total	404	100.0%
My staff numbers will increase greatly	4	1.0%
My staff numbers will increase a little bit	13	3.2%
My staff numbers will stay about the same	132	32.7%
My staff numbers will decrease a little bit	80	19.8%
My staff numbers will decrease greatly	125	30.9%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	50	12.4%

Respondents were given a list of resources and asked which were needed for their business to recover from the impact of COVID-19. By far, the most commonly reported need were emergency relief funding grants (75%). Around one-third of respondents also reported needing updated marketing/social media campaign promoting business (37%), delay, reduction or waiver of local taxes and fees (33%) and advocacy at local, state and federal levels concerning business protections (32%).

Table 45. Are any of the following resources needed for your business to recover from the impact of COVID-19?

Resource	Number	Percent
Emergency relief funding grant	420	75.4%
Updated marketing/social media campaign promoting business	207	37.2%
Delay, reduction or waiver of local taxes and fees	184	33.0%
Advocacy at local, state, federal level concerning business protections	177	31.8%
Emergency business loans	162	29.1%
Consistent special events to encourage foot traffic	114	20.5%
Business development advisement and direction on accessing resources	105	18.9%
Education program focusing on business strategy	95	17.1%
Federal SBA Program Education	77	13.8%
Access to workforce and labor	38	6.8%
Other Resource	45	8.1%
None of the above	42	7.5%

Other resources included lifting of restrictions and mandates, extensive vaccination program and loan forgiveness.

Information and Support Needed by Businesses

Business were asked what information or support their business needs the most at the time of the survey.

As reflected by the response to the earlier question about needed resources, business owners commented most frequently on the need for more grant funding.

“Continuation or extension of current support.”

“How to access more grants. While I appreciate the loans, loans are hard to pay back with decreased foot traffic.”

“More grants and financial aid with higher limits for businesses with high operating costs. The \$10-\$15,000 limits didn’t come close to covering expenses incurred during the closure when one landlord payment for one salon alone is over \$10,000 per month!”

“We need funding and support until the pandemic is over.”

Paying rent is of particular concern for many businesses:

“Continued assistance with rental/mortgage costs and materials costs are the most useful.”

“I need funds to sustain me. Rent still needs to be paid even though it was a mandated closure and I am currently behind on my utilities.”

“Funds for rent relief until traffic levels return to normal in our mall. Covid needs to be under control!!”

Another frequently requested area of support is help in promoting their business and the support of local businesses in general.

"Leads to clients that can use my services. That way I can stay in business."

"Support in laying out a new marketing/sales plan would be helpful. Also, social media help."

"Perhaps have a method for promoting small business within the community to help keep things local."

Many business owners recognize the role of vaccinations in the ability to safely reopen and have customers return.

"A clear and focused vaccination program to help us to determine when we can confidently schedule live events."

"We need the public to be vaccinated."

"Customers to get vaccinated so they can return to the salon unafraid."

"Get everyone vaccinated for COVID so they start going out."

"Information about the vaccination plan so we can gauge future sales projections."

Other needs included loan forgiveness, lifting of state mandates and property tax relief.

Additional Feedback

Respondents were also given an opportunity to provide any additional feedback for Ramsey County about future partnerships or work with small businesses

- **Opportunities to network with other businesses**

Many businesses noted that they would like to have more opportunities to network with other local businesses.

"Some sort of business-to-business networking support would be great as well, although we understand that is quite an undertaking!"

"I am interested to learn what type of partnerships are available."

"I would love to connect with a network of freelance or self-employed artists based specifically in Ramsey County. We can help each other! This can be a somewhat isolated community so a directory would be a boon."

"It would be helpful to have on-line business conferences so that affected businesses could share stories and survival information."

"It would be an interesting tool to have local small business listings divided by subcategory. For example, start by how the grant was divided, S corp, LLC, Sole proprietor, creative/arts. then trickle down into another category and another, to group businesses together on a desired search. So, we could reach out to each other and form stronger networks with like companies."

“We would love to be paired with a business partner who could mentor us. We've tried the BBB mentorship, but they sent a retired fella whose "wife likes art" and we really need a savvy businessperson who has worked with construction/public art and understands.”

- **Business- county partnerships**

Businesses would like to see Ramsey County partnering and directly contracting with local small businesses.

“Continue to advertise and offer partnerships with small businesses in the community. It's hard to compete with big business.”

“One suggestion: why not “mandate” that MN government agencies purchase from small business first and Ramsey County grant recipients are “mandated” to buy from each other.”

“Would be great to be able to perform at county events.”

SBRF Grant Application Process

Businesses were asked a series of questions about how they learned about the grant, any help they received to complete the application and their overall experience of the application process.

Respondents learned about the SBRF grant through a variety of ways. The most common were by word of mouth (from another business or individual) and the Ramsey County website (26% respectively). It is important to note that some of these categories may overlap, for example, outreach partners may have used social media to get information out about the grant and businesses may have selected “social media” rather than an outreach partner. Businesses did vary on how they learned about the grant, for example Saint Paul businesses were more likely to learn from social media or outreach partner, suburban businesses more likely through Ramsey newsletter.

Table 46. How did you first learn about the SBRF grant?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	557	100%
From another business or individual	147	26%
Ramsey County's website	144	26%
E-newsletter	80	14%
Outreach Partner	68	12%
Social media	60	11%
City	20	4%
News Media	7	1%
Local chamber of commerce	6	1%
Business Rental Office	4	1%
Web Search	4	1%
Other	17	3%

Ramsey County CED contracted with the Alliance to partner with several community-based organizations to help provide technical assistance to small businesses on the application process. Just under one in ten respondents (8%) indicated they received help from one of the community-based

organizations as listed in Table 47.²⁰ Results from interviews with most of these outreach partners can be found in the **Error! Reference source not found.** section of this report.

Table 47. Name of Outreach Partner who Helped with Application

Partner	Number	Percent
Total	44	100.0%
Springboard for the Arts	8	18.2%
Neighborhood Development Center	6	13.6%
Hmong American Partnership	4	9.1%
Latino Economic Development Center	3	6.8%
Metropolitan Regional Arts Council	3	6.8%
Asian Economic Development Association	2	4.5%
East Side Neighborhood Development Company	2	4.5%
WomenVenture	2	4.5%
African Development Center	1	2.3%
African Economic Development Solutions	1	2.3%
Mni Sota Fund	1	2.3%
Other (please specify)	3	6.8%
Don't remember/prefer not to answer	8	18.2%

Ease of Application Process

Two-thirds of respondents (68%) indicated that the application process was somewhat or very easy.

Table 48. How would you rate the application process for the SBRF Grant overall?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	557	100.0%
Very easy	181	32.5%
Somewhat easy	195	35.0%
Neutral	111	19.9%
Somewhat difficult	65	11.7%
Very difficult	5	0.9%

The SBRF grant became available to sole proprietors and creative businesses during the second round of funding. Creative businesses were asked how applicable they found the application to be to creative businesses. Two-thirds of creative business respondents (68%) indicated that they found it to be somewhat or very applicable.

²⁰ No respondents reported working with Black Women's Wealth Alliance, Hmong Chamber of Commerce, Minnesota Black Chamber of Commerce, St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, nor Urban Village.

Table 49. How applicable was the application process to creative economy businesses?

Response	Number	Percent
Total	59	100.0%
Very applicable	21	35.6%
Somewhat applicable	19	32.2%
Neutral	15	25.4%
Not very applicable	3	5.1%
Not at all applicable	1	1.7%

Feedback on Application Experience

Experience with the application process and assistance provided by the Metropolitan Consortium of Community Developers (MCCD) varied greatly. A number of respondents reported positive experiences:

“Thank you - this whole process was easier, and much more clear than PPP loans.”

“I called in a couple of times to ask questions, and I receive such helpful, polite responses from the staff. It was wonderful - congratulations to those fielding calls for the high quality service!”

“For us the grant process was easy to navigate and the staff support was helpful. You should help DEED make their process easier and more accessible online!”

“It was a pleasure working with the staff administering the grant.”

“The emails back and forth were very kind. You could tell people were trying to help keep us going.”

“I really appreciate the ease of application and the speed at which the process, uh, proceeded.”

Others saw opportunities for the improvement in the process and had recommendations to improve similar application processes for future opportunities. The most common recommendations were in the following areas.

- **Improve marketing of business grant opportunities:**

“If I hadn't been scouring the internet for grant opportunities. I wouldn't have seen it. Thinking of other ways to get the word out- maybe post cards in the mail?”

“Not sure if this grant was shared with non-English speakers. Several people did not know about the grant.”

“I wish this program had been more widely announced. I only heard about it from another business owner.”

- **Have clearer instructions and definitions in the application form:**

“A few of the questions used different time frames or vague time frames, which made for a bit of guessing.”

"If instructions could be extremely precise, that would be helpful. The wording for the instructions was rather vague... There was conflicting information as to when I was supposed to start counting my expenses. (beginning of March or March 15th), and how far I should go into the later months (July or August... both were mentioned as an end time in different parts of the grant info.)"

- **Improve communication, including around answering questions and a mechanism for businesses to confirm their application status:**

"The communication and delayed responses from the Metropolitan Consortium was the most difficult part of the process. We were bounced between people there and we were not clear on what was happening or what the issue was."

"Emails did not get answered."

"Ability to monitor the progress of the application and evaluation would be helpful."

"My only complaint is once we submitted everything it literally went into a Black hole of sorts until we got an approval email many weeks later. Better status reporting and a solid ETA would be helpful."

- **Provide a checklist that includes all application questions and supporting materials the business will need to complete the application:**

"Having the grant questions and a list of needed attachments available prior to starting the grant process would help to streamline it."

- **Address issues with the online application system, especially regarding file uploads:**

"Allowing more than one attachment per category (instead of having to combine multiple attachments as one file prior to uploading)."

"Letting us submit information via uploading a spreadsheet vs. listing. We order supplies weekly from different suppliers and vendors and pulling together a list by supplier/vendor with over the time period was challenging. It would have been easiest to send a spreadsheet with the expenses rather than list them."

- **Better fit application to different types of businesses, especially sole proprietors and creative businesses:**

"Have questions tailored to different types of businesses. A Photography business differs greatly from a standard retail operation. Maybe think about not having a "one size fits all approach" to questions?"

"As a sole proprietor, I found the process more in line with a larger business entity."

Outreach Partner Interview Results

In addition to the online survey of funding recipients, the evaluation team also conducted a series of interviews with the outreach partners who were involved with the first two rounds of funding. These organizations (described in greater detail in the introduction section) were instrumental in supporting the outreach and technical assistance efforts, specifically with BIPOC business owners operating in Ramsey County. The intentionality of this role is revealed in the range of supporting organizations selected to perform this work, representing a wide range of diaspora communities.

The Alliance produced two reports (one for each funding Round) that summarized the outreach partners' experiences with the SBRF; these were reviewed by the evaluation team as part of the background document review process. According to these progress reports, the partners conducted outreach about the SBRF grant with over 250,000 business contacts via social media, email and other outreach efforts. They also provided technical assistance to more than 250 businesses, many of whom "wanted to meet in person."²¹²²

Overall, the findings reported in the Alliance reports complement the findings of this Ramsey County evaluation, and will be mentioned, when appropriate, throughout this section.

General Business Grants

For general business grants awarded in Rounds 1 and 2 (through CARES funding), the average amount was \$8,380 per grant, with more than half of all beneficiaries receiving the \$10,000 maximum grant.²³ Overall, interview respondents from partner organizations felt that grants of this limited amount were helpful in keeping businesses afloat for a short period of time but did not alleviate the long-term financial challenges that small businesses were facing and continue to face during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

"It helps in some ways...My assessment of it, and what we're hearing from our entrepreneurs, is that it helped them to get through maybe a stage of it, or a phase of it, whatever were their expenses at that time. But, did it help through the whole pandemic? Depending on the size of the business. If it's a larger firm, it may have helped them for a shorter amount of time. If it's a smaller, one-person operation, maybe it was sufficient to carry them through for a couple of months."

"The cash assistance was very important – crucial – for many of these businesses, all of them, actually ... It was a lifeline. I mean, it was not enough for most of them, obviously. But whatever little they could qualify for and were awarded, that was helpful for all of them. I think they were very thankful that this was available income for those who received the money."

"Most definitely, with the clients that we've helped and even the ones where we are just talking to them, this grant has helped. Many of them tremendously. We've had situations where just receiving the grant has given them so much relief. Not just business-wise, but at home, economically, socially, personally, too."

While partners were overwhelmingly favorable about the impact of these grants, they also had a lot of feedback on the challenges their applicants had faced and suggestions to enhance the process for

²² Alliance for Metropolitan Stability (2020). *Ramsey County Small Business Relief Fund – Round 2 Final Report*.

²³ Of 830 grants given in Round 1 and 2, 56% (n=463) were for \$10,000. However, of these, four businesses received more than one grant, one of which totaled \$10,000 between the two awards.

future iterations. For general business owners, partners felt that the biggest challenge was proving they met the eligibility requirements through providing the formal documentation of revenues lost, which was required to receive a grant.

“We’re dealing with businesses whose normal way of operating didn’t include working with a bookkeeper or tracking the receipts on expensive software on a regular basis.”

“We were still before the deadline for you to submit your 2019 tax returns – there was an extension until July [2020]. So, if you’re applying and you didn’t do your tax returns yet ... there was also the need to demonstrate a loss between the first quarter of 2018 and the first quarter of 2019. That’s where people got hung up, because for small businesses, you’re not filing quarterly tax returns, you do it at the end of the year. For an LLC or a sole proprietor, they’re not producing monthly or quarterly financial statements. They’re just saving receipts.”

Another critique was that the eligibility requirements and the documentation required for the application process were not always consistent, which created a barrier for sole proprietors and other small businesses that were not required to be formally registered but had to show proof of good standing with the Secretary of State, nonetheless.

“Some of them were not registered with the Secretary of State and that became a thorn because if you didn’t really need to be registered with the Secretary of State, if you’re a shoe store that’s a sole proprietor, you didn’t have to be registered. But one of the required documents was evidence that you’re in good standing with the Secretary of State. So, then we had to get people to sign up and register. That became more complicated...”

In many cases, these hurdles were too challenging for aspiring applicants to overcome, which prevented them from applying for a grant.

“That was big – a category of businesses were not eligible because they didn’t have a registration, or current registration. That was automatically taking at least 10 to 15% of the applicants out ... they opened their business, they registered, but they never remembered to renew. I think there’s a lack of information from the Secretary of State’s office in other languages, and maybe even for English speaking businesses, to be aware of that requirement. For a lot of them it was so painful because they didn’t qualify for a grant, they didn’t have their registration current, and it was so sad.”

Grants to Support BIPOC Communities

In order to reach a wide range of BIPOC communities and businesses, Ramsey County established the consortium with MCCD, the Alliance, and 14 community-based partner organizations, to provide outreach support and technical assistance to applicants. In general, respondents identified similar challenges for BIPOC businesses but that the magnitude of these barriers were amplified by language barriers, a lesser degree of comfort working within governmental systems and structures, and limited availability of documentation that was required to participate in these systems. Most of these issues are also documented within the Alliance’s final reports as challenges faced, including limited trust in government agencies, limited English language and computer literacy skills.

Limited Trust. While the respondents do feel that the strategy of partnering with community-based organizations goes a long way towards building increased trust and engagement within BIPOC communities, it is still not enough to circumvent systemic barriers in the system.

“Helping these businesses get registered, the right registration, having them understand how to do taxes... that’s the first step in getting people to trust the system. We’re not here to get you, the system is not here to get you, the system is here to help you.”

“It goes back to timelines and to trust. Inequities are pervasive because we don’t put the time and the flexibility [to build] trust into these emergency and crisis funding situations, to get funding to those folks [in BIPOC communities].”

Limited English Language Skills. One of the biggest areas in which the partners who focus on a specific racial/ethnic population could offer specialized support was in translating and language support for applicants who do not speak English fluently.

“Translating documents and information fell on us and some of the other partner organizations that have smaller budgets, because we recognize the need to get that information out to the businesses. But if there could be a way that the County could ... [provide those] resources already translated, that would have made a difference because then we’re not taking the time to translate everything. I’ve had conversations with other organizations that are predominantly non-native English speakers, and that’s something that comes across often.”

“For many of them, English is a second language. They may not be able to read it proficiently, they may not be able to understand it fully. For clients that a bank would work with, this might not be a huge problem. But for some of our clients, trying to complete an application that’s two, three pages long, it does become a challenge.”

“I think language is important. I was glad to see so many bilingual agencies sign up to be TA providers. I even referred some of our Latina businesses [to them] because I knew it would be easier for them to communicate in their first language.”

Limited Computer Literacy. Partners also shared that many small business owners seeking technical assistance had limited computer and technology skills, which made it even more challenging for them to navigate the application process without receiving significant technical assistance from the community partner.

“We started feeling the pressure of more and more people needing assistance because of the whole ‘digital divide.’ Because not everybody spends a lot of time on their computers, especially with the restaurants, retail and barber shops and hair salons. These are not people that sit behind a desk and work on their computers.”

This issue is further magnified by limited English skills, creating multiple literacy challenges for those struggling with both language and technology skill gaps.

“English language is one big barrier. Another is technology, using technology itself. Even when they receive the email and they are able to read the language itself; it really is a challenge and a barrier.”

Creative Business Grants

Of the grants awarded in the first two rounds, 72 were given to creative businesses, for an average amount of \$5,193. Two arts-focused partner organizations were brought onboard support this work starting in Round 2 when creative businesses were added to the eligibility pool. Partners applauded the inclusion of sole proprietors and creative businesses and the inherent recognition of the value and need for creative businesses in Ramsey County, including those owned by BIPOC artists.

“I think that it’s progressive for any county or any small business department to be thinking about creative businesses because most of them don’t actually put the focus and attention that’s needed to ensure those communities are included. I think Ramsey County making the decision to include creative businesses and individual artists was really important.”

This feedback was not only heard from arts-serving partners; many of the BIPOC-serving partners also said that creative businesses in their focus communities became eligible with the addition of the creative business grants. However, one partner shared that, while changes for Round 2 expanded the eligibility in such a way that should have reached more women artist entrepreneurs from immigrant communities, the documentation requirements were still too restrictive to reach all those who were eligible.

“Most of our artisans are women, especially within the Karen community, there’s a tradition of weaving traditional clothing. It was not super-applicable for them just because it was really challenging to demonstrate the loss when the loss is coming in the form of missed opportunities, rather than being a huge rent payment or something.”

Another partner questioned the extent to which BIPOC businesses received these grants.

“I feel like the initial goal and desire was good. I think in the execution, some of those initial goals and desires, especially equity and reaching the artistic community, I think they got lost. Looking at the breakdown of who, at least in terms of racial and ethnic categories, who received the most money, applicants from Black and African American communities just didn’t get funded. It was not surprising, but it was very disappointing.”

The Alliance report for Round 2 also discusses the unique challenges of supporting artists to apply for grants, stating that artists “did not have the same level of bookkeeping and general business acumen that other business owners in the same community have.” They suggested that artists require longer lead times to prepare required documentation and also to do “more relationship building and familiarity with bureaucratic systems.”²⁴

Grants-making Recommendations from Partner Organizations

One of the most frequently heard recommendations from the partner organizations is to offer more time for applicants to prepare their applications, which is also mentioned in both Alliance reports as a major challenge for the partners. While the respondents understood that the COVID-19 pandemic required

²⁴ The Alliance (2020), SBRF Round 2, pg. 3.

extraordinary approaches to this process, they also felt that shorter lead times put more vulnerable applicants at a disadvantage as compared with more established and tenured businesses who are accustomed to having this type of documentation on hand.

“The best thing is to have as long a lead time as possible, so that folks can hear about it and then, if they require a lot of supporting documentation, they have time to gather that stuff or generate it if they don’t necessarily have it. We run into a lot of artists who don’t necessarily have all the documentation on a regular basis. They’re not dealing with banks and credit unions that require those documents.”

Other recommendations from partners included:

- **Provide training, mentorship, and capacity development support** for aspiring entrepreneurs and existing small business owners, focusing specifically on BIPOC and recent immigrant communities (as one respondent characterized it, “non-traditional entrepreneurs”), to register their businesses, pay their taxes, and access capital for business development including public funds, and to expand their comfort level with integrating technology into standard business practices.
- **Provide FAQs or quick reference guides** with videos or screenshots for community-based partner organizations providing technical assistance and for entrepreneurs seeking grants, in order to enhance access to consistent guidance and resources.
- **Ensure that all support is available in multiple languages**, in written and oral forms to facilitate access for those do not speak English fluently and for those with limited literacy skills. Use these county communications as an opportunity to demonstrate cultural competency for diaspora communities and to model public messages, such as mask wearing.
- **Offer forgivable loan funds managed by long-term community partnerships** to reach a segment of the community who are normally underserved or blocked off from access to capital that is more widely available from banks or agencies.

Feedback about Outreach Partnerships

The partner organizations overwhelmingly felt that the consortium partnership model enabled Ramsey County to enlist the support of community-based partners for outreach support and technical assistance and thus, to provide grants to small businesses and entrepreneurs, that would otherwise not have been reached.

“I don’t think Ramsey County would have been able to reach all these communities... into the immigrant communities, the artistic communities. Having these partnerships with organizations that work primarily with these communities was really smart. We were able to reach those who probably would never be on the Ramsey County list. Or even if they saw something come out of Ramsey County, on their own, they would probably be more hesitant to apply without some kind of intermediary relationships with all the partners.”

Another partner asserted that without the support of the Alliance, the smaller community-based partners would be less likely to enter into a contractual relationship with MCCD and Ramsey County themselves.

“The only reason why we would do this is because Ramsey County and MCCD went out to the Alliance. If not for the Alliance, we would not be part of this. Our sense was that Ramsey County had no interest in working with us.”

Across the board, the partners provided concrete feedback on how participating in this consortium enhanced their organizational development. They felt that the opportunity to come together as a group, to discuss experiences and share effective strategies, was a rewarding and effective model to develop their own organizational capacity.

“This was an unprecedented kind of new experience, probably for all of us. This is the first grant that we’ve been a part of, where we’ve provided this type of support to the community ... We would love to continue to partner on stuff like this. It was really great that this was a win for the County being able to achieve what they were setting out to do. But then also, it provided us with an opportunity to continue and kind of deepen those relationships with businesses in our community.”

“I think coming in and engaging in those conversations with members of those different organizations and hearing how everybody is approaching this – MCCD, the Alliance, other organizations, especially ethnic organizations, they’ve already gone through similar challenges that we went through as well. It’s great that there’s a consortium through this effort, to really hear about the process and to learn from each other. It’s peer learning or peer-to-peer coaching.”

“Through working with Ramsey County, I was able to form very good relationships with some businesses in the Payne-Phalen corridor... It has been really one of the most satisfying experiences in my short tenure here. If it hadn’t been for Ramsey County, it probably would have taken way longer to develop those relationships and to this day, they’re still calling me when they need to consult on something.”

This feedback suggests that these ties between the various consortium members continues, and its sustainability could further be fostered through ongoing engagement efforts by Ramsey County. Partners generally expressed a favorable attitude towards continuing this ongoing relationship.

“We’re going forward and creating partnerships [through this consortium] that will certainly last longer than any contract or any point in time. I think it’s a partnership that is here to stay, from our perspective, we see a lot of value in being connected to a consortium like that.”

However, there were at least two partner organizations that had already withdrawn from the consortium because their focus communities were more heavily concentrated in neighboring communities and/or they felt their organizational resources could be better invested elsewhere. Given the heavy investment of time and resources dedicated to securing and managing a government partnership, it is not surprising that partners can be forced to choose where to invest their time and resources. Within their feedback there is an implied recommendation that these entities should be working together, and that these geographic divisions can force duplication of effort, confusion, and even limited participation.

“We were contracted both for Hennepin County and for Ramsey County. Given that the bulk of our network is in Hennepin County, and our time was spread pretty thin, it made sense to be more acute with our focus, so we decided to stick with Hennepin County instead of Ramsey.”

Overall, the partners felt that the consortium had been a positive experience. The primary challenge partnerships that respondents identified most frequently was ensuring prompt and consistent communications between the various parties, including greater clarity in eligibility guidelines, providing

one point of contact to whom questions can be directed, and stronger engagement in overall processes, including inputs for what determines eligibility and selecting which applicants get awarded grants. While many respondents did identify a key point of contact by name, others still struggled to access help.

“We got some feedback from someone who was told that their application was ineligible... I don’t know if there was a misunderstanding between us and the county, or between MCCD and the county, but they put a lot of time and effort into putting an application together, and then were told after the fact that you’re not actually eligible because of this technicality that wasn’t clearly enumerated in the county guidelines.”

“I’m not sure if there was ever a full set of agreed guidelines about how much risk, how much flexibility, and how the money was going to get out. There’s a game of telephone between the partners telling the county what to do, the county telling MCCD what to do, and MCCD being at some of the meetings and figuring out what the actual guidelines were ... how those shifted with the various rounds made it hard for us as a technical partner to communicate consistently and clearly.”

“If folks are coming to us as a trusted partner, then having our organizational mind wrapped around the whole picture of the funding would have been really helpful.”

“If there was a contact person at the organization, even a technical person. One of my coworkers had a call from someone who was having technical difficulties, and she wasn’t sure who to direct that person to. It was out of her realm to help that person and she wasn’t sure where to turn, or how to track that person. So, some like contact name or number, something like that would be helpful.”

Aside from the above comments, the feedback on MCCD’s and the Alliance’s work to support the consortium was generally very positive. Many respondents cited assistance provided by the Alliance’s Executive Director as being their most helpful resource for answering questions.

“We’ve been launching members of MCCD and now are also in a partnership group with the Alliance and a number of other technical assistance providers that they work with, and have really worked to identify what hurdles the whole group has found in accessing this funding. Not just for Ramsey County, but it’s pretty consistent across the board, no matter what county or state – there are pretty similar hurdles, so kind of working as a group to address those.”

“We’re really excited in the relationships that this has brought to us. There’s more work that this Alliance-led consortium of people, plus other folks, that can spin off into its own thing now, which is exciting.”

“I would just affirm that, anytime I had to reach out to Joo Hee [at the Alliance] or MCCD or Ramsey County, they were very responsive.”

In addition, respondents had very positive feedback for Ramsey County overall for the grants given and for the supportive approach to partnership and community engagement.

“First and foremost, thank you for having allowed us the opportunity to work with Ramsey County. When local community organizations work with the government, the county, that’s when we build community trust.”

“Creating relationships goes a long way in communities of color and immigrant communities. Knowing that someone in the government, in their local government, has been in contact with them and has reached out to say ‘I’m from Ramsey County and if you’re interested, if you have a need, then I can help you.’ That could be a significant step in creating relationships.”

“Don’t let this moment go. Even if we get to a point in 2021, maybe even 2022, when the needs of the community – when they’re not in such dire need. We could shift to continue this partnership and look for other opportunities that build a relationship with the community. We shouldn’t let this momentum that we’ve gained slowly die off.”

Partnership Recommendations from Partner Organizations

As discussed above in the section on partnership challenges, respondents requested clearer guidance on a contact person to whom questions and problems could be addressed. While some respondents could name a point of contact, others could not and thus, recommended that this be more readily available for partners providing technical assistance to applicants. Respondents also suggested the following recommendations:

- Expand knowledge- sharing efforts to raise awareness about key resources and regulatory services, as well as other information that would be useful for aspiring entrepreneurs and the community-based partner organizations that support them.
- Facilitate partnerships using shared space to promote a greater sense of solidarity and participation in an active consortium of partners (especially when in-person meetings are again a viable alternative).
- Facilitate greater synergies with other public partners operating in tandem with Ramsey County, including the State of Minnesota, neighboring counties (especially Hennepin), the city of Saint Paul, and others, to coordinate efforts, issue joint funding applications, share resources, and minimize the siloed approach to government services that can inhibit cooperative efforts.
- Explore strategies to have a division of labor between partners, with some focusing on outreach and others with more experience in managing community development financial institutions (CDFIs) and public sector funding opportunities, providing the technical assistance with an effective and efficient referral system amongst them, including support for translation for those who do not speak English fluently.
- Continue to diversify the pool of community-based organizations with which Ramsey County partners, to expand outreach, build trust, and promote awareness of county resources to support small businesses and entrepreneurs in BIPOC communities.
- Explore strategies to include partner organizations in the application review and selection processes.

Discussion

The next section will answer each of the evaluation questions based on the data detailed above.

What proportion of grants went to businesses in owned by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)? Did the grants reach businesses in these targeted communities?

Just under half of the grants from Round 1 and 2 (44%, n=362) went to businesses owned by BIPOC individuals. Without data on the total number of BIPOC-owned small businesses in Ramsey County by race/ethnicity of the primary owner, it is hard to assess whether this rate is equitable to White-owned businesses. Interviews with and grant reports from partner organizations that provided outreach and technical assistance to BIPOC-owned businesses show that these grants did reach and impact BIPOC-owned businesses but that some would-be applicants were prevented from applying by their limited capacity to demonstrate a financial loss (often due to less sophisticated bookkeeping practices) and a lack of trust in the intent behind governmental assistance.

In addition, BIPOC business owners from immigrant communities faced additional barriers to accessing grant application and informational materials due to cultural and language barriers, as well as access to and competency in the technology needed to learn about the funding opportunities and to complete the application online. Partnering with community-based organizations, and especially CDFIs, is an effective practice to promote a greater sense trust and provide culturally-appropriate support for BIPOC communities and other groups that face barriers to accessing business resources (e.g., women, creative businesses) to provide better access to grants and public funding in general, including translation and interpretation when needed.

For businesses that face challenges in accessing grants because they do not meet – or cannot provide sufficient documentation to demonstrate that they meet the grant eligibility requirements – greater flexibility and expansion of these requirements to include creative and sole proprietors did increase access for BIPOC businesses. However, remaining eligibility restrictions and documentation requirements that are not a good fit for the business and accounting practices of micro-businesses and home-based businesses continue to limit the accessibility and impact for BIPOC and other marginalized communities. While changes were made in Round 2 to expand eligibility to include creative and sole proprietors in Round 2, which was advocated by a number of partner organizations, did increase access for BIPOC businesses. However, eligibility restriction for micro businesses and home-based businesses continue to limit eligibility for some BIPOC businesses, especially micro-entrepreneurs and gig workers.

What impact did the Small Business Relief Fund have on small businesses, particularly businesses in the targeted communities?

Businesses varied greatly in how they were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, what financial resources they have had access to, how the SBRF grant helped and their future outlook and needs. County efforts to support businesses should be customized to the unique needs of different business subgroups. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically decreased businesses revenues and whether they were even able to remain open during the pandemic.

There were also large differences in which businesses had access to business-related resources to cover costs such as loans, credit cards and savings and may experience more of a long-term impact and personal risk by relying on personal resources, such as individual savings, loans, credit cards, help from family and friends and even early withdrawal from retirement savings. Some business owners may not even have access to these personal resources. For example, nearly half of businesses (43%)

reported accessing personal savings to cover their business costs. It is anticipated that many of the other half of business owners may not have any personal savings available to them to use.

In addition to loss of revenues, the most widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses was unplanned expenses due to COVID-19, such as personal protective equipment. Many businesses also experienced a decrease of business hours and hours available to workers. Temporary closure of businesses was also an issue, with a small percent reporting that their business has since closed permanently.

When looking at the impact of the SBRF grant on these COVID-related issues, the largest impact for the most businesses was in the cost of unplanned expenses due to COVID-19.

Nearly all businesses were helped at least partially by the grant: 95% of businesses were helped at least “some extent” with one or more of their reported COVID-related issues. However, it is most likely that the grant has not resolved their crisis as only 50% of businesses reported that they were helped to a “great extent” with one or more of their reported COVID-19 related issues.

Businesses are cautious and mixed with their outlook. With most ranging from a somewhat positive to somewhat negative outlook on the future of their business’ revenues. Many have little cash on hand to cover expenses and half of businesses with staff anticipated further staff reductions at the time of the survey.

When it comes to BIPOC-owned businesses, these businesses tended to have a number of factors that put them at increased risk during the pandemic, including being forced to close under executive order, being in operation for less years and having had lower annual revenues prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic than White-owned businesses.

The SBRF grant appears to have had a stronger impact for BIPOC-owned businesses than White-owned businesses. BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to report that the SBRF grant helped with four or more of the COVID-related issues they reported and to have helped with 76% or more of their reported issues.

How can Ramsey County continue to support businesses during the pandemic?

The largest concern on the minds of many business owners is whether they will be able to keep their businesses open until the end of the pandemic. The most obvious and commonly heard answer for what is needed, is for Ramsey County to offer more grants to provide more financial support for businesses who continue to experience limited revenues because of COVID-19.

Even if their businesses do survive the pandemic, small business owners are concerned about the long-term impact on their revenues and customer buying/patronage behavior. In order to advance the goal of returning to normal (i.e., pre-pandemic) consumer practices, residents need to feel safe to shop and socialize in public (especially indoor) environments. Widespread provision of the COVID-19 vaccination in our community and lifting of mandates when transmission rates allow it are important milestones for many businesses to feel secure that they have sufficient revenues (and expectation of future revenues) to continue standard operations into the future.

Another measure that would offer financial support to small businesses would be to offer relief from local taxes. This might be accomplished through various measures, including delayed payment terms, reduction or waiver of amounts due, especially for income derived from CARES funding. While businesses have relied upon various measures to cover revenue losses, including loans and Go-Fund-Me type donations, these grants were also a major source of financial assistance for many businesses

who have experienced significant loss in revenues due to the pandemic. Some applicants were concerned about whether accepting a CARES grant might make them ineligible to receive other assistance they were already relying on, or that receiving grants from multiple government entities (e.g., other neighboring counties, the State of Minnesota, city grants, etc.) is “double-dipping,” and would be in violation of some unknown restriction.

Government advocacy for business protections and emergency business loans are also needed. As shown in the business profiles in Appendix A4, businesses in a number of categories vary in their access to financial resources, how they are impacted by COVID-19 and what supports are most helpful to them. This includes creative businesses, BIPOC-owned businesses, Woman-owned businesses, sole proprietors and businesses in Saint Paul. Efforts to customize the application process and how they meet eligibility requirements for grants is essential, as well as other customized business support strategies.

In addition, many business owners would like support to develop their capacity in business skills, such as marketing or fundraising, in order to boost their revenues by re-attracting lapsed customers and drawing in new customers. Partner organizations would also like to have more opportunities to build their capacity to provide support for businesses seeking funding, as well as clear and accessible guidance (in multiple languages) to help them in this work.

The most often-heard feedback from partners was the need for clear and consistent guidance, providing a point of contact within Ramsey County to answer questions, and to give the partner organizations a sense of confidence that they can respond to the needs of their clients with sufficient accurate information to support the grants-making process. Partners and businesses would appreciate more detailed FAQs and quick reference guides, most especially about eligibility guidelines and documentation requirements, to answer questions from small business owners quickly and accurately. They also suggested greater alignment and cooperation between local and state government entities providing grants, to make funding more accessible with less bureaucracy required to access it.

What can Ramsey County learn from its partnership with MCCD and partnering outreach organizations to inform Community Economic Development’s future business outreach and collaborations to support and sustain small businesses?

The biggest take-away from the SBRF partnership experience in 2020 is that Ramsey County benefited greatly from collaborating with these community-based organizations to reach BIPOC and other marginalized groups, including women and creative businesses, that might not otherwise learn about and apply for these grants. These partnerships built trust and promoted greater acceptance of government support for businesses experiencing unprecedented challenges this past year. These partnerships also built the capacity of these partner organizations to support Ramsey County’s work by providing technical assistance to potential applicants.

Overall, these partner organizations greatly appreciated the opportunity to support SBRF grants and want to feel they are an integral part of the grants-making process. They gave positive feedback on the eligibility changes that Ramsey County implemented for Round 2 based on their feedback to include sole proprietors and creative businesses as eligible applicants and felt this reflected a successful partnership model with mutual feedback systems.

Several partners expressed an appreciation for regular partners’ meetings to share experiences and resources. They requested more training on key technical assistance areas, to provide better services for clients seeking grants. One partner also expressed a desire to contribute to the selection process for grantees. While this suggestion would promote a sense of inclusion and transparency between partner

organizations and with the general public, it also would require clear guidelines and systems to ensure that this input still enabled fair and unbiased selection of grantees.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

As the county and businesses recover from the economic and other impacts of the pandemic, in the short-term we recommend that the county:

Continue and Expand Direct Help to Businesses

- **Provide ongoing grant relief to businesses, particularly to address help with rent and mortgage payments.** Businesses have received temporary relief through the grant funds already awarded and need additional support in order to stay in business during the pandemic and to mitigate adverse long-term impacts.
- **Work with the Information and Public Records to explore how to work with businesses in Ramsey County to reduce, delay or waive property taxes.** This is one business expense on which Ramsey County has direct influence and should look at how to provide relief in this area.
- **Review funding guidelines** to ensure that accepting a SBRF grant will not disqualify applicants from receiving other funding, including public assistance and other grants.

Provide Other Business Supports

- **Develop business support strategies specific to sub-populations of businesses,** such as sole proprietors, woman and BIPOC-owned, creative, small businesses and industries uniquely impacted by state mandates and significant shifts in customer buying/patronage behavior. Refer to Appendix A4: Small Business Relief Fund **Error! Reference source not found.** of this report for additional information on the unique experiences and needs of these businesses.
- **Support businesses in marketing strategies including local business campaigns to help with small business recovery.** Many businesses recognize the need to re-attract former customers and expand their customer base due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Businesses would benefit from support in marketing their business and overall campaigns to promote shopping at local businesses as was way to help the local economy recover from the pandemic.
- **Invest in widespread COVID-19 vaccination and link vaccination campaigns to local business support.** Businesses recognize the role of vaccination in helping their staff and customers safely return to their business. Linking vaccination to local business support, such as a “help us get back to business- get vaccinated!” campaign, would support success on both fronts.
- **Opportunities for businesses to network.** An interest reported by many businesses was to find greater and more diverse opportunities to network with other local businesses.

Enhance Approaches and Practices for Grants-making

- **Continue outreach and expand upon current marketing strategies** for promoting future grant opportunities. Ensure cultural, language and technology barriers are addressed in application processes and in the technical assistance offered to small business applicants.
- **Reduce barriers to grant eligibility and application process.** Revisit what types of “work” is eligible for grant relief, including home-based businesses and in the gig economy. Explore opportunities to build more flexibility into documentation requirements to enable a larger

proportion of these types of micro-businesses to apply for grants. For the application process, provide detailed information about the application and documentation processes in the beginning, including clear definitions for all requested information in multiple languages (both written and spoken) for non-English speaking applicants.

- **Adjust application materials to provide greater flexibility** for different types of businesses, especially sole proprietors and creative businesses who cannot meet the current documentation guidelines but still qualify for and need financial assistance. Explore opportunities to offer a wider range of funding types, including forgivable loans and grants facilitated by multiple government entities (e.g., city, neighboring counties, state).
- **Develop a process to track applications and businesses that are not funded** in order to better understand any inequities in the application and approval processes, to enable the County to reduce or eliminate these barriers in the future.
- **Improve communication systems and materials:** establish and visibly promote contact information to reach a single point of contact within Ramsey County who is consistently available to answer questions from applicants and technical assistance partners. Establish and visibly promote a mechanism for businesses to confirm their application status, in order to reduce the sense of frustration and promote transparency about selection processes and award timeframes.
- **Develop clearer FAQ and quick-reference guides** for applicants and technical assistance partners, including a checklist that includes all application questions and supporting materials the business will need to complete the application.

Long-term Recommendations

Through the COVID-19 recovery and beyond, to improve partnerships with the business community, we recommend:

- **Invest in long-term partnership models** building off the success of the SBRF grants to engage partners in supporting Ramsey County's work on a larger scale, including involving them in development and review processes as appropriate.
- **Expand the range of types of organizational partners** to support a broader range of stakeholders, including women and at-risk communities.
- **Engage with partners through inter-governmental partnerships**, including joint projects with neighboring city, county, and state agencies that are working towards a common purpose.
- **Promote collaboration and asset sharing between CBO partners**, including referrals to appropriate culturally-based organizations for applicants with limited English language skills, and to CDFIs for applicants who may require more sophisticated technical assistance to complete an application.

Service Delivery Redesign

Introduction

In 2018, Ramsey County began the work to define and describe the provision of county services in a way which centered the resident and their experience launching the Residents First strategic priority. The 2018, 2019 and 2020 Strategic Plans each prioritized driving improvements in service delivery and facilities, with an emphasis on engaging residents and employees, process efficiency, innovative technology and accessibility. From the strategic priority emerged the Residents First Program in 2019. The Residents First Program conducted enterprise-wide analysis of operations to find gaps and overlaps in how services are provided, worked directly with residents to include their input in recommended changes and engaged employees to improve the resident and employee experience. In March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ramsey County identified the need to expedite changes to the resident experience.

The goals of the project are that:

- Residents are easily connected to needed services.
- Service delivery is centered on resident needs, rather than policies, rules, budgets, or building locations. The service delivery system is invisible to residents.
- Establish a “one door” system where there is parity in services and quality of services regardless of how a resident contacts the county.

The major components for the first six months of the project, which set the stage for future changes over the next two to three years, were to:

- Establish five services center hubs which will offer comprehensive services in person. Initially these service centers will include Workforce Solutions, Financial Assistance Services, Social Services, and Property Tax services.
- Staff service centers with navigators who will act as a guide to county services, connecting people to needed services and ensure people get the services they need.
- Provide technology access at service centers so that residents can connect online to services, access technology for other things like completing applications, job searches and applications, and other things that require the internet.

The service centers and navigator services were launched in August 2020. This report will focus on August to December 2020 and used to inform future planning.

Evaluation Methods

This evaluation answers the following questions:

- What have we learned in the first six months to inform and improve practices in the next two years?
- What is the resident experience of service centers, technology access, and navigators?
 - How does this compare to other ways of accessing services?
- What are the training and support needs of navigators to successfully service residents?

Navigator Tracking Metrics

Supporting data from the Navigator Metrics tracking tool is also included in this report. This is a Microsoft Forms database where navigators track user information and demographics, including data on users’ age, gender, ethnicity/race, and spoken language preference, as well as the site visited, type and topic of interaction with the navigator, and how much time they spent working with the navigator.

These data were analyzed using SPSS and included in this report to the extent that information was relevant and contributed significant content.

Resident Survey

A resident survey was conducted in October 2020. Evaluation staff delivered surveys and \$10 Target gift cards as completion incentives to the site supervisors on Monday, October 19. The number of surveys to each site were based on weekly average interactions in the navigator tracking log in September. Surveys were provided in English, Hmong, Somali, Spanish, and Karen. Site supervisors and navigators were directed to offer surveys to residents whose interaction met the criteria to be entered into the navigator tracking log. Some sites, in particular the West Side and Roseville Library, had large numbers of people visiting to vote or drop off ballots who did not otherwise interact with the navigators. Because the intent of the survey was to understand navigator interactions, navigators were told to avoid offering surveys to these visitors who would not be there outside of the election. Evaluation staff picked up the surveys on Monday, October 26, except for Downtown, which was given another week to complete more surveys.

Interviews

Qualitative data for this report consist of 11 semi-structured interviews that were conducted over web conference platforms with six navigators and five navigator supervisors in November 2020. Questions between the two respondent groups were similar but not the same and explored the main themes of the research questions identified above. Respondents include all navigator and navigator supervisor staff who were in their positions in November 2020 (except one individual who was out of the office during the data collection period), as well as one supervisor who had left the position.

Interviews were also conducted with ten financial workers embedded in the Maplewood, West Side, Roseville, and Shoreview service centers who worked in those sites in November and December. Interviews were conducted in January and February 2021.

Participation in the interviews was voluntary; sessions were recorded and transcribed in all cases except one, in which the respondent had technical difficulties. Interviews were scheduled in advance and respondents provided a copy of the interview questions so they could prepare responses before the meeting if they wished to.

Interviews were transcribed with Otter transcription software and coded using DeDoose qualitative analysis software according to a code set developed by the research team prior to starting the analysis process. Three researchers participated in the coding process to enhance validity through comparison of analysis results. Finally, the results were organized into a formal Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations and Quotations matrix, to which all three researchers contributed content; these data were combined with the quantitative data (described below) and organized into this report.

Financial Worker Survey

In the Downtown site, 68 financial workers provided FAS support in November and December. Workers were chosen by lottery and very few worked more than one or two shifts in the Downtown service center. A nine-question survey was sent to these financial workers in January 2020 to ask about their experiences working with navigators.

The survey and interview questions are provided in [Appendix B](#).

Limitations

While no major limitations were noted in the research process, possible limitations to the data must be considered, and include the following:

- Respondent bias: Respondents may formulate their responses to please the interviewer or withhold information that the respondent feels could be damaging to someone or something associated with the project. Concerns about this limitation is especially prevalent in this study as the respondents are Ramsey County employees and thus are dependent on the position for their employment and are correspondingly intimate with the topic and have strong emotional connection to it. In order to mitigate this issue to the greatest extent possible, the research team read a short statement at the outset of each interview, assuring the respondent of their anonymity and encouraging frank dialogue.
- Recall bias: Respondent may recall information incorrectly, which is a common and documented issue in observer reliability and self-reported data. Staff who have worked in these positions for the past six months, during a turbulent and emotional time in history, have thoughts and opinions about their roles that are influenced by emotion, which influence how they perceive their jobs and positions within the county structure.
- Interpretation bias: The data collector could misunderstand the respondents' meaning. While the use of video recording mitigates this issue to some extent by enabling full review of the interview and transcribing of the conversation, there is still potential for the research team to have misinterpreted a respondent's intended meaning.
- Data collection errors. Navigator use of the tracking form decreased mid-November, particularly in downtown. All data from the tracking form should be viewed as an underestimate as many visits were not logged.

Results

Survey Results: Resident Survey

A total of 114 surveys were completed. There were 429 visits logged into the navigator tracking log for the time period the surveys were available, for a completion rate of 27%. Table 50 shows the sites, number of surveys provided, number of navigator visits logged, and surveys returned. The Roseville Library did not complete any surveys. Maplewood Library staff mistakenly gave out surveys to people coming to the site to vote or return ballots, resulting in a high response rate. Five surveys from Maplewood were requesting services for things other than elections; 25 were for elections. These surveys were included in the results but reported separately. Downtown was given a second week to complete surveys. Evaluation staff discussed extending the survey at other sites, but navigator supervisors felt that there was so little traffic that very few additional surveys would be completed. Ninety-two percent of surveys were completed in English, 4% in Somali, 3% in Karen, and 1% in Spanish. No surveys were completed in Hmong.

Table 50: Survey Responses by Site

Site	Surveys Provided	Visits Logged	Surveys Returned	Completion Rate
Total	500	429	114	27%
Roseville	25	13	0	0%
Maplewood	50	3	5/25	167%/833%
Shoreview	75	2	2	100%
West Side	100	2	6	300%
Downtown	250	409	76	19%

People tended to visit the building where they would have received that type of service prior to the creation of the service centers. For example, people seeking help with cash assistance or food support tended to come to the Downtown site and those seeking help with property taxes went to the West Side site. Table 51 shows what assistance people were seeking. Totals exceed 100% because some people were seeking help with more than one thing.

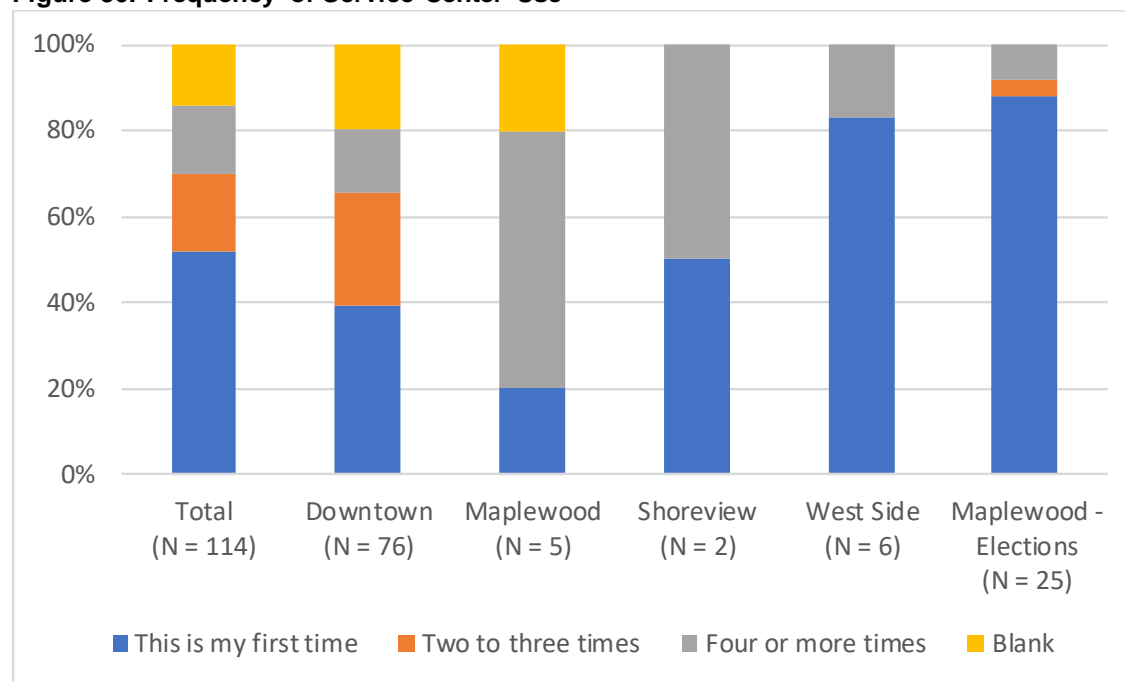
Table 51: Visit Reason by Site

Service	Total	Downtown	Maplewood	Shoreview	West Side
Income, food, or childcare	39	38	0	1	0
Elections or Voting	29	3	25	0	1
Use the computer	10	7	1	1	1
Help with medical bills	9	8	1	0	0
Property Tax	7	3	0	0	4
Help applying for a job	6	6	0	0	0
Use the scanner or copier	6	3	3	0	0
Other	13	8	0	0	2

Other reasons for visiting included: help with a disability, housing, passport assistance, and obtaining identification. Twenty respondents listed other services or resources they would like to see offered. Most of these were services they could already receive at the site, such as application assistance for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or use of the copier. The most common other recommendations were a food shelf (3 responses), employers or job fairs (4 responses), assistance with housing (3 responses), help using the computers (2 responses), and mental health counseling (2 responses).

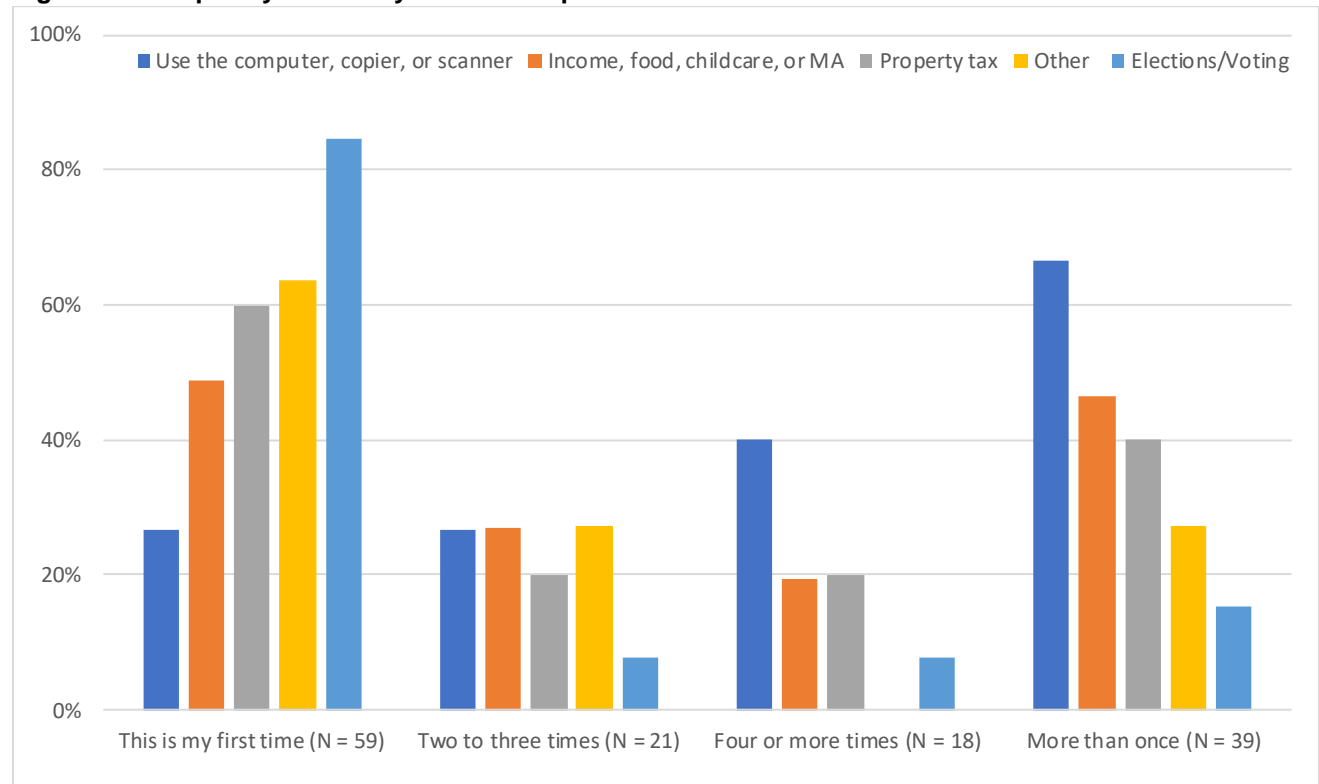
Overall, 52% of visits were a residents' first time visiting a service center, 18% had visited two or three times in the last month, and 16% had visited four or more times in the last month. Fourteen percent left the question blank. Downtown was the busiest site, with 76 surveys completed and was most likely to have repeat visits, with 40% reporting this as their first visit, 26% visiting two to three times, and 15% visiting four or more times. Figure 36 shows the percent of visits by number of visits and site location with people visiting Maplewood for elections separately than others.

Figure 36: Frequency of Service Center Use



Frequency of use varied by what services residents were seeking. Most people seeking assistance with elections or voting, and property taxes were first time users (85% and 60%, respectively). Two-thirds of people visiting to use a computer, copier, or scanner had visited more than once in the last month, with 40% visiting four or more times. Nearly half of people seeking assistance with income, food, childcare, or Medical Assistance visited more than once, with 27% visiting two to three times in the last month.

Figure 37: Frequency of Use by Service Requested



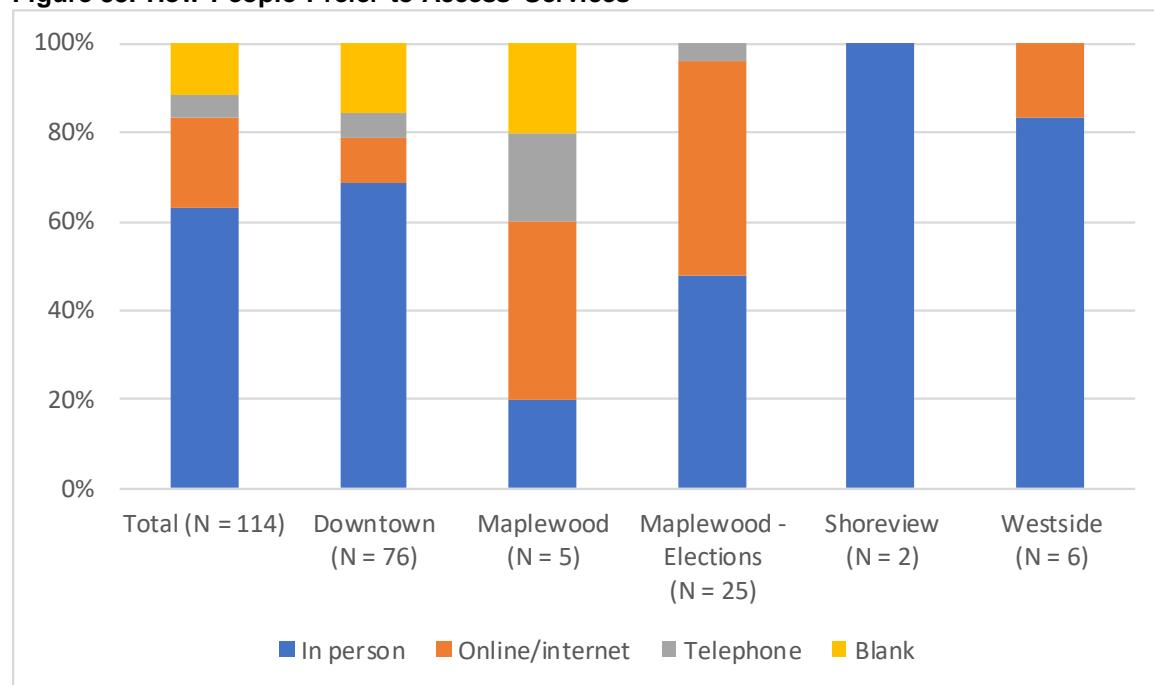
Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale whether they received the help they needed, whether the staff were helpful, whether the staff were kind and respectful, and whether the space was welcoming. All sites had similar responses with the averages overall shown in Table 52.

Table 52: Average Rating Customer Satisfaction

Question	Average	Minimum	Maximum
Did you get the help you needed?	4.7	2	5
Were the staff helpful?	4.8	2	5
Were the staff kind and respectful?	4.8	2	5
Was the space welcoming?	4.8	1	5

Overall, the majority (63%) prefer to get help in person, ranging from 20% to 83% depending on the site. Overall, 20% prefer to receive help via the internet or online, ranging from none to 48% depending on the site. Only 5% prefer to receive help via the telephone and 11% did not answer the question. (Figure 38)

Figure 38: How People Prefer to Access Services



Overall, 54% of respondents drove themselves to the site, 18% took public transportation, 13% received a ride from a friend or relative, 9% walked, and 2% used other means. Except for Downtown, the majority of respondents drove themselves, ranging from 60% of Maplewood non-elections respondents to all of the people going to Shoreview. At the Downtown site, 40% drove themselves, 28% took public transit, 15% received a ride, 13% walked, and 3% took some other means. (Figure 39)

Figure 39: How People Got to the Service Centers



Overall, about half of respondents always have internet access at home, 21% do not have internet access, 14% have internet access sometimes, and 3% did not know whether they have internet access.

For visitors for Downtown, 38% always have internet access at home, 29% do not have internet access, 18% sometimes have internet access, and 4% did not know whether they have internet access at home. (Figure 40)

Figure 40: Home Internet Access

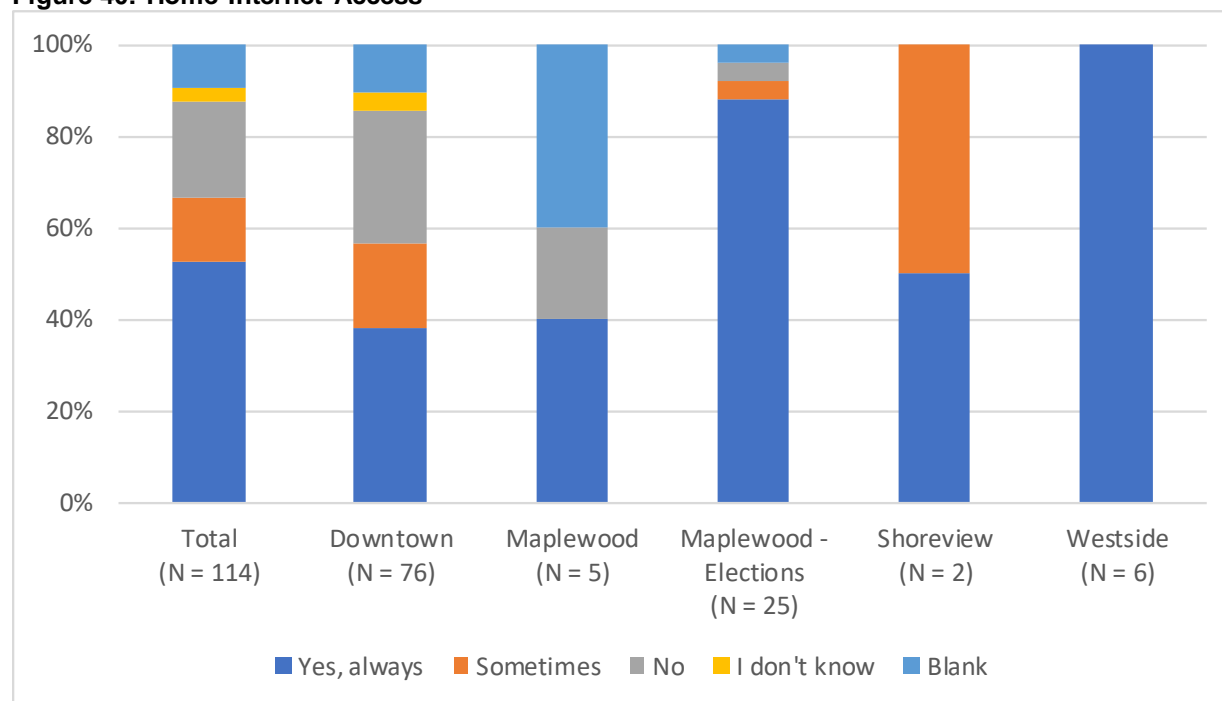


Table 53 compares demographics of survey respondents to those tracked in the metrics log. In both data sources, females were more likely to visit service centers than other genders and survey results were similar to the metrics log. About 60% of visitors from both data sources were female with 35% of survey respondents saying they were male and less than 1% non-binary/third gender compared to 39% of visits in the tracking log being male and none being non-binary/third gender.

Survey respondents were more likely to report their race as White (26% compared to 17% in the tracking log), having Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity (7% compared to 4% in the tracking log), or leave race blank (13% compared to 0.2% in the tracking log).

When asked what language they preferred to receive services in, 79% of survey respondents said English, which was similar to language preferences in the tracking log (78%). Six percent said Somali (compared to 11% in the tracking log), 5% said Karen (compared to 4% in the tracking log), and 3% said Spanish (compared to 2% in the tracking log). Two percent of people in the tracking log spoke Hmong and no survey respondents said they prefer Hmong. Three survey respondents said they preferred other languages. Those languages were Russian, Oromo, and Amharic.

The average age of survey respondents who reported their age was 42.8 years. Fifteen percent of survey respondents did not report their age, but of those who did, the survey respondents are slightly older than the overall visits tracked by navigators. Eight percent were ages 18 to 24 compared to 4% of overall visitors tracked, 30% were ages 25 to 39 compared to 38% overall, 35% were ages 40 to 59 compared to 52% overall, and 12% were ages 60 and older compared to 7% overall.

Table 53: Survey Respondent Demographics Compared to Navigator Metrics Log

	Survey		Metrics Log	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	114	100.0%	429	100.0%
Gender				
Male	40	35.1%	167	38.9%
Female	67	58.8%	262	61.1%
Non-Binary/Third Gender	1	0.9%	0	0.0%
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian	4	3.5%	1	0.2%
Asian	9	7.9%	38	8.9%
Black	55	48.2%	299	69.7%
Multiple	1	0.9%	0	0.0%
White	30	26.3%	71	16.6%
Unknown	15	13.2%	1	0.2%
Latinx/Hispanic	8	7.0%	19	4.4%
Language				
English	90	78.9%	336	78.3%
Somali	7	6.1%	47	11.0%
Karen	6	5.3%	18	4.2%
Spanish	3	2.6%	10	2.3%
Hmong	0	0.0%	8	1.9%
Other	3	2.6%	10	2.3%
Age				
18 to 24	9	7.9%	16	3.7%
25 to 39	34	29.8%	161	37.5%
40 to 59	40	35.1%	224	52.2%
60 and older	14	12.3%	28	6.5%
Missing	17	14.9%	0	0.0%

Survey Results: Financial Worker Survey

A short survey was sent to the 68 financial workers who worked at least one shift in the Downtown service center in November or December 2020. A survey was sent rather than interviews because of most had only worked a single shift in that location, rather than the other sites where specific workers were embedded in the site on a regular basis. Financial workers were given one week to complete the survey. Thirty-four financial workers completed surveys for a response rate of 50%. Of those completing the survey, 26 (38%) worked one or two shifts and eight (12%) worked three or more shifts in the Downtown site. Workers at the Downtown site were chosen by lottery.

Sixty-eight percent of respondents felt that the training in FAS, Social Services, Workforce Solutions, and Property Tax were the right areas for navigators; a quarter did not know and nine percent did not think these were the right areas. About a third agreed or strongly agreed that navigators had sufficient knowledge of FAS programs, while about a quarter disagreed or strongly disagreed. When asked what areas of FAS navigators were missing, most did not answer but those who did mentioned program

eligibility criteria. A few people expressed concern that the amount of knowledge navigators were expected to have was unrealistic and that the navigators could not truly be helpful with the level of information they would be able to retain.

Just more than half of respondents had been asked by a navigator to be a subject matter expert and all who were asked to do so reported that they were able to resolve the residents' concern. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported that having a navigator available made their job easier or much easier and 29% reported it did not make their job easier or more difficult. When asked what about having a navigator made their job easier or more difficult, 11 respondents appreciated navigators pre-screening clients, answering basic questions, and helping clients complete applications. They mentioned having more time for complicated questions and needs. A few felt that it confused residents or mentioned navigators not providing correct information.

When asked how navigators and financial workers can work together to best serve residents, just more than half offered suggestions. Most suggestions were around improved communication. Financial workers would like navigators to be able to write case notes in MAXIS, the administrative database, so they know what action was taken or what a resident was told. A few expressed concerns that residents were told something would happen by a specific date or "right away" when that would not be the case. Some wanted more clarity between what can be expected of navigators or "the most common list of things they can do." Most felt the navigators should have a "clerk" role of helping people complete paperwork, looking up case statuses, and help people print forms or make copies.

Interview Results: Financial Worker and Navigator Interviews

Interviews were conducted with six navigators and five navigator supervisors in November 2020. In January and February 2021, interviews were conducted with 10 financial workers who worked in service centers at the libraries and West Side in November and December 2020. All people interviewed received the questions in advance and copies of all data collection tools used in this research (surveys and interview guides) are included in [Appendix B](#).

Service Centers

Although tracking metrics in the navigator log were not kept consistently after mid-November, there is low usage at all sites except for Downtown as reported by both navigators and financial workers. Financial workers reported seeing not more than a few residents per month and that most of their time was spent processing or working on their regular caseloads, as did navigators. Most navigator time at the suburban sites was spent helping residents access computers, acting as a receptionist, or clerical duties. In communities like Shoreview and Roseville there is a lack of awareness about service centers as a resource; people are using the libraries for what they have always used them for and are just interacting with different staff than previously. Similarly, visitors to the Downtown site are there primarily for Financial Assistance Services (FAS) related needs, just as they have always done.

All interviewees felt that there was lack of awareness of service centers and that people might choose to go to places other than Downtown if they were aware of the service centers. They felt that service centers do help residents access services from one location. However, they felt a conceptual shift should be made to consider navigators separate from the service centers; both are essential, but not interchangeable. If one of the goals was to move from a building-centric approach to meeting resident needs to a resident-centered approach, the service centers have just changed the buildings – not the overall approach.

"Walking into a building that's known as a library has a lot less stigma attached to it than walking into 160 East Kellogg. If I'm a family and I know that I need to go to the library, and I want to apply for food stamps, but I'm scared that somebody may see

me, going into a service center and being able to access that is a lot better than having to go to 160.”

“I really think this [service center model] would really work if we could get it going. I like the idea and think it would work because it really is helping people in the communities be able to get help without having to go to that one spot downtown.”

All respondents felt that enhanced outreach is necessary to raise awareness of services centers. After decades of accessing county services in one way, residents are not aware of the new model. One respondent suggested coupling a mobile navigator role with other services offered in the community, such as food shelves, so people can one-stop-shop for services in a setting they are already used to visiting. Two respondents suggested sending county representatives to school, non-profits, or religious institutions to tell people about service centers. Others suggested television or billboard advertising. Several respondents expressed skepticism about the efficacy of the flyer mailing strategy as a sufficient tool to get the word out and suggested strong outreach was needed.

“One of the biggest gaps was not paying from the beginning for advertisement. Getting the word out...If we could have got more of an advertisement push. I know they did Facebook and social media stuff. I definitely think that one of the biggest gaps was that: the advertisement, the push of it.”

“Because it’s [flyer mailing] just not cost-effective. It’s just not effective in a lot of different ways. People don’t open their mail, first of all. Billboards. There’s a lot of different ways we can do outreach.”

Respondents also reported the need for a different physical set-up at service centers that allows navigators and embedded financial workers to have privacy to meeting with residents and that separates their role from that of a receptionist or security guard. Respondents indicated that while it is important to have the navigator be centrally located and visible for accessibility, most locations offered limited privacy to sit with residents and discuss what can be potentially sensitive or confidential issues. Sometimes resident interactions were emotional or loud which was seen as being disruptive to other library patrons and staff at sites not used to people being upset.

“Where the navigators are sitting, you’re walking in the lobby and you’re basically baring your soul; there’s not a lot of privacy...if we could separate, to protect that for people. It’s not an easy thing to do for a lot of people, to walk in and ask for help.”

Respondents saw a lot of potential for improving offerings at services centers. Several envisioned better use of technology that would allow them to provide virtual services, as well as increase self-service options for residents. In addition to providing in-person support, navigators suggested that their services could be provided via the web and telephone to increase resident access. Prior to the pandemic, FAS explored the potential to offer kiosks to residents at 160 East Kellogg to scan required documents, look up the status of their case, and access forms. Dakota County has kiosks that do many of these functions, which frees up their staff time to handle more complicated situations and lessen the amount of time residents spend waiting in lines.

Others suggested offering support and tools to ease access to community resources as well as county services. They identified unmet needs around transportation, like providing bus passes; use of telephones (especially for residents experiencing homelessness); on-site food shelves; and mailboxes. A couple of respondents mentioned the need for easier access to interpreters to better assist residents who do not speak English.

Navigator Role

There was significant confusion about the role of a navigator. Navigators said that the navigator position is supposed to be a high-level position but has devolved into cleaning computers and being a receptionist or directing traffic for the site. In the downtown location, the navigators serve as “gate-keepers” to FAS and visitors do not understand that they are not financial workers. In other sites, the duties of maintaining the computers or serving as a greeter have overshadowed the position’s purpose and led to confusion by other staff; those who have been physically away from the office do not know that this new position is.

Financial workers and navigators saw the navigator role very differently. Financial workers understood the navigator role to be that of someone who can help complete paperwork, collect forms, look up case statuses, and answer basic questions. In the past, this role has been held by customer service representatives or clerks and this was how most financial workers saw navigators. Navigators, on the other hand, saw their role as helping residents with more complex needs or needs that span across departments. As one navigator put it:

“We want to leverage the difference between the navigator and the financial worker; it is really that the navigator has the time to take a call and walk you through. If that means it is an hour, it is an hour. The FAS line doesn’t have the opportunity to do that. We don’t have a caseload of 1,000 people waiting to call back, we’re really serving that one client...The navigators at 160 are basically the gatekeepers to FAS. It’s not the same experience. That is not what we are trying to do.”

Navigators reported that their initial sense of excitement and opportunity about the role was decreasing as they deal with the lack of clarity in their role and the routine tasks they have been asked to take on.

“I feel like there’s a lack of definition around the role of a navigator. I feel the boundaries aren’t clear. I feel we have a vision that is unclear. The staff at first, we had all this energy and excitement, I feel like that’s starting to die down. Because I feel like a lot of our staff are starting to feel like they clean computers and are the receptionist.”

“There were many days it is still a very clerical role. If they want to pay me top salary...to stuff envelopes and wash off the computer, I can do that. I just don’t know how much it will ever turn into a social services input. So that part I’m pretty disappointed in.”

Another challenge is that the scope of the navigator’s authority is limited to referring residents to other departments within the county. In some cases, this limitation was frustrating to the navigators who wished to help the resident resolve their issue fully. A couple of respondents reported that they felt limited in their ability to fill requests in real time, especially for property tax issues and FAS issues. Sometimes this limited scope impacted their capacity to fulfill even simple requests, like providing a receipt for a property tax payment. The navigators lacked full authority to implement some of the more complex or formal actions needed by a resident and reported feeling like a “middleman.”

“We need to be a little bit more specific because sometimes this is how we ended up with people wanting service and we cannot provide it because we are just the middleman. They think, ‘This is the place where I can pay my taxes.’ Yes, you can, but we are not going to give you a receipt, we cannot accept cash, you need to have

your check. I think that right now, the way that is displayed, is giving the wrong impression to residents that service centers are for everything.”

To be successful, respondents said that navigators require a deep knowledge of the services Ramsey County offers and how to assist residents access them. They also need compassion and an ability to manage stressful situations, a strong desire to help vulnerable members of the community, and the versatility of spirit to creatively problem-solve.

Individuals selected to work as navigators need a strong desire to work with diverse communities. Many respondents felt that longer tenured staff were more effective as their past experience provides them with a broader understanding of county offerings, how to make things work, and how to use data systems.

“There is no amount of school or any sort of anything that anybody could have taught me to jump into this role, other than my experience. Having [many] years of organizational knowledge has been crucial to my success.”

Finally, as mentioned above, the navigator role and the service centers are not the same. Having services tied to a building, even if there are more, is still building-centric. All respondents, navigators and financial workers, saw the need to have mobile navigators and financial workers in the community at places where people already visit. Respondents felt there is a greater need for navigator services in lower-income, inner-city locations like University/Midway, Frogtown, the East Side, and Rondo. Respondents suggested partnering with emergency shelters, community centers, or food shelves to provide roving outreach and transform service provision into a service-based model, rather than a location-based approach.

Starting in January 2021, navigators are visiting emergency shelters and the Saint Paul Opportunity Center at Catholic Charities. As of the writing of this report, service redesign management is seeking partnerships with community centers and other locations in the above targeted neighborhoods.

“I think we need to go where people are and not have people come to us. I think that was the whole vision. We want to meet people where they’re at and be in the community and be accessible. I know Ramsey County is big, but for the four service areas that we’re looking at right now, I don’t think we are in the right spots.”

Barriers to Service

Respondents identified several common barriers to residents: lack of phone or internet access, meaning residents must come in person to receive services; difficulty contacting financial workers; and people experiencing homelessness who do not receive notices by mail and have their benefits discontinued.

Particularly for residents visiting the Downtown site, many do not have telephone or internet access. For some this means coming to the service center to make general phone calls, check email, or access the internet. More services are only available via telephone or the internet due to the pandemic, not just county services, but other community-based services as well. People come in person but rely on navigators to make phone calls for them.

“I think there’s a certain percent of our population that doesn’t have phones and can’t communicate. With the buildings shut down and offering very limited services, most of the workers are working from home. They come in frustrated, unable to reach their worker, they have a phone for 30 minutes, they don’t answer, they leave a message,

and no callback. It is just awful. They come in and ask 'help me.' We are not financial workers. We can't help them at that point, so it almost feels like we're trying to make this a one door approach. We are really a stop on their way to another door."

Prior to the pandemic, a bank of telephones was available to call financial workers. These are now not available to reduce contact with surfaces during COVID. This has been a burden for people, especially when they call their financial worker and need to leave a message. There is nowhere for these residents to receive a return call. With FAS staff working remotely and navigators unable to address every FAS-related need, the telephone has become even more important. This is of critical importance to people experiencing homelessness who do not receive mailed notices related to their financial assistance case and come in person to have benefits restored. This is a combination of longer-term challenges related to large caseloads and lack of access to technology such as document management software that are exacerbated by work structural changes due to the pandemic.

"I think that the navigators in that location, really, you could hire 60 navigators. But if they're all coming to FAS, we really need to have 60 FAS workers in there."

Respondents felt that the Downtown site would be better served by financial workers who have the expertise to answer FAS-related questions directly, since the majority of visitors were there for financial assistance needs. As stated previously, navigators often felt as if they were the middleman and residents need a more direct connection to FAS. This will become more pressing as waivers to program requirements due to the pandemic end. Physically, navigators at the Downtown location are the front door to FAS services; this may be duplicative and an unnecessary step. Navigators and supervisors are concerned about the potential for burn out among navigators who face challenges in resolving these requests, and the investment in MAXIS training for navigators when this role might be better served by financial workers.

Navigator Support and Training

Respondents felt that the current training package focusing on the four key service areas (Workforce Solutions, FAS, property tax, and Social Services) were the right areas and that the one-week training was comprehensive and helpful. One navigator felt that the in-depth presentations from each of the four county support areas was too exhaustive and the time could have been better spent on other topics that would be more useful for the navigator position. Many respondents said there was a lot of material to master during a very intensive week and that some areas went too in-depth and in other areas not deep enough; nearly all respondents requested more training on MAXIS and FAS programs. They also saw the need for more computer technical support training if they were to continue to support computer users at libraries.

One respondent suggested including knowledge about MNSure to navigators' knowledge bank, as this was thought to be a need especially for visitors to the Downtown site. Another respondent suggested it would be helpful to cover as a training topic what the most requested needs at each location in general, since the clients and services are so site-specific. Other respondents also mentioned child support, legal/court issues, and Social Services Child Protection issues as helpful areas to cover in training. Most respondents asked for more hands-on training opportunities, like vignettes or practice examples, especially on administrative databases.

"I think there was just a lot of information. It was very good. I think, for the most part, it did prepare me. I think part of it is just hands-on learning. I'm very hands-on training. So, I think part of it was just going there and learning as you go, which was a lot of FAS."

"I would say that MAXIS is the most difficult system to learn, especially if you're not from FAS and you're not familiar with it. So, you can navigate and understand what the different panels are because a lot of time, residents are coming in downtown asking 'what's going on?'"

Respondents expressed concern about forgetting knowledge they did not use frequently and suggested they should receive more ongoing support beyond the one-week training. Some would like one-page quick reference guides on key topics; others wanted periodic refresher trainings, especially on seasonal topics like property taxes or elections, which they may only need once a year. They also requested periodic trainings on other topics not encountered as often, like Social Services programs and administrative systems that include hands-on practice.

Discussion

The following section responds to the three evaluation questions based on the findings described above.

What have we learned in the first six months to inform and improve practices in the next two years?

Overall, respondents indicated strong support for the service center concept and one-door access to service as a valid approach to enhance the accessibility of Ramsey County services for residents. However, traffic to service centers other than the downtown location has been limited thus far and analysis of usage patterns indicates residents are still generally accessing services in the location where they have done so in the past. While Ramsey County has engaged in some marketing and outreach to promote usage of alternate locations, this has had limited impact thus far. Some of the marketing materials were outdated, which limited their utility, or were disseminated in limited quantities, which limited the scope of their impact to targeted communities only.

The location of the service centers in Shoreview, Maplewood, and to some extent Roseville and Plato, may not be the right locations to reach residents with the greatest need. Many respondents suggested that communities of color and with greater vulnerability indices should have service centers, including Frogtown, Midway, Rondo, East Side and others. This is covered in more detail in the Discussion section for Question 2 (Resident Experience) below.

While the navigator position was originally created to staff the service centers, the two can operate independently, which could maximize the potential of each and alleviate some of the current barriers for residents to access these services. Navigators could be made available more widely than just in the service centers, including virtual services for residents who feel more comfortable using technology. Ramsey County could explore opportunities to partner with community-based organizations and locally-based poverty relief organizations to provide navigator services remotely, and/or in partnership with non-governmental entities, so that navigator services can be provided directly in locations that are already reaching these vulnerable populations.

For service centers located in the libraries, identifying the most appropriate position for the navigator's desk has been challenging thus far. Navigators need to be positioned so that they are visible and accessible to residents seeking assistance, yet they also need to be able to engage in private and potentially sensitive conversations about the types of services a resident might wish to access. In some locations, this mission has been especially challenging due to space limitations in the library sites; in other cases, navigators felt the library staff were not welcoming of their presence or had relegated them to the relatively low-level position of computer cleaners rather than appreciating the intended nature of

their role as resident services advisors. In addition, some resident service interactions have the potential to become loud or emotional, which may not be compatible with the quiet environment of the library lobby, especially post-pandemic when these locations resume regular library services.

The development of the navigator position happened quickly in response to COVID-19, which ultimately impacted the development of the job description, the structuring of duties vis-à-vis the physical space in which the service centers are located, and how the navigators work in conjunction with FAS and library staff. This resulted in some lack of clarity around the navigator position among the various parties, with FAS staff seeing navigators as greeters or gate-keepers for the financial workers at the Downtown Service Center, and navigators being tasked with responsibility for all computer assistance and maintenance (including COVID-related sanitizing) in the libraries. However, this position was originally intended to have greater responsibility and seniority; thus, the individuals taking on this role have experienced some frustration as they see their duties being largely administrative and not commensurate to their seniority and compensation levels. The role of the navigators at the Downtown Service Center most especially needs to be reconsidered: the functions of looking up cases, helping with basic questions, and providing residents with forms could be done by a customer service representative or clerk, while navigators and financial workers would be available for more complex questions and needs.

What is the resident experience of service centers, technology access, and navigators? How does this compare to other ways of accessing services?

Overall, residents who visited the service centers to meet with a navigator were most often seeking assistance with financial services or using the computer and/or other office equipment, often to complete application forms for financial assistance. Since 2020 was also an election year, navigators also offered assistance for the voting process, though this would logically be in less demand in non-election years and possibly require less facilitation than 2020's early voting effort due to the pandemic.

For about half of the residents reported in the service center resident survey, it was their first time visiting the service center, although data indicate that another quarter of clients, especially those with financial-related issues (income and food assistance, childcare or medical assistance) required more than one visit to address their needs. In these cases, both residents and Ramsey County staff (navigators and financial workers) reported that the issue was resolved efficiently and to the resident's satisfaction, which indicates that the level of service provision is meeting residents' needs and reducing the potential for delayed or limited assistance during a time of extreme social challenges.

The demographic profiles of users at the Downtown Service Center versus users at the library sites (which are located in suburban communities) indicate that downtown users are generally more vulnerable, including being less likely to have internet at home and feel less comfortable accessing services virtually (including telephone and online). They more often used public or alternate means of transportation (such as bus, walking, ride from a friend) to access the site. Of the three library sites, two are located in suburban census tracts with low social vulnerability scores (Roseville: 0.34 and Shoreview: 0.22).²⁵ While these locations should logically be more accessible to residents from the northern suburbs, they are not being as well-used as the Downtown Service Center. This may be due to lack of awareness about the other sites and/or high demand for FAS driving residents' expectations that the Downtown Service Center is where they need to go. Many vulnerable residents from the urban communities around downtown Saint Paul are still accessing services through this Downtown Service Center.

²⁵ The third library site, Maplewood, has a social vulnerability score of 0.84, which is considered to be very vulnerable. The Downtown Service Center's social vulnerability is rated 0.47 and the West Side (Plato) building is rated 0.99.

In addition, there are additional areas of service that respondents recommended be made available at the service centers that could build on resident needs and enhance the one-stop-shop experience. These included: food shelf services; access to job fairs and employment services; assistance finding available housing; bus pass sales; telephone or mailbox access for residents experiencing homelessness; interpretation services for non-English native speakers; computer training; and mental health counseling.

The question of where to locate the service centers and how to house the navigators within them suggests a conceptual shift should be made in the relationship between them. Whereas the service centers are established physical locations to which residents might visit to access services, the navigators (and the services they provide) may not necessarily need to be accessed through a physical location. Expanding navigator service provision through virtual platforms would enable the county to serve a broader range of residents without requiring in-person contact, including those who have limited mobility. This could include self-service options provided through telephone, online, and through kiosks located in the service centers for residents to scan and send required documents, access forms, and monitor the status of their applications.

What are the training and support needs of navigators to successfully service residents?

Overall, the navigator training received good feedback from both navigators and FAS staff, including the four focus areas of service provision. While the deep dive into each of these areas may be tedious or repetitious for longer-term county staff who are moving into the navigator role, it was felt to be appropriate and even necessary by others, especially those with shorter employment tenure with the county and thus less background knowledge of county resources and processes.

The greatest area in which navigators need more training was using the MAXIS system, especially for navigators without an extensive background working with Ramsey County overall, and FAS in particular. Financial services staff felt that having navigators with the capacity to interpret and complete notes in MAXIS about their interactions with residents made their jobs easier and was essential to ensure that residents receive accurate and consistent messaging about their case. While the MAXIS system is complex and challenging to become adept in, this enhanced capacity could enable the navigators to take on a larger role in supporting FAS while simultaneously alleviating some of the uncertainty around the navigator role and its capacity to provide useful support to residents, beyond being “just a middleman.”

Navigators would also benefit from regular refresher trainings on topics like SSIS, which they do not use as often as other systems, and during times leading up to seasonal needs, like elections. They expressed the need for hands-on training, such as vignettes or case studies, that give them opportunities to problem-solve and get more practice using data systems.

Beyond training on county services, navigators may benefit from training on computer usage and maintenance if that responsibility continues to be part of their role going forward. This may also be an area in which other county staff may be able to support their work, by providing technical experts in information technology that could be called upon to assist residents with more advanced technology needs.

Finally, navigators’ authority is generally limited to gathering and passing information to others within the county system. In some cases, this authority could be expanded to fulfill simple requests such as writing a receipt for property tax payments or other services that residents seek to resolve directly through these agents, with appropriate training content to ensure that these requests are handled according to county rules.

Recommendations

Short-term Recommendations

- **Continue to expand marketing and outreach** to increase resident awareness and usage of service centers beyond the Downtown location, targeting a wider audience of general residents with a goal to make awareness of these service centers part of the common knowledge base of all Ramsey County residents. Word of mouth remains the most effective means of communication so pair wider outreach with sending county representatives to schools, community groups, or religious institutions to talk directly with their communities.
- Explore opportunities to **provide navigator services outside of the service center model**, including virtual and user-managed options to enhance accessibility, especially in vulnerable communities and in partnership with community-based organizations that have already developed relationships with these residents and can promote Ramsey County as a resource and service provider for them, including homeless shelters, food shelves, and other organizations that focus on vulnerable residents.
- Enhance the facilitation of **strategic communication and cooperation between the navigator staff and financial workers** so that each position's roles and responsibilities are clear to all and staff are well-positioned to complement each other's work. Implement regular attendance at each other's staff meetings, regular meetings or communication between navigator supervisors and FAS supervisors, and other means of communication between the partners. Explore how to give navigators access to case note interactions with FAS clients as well as SSIS case note access.
- Consider a **three-prong approach to staffing Downtown**, with customer service representatives as the first line for answering basic questions, financial workers available for complex FAS-related needs, and navigators available for needs that cross departments.
- Work in close partnership with library and other County staff to **clarify navigator roles and responsibilities** – both what they are and are not. Explore opportunities to provide appropriate space for navigators to be located so they have both visibility and privacy, so they are not seen as receptionists or greeters. Return responsibility for computer cleaning and general technology assistance to the libraries or make better use to customer service representatives for routine tasks.
- Work with Information Services, navigators, and customer service representatives to **develop a short-term data tracking system** that is not burdensome for staff but captures data necessary to support operations.

Long-term Recommendations

- **Regularly review navigator training** to ensure it is comprehensive and targeted to meet the demands of the navigator position, including ongoing refresher trainings for services offered less frequently or on a cyclical basis (like voting).
- **Continue to engage with the First Human Service Modernization project for a long-term solution to data tracking** and sharing.

- **Implement enhanced technology for residents** to offer services, such as self-service kiosks, online chat tools, and interactive website tools for residents to access Ramsey County support without requiring face-to-face interactions.
- Navigators can only be successful to the extent that other departments are also successful. **Identify support and resources needed in FAS to ensure when a resident reaches out to them, they can get prompt assistance.** Along with the three-prong approach to the Downtown service center described in the short-term recommendations, in the long-term build on the Human Service Modernization project to ensure FAS has the technology and staffing resources necessary to provide prompt customer service.
- **Conceptually separate navigator roles from the physical service centers.** A service center-based model is still a building-centric model, even if more services are available at those sites than previously. Move toward a resident-centric model where residents can access county services through multiple physical and online doors, with navigators as the linchpin.

Race Equity and Community Engagement Response Team: Masks for Everyone, Trusted Messengers, and Media Messaging

Introduction

In July 2020, Ramsey County's COVID-19 Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT) awarded \$300,000 to 27 contractors for a first round of two separate culturally specific and focused media and messaging-related funding opportunities for trusted messengers, community and local media agencies. This funding was made possible by the appropriation to Ramsey County under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The selected contractors worked in partnership with RECERT and the County's Incident Management Communications. The county provided COVID-19 media and communication resources, including public health messages, resources and technical assistance contacts that could be utilized, replicated and/or redesigned by contractors to be culturally specific, relevant, linguistically appropriate and accurate for the community reached. The contracts ran from July 2020 – September 2020. A second report on the second round of contracts will be completed in April 2021.

Media and Messaging

The first funding opportunity was called Media and Messaging and contracted with 12 community agencies and individuals to provide media services to aid the county in getting culturally specific, relevant, linguistically appropriate, accurate, and timely messages and communication related to COVID-19 to racially, ethnically and culturally diverse communities in Ramsey County. (See Appendix A5: RECERT for the list of fund recipients.) The objective of the Media and Messaging initiative was to ensure that individuals and families are engaged and have timely, accurate and up-to-date information about COVID-19 in Ramsey County communities. Media services included formats such as online, radio, print, direct mail, social media, television/video and other culturally specific and appropriate forms of communication and messaging. Contractors were encouraged to use methods that are adaptable to quickly changing information and explore alternative, effective methods of communication, so long as people maintain physical distancing. The contractors' primary audience(s) must include one or more of the following populations: African American/American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), African-born, Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian residents of Ramsey County.

Trusted Messenger

The second funding opportunity was called Trusted Messenger and contracted with 15 trusted messengers and community agencies to provide outreach and engage racially, ethnically and culturally diverse communities during the COVID-19 response. (See Appendix A5: RECERT for list of fund recipients.) The purpose of the Trusted Messenger program was to engage with individuals and families and provide accurate and up to-date information to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This program was also intended to help individuals and families to access resources and services for which they qualify both in their community and with Ramsey County. The selected contractors covered a range of outreach, engagement, resource connection and referrals that reached a diverse racial, ethnic and cultural communities.

Evaluation Description

RECERT initiated evaluation of these efforts to assess the impact of culturally specific messenger and media messaging activities with racially and ethnically diverse communities, to make improvements for future partnership opportunities as well as part of a broader coordinated effort to evaluate the impact of CARES funding spent by Ramsey County. This evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What proportion of funds went to support racially and ethnically diverse communities?
2. Who was served by the contractors and what services/strategies did they employ?

3. How well did RECERT reach the intended communities with these contracts?
4. What impact did the work have on the targeted residents/communities?
5. What were the successes and challenges for contractors?
5. How can Ramsey County improve its contracting processes to make them more accessible to community organizations?
6. How could the trusted messenger model be expanded across service teams?

Methods

The methods that were used to answer the evaluation questions were:

- *Evaluation reports submitted by contractors.* Contractors were asked to submit an evaluation report at the end of the contract period. The reports were submitted via an online survey.
- *Reflection session with contractors/partners.* Two reflection sessions were held for each contract type on October 2, 2020. The number of participants in each reflection session are as follows:
 - Trusted Messenger #1 - 11 participants
 - Trusted Messenger #2 - 5 participants
 - Media & Messaging #1 - 4 participants
 - Media & Messaging #2 - 4 participants
- *Reflection session with Ramsey County employees involved in contract support.* One reflection session with county employees was started on October 13, 2020 and finished on October 22, 2020. The reflection session was held across both contract types. The first session was attended by 13 employees and the second session was attended by 12 employees.

[Appendix B](#) includes the contractor/partner reflection session questions and staff reflection session questions.

Results

Funding of Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities

All (100%) of the \$300,000 funding was provided to organizations within racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Populations Served

As part of their evaluation reports, partners provided information about the populations served and services provided. The information below is based on partner self-reports.

RECERT partnered with 15 community organizations through Trusted Messenger funding which resulted in the following:

- Over 100,000 Ramsey County residents were reached.²⁶ A number of partners noted that their reach extended beyond Ramsey County to across Minnesota and the United States or even a global audience.

²⁶ Based on partner estimates. The count is likely to include duplicates as residents may have been reached by multiple partners.

- Worked with many different cultural and ethnic communities including African American, African-born (Somali, Oromo, Nigerian), Asian (Hmong, Karen, Karenni), Latino/x American Indian, White and mixed culture communities.
- A number of partners reported other specific population focuses, including men who are homeless and/or involved in the criminal justice system, youth and young adults, pregnant and postpartum women, elders and low-income residents.

RECERT partnered with 12 media and other community organizations through Media and Messaging which resulted in the following:

- Over 500,000 individuals were reached. For many partners, it was not possible to track whether individuals were in Ramsey County because their reach was statewide, nationwide or even global.
- Media and messaging was distributed to many different cultural and ethnic communities including Asian (Vietnamese, Hmong, Karen, Karenni, Cambodian, Lao), African American, African-born (Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Oromo, Liberian, Nigerian), Latino/x and Spanish-speaking individuals and American Indian.

Strategies and Services

Below are the strategies and services carried out by the Trusted Messenger and Media and Messaging Partners. Although the scope of each contract type was intentionally different, there was a lot of overlap in the actual strategies and platforms used by the partners.

Trusted Messenger contractors employed several strategies to reach their target communities, including:

- Direct outreach and engagement.
- Messaging campaigns using text messaging, phone calls, emails and mailings.
- Distributing flyers.
- Use of social media (Facebook, WhatsApp).
- Education sessions (over conference call or virtual meeting platform).
- Discussion and storytelling circles.
- Public service announcements.
- Peer educator training.
- Development of strategic partnerships.
- Graphic design and visual storytelling.
- Facebook pages and websites.
- Video, audio and print production.
- Participation in events planned by others.
- Development of educational fact sheets and posters.
- Facebook live events.
- Word of mouth.
- Phone calls to community members and clients.
- Other direct outreach to existing clients.
- Translation of materials.
- Announcements at places of worship.

Of particular note was the high use of phone calls to reach out to communities with barriers to accessing other technology, including calling individual clients and conducting sessions over conference call. This appeared to be a key strategy to reaching the elders of each community.

Residents were linked with a variety of county services, most commonly financial assistance, food support, how to obtain masks, free COVID-19 testing. Other types of services included Census and voter registration, employment support, TechPak program, public health services, mental health resources, child support, immigration services, small business relief fund.

Media and Messaging contractors reported they used a variety of media and communication strategies to reach their target audiences, including:

- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube).
- Printed material (Newspaper, bulletins, flyers, etc...).
- Direct Mail.
- Radio.
- Television/ video.
- Websites.
- Messaging at events planned by others.
- Face to face interaction.
- Community town halls and forums using Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms.
- Graphic design.
- Phone banking.
- Posting at culturally specific businesses.
- Media releases.

The content of the messaging included COVID-19 prevention and management information, COVID19 testing and mask distribution opportunities, as well as community and government resources. Some contractors reported also providing direct assistance applying for public assistance and unemployment insurance, referral to resources (financial assistance, housing, food support, mental health, workforce) and completion of Census and voter registration paperwork.

Successes and Impact on Target Communities

Partners under both contracts reported a number of ways they were successful with this funding, including strategies that facilitated their success.

Partners reported overwhelming engagement with their target populations. This included subsections of their communities, such as seniors and youth and other hard-to-reach communities. Community partners also reported that they were able to be a trusted source of information for their communities and that their activities were well-received by the target populations. They also believe that they were successful in providing media and information in a way that was linguistically and culturally appropriate.

Partners based their success on high traffic on their platforms, use and/or participation in their media and messaging, as well as direct positive feedback from participants and community.

Common successful strategies reported by the partners included:

- Collaboration
- Working with community leaders
- Use of phone calls

The community partners acknowledged that it was not always possible to measure the impact of their work on participants and broader community, given the ways through activities were delivered, ability to identify who participated and tight timeframe for the contract.

However, partners shared anecdotal information that supports the impact they had in a number of areas:

- Communities increased in knowledge and awareness around COVID-19 risks, prevention, testing and management. Some partners also noted that they believe community members had increased in use of preventative behaviors (such as wearing of masks) and testing.
- Clients were connected with county and community services and resources. Partners noted that without their intervention many community members would have gone without services and resources during this time.
- Many partner activities also contributed to the emotional support of community members as they navigate the hardships brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Other impacts include increased participation in the Census and voter registration.

Strengths

In addition to the successes covered above that were achieved through the funded work of each partner, RECERT's initiatives were recognized as having a number of strengths. First of all, contracted partners acknowledged that Ramsey County is a leader across jurisdictions in the U.S. around targeting messaging and prevention in racially and ethnically diverse communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was also overwhelming consensus across partners that the goals for these initiatives successfully targeted critical community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Partners were given a significant amount of flexibility and empowerment through these projects. Partners were also treated as experts in how to best communicate with their communities. Many partners engaged in collaboration and strategic alliances and developed creative and culturally appropriate approaches to their messaging, for example through visual storytelling.

Although some barriers may have existed for partners in the contracting process, in March 2020, Ramsey County Contracting and Procurement implemented an Emergency Purchasing Informal Quotes (EPIQ) process that streamlined processes during for the pandemic response. The solicitation process was different for this funding opportunity because the EPIQ was available outside of DemandStar through the emergency request for informal quote process. RECERT and Ramsey County Procurement were able to expedite the entire contracting process due to emergency procurement policies. In addition, RECERT was able to expedite the selection process and quickly execute contracts.

Barriers and Challenges

Scope of the Two Contracts

RECERT issued these funds in two distinct lines of funding and slightly different scopes. The Trusted Messenger initiative provided \$10,000 to fifteen community organizations to carry out engagement and outreach around specific areas of messaging as well as connecting targeted communities with available resources. The Media & Messaging initiative provided two partners \$25,000 and ten partners with \$10,000 to use specific media platforms, including newspapers, radio, online platforms to engage and connect with the target communities.

Partners reported a lot of confusion around the difference between the two contract types and many partners applied for both and often identified themselves as a Trusted Messenger even if they had a contract under the Media and Messaging project. Also, as discussed earlier in this report, in practice many partners carried out activities from both project scopes.

Seven of the 27 funded partners applied for both opportunities. Some partners noted that they submitted proposals hoping for the full \$25,000 but were given \$10,000. It was not clear to these partners as to how they should scale back their workplans based on the lesser amount of funding.

Solicitation Process

Both county staff and partners acknowledged that the length of the solicitation timeline was not ideal, as it was hard to get the opportunity circulated to potential respondents and to allow for time to submit their quotes. Although there was a total of 41 organizations that applied for the Trusted Messenger contract and/or for the Media and Messaging contract, some partners noticed that well known culturally-specific media organizations did not apply for the contracts.

Partner experience with the solicitation process varied. Some found it very confusing with discerning the difference between the two funding opportunities and determining which one to apply for. Some partners also found the process time-consuming. On the other hand, many partners reported that the process was much easier than past county request for proposals. Although the EPIQ included evaluation criteria and how points would be assigned, some county reviewers expressed concern that some responders, especially those new to partnering with Ramsey County, may not have known how to use the evaluation criteria to make sure their application was competitive as possible.

Another issue that came up is that a group of potential applicants had received technical assistance from the Public Health Outreach team around submitting a proposal as a collaboration, but the lead applicant did not end up sharing the funds.

Contract Execution and Invoicing

Partners noted that the length of the contract period was a barrier to implementing the work in the most effective way. The timeline needed to be short in order to address immediate needs of COVID 19 communications under the deadlines of CARES funding. Although most contracts were executed on the same day, some partners noted that there was a delay in executing their contract which further shortened the timeline to carry out the work. These delays were often due to not receiving necessary documentation from partners, the approval process that occur both internal and external (such as review of the contract, negotiations, signatures/approvals, etc.). Others noted that the delay in the payment advance was a challenge, as they did not have the start-up funds to cover the initial costs of the contract.

County staff noted that knowledge around developing an invoice and completing general ledgers was a barrier for some partners. Although information was provided in the contract that partners would be reimbursed after proof of expenses incurred have been submitted, some partners didn't seem to understand this.

Support around Prioritization of Messaging and Approval of Materials

Many partners noted that although they appreciated the flexibility they were given though these funds, it was often a challenge to know how to prioritize which messages to focus on amongst the wide variety being shared by Ramsey County. They wish that they had more assistance in this area to strategize around how to prioritize the messaging. In addition, it could have been helpful to have example messaging materials available as part of the EPIQ or as part of the kick-off process for the grant.

On the county side, staff reported that it was hard to tell if partners were interested in the materials being distributed as there was no systemic mechanism in place to receive this feedback from partners on what topics were most important. The county convened learning sessions which was a place where that feedback could be shared. This did happen, such as partners requesting more public health

messaging, but there was still not a way for use of and feedback on individual messaging campaigns to be tracked.

There seemed to be a lot of confusion and frustration across partners in the approval of partner-developed materials. Although it was outlined in both contracts that all materials needed to be approved by Ramsey County staff before being distributed, it is not clear whether all partners understood this, as not all materials were submitted for approval. In addition, partners reported delays in getting their materials approved and a lack of ability to find out the status of their materials in the review process. Some partners ended up making multiple contacts to check on the status of their materials and it may not have been clear who their county contact should be about this information.

In addition, some partners would have liked more transparency with the county's internal process for reviewing materials, including who was reviewing the materials and what criteria they were looking for to determine an approval. Although RECERT provided criteria during the orientation some partners still experienced challenges with this.

County Capacity to Support Partners/Contracts

One factor that contributed to the delay in the approval of materials was limited staff capacity to review the materials, especially for translation. There were multiple staff pulled into roles around these contracts, often on top of their full-time duties. However, the liaison work was assigned to six staff in addition to staff finance and planning staff that specifically worked on processing financial forms and invoices. Sometimes this created additional challenges in having a coordinated, consistent response to partners. The county liaisons did not always feel like they had access to the necessary information and resources, such as access to Basecamp project management website nor the shared mailbox, in order to support the partners.

Other Barriers Impacting Partners

Partners reported additional barriers through their evaluation reports, including the need to unexpectedly adjust to delivering services remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, some partners acknowledged that some clients have been reluctant to engage around their messaging. At least one partner had asked for COVID-19 case data that would be specific to their cultural community for targeting their planning, but Ramsey County was not able to provide this.

Another issue that partners raised is concern about the potential duplication of efforts across partners who were targeting the same cultural community. Partners were not always aware of the activities nor materials developed by the other partners, which created the possibility that multiple partners may be translating and distributing the same materials without coordination.

Round Two Improvements

Right as the contracts for Round One were wrapping up, RECERT leadership was actively planning for a second round of funding and quickly pivoted to incorporate learnings and feedback received from Round One into the design of Round Two. These changes address many of the barriers addressed above as well as recommendations laid out in the next section.

In Round Two, RECERT:

- Combined the scope of the two Round 1 contracts into a single Trusted Messenger initiative. RECERT also added funding to support community conversations and cultural community connectors.
- Targeted invitations to submit proposals to specific media and community organization to ensure coverage across communities.

- Encouraged formal and informal collaboration across partners working with the same cultural and ethnic communities, including subcontracting with smaller providers who may not have the capacity to directly contract with the county.
- Provided more support and technical assistance to partners, including a kick-off orientation, kick-off technical assistance meetings, and weekly virtual office hours with county staff.
- Centralized the county work and technical assistance to two county staff. Partners were reminded of the review and approval process. Still having communication come through the Racial Equity inbox.
- Provide additional clarity around material approval requirements and streamlined process for approval of partner media and messaging materials. Processes.
- Implemented weekly messaging topics to help partners to prioritize and target key messaging for their communities.
- Provided additional opportunities and instructions for how partner organizations can add team members and subcontractors have access to Basecamp and county communications.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for replication and expansion of “Trusted Messenger” type partnerships as well as general recommendations for all of Ramsey County Contracting and Procurement opportunities.

For “Trusted Messenger” Partnerships

The recommendations for future Trusted Messenger partnerships are:

Scope of Work

- **Keep similar scope for next round of funding.** There was overwhelming consensus amongst the partners that the goals of the grants were spot on. Many partners were already doing messaging work and funding allowed them to expand.
- **Consider combining the two contract types into a single contract** with a choice of activities/strategies that span the purpose of both. Many partners found confusion between the two and even applied for both. A number of partners ended up carrying out activities that crossed the scope of both contracts. Most partners saw themselves as a “trusted messenger” in their community, regardless of their contract type.
- **Recognize key functions** in the process of successful delivering messaging to culturally-diverse communities. Partners should have one or more of the following:
 - Ability to translate and adapt messaging to identify with culture and community values.
 - Perceived by community as a messenger whose information they can trust.
 - Access to hard to reach populations.

Contract Partnership rather than Contract Management

The work of the Trusted Messenger and Media and Messaging projects require active partnership between Ramsey County and the partners. A number of contractors noted that they did not feel like full partner in the work. In addition, a strong partnership needs to exist between RECERT, communications and the areas of the county with messaging to distribute. Because the messaging around COVID-19 has constantly evolved, active monitoring and two-way conversation between the county and partners is essential.

- Utilize Ramsey County communication mechanisms to distribute partner’s media and messages.

Encourage and Facilitate Collaboration and Cohort Development

Collaboration was a common theme that came out throughout all sources for this evaluation.

- **Encouraging more established organizations to collaborate with smaller, grassroots efforts** under a subcontractor model to engage new partners in the work that may otherwise have barriers to applying for the funds. Some small grassroots, community level organizations would not have the business infrastructure and start-up capital needed to do work under this contract. Language barriers and lack of knowledge of government contracting are barriers. If they do apply, they can easily be out strategized by more established organizations.
- **Set collaboration expectations or incentives in proposal/contract development and selection.** Some partners naturally worked with each other and other organizations to carry out the work. Partners would have liked to see more formal encouragement of collaboration by Ramsey County, especially with bringing partners together that are focused on the same culture/community. Funded partners targeting the same community didn't always know what each other was doing. Partners felt that collaborating with the other partners who were targeting the same communities would allow them to avoid duplication and boost the messaging of the other partners, in order to have an even greater reach to their communities
- **Support collaboration and cohort development through the duration of the contract.** Many partners reported that the learning sessions had been very helpful to them and would have liked additional opportunities to meet and collaborate with the other funded partners. Having more frequent optional meetings would help provide opportunities for partners to update each other on their work as well as strategize and unify around messaging.
- **Coordinate with other jurisdictions funding similar efforts.** Partners noted that other jurisdictions (Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), Hennepin County) have also issued funds for similar efforts. Coordinating across jurisdictions could help in covering gaps in reaching target audiences as well as reduce duplication of efforts.

Dedicated County Resources

The success of this work relies on active engagement and communication between Ramsey County and the partner organizations. This work requires investment in messaging facilitation and technical assistance. During this first round, the RECERT team worked together to carry out various activities related to these contracts, as a part of their full-time job duties. It will be helpful to have fewer, more highly designated staff to attend to this work.

- **Designate a central person** who can be responsible for responding to emails or ensuring a timely response. Make clear who the different county staff are and their roles with contract work. Partners prefer to have a single person as their contact for technical assistance related to the contract.
- **Be more proactive and responsive in communication with partners. Improve timely response to partner emails and phone calls.** Many partners experienced significant delays in getting responses when emailing the RECERT email account. RECERT asked for up to 72 hours to respond, but sometimes responses took longer than this due to limited capacity and further review if needed. There was also confusion by the liaison role and use of liaison varied greatly. Partners want a point person they can contact to coordinate work
- **Increase and streamline technical assistance and support.** Partners would like to have more opportunities to consult and brainstorm with Ramsey County contacts about their plans and options. Partners would have liked more feedback about their work and their role as a partner to Ramsey County. In addition, when partners wanted to modify their plan, they weren't sure if this was an option and believe having someone to consult would have helped.
- **Ensure appropriate contact information for partners.** Be aware that the staff involved with completing the application/proposal is not the same as who may be coordinating the work nor doing the invoicing. Make sure to collect contact information for different roles around contract. Some partners were not getting communications directly and had to be forwarded by the person who submitted application.

- **Provide better access to and coordination** of Basecamp and other project management tools. Not all staff from partner organizations had access to Basecamp. When partners received notifications from Basecamp, it was not clear if all required action.
- **Suggested roles for the next project are:** communications person, translation partner, technical assistance, project manager, and subject matter expert (such as public health).

Messaging

Below are recommendations for how Ramsey County works with partners to identify and distribute messaging opportunities. Partners generally appreciated the amount of freedom they were given around messaging distribution but would have liked more support in this area.

- **Provide a centralized process for distributing messaging to partner organizations.** In addition to messaging posted by RECERT, partners often were also getting communications/messaging from other Ramsey County departments directly. Some county teams would approach multiple partners to get assistance with translation.
- **Improve timeliness of when messaging is shared with partners, especially when time sensitive.** Often information was posted at the last minute not giving enough time for partners to translate and get out to their communities. Even if distribution of the materials was optional, partners would have liked more advanced notice. Provide as much material at the beginning of the contract or as part of the solicitation announcement.
- **Consider having weekly targeted messages.** One suggestion is to have a targeted message or theme each week on which partners can focus.
- **Provide more clarity around how partners should triage and prioritize messages and communications coming from Ramsey County.** As mentioned above, partners experienced a lot of confusion around how to prioritize messaging when there was so much information coming out, sometimes from multiple parts of the county. Some partners felt they were left to put a lot of “guess work” into prioritizing. In addition, it wasn’t always clear when emails were sent out whether it was expected that they would distribute all messages or if it was optional.

Materials Approval by Ramsey County

- **Provide clarity around expectations of approval of materials by Ramsey County and remove barriers to timely approval process.** There appeared to be confusion or differing approaches across partners as to whether all materials needed to be submitted for approval. In addition, partners experienced significant delays in getting submitted materials approved. Some partners had to make multiple contacts to follow up on material submitted. Partners would also like more information as to what is being reviewed as part of the approval process and what criteria are used to determine approval.
- **Develop a system for documenting material submissions and approval status.** This will allow Ramsey County to better monitor the flow of material being submitted for approval as well as monitor activity for individual partners.

For Ramsey County Contract and Procurement

Below are general recommendations that can apply to many other contracting opportunities at Ramsey County.

- **Shift from a transactional to relational model of contracting.** Rather than focusing on a transfer of goods and services, focus on how relationships are developed and sustained with community organizations and businesses that are built on trust, collaboration, two-way communication and building the capacity of the community.
- **Increase timely marketing of funding opportunity.** Oftentimes information about funding opportunities do not reach potential partners or is received with such short notice that those

partners are not able to apply or submit as strong of proposals as if they had advanced notice. In addition, those who already have an existing relationship with Ramsey County are often receive announcements directly from county staff, putting them at advantage over community organizations that have not had the opportunity to work with Ramsey County.

- **Use a third party for outreach and solicitation development assistance around funding opportunities.** One strategy for supporting culturally- specific and smaller organizations in successfully obtaining Ramsey County contracts is to provide a third party that can carry out this outreach and support within their own communities to educate potential responders on the solicitation process.
- **Simplify the solicitation process and use wording that is easy for applicants to understand.** This will allow applicants to be more successful in providing most relevant information and to not be penalized in the scoring process for not understanding the questions.
- **Provide additional support and information for the solicitation process.** Provide additional opportunities to get questions answered about the funding/solicitation process, scoring and selection process. It is important for applicants to know how points will be assigned to their proposal/solicitation.
- **Support community organizations in becoming fiscal entities for smaller providers.** Oftentimes grassroots efforts or small organizations are the most closely connected to their communities, yet don't have the infrastructure or capacity to seek out and obtain a Ramsey County contract. One strategy is to incentivize and provide opportunities for organizations to subcontract with these smaller organizations.
- **Have more community representation on review of proposals.** It is important to have community involvement in selecting the partners who will best serve their communities.
- **Provide orientation on contract and invoicing process.** Organizations new to partnering with Ramsey County may not know how to prepare an invoice or develop a general ledger. Make sure to review contract requirements so that they are understood by partners.
- **Provide advanced funds.** Partners may not have start-up funds to cover initial costs.

Early Childhood Initiative

Introduction

The Early Childhood Initiative was designed to support pre-kindergarten children (ages 0-5) who were impacted by daycare and early childhood education center closures due to COVID-19. The program was funded through the CARES grant and the purpose was to support early childhood education for 1,300 pre-kindergarten children by providing parents a \$300 voucher to Lakeshore Learning. Lakeshore Learning is a toy store that specializes in developmentally- and age-appropriate toys with a focus on encouraging child development through play. The vouchers could be used to purchase educational resources and activities to enhance their child's learning and development.

The target populations were prioritized according to need. First priority families were those residing in family emergency and domestic violence shelters. The second priority were families receiving cash benefits from the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and employment counseling from Workforce Solutions, particularly targeted at parents ages 24 and younger and under 200% of the Federal Poverty Guideline (FPG).

Evaluation Description

Overall, Ramsey County measures the effectiveness of CARES-funded projects against two overarching questions: (1) Are Ramsey County residents better off as a result of CARES programming? and (2) Did the project achieve the outcomes the community was seeking? These two overarching questions will be applied to the Early Childhood Initiative through the application of the following questions:

- Do parents believe their pre-K children are better off because of the voucher they received?
- What proportion of Lakeshore Learning vouchers was used by families from the BIPOC community?

Methods

Ramsey County employees reached out to family emergency and domestic violence shelters to distribute vouchers to families with pre-K children. Shelter staff met with parents/caregivers and looked at the Lakeshore Learning website with them in order to select toys or activity sets that would be appropriate for their children. The items were ordered and shipped to the shelters. In addition to families in shelters, county staff reached out to other county programs and community-based organizations to inform families of the voucher opportunity.

Interested parents/caregivers completed an application online. A total of 2,700 parents/caregivers applied for the grant. Recipients were randomly selected to receive the vouchers. A parent was eligible to receive one \$300 voucher for each child five years old or younger. Therefore, some families received more than one voucher. A total of 871 families (1,340 children) received Lakeshore Learning vouchers in late December and early January. Parents were given until January 30 to redeem the Lakeshore Learning voucher. Vouchers that were not redeemed by families were given to shelters to purchase items for families living there at the time. There were approximately 100 vouchers distributed to families in shelters at the end of the program, however we were not able to identify the recipients on an individual level.

An online survey was emailed to all voucher recipients in early January. A total of 339 people responded to the survey (response rate of 39%). The survey asked about the number and age of the children in the household, how they were impacted by the early childhood and daycare closures, and the impact of the program on their children (see [Appendix B](#) for survey questions). Demographic data

was collected from families through the application process address the questions regarding the populations served by the initiative.

Limitations

The short turnaround time was a significant limitation for this study as the entire program and evaluation process happened in the course of two months. During this time there was staff turnover in the department impacting who was responsible for coordinating the process. Additionally, since the timeline was short, communication needed to happen primarily via email which made it a challenge to connect with and involve non-English speaking families or those without internet access. Therefore, the population of parents/caregivers who received the vouchers and surveys was limited to those who could be reached easily by county employees. Data was not able to be collected from parents/caregivers of pre-kindergarten children at county shelters who received vouchers, so their demographics and perceptions are not included in these findings.

Results

Data was collected from the applications parents and caregivers completed in order to receive assistance from Ramsey County for early childhood learning resources. In addition, an online survey was emailed to all recipients after they applied. The application asked parents/caregiver to provide demographic information such as race/ethnicity, age of caregiver, and number of children. The survey focused on the type of early childhood programming their child/children were participating in before COVID-19 restrictions, the impact of closures on their child/children's educational development, the application process, and the impact of the grant assistance.

Application Data Results

The program application asked applicants to provide basic information on their race, ethnicity and age to track the population being served by the assistance. As shown in Table 54, the majority (78%) of parents/caregivers who received a Lakeshore Learning voucher were non-White. Nearly one-third (30%) identified as Asian and 25% as Black. Five percent or fewer indicated they were Latino/Hispanic (5.5%), Multi-racial (5%), African Immigrant (4%), American Indian (2%), Hawaiian or other.

Table 54: Race/Ethnicity of Caregiver

	Number	Percent
Total	871	100.0%
African Immigrant	32	3.6%
American Indian	20	2.2%
Asian	263	30.0%
Black	217	25.0%
Hawaiian	2	--
Latino/Hispanic	48	5.5%
Multi-racial	46	5.3%
Other	6	--
White	237	27.2%

Caregivers were also asked to report their age on their application. The initiative was targeted at parents and caregivers 24 years old or younger. According to application data, 15% of recipients fell into this age bracket. Approximately one-fourth of applicants fell into the age brackets of 36-45 (27%), 25-30 (27%), and 31-35 (28%). Less than 4% of parents/caregivers reported they were over 45 years old.

Table 55: Age of Caregiver

	Number	Percent
Total	871	100.0%
14-18 years old	10	1.0%
19-24 years old	122	14.0%
25-30 years old	236	27.0%
31-35 years old	240	27.5%
36-45 years old	232	26.5%
46-50 years old	16	1.8%
50+ years old	15	1.7%

Survey Results

The online survey asked about the number and age of the children in the household, how they were impacted by the early childhood and daycare closures, and the impact of the program on their children.

The first question on the survey asked respondents how many children ages five or younger they have. Over half (53%) reported only one child, 35% reported two children, 10% reported three children, and only 2% reported having four or more children ages five and younger in their household.

Table 56: Number of Children 5 Years or Younger in Household

	Number	Percent
Total	338	100.0%
1 child	179	52.9%
2 children	117	34.6%
3 children	34	10.1%
4 or more children	8	2.4%

When asked about the ages of their children, respondents were asked to check all the ages that applied to the children in their household. While 337 parents responded, the data represents a total of

532 children. As Table 57 illustrates, the ages of the children who received learning resources were evenly distributed across all age categories.

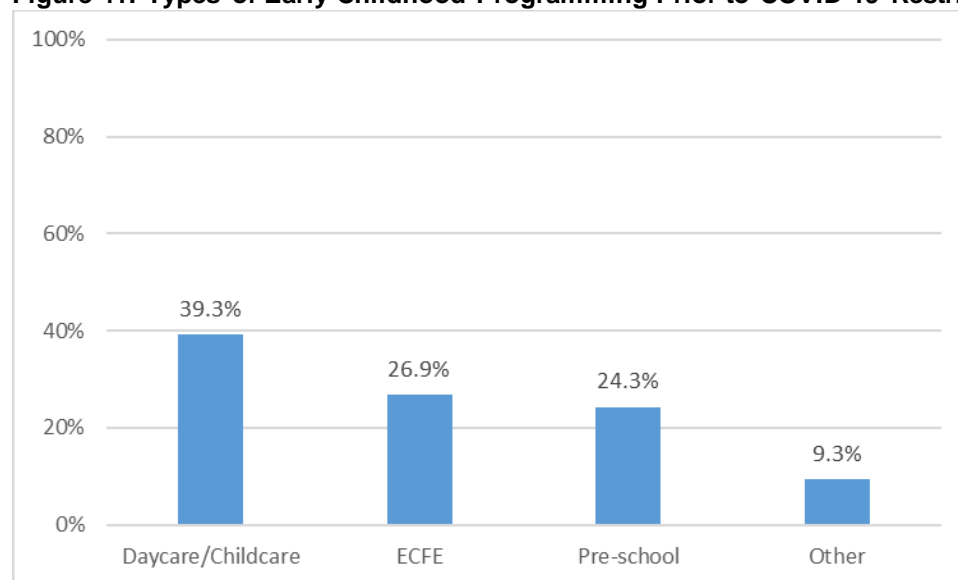
Table 57: Age of Children

	Number	Percent
Total	337	
Less than 1 year old	59	11.0%
1 year old	86	16.1%
2 years old	99	18.6%
3 years old	99	18.6%
4 years old	109	20.4%
5 years old	80	15.0%

*Data represents 532 children from 337 families

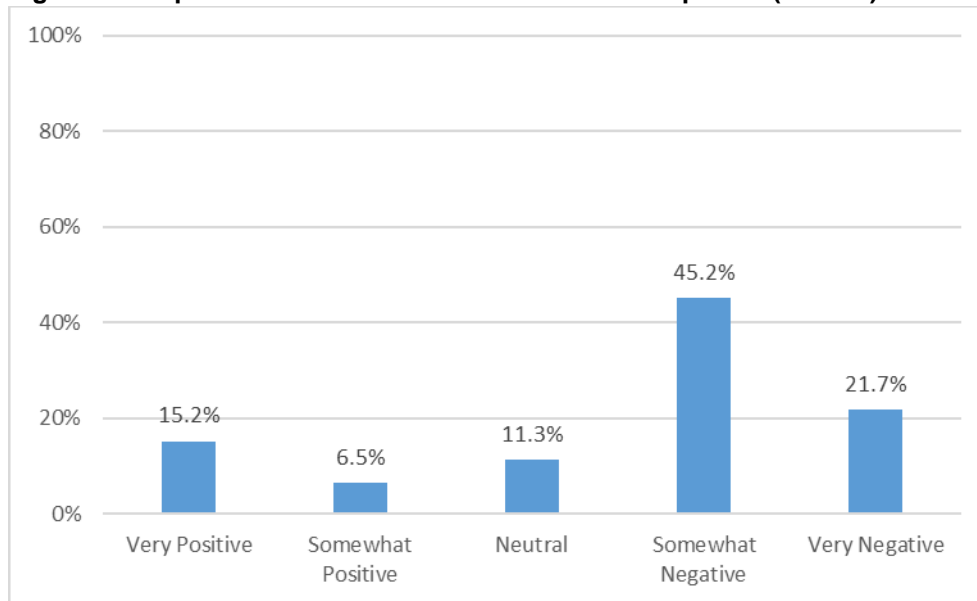
Survey respondents were asked about the types of early childhood programming their child/children were participating in before COVID-19 restrictions were imposed. Daycare/childcare was reported by 39%, 27% said Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), 24% indicated pre-school programming and 9% reported other programming. When asked to specify other programming, parents and caregivers mentioned things such as care by family members, church programming, and pre-K or kindergarten classes.

Figure 41: Types of Early Childhood Programming Prior to COVID-19 Restrictions (n = 338)



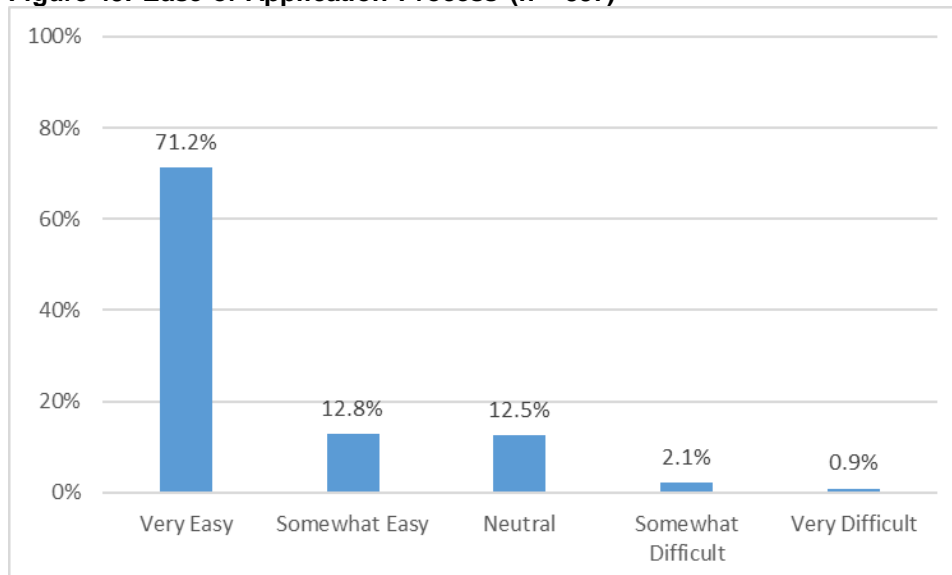
Parents were asked how they rated the overall impact of COVID-19 on their child/children's educational development. Two-thirds of respondents (67%) said the impact has been very or somewhat negative compared to 22% who reported it was somewhat or very positive.

Figure 42: Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Development (n = 336)



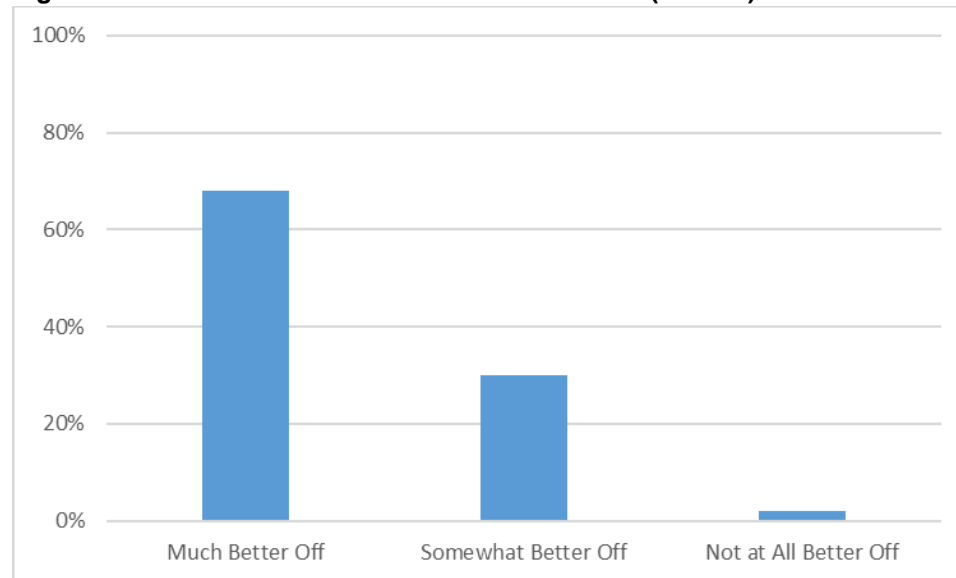
When asked about the ease of the application process, the vast majority (72%) of respondents reported that the application process was very easy. An additional 13% said it was somewhat easy. Only 3% of all applicants thought the process for somewhat or very difficult.

Figure 43: Ease of Application Process (n = 337)



Parents/caregivers were asked to what extent they think their child or children were better off because of the resources they were able to purchase with the voucher they received. Nearly all (98%) of respondents who answered the question reported they believe their child/children were somewhat (30%), or much better (68%) off due to the learning resources they were able to obtain with the vouchers. Only 2% of recipients reported they did not believe their child/children were better off after receiving the assistance.

Figure 44: Extent to Which Children are Better Off (n = 338)



Survey respondents were asked if they had anything to share with Ramsey County leadership about the needs of the children in their family and the community. Of the 339 people who responded to the survey, 229 provided an answer to this question. Nearly half (47%) of respondents used this an opportunity to thank Ramsey County for the vouchers. Here are some examples of what respondents said:

“This grant greatly impacted our children in positive ways. It was the light that finally appeared in the darkness of 2020.”

“I am thankful to have these items. I am a single mom. I attend school full time and work as much as I can in between studies and my kids. I would not have been able to provide specific learning items for my kids. I am truly grateful. I hope in the future I will be able to return the gratitude to a family.”

“I appreciate being able to give our children some of the experiences that they have missed without being able to go to early childhood classes. Thank you!”

“Due to the pandemic it’s been hard to purchase learning things for my children. Thank you so much for this opportunity of giving us funds to purchase learning equipment and items that we in general would not have the money for. My family is very grateful for this opportunity, especially during the pandemic and financial strains we’ve experienced.”

Twenty-eight percent of respondents reported they appreciated the high-quality learning resources they were able to purchase through Lakeshore Learning with the voucher.

“This was a great benefit to our family. We have been struggling to find engaging ways to keep our child engaged and learning during the pandemic, so we are excited with the new tools we were able to get with this grant.”

“There's definitely a need for learning supplies for children. My children need manipulatives and many things that would help them to be better learners.”

A smaller percentage (14%) said they needed additional help including more educational resources, access to affordable childcare and other financial support. Parents also reported the need for their children to have in-person interactions (9%) and expand the use of the vouchers to older kids and other resources (5%).

“They need more activities to help with their growth since we are no longer doing things face to face.”

“They are in need of more supplies home to help them learn. These hands-on supplies will help keep them engage in learning.”

“Our kids need socialization and structure. Educational programs provide this as well as the platform for learning and teaching skills needed to understand how to engage and interact outside of their family circles.”

Discussion

When COVID-19 restrictions were implemented in March 2020 many schools and childcare centers were closed and early childhood programming was abruptly put on hold. While some schools and programs have since reopened, many remain closed leaving many parents without access to any form of early childhood education for their children. As part of the CARES funding Ramsey County received, parents and caregivers with pre-K aged children were invited to apply for a \$300 voucher to Lakeshore Learning based on their need. The voucher allowed them to purchase educational developmental toys and activity sets.

Two-thirds of parents (67%) reported the overall impact of COVID-19 on their child/children's educational development was very or somewhat negative. The three types of early childhood programming parents reported their child/children participated in prior to COVID-19 restrictions were daycare/childcare (39%), Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) (27%), and pre-school (24%).

Parents and caregivers overwhelmingly report they think their child/children are better off because of the early childhood resource voucher they received (98%). In addition to the survey question asking this directly, respondents also provided many comments thanking Ramsey County for the resource and reporting they think the resources helped with their child/children's educational development during this time. Although parents appreciated the vouchers provided by the program, they also reported the need for additional learning resources as well as the need for in-person learning opportunities for their children.

One of the goals of the initiative was to reach families in the BIPOC community. Seventy-eight percent of parents/caregivers served identified themselves as BIPOC. Nearly one-third (30%) identified as Asian and 25% as Black. Five percent or fewer indicated they were Latino/Hispanic (6%), Multi-racial (5%), African Immigrant (4%), American Indian (2%), Hawaiian or other.

Appendix A1: Food and Basic Needs

Home Delivered Meals and Food Shelf Vendors

Home Delivered Meals	
Organization	Population Served
Afro Deli	Elderly, vulnerable adults, those in need of Halal options, East African Community
Fairview Foundation	Primarily black/African populations, and Native American in Dayton's Bluff, Payne-Phalen and Greater East Side areas
Open Arms of MN	Communities of color, ethnic and racial minorities, those with limited finances and other traditionally underserved individuals. (English, Spanish, Hmong)
Senior Services Consortium of Ramsey County	Elderly home-bound residents and their caregivers
Karing Neighbor, LLC	South East Asian Communities (Hmong, Karen, Lao, Vietnamese, Cambodian)
Midway Café and Grill	Nutritionally balance prepared meals. Meals prepared locally and made from scratch. Vegetarian options available. (English, Russian, Urdu, Hindi)
Safe Ride Twin Cities	Delivering meals from local restaurants to residents.
Groceries and Nepali Kitchen	South Asian culturally specific prepared meals prepared fresh. Medically tailored options available Vegetarian options available (Nepali, Hindi, English)
Food Shelf Vendors	
Organization	Population Served
CLUES	Drive-thru distribution. Latino community.
YMCA of Greater Twin Cities	YMCA Neighborhood Centers serves people residing in affordable housing, many units are section 8 housing.
Hmong American Partnership	Hmong community.
Keystone Community Services	Food shelf and foodmobile. Several locations.
Isuroon	Healthy ethnic foods to Somali community.
Vietnamese Social Services	Vietnamese, Karen, Burmese, Somali and Laotian
Muslim American Society	Muslim community.
North East Neighborhoods Living at Home/Block Nurse Program	Seniors living at home.
Merrick Community Services	High quality food and household supplies in East Side of St. Paul and Maplewood.
Hallie Q Brown Community Center	Foods including fresh produce and basic needs to 16 zip codes including Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods.
Somali American Parent Association	Somali community.
Salvation Army- St Paul Citadel Worship and Service Center	Western St. Paul neighborhoods.
Salvation Army Eastside Worship and Service Center	Eastside St. Paul neighborhoods.

Neighborhood House	Healthy food to individuals from any zip code.
Organization	Population Served
Vineyard Community Services	Food and basic needs for low-income individuals and families. Located in East Saint Paul.
BrightSide Produce	Eliminating food deserts with fresh produce to urban areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul.
The Sanneh Foundation	Variety of options for all community members.
Experience of Neshama	BIPOC community, living in low-income neighborhoods with a history of long-term homelessness.
Mt. Oliviet	Youth, seniors, families and particularly high-risk residents - primarily in the Summit-University, Thomas-Dale, Frogtown Neighborhoods.
Hamline Midway Coalition	Food distribution at Hancock Recreation Center in Hamline Midway Neighborhood.
Karing Neighbor	Grocery and basic needs for the SE Asian community in Ramsey County, particularly Hmong, Karen and Vietnamese families who are experiencing food insecurity. Groceries provided will be Asian culturally specific food staples.

Food Self Usage by Month and Organization

Organization	September	October	November	December	Total
Total	27,173	27,774	29,597	30,942	115,486
CLUES	598	884	875	476	2,833
YMCA of Greater Twin Cities	213	437	521	554	1,725
Hmong American Partnership	2,300	2,893	2,990	4,366	12,549
Keystone Community Services	12,800	6,219	10,399	4,160	33,578
Isuroon	300	450	316	1,500	2,566
Vietnamese Social Services	450	450	400	954	2,254
Muslim American Society	48	69	72	101	290
North East Neighborhoods Living at Home/Block Nurse Program	27	37	56		120
Merrick Community Services	2,708	2,580	--	--	5,288
Hallie Q Brown Community Center	1,442	623	--	--	2,065
Somali American Parent Association	80	180	187	190	637
Salvation Army-St Paul Citadel Worship and Service Center	2,208	4,652	4,107	4,147	15,114
Salvation Army Eastside Worship and Service Center	1,467	3,156	3,825	3,441	11,889
Neighborhood House	2,113	2,567	2,549	3,428	10,657

Vineyard Community Services		1,944	1,596	2,094	5,634
BrightSide Produce			326	383	709
The Sanneh Foundation	419	633	820	1,650	3,522
Experience of Neshama	--	--	--	68	68
Mt. Olivet	--	--	558	1,163	1,721
Hamline Midway Coalition	--	--	--	182	182
Karing Neighbor	--	--	--	2,085	2,085

Food Shelf Home Delivery by Month

Organization	September	October	November	December	Total
Total	2,388	3,467	3,938	6,614	22,111
CLUES	281	467	297	252	1,297
YMCA of Greater Twin Cities	336	503	589	607	2,035
Hmong American Partnership	724	686	30	1,376	2,816
Keystone Community Services	105	190	137	34	466
Isuroon	20	22	22	279	321
Vietnamese Social Services	28	47	32	74	181
Muslim American Society	2	11	28	29	70
North East Neighborhoods Living at Home/Block Nurse Program	18	100	102	--	220
Merrick Community Services*	--	--	--	--	5,726
Hallie Q Brown Community Center	64	80			144
Somali American Parent Association	--	--	7	3	10
Salvation Army-St Paul Citadel Worship and Service Center	147	277	247	193	864
Salvation Army Eastside Worship and Service Center	100	300	60	95	555
Neighborhood House	144	132	160	215	651

Vineyard Community Services	--	19	66	81	166
BrightSide Produce	--	--	1,304	1,532	2,836
The Sanneh Foundation	419	633	820	1,650	3,522
Experience of Neshama	--	--	--	68	68
Mt. Olivet			37	50	87
Karing Neighbor	--	--	--	76	76

* Merrick only provided total deliveries without a monthly break down.

Appendix A2: Emergency Assistance/Emergency General Assistance

EA/EGA/Extended CARES Policy and Exceptions

EA/EGA Rent Subsidy Initiative for Families at Risk of Losing Housing due to COVID-19					
What are we trying to accomplish?	Prevent serious hardship or immediate threat to physical health and safety from emergency situations and emergency situations due to COVID 19 public health crisis (i.e., threat of eviction, utility disconnection)				
Through:	EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE		EMERGENCY GENERAL ASSISTANCE		Expanded CARES for emergency assistance
For whom:	Families with a minor child or a pregnant woman by providing emergency assistance		Single and married couples by providing emergency general assistance		Households who have experienced loss of income (from self-employment or any other source) by providing additional eligibility criteria for emergency assistance due to COVID-19
	Policy	Current Exceptions	Policy	Current Exceptions	Policy
Income Guidelines	At or below 200% gross FPG	Currently using at or below 300% FPG net (May 13)	Under 200% FPG	Currently using at or below 300% FPG net (May 13)	At or below 300% FPG net
Living Allowance	Allows \$500 living allowance	Allows \$1,000 living allowance (May 13)	There is no living allowance for EGA	No change	\$1,000 living allowance for families
50% Test	Client needs to pass 50% test (spend 50% of income on basic needs) at time of application	Person needs to pass 50% test (spend 50% of income on basic needs) at time of application; allows clients to "spend down: in application processing time to pass 50% test. (May 13)	There is no 50% test for EGA	No change	There is a 50% test for families.
Assets	Need to use resources toward emergency	Need to use resources toward emergency – current exception allows client to keep \$2,000 (May 6)	Need to use resources toward emergency	Need to use resources toward emergency – current exception allows client to keep \$2,000 (May 6)	Households can retain up to \$2,000 in liquid assets
(continued next page)					

	EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE		EMERGENCY GENERAL ASSISTANCE		EXPANDED CARES
	Policy	Exceptions	Policy	Exceptions	Policy
Issuance	<p>Mortgage: 2x household's monthly mortgage payment</p> <p>Rent: 2 months of rent OR 1 month's rent plus damage deposit</p> <p>Section 8: 2x tenant share of subsidized rent</p> <p>Utilities Cap: \$1,800</p>	<p>Mortgage: Maximum issuance limit is \$5,500 (May 13)</p> <p>Rent: Maximum issuance limit is \$5,500 for market rate (May 13)</p> <p>Section 8: Maximum issuance limit is \$2,750 for those residing in subsidized housing (My 13)</p> <p>Utilities Can approve up to \$3,000 (May 13)</p>	<p>Mortgage: Maximum issuance limit is \$812.00</p> <p>Rent: Maximum issuance limit is \$812.00</p> <p>Section 8: Maximum issuance limit is \$812.00</p> <p>Utilities: Maximum issuance limit is \$812.00</p>	<p>Mortgage: Maximum issuance limit is \$3,000. (May 6)</p> <p>Rent Maximum issuance limit is \$3,000 for market rate rent (May 6)</p> <p>Section 8: Maximum issuance limit is \$1,500 for those residing in subsidized housing (My 6)</p> <p>Utilities: Can approve up to \$3000 (May 6)</p>	<p>Rent/mortgage & rent/mortgage subsidy <u>FAMILIES (EA)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o \$5,500 for Market Rate rent o \$2,750 for those residing in subsidized housing o Requests above this amount, consult with your Supervisor or Manager <p><u>INDIVIDUALS (EGA)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o \$3,000 for Market Rate Rent o \$1,500 for those residing in subsidized housing o Requests above this amount, consult with your Supervisor or Manager <p>Utilities: Cap: \$3,000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Requests above this amount, consult with your Supervisor or Manager <p>Car Repair</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o \$3,000 o The payment for car repair must be to a vendor o Car repair criteria include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Car must be in client's name ✓ Car must be needed to maintain employment ✓ Car repair cannot exceed NADA trade-in value of the car. ✓ Client must have valid driver's license ✓ Client must have proof of liability insurance ✓ Repair estimate must come from an established business
How often issuance?	1 issuance in 12-month period	2 nd issuance in 12-month period (April 1)	1 issuance in 12-month period	2 nd issuance in 12-month period (April 1)	2 issuances

	EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE		EMERGENCY GENERAL ASSISTANCE		ADDITIONAL ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA for emergency assistance
	Policy	Current Exceptions	Policy	Current Exceptions	Policy
Affordability	Will not issue funds if client cannot afford shelter/utilities ongoing	Affordability criteria waived (Sept 10)	Will not issue funds if client cannot afford shelter/utilities ongoing	Affordability criteria waived (Sept 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If housing was affordable prior to COVID-19, Ramsey County will review all available information and make a determination about affordability based on some or all of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Current verifiable household income, and if in combination from all sources (such as unemployment compensation, other unearned income, other wages or self-employment income) is at least equal to monthly rent or mortgage obligation ○ Employer-verified status update that a return to work is expected once the business is re-opened ○ If housing is subsidized, Ramsey County will presume affordability • A supervisor or manager may review the following circumstances and make an eligibility finding based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ History of ability to maintain residence in same housing ○ Availability of other family resources and written intention to assist ○ Availability of other federal or local subsidies (such as contributions from community agencies) towards resolving the emergency need for up to 3 months

Appendix A3: Housing and Homeless

Hotel Shelter Wrap Around Services Timeline

March 2020

Hotel Shelter program begins

May 2020

Ramsey County Targeted Case Management team provides in-person mental health services at the hotel shelters

June 2020

Ramsey County applies for and was awarded an AmeriCorps grant for 5 Benefit Navigators. DHS reaches out to the County offering a contracted employee to help develop a wrap-around services program.

September 2020

AmeriCorps grant ended putting housing and benefit work on hold. Ramsey County issued a Housing and Benefit Navigators RFP utilizing CARES funding to fill in the gap of services.

October 2020

Six community providers were approved to provide benefit navigation and/or housing case management services.

November 2020

Ramsey County Targeted Case Management team suspends in-person mental health services

December 2020

Ramsey County Service Center staff on site to help support clients apply for Medical Assistance and support Navigators with benefit verifications.

January 2021

Change Health Care on site to help clients apply for Social Security benefits.

Benefit and Housing Wrap-around Service Program Roles

Department of Human Services

Ramsey County Planners received support from MN Department of Human Services (DHS) who offered a contracted staff to help develop the wrap-around services program. The staff person provided benefit and services training for AmeriCorps Navigators. They connected Planners to key departments in the state to help streamline access to benefits and services. This included the Social Security Advocacy team and a DHS Financial Worker to help process applications for the first few months of the program. DHS partnership was instrumental for the start-up of the wrap-around services program.

Ramsey County Planners

Developed a process to identify high priority clients for housing. Recruited housing providers and Housing Stabilization Service providers to help increase referrals for housing and services. Hosted weekly meeting with providers and hotel staff. Requested referrals from Coordinated Entry staff to help fill housing openings when they become available. Accepted housing voucher applications from navigators and submitted to Public Housing Authorities (PHA). Manage and update shared spreadsheets, data reports and collect and share resources. Coordinate with Service Center Staff, FAS Housing Support staff and providers with client benefit applications and verifications. Connected providers to Social Services and Vet Service Office programs when needing additional services for clients.

AmeriCorps Benefit Navigators

Navigators identified guests who appeared to be eligible for benefits and housing. They assisted the client with completing the Combined Application Form (CAF); the application required for CASH and SNAP programs. This form and additional documents were completed with the client in person and then submitted to FAS for processing. The Navigator made direct referrals to LTH Housing Support providers and other housing opportunities. The Navigator completed voucher paperwork, helped clients apply for housing, and addressed any barriers preventing someone from entering housing. Workers were trained to complete Coordinated Entry assessments. Navigators referred to Housing Stabilization Services and MNChoices for additional services if needed. They attended weekly case review meetings and helped to track progress of clients housing plans.

CARES Provider Benefit Navigators

Very similar to AmeriCorps Navigators, except that the CARES providers had more housing expertise and more knowledge of resources in the community, which helped to increase referrals to housing providers. One provider is also an enrolled Housing Stabilization Services, so the agency is able to complete housing plans on-site, which helps clients connect to case managers faster so they can receive help finding housing.

CARES Housing Providers

The Housing Provider's role is to help the person find housing in the community. Housing providers receive housing referrals from Navigators and Coordinated Entry. Navigators provided a warm hand-off to housing staff who then began the engagement process with the client in the hotel. Rent is paid with the LTH Housing Support program, housing vouchers or subsidized housing. Providers develop relationships with new landlords and help clients with the rental application. Housing providers have access to direct assistance funding which was used for security deposits, applications fees, furniture and any other barriers that may be preventing someone from accessing housing. Staff attend weekly case review meeting and reported any housing search progress and barriers.

Ramsey County Service Center

Service Center staff reached out to Planners in December to see how they can assist with work being done in the hotel shelter program. They are now on site helping with Medical Assistance applications to help fill a gap for those who are not on health care. Staff also help with confirming benefits and providing verifications needed for housing programs. Providing these documents are vital to securing housing, without this help, clients would not be approved for affordable housing or vouchers.

Change HealthCare

Change Healthcare is a SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery) agency that helps clients experiencing homelessness apply for Social Security disability benefits. Due to support from DHS, this agency is now on-site in our locations meeting people in person to help complete Social Security applications.

Appendix A4: Small Business Relief Fund

Business Characteristics and Demographics

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the characteristics of their business and owner demographics.

Table 58. Type of Application Completed

Application Type	Number	Percent
General	498	89.4%
Creative	59	10.6%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 59. Month of SBRF Grant Payment

Month	Number	Percent
July	123	22.1%
August	60	10.8%
September	78	14.0%
October	99	17.8%
November	148	26.6%
December	49	8.8%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 60. Which category best describes your business structure?

Business Structure	Number	Percent
Corporation for profit (S-corp or C-corp)	198	35.5%
Sole proprietor / Self-employed	178	32.0%
Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) / Partnership	174	31.2%
Partnership	6	1.1%
Cooperative	1	0.2%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 61. What were the annual revenues of your business in 2019?

Amount	Number	Percent
Less than \$5,000	9	1.6%
\$5,001 to \$10,000	17	3.1%
\$10,001 to \$50,000	124	22.3%
\$50,001 to \$100,000	77	13.8%
\$100,001 to \$500,000	211	37.9%
\$500,001 to \$1 million	60	10.8%
Over \$1 million	25	4.5%
Don't know/prefer not to answer	34	6.1%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 62. Type of Business Industry

Industry	Number	Percent within Type	Percent of All
General Businesses			
Restaurants, bars, and other prepared food outlets	91	18.3%	16.3%
Health care and social assistance/veterinary services	70	14.1%	12.6%
Personal services (hair salons, nails, cleaning services, fitness)	67	13.5%	12.0%
Professional services (including technical trades)	58	11.6%	10.4%
Retail	53	10.6%	9.5%
Arts/entertainment	29	5.8%	5.2%
Business support/consumer services	20	4.0%	3.6%
Child care	18	3.6%	3.2%
Leisure/tourism/hospitality services	14	2.8%	2.5%
Media/publishing/graphic design	13	2.6%	2.3%
Construction	12	2.4%	2.2%
Manufacturing	12	2.4%	2.2%
Education	11	2.2%	2.0%
Transportation/warehousing	11	2.2%	2.0%
Wholesale trade	8	1.6%	1.4%
Financial/insurance services	5	1.0%	0.9%
Agriculture	3	0.6%	0.5%
Other	3	0.6%	0.5%
General Total	498	100.0%	89.4%
	Number	Percent within Type	Percent of All
Creative Businesses			
Musicians (instrument, production, vocal, etc.)	16	27.1%	2.9%
More than one discipline/area	13	22.0%	2.3%
Artistic (painting, murals, photography, etc.)	8	13.6%	1.4%
Media (film, video, production, etc.)	7	11.9%	1.3%
Performance (actor/actress, theater performers, etc.)	7	11.9%	1.3%
Crafts (wind chimes, farmers market vendors, etc.)	4	6.8%	0.7%
Other	4	6.8%	0.7%
Creative Total	57	100.0%	10.6%

Table 63. What is the Zip Code of Your Business?

Zip Code	Description	Number	Percent
<i>St Paul</i>			
55101	Downtown	26	4.7%
55102	W 7th-Ft Road	34	6.1%
55103	North End	36	6.5%
55104	Hamline-Midway	98	17.6%
55105	Macalester-Groveland	33	5.9%
55106	Battle Creek	51	9.2%
55107	Westside	21	3.8%
55144	St. Anthony	31	5.6%
55116	Highland	15	2.7%
55130	Payne/Phalen	14	2.5%
	St. Paul Total	340	64.6%
<i>Suburban Ramsey County</i>			
55112	Arden Hills, Mounds View, New Brighton	27	4.8%
55126	Arden Hills, North Oaks, Roseville, Shoreview	7	1.3%
55110	Dellwood, Vadnais Heights, White Bear Lake, White Bear Township	41	7.4%
55108	Falcon Heights, Lauderdale	6	1.1%
55113	Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Little Canada	52	9.3%
55127	Little Canada North Oaks, Vadnais Height	4	0.7%
55117	Little Canada, Maplewood	20	3.6%
55109	Little Canada, Maplewood, North Saint Paul	23	4.1%
55119²⁷	Maplewood	18	3.2%
	Suburban Ramsey County Total	217	35.4%
Total		557	100.0%

Table 64. How many years has your business been in operation? (General Only)

Number of Years	Number	Percent
Less than one year	2	0.4%
1-2 years	50	10.0%
3-5 years	128	25.7%
6-10 years	102	20.5%
11-15 years	71	14.3%
16-20 years	39	7.8%
21+ years	106	21.3%
Total	498	100.0%

²⁷ The zip code 55144 was combined into 55119 as it is a very tiny area within the 55119 zip code.

Table 65. How many employees do you currently have?

Response	Number	Percent
None	151	27.1%
1 to 4	246	44.2%
5 to 9	95	17.1%
10 to 20	54	9.7%
21 to 35	10	1.8%
36 and higher	1	0.2%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 66. What is the Race/Ethnicity of the Primary Business Owner?

Race/Ethnicity	Number	Percent
African	37	6.6%
Asian	107	19.2%
Black/African Descendant of Slavery	44	7.9%
Hispanic/Latinx	21	3.8%
Native American/Native Alaskan	6	1.1%
White	272	48.8%
Multi-racial	17	3.1%
Other	4	0.7%
Prefer not to answer	49	8.8%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 67. What is the Gender of the Primary Business Owner?

Response	Number	Percent
Female	263	47.2%
Male	256	46.0%
Non-binary, gender non-conforming or other	3	0.5%
Prefer not to answer	35	6.3%
Total	557	100.0%

Table 68. Response Rate Gender of Primary Business Owner

Gender	Population	Survey Response	Response Rate
Female	377	263	69.8%
Male	399	256	64.2%
Non-binary, gender non-conforming or other	7	3	42.9%
Prefer not to answer	45	35	77.8%
Total	828	557	67.3%

Table 69. Response Rate by Location of Business

	Population	Survey Response	Response Rate
St. Paul	525	359	68.4%
Suburban Ramsey County	303	198	65.3%
Total	828	557	67.3%

Table 70. Response Rate by Zip Code

Zip Code	Population	Survey Response	Response Rate	Description
55101	41	26	63.4%	St. Paul- Downtown
55102	55	34	61.8%	St. Paul- West 7th-Fort Road
55103	48	36	75.0%	St. Paul- North End
55104	129	98	76.0%	St. Paul- Hamline-Midway
55105	52	33	63.5%	St. Paul- Macalester-Groveland
55106	79	51	64.6%	St. Paul- Battle Creek
55107	25	21	84.0%	St. Paul- West Side
55144	43	31	72.1%	St. Paul- St. Anthony
55116	27	15	55.6%	St. Paul- Highland
55118	4	0	0.0%	St. Paul- West Side
55130	22	14	63.6%	St. Paul- Payne/Phalen
55108	10	6	60.0%	Falcon Heights, Lauderdale
55109	29	23	79.3%	Little Canada, Maplewood North Saint Paul, North St Paul
55110	60	41	68.3%	Dellwood, Vadnais Heights, White Bear Lake, White Bear Township
55112	36	27	75.0%	Arden Hills, Mounds View, New Brighton
55113	78	52	66.7%	Falcon Heights, Lauderdale, Little Canada
55117	44	20	45.5%	Little Canada, Maplewood
55119	23	17	73.9%	Maplewood
55126	15	7	46.7%	Arden Hills, No Oaks, Roseville, Shoreview
55127	7	4	57.1%	Little Canada North Oaks, Vadnais Heights
55075	1	0	0.0%	Other
Total	827	557	67.4%	

Business Profiles

Businesses that responded to the online survey varied widely across demographics and business characteristics. The chi square test of independence was used to explore whether there was a relationship between different business characteristics that may put some businesses at greater risk of impact from the pandemic. The relationship between all business characteristics were explored and key differences were found for creative businesses, Saint Paul businesses, BIPOC-owned businesses, Woman-owned businesses, and sole proprietors.

Note: It is important to clarify that these relationships only reflect the population of businesses that responded to the survey and caution should be taken in drawing conclusions about all SBRF grantees and all small businesses in Ramsey County.

Each profile discusses any statistically significant differences in these areas:

- Business characteristics
- Access to Other Resources
- Impact of COVID-19
- Impact of SBRF Grant
- Needed Resources

A graph showing differences by percent is included in each profile.

Creative Businesses

There were distinct differences between businesses that received grants and were designated as “creative” versus the general business grantees. See Figure 45 for a complete summary of these differences.

Business characteristics

Creative businesses were more likely to be in Saint Paul, be self-employed/sole proprietors and have lower 2019 revenues than general businesses.

Access to Other Resources

Creative business owners had less access to business-related resources (business loans, business savings, business credit cards) and more likely to rely on personal savings, help from family or friends, early retirement savings withdrawal.

Impact of COVID-19

Creative businesses were more impacted by the state shutdown mandates and more likely to be at risk or experience permanent closure of their business than general businesses.

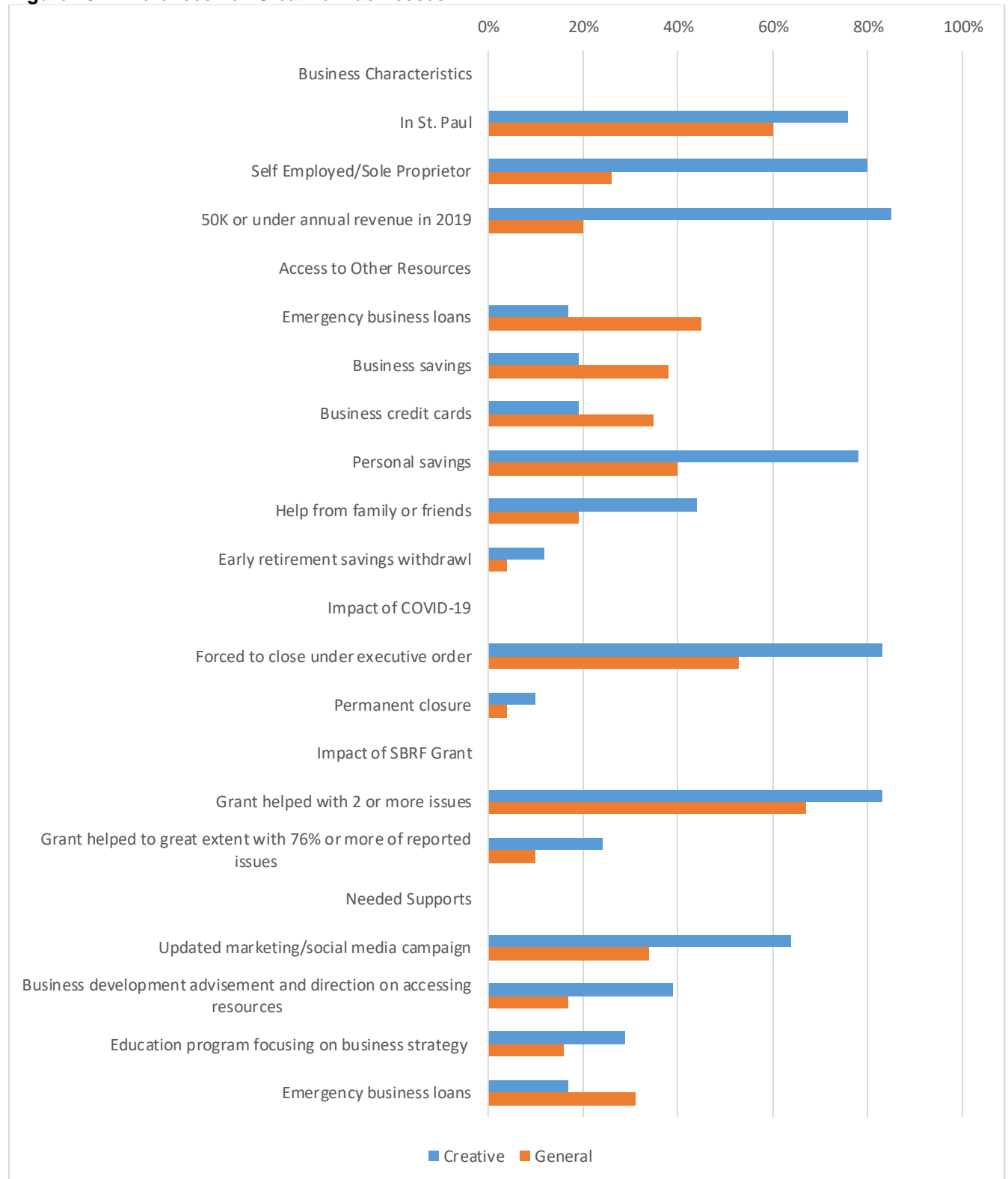
Impact of SBRF Grant

Although there was no significant difference in the number of issues reported by creative and general businesses, creative businesses reported the SBRF helped with higher numbers of issues.

Needed Resources

Creative businesses were more likely to need specific resources in order to recover from the impact of COVID-19, including updated marketing/social media campaign promoting business, business development advisement and direction on accessing resources, education program focusing on business strategy and less likely to need emergency business loans than general businesses.

Figure 45. Differences for Creative Businesses



BIPOC-Owned Businesses

Businesses who self-reported the race or ethnicity of their primary business owner to be Black, Indigenous or people of color (BIPOC) were compared to those who are White.

There were distinct differences between business grantees that are BIPOC-owned versus those who are White-owned. See Figure 46 for a complete summary of these differences.

Business Characteristics

BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to be in Saint Paul, have \$100,000 or less annual revenue in 2019, be in operation for five or less years and to have an LLC business structure.

Industries

When comparing the five most common industries of funded businesses, BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to be in the industries of personal services (including hair salons, nail services, cleaning, fitness) and restaurants/bars and less likely to be in the industries of retail, professional services and healthcare/social assistance.

Access to Other Resources

BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to rely on help from family and friends, personal credit cards and other grants besides SBRF. They were less likely to select none of the listed resources.

Impact of COVID-19

BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to be forced to close due to executive order. They were also more likely to report having missed payments on business loans or other scheduled payments (i.e., rent, utilities) and to have been adversely impacted by factors beyond COVID-19, including the general political environment and social uprisings.

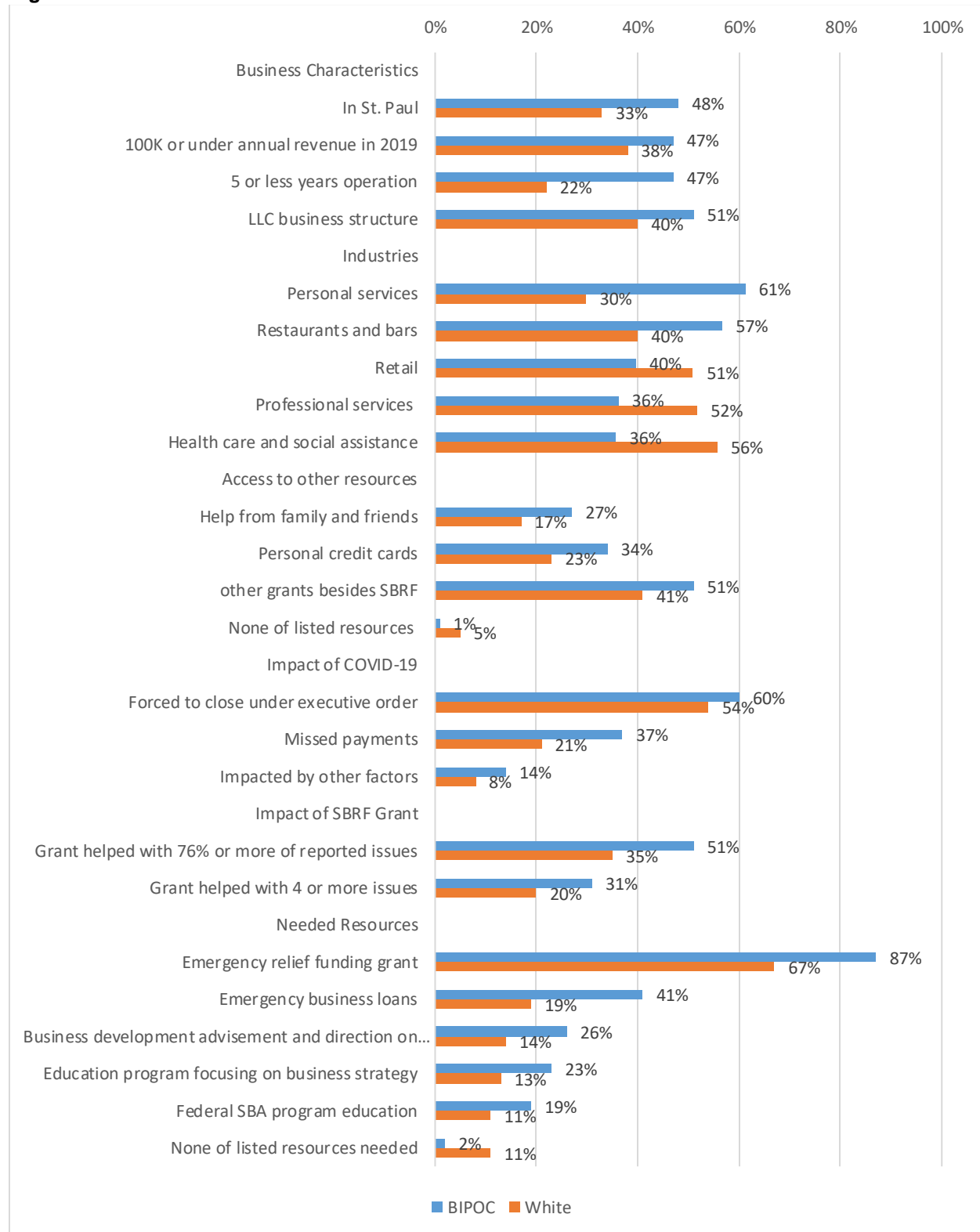
Impact of SBRF Grant

BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to report that the SBRF grant helped with four or more of the issues they reported and to have helped with 76% or more of the issues they reported.

Needed Supports

BIPOC-owned businesses were more likely than White-owned businesses to report that they need resources in order to recover from the impact of COVID-19, including emergency relief funding grant, emergency business loans, business development advisement and direction, education program focusing on business strategy and Federal SBA program education.

Figure 46. Differences for BIPOC-owned businesses



Woman-Owned Businesses

Businesses who self-reported the gender of the primary business owner as female were compared to those who were male-owned.²⁸

There were distinct differences between business grantees that are BIPOC-owned versus those who are White-owned. See Figure 47 for a complete summary of these differences.

Business characteristics

Woman-owned businesses were more likely than male-owned businesses to have annual revenue under \$50,000 in 2019 and less likely to have a corporation for profit business structure.

Industries

Woman-owned businesses were more likely than male-owned businesses to have businesses in the personal services and health care and social assistance industries. They were less likely to have businesses in the industries of restaurants and bars and professional services.

Impact of COVID-19

Woman-owned businesses were more likely than male-owned businesses to be forced to close due to an executive order for COVID-19.

Outlook

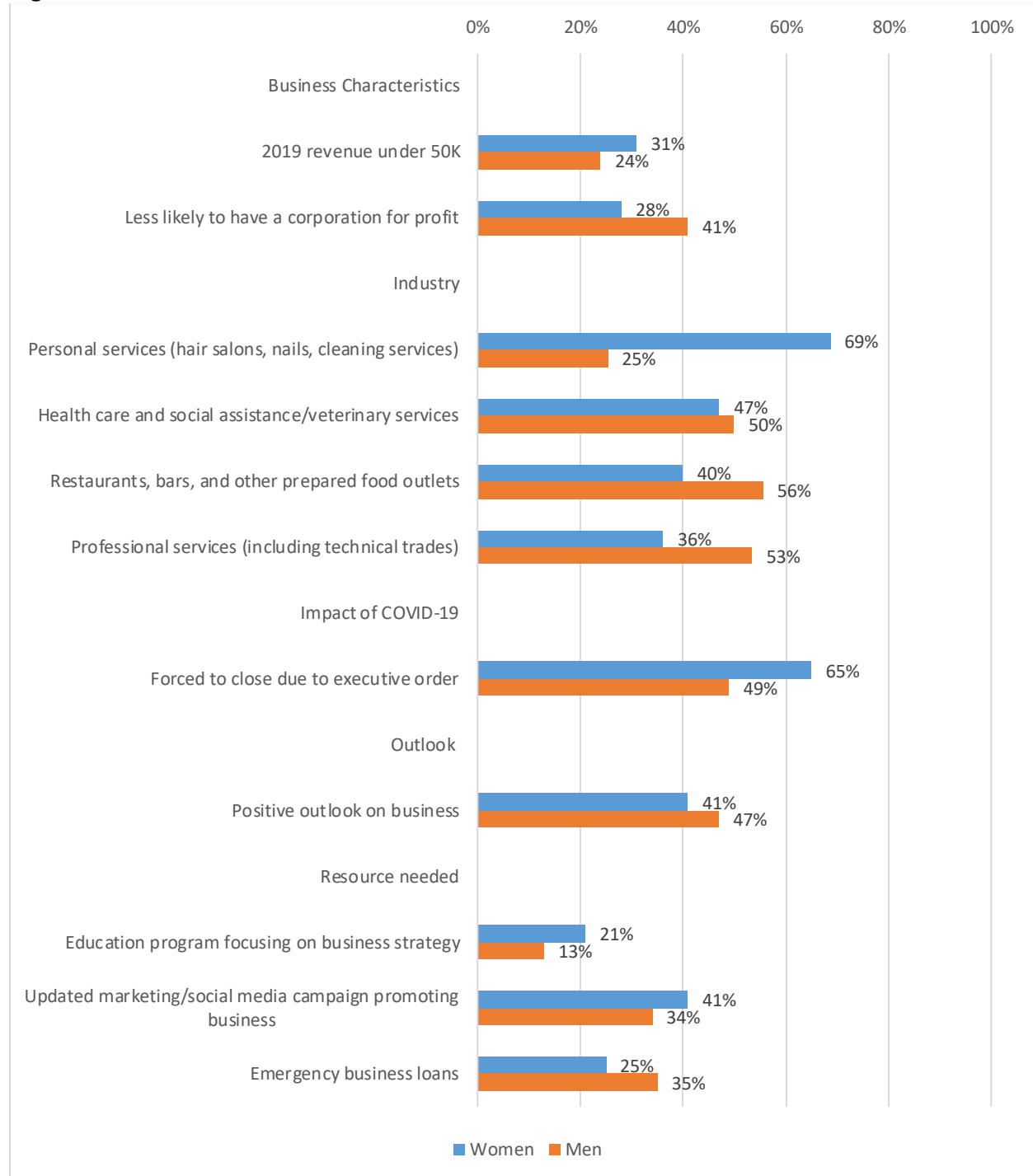
Woman-owned businesses were less likely to have a positive outlook on their business.

Needed Supports

Woman-owned businesses were more likely than male-owned businesses to report that they need the following resources in order to recover from the impact of COVID-19: education programming focusing on business strategy, updated marketing/social media campaign promoting their business. They are less likely to need emergency business loans.

²⁸ Three businesses indicated that the primary owner of their business was non-binary, gender non-conforming or other gender identity

Figure 47. Differences for woman-owned businesses



Self Employed/Sole Proprietor

Businesses owners who were self-employed or sole proprietors were compared to those that had other business structures (i.e., corporation for profit, limited liability corporation)

There were distinct differences for self-employed/sole proprietor businesses. See Figure 48 for a complete summary of these differences.

Business characteristics

Self-employed/ sole proprietors were more likely to have annual revenue under \$50,000 in 2019.

Access to resources

Self-employed/ sole proprietors were more likely to have accessed personal savings and help from family and friends or no resources. They were less likely to have accessed business-based loans, savings and credit cards as well as personal loans.

Impact of COVID-19

Self-employed/ sole proprietors were more likely to have been forced to close due to an executive order for COVID-19. These businesses were also more likely to have experienced two or less of the issues covered in the survey. In particular, they were less likely to have experienced:

- Missed payments on business loans or other scheduled payments
- Layoff or furlough of workers
- Cancellation of business purchases planned prior to COVID-19
- Decrease or potential decrease in the number of hours your business is open during a one-week period
- Decrease in foot traffic
- eviction or potential eviction from business space/location
- Unplanned expenses

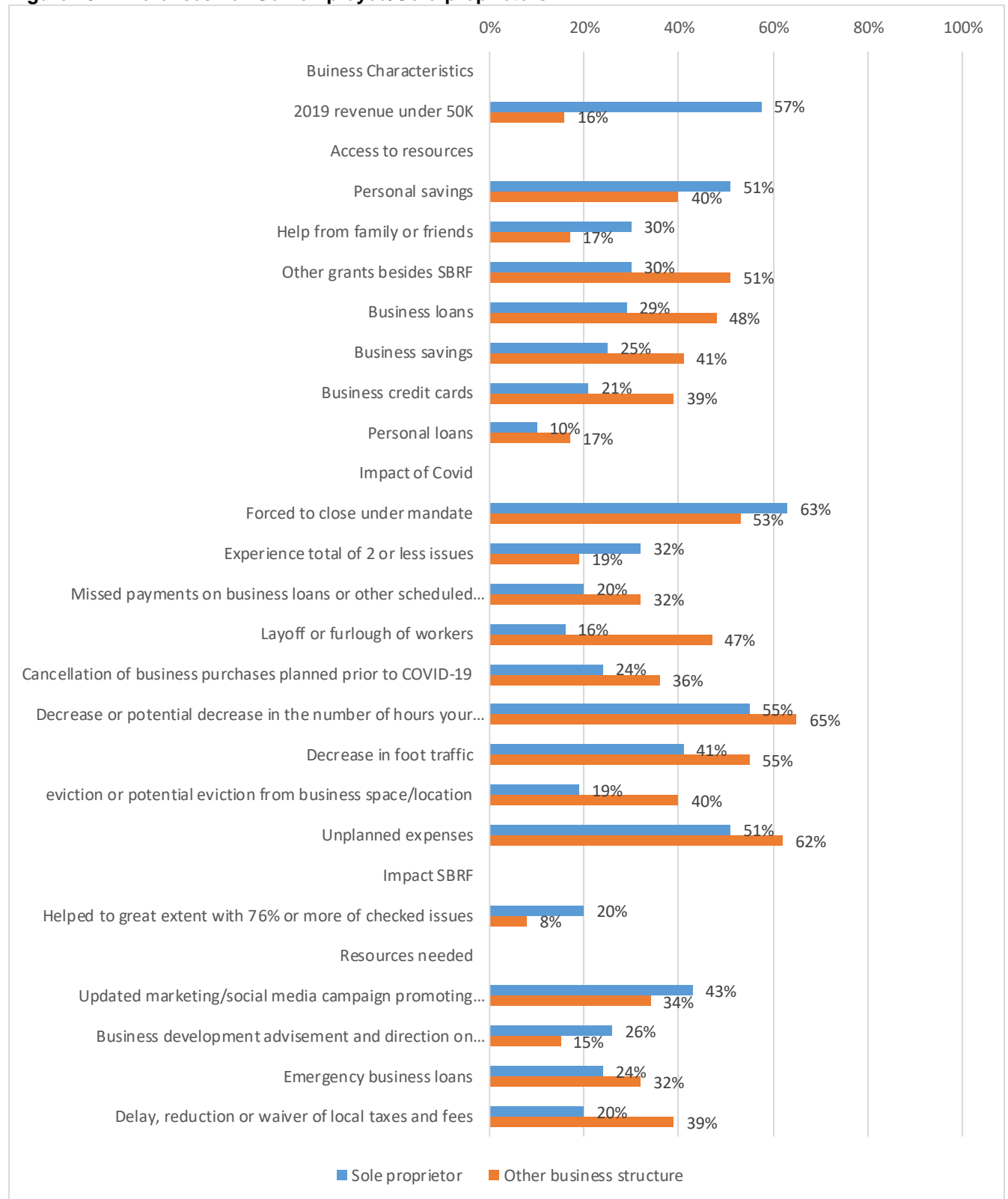
Impact of SBRF grant

Although self-employed/ sole proprietors experienced less issues covered in the survey, they were more likely to report that the SBRF grant helped to a “great extent” with 76% or more of those issues.

Needed Resources

Self-employed/ sole proprietors were more likely to need the following resources in order to recover from the impact of COVID-19: updated marketing/social media campaign promoting business and business development advisement and direction on accessing resources. They were less likely to need emergency business loans and delay, reduction or waiver of local taxes and fees.

Figure 48. Differences for Self-employed/Sole proprietors



Smaller Businesses

The annual revenue of businesses in 2019 and number of employees are two indicators that were explored to identify differences in experience for smaller businesses. In this analysis, smaller businesses are considered to be ones that had an annual revenue in 2019 of \$50,000 or less and/or had between zero and four employees. There were distinct differences across both of these characteristics. See Figure 49 and Figure 50 for a complete summary of these differences.

Unless otherwise noted, all differences were present for both revenue and number of employees.

Access to resources

Smaller businesses were more likely to access personal savings and help from family and friends and less likely to access business-based loans, credit cards and savings as well as other grants besides SBRF.

Impact of COVID-19

Businesses with 2019 revenues under \$50,000 were more likely to report that their revenues decrease “a lot” since the start of COVID-19, yet less likely to have five or more issues experienced. Businesses with four or less employees were also less likely to have seven or more issues experienced. Both sets of small businesses were less likely to be impacted in the following areas:

- Layoff or furlough of workers
- Decrease or potential decrease in hours available to workers
- Decrease in foot traffic
- Unplanned expenses

Impact of SBRF grant

Although smaller businesses experienced less issues due to COVID-19, they were more likely to report that the SBRF grant helped with the issues they did have.

Needed Resources

Smaller businesses were more likely to need the following resources in order to recover from the impact of COVID-19: updated marketing/social media campaign promoting business and business development advisement and direction on accessing resources. Businesses with 2019 revenues under \$50,000 were also more likely to need education program focusing on business strategy.

Smaller businesses were less likely to need delay reduction or waiver of local taxes and fees.

Businesses with four or less employees were also less likely to need:

- Advocacy at local, state, federal level concerning business protections
- Emergency business loans
- Consistent special events to encourage foot traffic

Figure 49. Differences by 2019 Annual Revenues

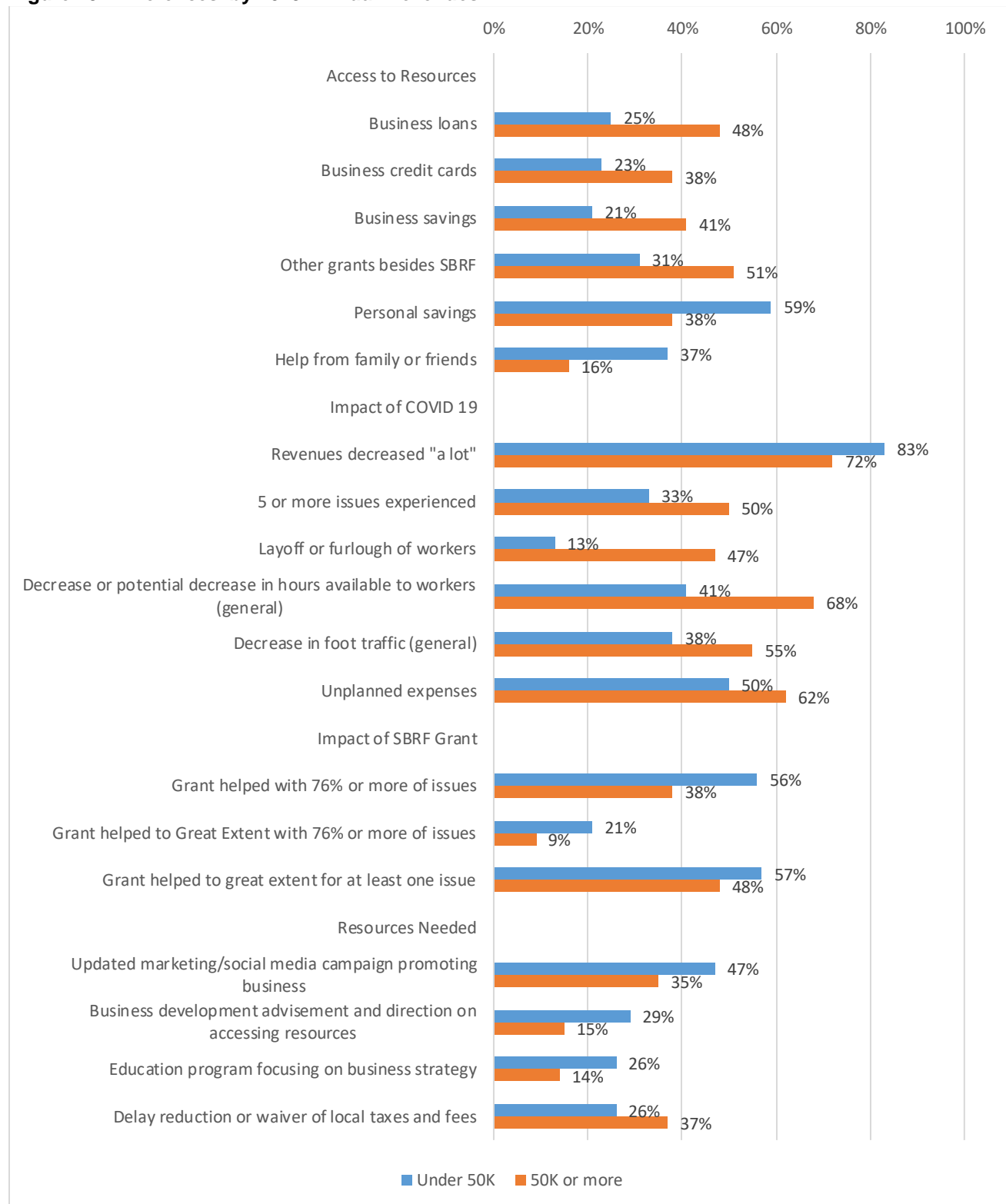
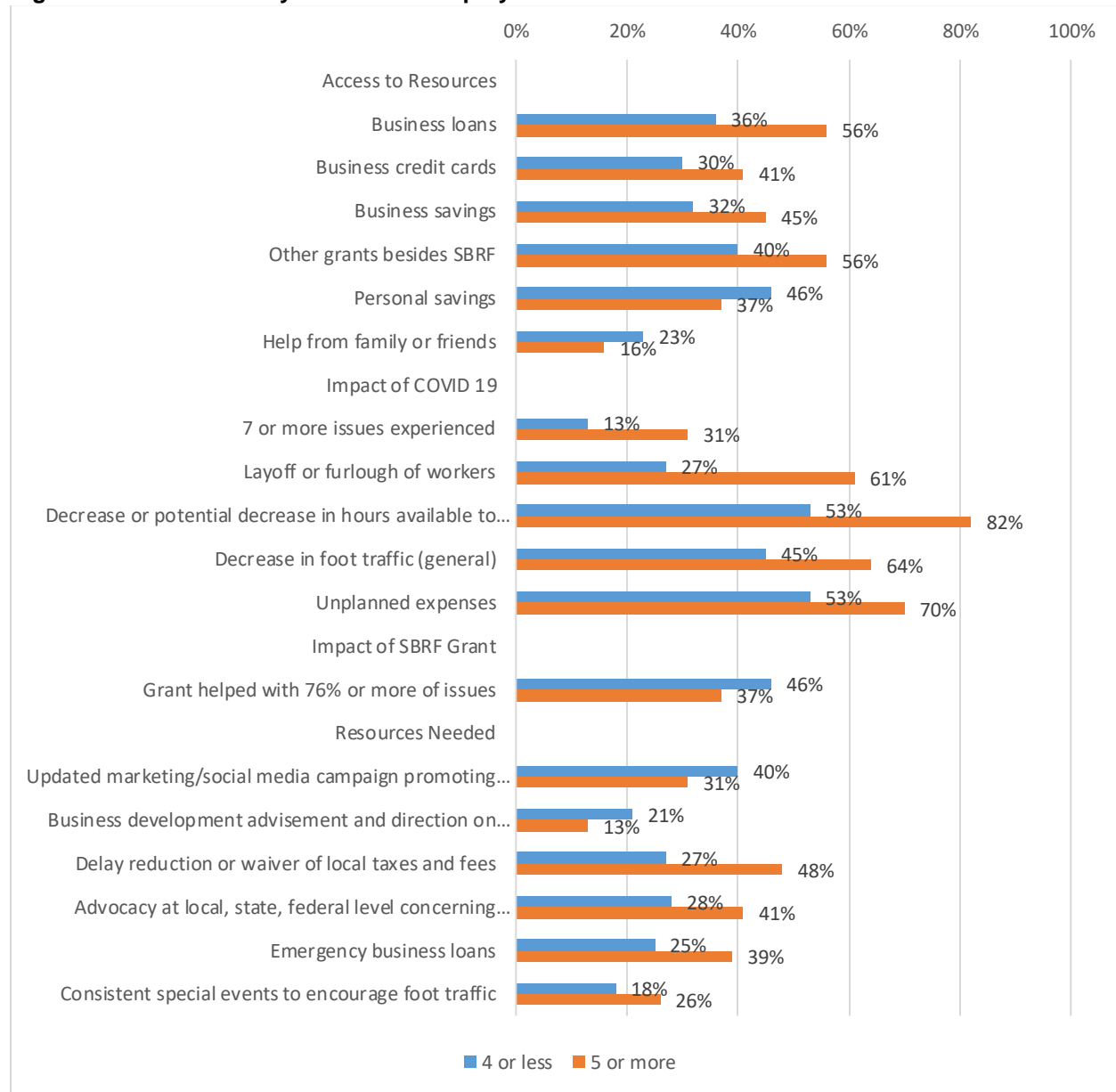


Figure 50. Differences by Number of Employees



Saint Paul Businesses

Businesses within Saint Paul were compared to those in suburban Ramsey County. There were a number of differences based on business location. See Figure 51 for a complete summary of these differences.

Business characteristics

Businesses in Saint Paul were more likely to have been in operation for five years or less, to have four or less employees and to have 2019 annual revenues \$50,000 or less.

Access to resources

Businesses in Saint Paul were more likely to access personal savings.

Impact of COVID-19

Businesses in Saint Paul were more likely to have been forced or have chosen to close due to an executive order for COVID-19. However, businesses in Saint Paul were less likely to report a decrease in foot traffic.

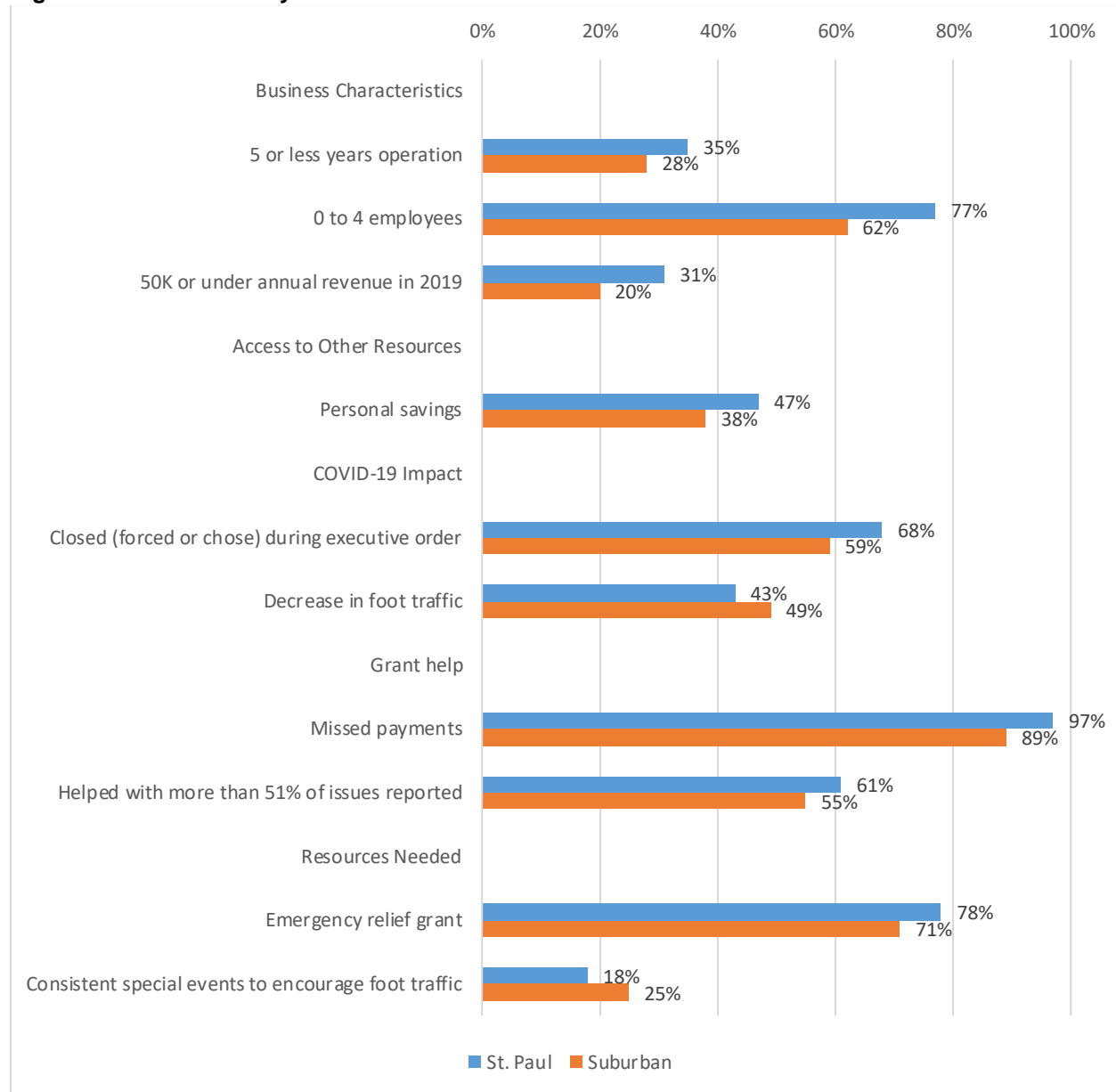
Impact of SBRF grant

Businesses in Saint Paul were more likely to report that the SBRF grant helped with missed payments and with more than half of the issues businesses reported.

Needed Resources

Businesses in Saint Paul were more likely to need emergency grant relief in order to recover from the impact of COVID-19. They were less likely to need consistent special events to encourage foot traffic than Suburban Ramsey County.

Figure 51. Differences by Location



Business Testimonials on Impact of SBRF Grant

Below are additional testimonials provided in the survey by businesses to how the SBRF grant has helped them during the COVID-19 pandemic:

"I want to thank you so much for doing what you did for us. It makes me proud to be a resident of Ramsey county. You have literally helped secure our dream. Thank you!"

"It was helpful to my confidence to continue to operate the business at a loss. The grant made up for 2-3 months of losses, helping to sustain the operation."

"Thank you so much. This grant helped me stay in business and able to support my family. My husband lost his job and my micro business became our primary source of income. This grant helped me find greater ways to increase revenue. Thank you so much."

"I literally would not be in business still if it was not for this grant. The first week that MN closed down in March I lost 10 clients in a span of 2 days. The ripple effect on small businesses was stressful. I'm truly grateful that I received this as I was able to keep going with my business. I thank you! Most of my clients are women and BIPOC owned businesses. We are trying to stick together and stay in business."

"The grant was incredibly helpful at a devastating time for a career musician."

"I am so incredibly grateful for this grant -- it has ensured that I am able to meet my bills through March, and by that time I will have made further preparations for pivoting how I run my business. Thank you!"

"Most of all, I am very grateful for the relief fund and it has been very helpful. It is wonderful that the county made this available to small businesses and it has helped us a lot. Thank you!"

"First, thank you. Second, even beyond the money, it felt good to know that I live in a county that recognized the work I do and cared."

"One positive is that Ramsey County was able to recognize small arts businesses like mine as viable and valuable and important for their commerce and community."

"This grant has given me access to new tools and technology to reach a broader audience as well as empowered me to help others in the same way."

"COVID - 19 has been deeply challenging at a social, physical, and psychological level. Because of it, I have experienced moments of panic and desperation; second guessing life choices. I am so grateful for the outpouring of support, and the recognition that we are in this together."

"If we had not gotten the money, we would have been in dire straits to pay our rent, payroll, etc."

"Covid-19 has changed a lot of ways our center has had to budget what money I had and what money became available. If it weren't for the grants and how I handled budgeting the funds, I don't believe I would still be in business as of today."

Appendix A5: RECERT

Media and Messaging Partners

Partner	Project Description	Contract Amount	Target Population
Santanmaria Broadcasting	Santanmaria Broadcasting will work with La Raza with an on-air presence to include not only ads and PSA types of spots, but also live mentions by their DJs, live interviews with Ramsey County representatives, Call-in shows that are interactive with the greater community, in-studio “town hall” type of panels using COVID-19 approved social distancing. La Raza is the only Spanish language media outlet in the Twin Cities with a dedicated journalistic news team.	\$25,000	Latino/a residents
Center for Hmong Arts and Talent	The Center for Hmong Arts and Talent will run a campaign with digital and grassroots strategies to reach all segments of the Asian American community in Ramsey County. The goal is to reach as many people as possible but also very intentional utilizing non-traditional means of reaching populations such as elders, recent immigrants and non-English speakers – who are the most vulnerable.	\$25,000	Hmong, Karen, Vietnamese, Filipino, Lao, Chinese, Khmer, Korean and Asian residents
Southeast Asian Diaspora Project	The Southeast Asian Diaspora (SEAD) Project will develop, translate, and disseminate culturally specific, relevant, accurate, and timely messages related to COVID-19 to Southeast Asian diaspora communities in Ramsey County. This project leverages SEAD’s role as a trusted community resource and facilitator, as well as their extensive experience with effective community-based storytelling through literary and visual design.	\$10,000	Hmong, Karen, Khmer, Lao and Vietnamese residents
CTV North Suburbs	CTV North Suburbs will provide outreach and engagement within the Ramsey County Spanish-speaking community. They are a video communication-based nonprofit with a strong network of community stakeholders and increasingly more Spanish-speaking stakeholders.	\$10,000	Latino/a residents
Social Impact Strategies Group	Social Impact Strategies has a strategy with an intention to focus on ensuring that individuals and families are engaged and have timely, accurate and up to date COVID-19 information that is linguistically and culturally appropriate in Ramsey County Hmong communities.	\$10,000	Asian residents, specifically Hmong
ZeHabesha LLC	ZeHabesha, LLC will reach Eritrean, Ethiopia, Oromo, Liberian, Nigerian, and Somali people in Ramsey County using communication platforms such radio, TV, online podcasting and popular Facebook accounts. ZeHabesha will ensure that communities are safer because they are well informed.	\$10,000	Eritrean, Ethiopia, Oromo, Liberian, Nigerian, and Somali residents

Partner	Project Description	Contract Amount	Target Population
OMG Digital Media	OMG Digital Media will provide cultural messaging delivered in a creative way to help African Americans understand the seriousness of the virus and what resources are available and when they should seek treatment. OMG will work with organizations, churches and community groups who serve communities of color.	\$10,000	Black elders/residents
Assn. of Nigerian Nurses	The Association of Nigerian Nurses of MN will provide education and community engagement activities to support, sensitize, and educate the African communities to participate in COVID-19 prevention, testing, contact tracing and treatment. They understand the impact of COVID-19 on the African immigrants with no health insurance, no job, low wage, need for food, clothing, housing and healthcare.	\$10,000	African-born residents
CLUES	CLUES will provide culturally and linguistically specific information targeting Latino communities in Ramsey County related to COVID-19 information, guidance, and resources. Information will be shared via live video streams, radio and TV, social media messages, group texts, and print materials.	\$10,000	Latino/a residents
Grace Restoration Intl	Grace Restoration will meet with community leaders to assess the need of each community; host community education and awareness for the community; the media services/ messaging will be delivered through check-in where designed/ trained staff will be calling homes (based on language spoken); fliers will be sent to identified homes.	\$10,000	African American, African-born, Somali, and Oromo
Empire Smile	Empire Smile is a culturally responsive media agency that promote community engagement, outreach and education, organize activities to increase public awareness of immigrant health issues, to improve cultural diversity by promoting education, entertainment and arts through events to build collaborative relationship with community stakeholders using our podcasts, collaborations, social capital and the support of the community.	\$10,000	African born residents
Fairview Health Foundation	Fairview Health Foundation will focus on engaging with Hmong, Karen, and Hispanic/Latino communities in East Side neighborhoods through targeted and intentional messaging and communication. They will work with partners and cultural brokers to create materials that consider family, value structures, history, and living conditions in a digestible format through the platform's community members utilize.	\$10,000	Hmong, Karen, and Hispanic/Latino communities

Partner	Project Description	Contract Amount	Target Population
Karen Organization of MN	The Karen Organization of MN will reach refugees from Burma to improve financial stability, housing security, healthcare access, and related support services.	\$10,000	Karen residents
Girls are Powerful	Girls are Powerful will share up to date information on COVID-19 with messages of strength and wellness encouraging community building empowerment. They will work with local businesses, organizations, and community leaders.	\$10,000	Black residents
Kaleidoscope	Kaleidoscope will culturally-adapt COVID-19 messages from trusted sources (St. Paul-Ramsey County Public Health, MDH, CDC, and WHO) into several accessible communication formats (e.g., audio and video PSAs and video educational briefings), disseminate these messages across a multitude of heavily-trafficked Hmong media outlets (e.g., YouTube channels, Facebook pages, Hmong radio stations), and evaluate the reach, content, and receptivity of these messages.	\$10,000	Hmong residents
Wellshare International	Wellshare International have produced materials used by large health care institutions, media partners like TPT and many community-based organizations alike. They also leverage the engagement of their team of 20 Community Health Workers (CHWs) in their ongoing implementation of both their standard public health programs as well as new specific COVID-19 response efforts.	\$10,000	Somali, Spanish, Hmong, Arabic and will be adding Oromo, Latinx, and Karen Residents
The Anika Foundation	Community Connections is an effort that highlights emerging and established leaders in the ADOS and broader African Heritage community. By doing so, they issue a strong message from trusted messengers who will leverage their sphere of influence to help residents make informed health & safety decisions during the COVID19 pandemic.	\$10,000	Black residents; Some cross reach to Latino/a, API and European American communities.
Hmong American Partnership	HAP will provide outreach to ensure that business owners in Ramsey County's Southeast Asian community have accurate and up-to-date information to safely operate their businesses while preventing the spread of COVID-19.	\$10,000	Hmong and Southeast Asian Residents
Minnesota Dawah Institute	MDI serves the community in the Frogtown and midway areas. They will get messages to over 800 people at one time about COVID-19 and other health related issues.	\$10,000	Somali and Oromo residents

Partner	Project Description	Contract Amount	Target Population
Darul Uloom	Darul Uloom serves as the community center and as an Islamic Center. The families are Somali, and they live mostly on the Eastside of St. Paul. Darul Uloom will get messages to over 800 people at one time about COVID-19 and other health related issues.	\$10,000	Somali and Oromo residents
Voices of Racial Justice	Voices for Racial Justice will provide outreach and engage BIPOC communities in St. Paul and Ramsey County during the COVID-19 crisis.	\$10,000	Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) residents
The Other Media Group	The Other Media Group (OMG) will work in partnership to adapt, amplify, disseminate, and inform maternal and child health-related (MCH) media about COVID-19 to the Hmong community in Ramsey County. OMG will lead the project as the technology and media expert and partner with the Hmong Breastfeeding Coalition (HBC) and Minnesota Breastfeeding Coalition (MBC) as subject matter experts (SMEs) with broad ranging connections to the MCH community across the county.	\$10,000	Hmong residents
Vietnamese Social Services	VSS of MN will develop, implement, and monitor a community engagement plan. The plan will include strategies for communicating effectively to protect Vietnamese, Somali, and Karen communities during COVID-19.	\$10,000	Vietnamese, Karen, Somali, Karenni residents
Minnesota Institute of Nigerian Development	The Minnesota Institute for Nigerian Development will organize outreach activities that will engage the target group and connect them with community and government agencies for resources that will improve their health and well-being, especially in the areas of mental health and food security. Specifically, they will organize a virtual town hall meeting, where a knowledgeable resource person will discuss available resources.	\$10,000	Black immigrants, Nigerian residents
Portico Healthnet	Portico Healthnet will help racially, ethnically and culturally diverse Ramsey County residents enroll in health care coverage, understand how to use the health care system, and access community and county resources that support their health and wellbeing. Portico provides culturally inclusive services and has become a trusted resource for Ramsey County agencies and residents.	\$10,000	BIPOC, immigrants, refugees, and complex immigration status residents
Ujamaa Place	Ujamaa Place has created a community engaged ecosystem built on cultural foundation of love, hope, pride and trust which will be integrated with COVID-19 and health equity messaging that helps African Americans understand the seriousness of the virus, what resources are available and when they should seek treatment.	\$10,000	Black men/residents

Partner	Project Description	Contract Amount	Target Population
Restoration for All, Inc.	Restoration for All, Inc. will implement a project titled “Essential Connections (E-Connects) project” and the proposed activities are designed and proposed to increase African immigrants’ (West and East Africans in the faith-based communities) understanding of and participation in COVID-19 testing, case interviews and contact tracing, and to reduce fear or stigma. E-Connects aims at reaching out to more than 150 vulnerable persons defined as: undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers, those that are going through removal proceedings, trafficked victims and survivors, older adults/elders as well as people living with disabilities using a multichannel approach spanning: learning-based model, campaign-based model, advocacy-based model, and support-based model.	\$10,000	African immigrants (West and East Africans) residents

Contractor Evaluation Report Criteria

Media and Messaging Contractor Evaluation Report

At the end of the contract term, contractors will be expected to submit a brief evaluation of the project to Ramsey County staff. The evaluation will include:

1. Number of Ramsey County residents served. Include demographic information of the audience reached by age, race/ethnicity, zip codes, etc.
2. Types of media services and/or messaging provided by your agency/organization.
3. Description of successes.
4. Description of the barriers/challenges. Description of the changes occurred in the lives of residents that participated in this initiative (i.e. resident testimony, media examples, outreach, etc.

Trusted Messenger Contractor Evaluation Report

At the end of the contract term, contractors will be expected to submit a brief evaluation of the project to Ramsey County staff. The evaluation will include:

1. Number of Ramsey County residents served by age, race/ethnicity/ location/zip code, etc.
2. Types of services provided by your agency/organization
3. Description of Community services that residents were linked to
4. Description of County services that residents were linked to
5. Description of successes
6. Description of the barriers/challenges
7. Description of the changes occurred in the lives of residents that participated