Topline Summary: Community Perspectives on COVID-19 Recovery

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We Rise Together: For an Equitable and Just Recovery is a coalition of corporate and philanthropic funders working with the community to accelerate equitable economic recovery in the Chicago region. Housed at The Chicago Community Trust, We Rise Together is increasing employment opportunities for Black and Latinx workers, strengthening businesses of color, and spurring investment in disinvested neighborhoods. Because We Rise Together is committed to grounding the initiative's efforts in the lived experiences of Chicago's most marginalized communities, the decision was made to host Community Conversations across Chicago neighborhoods that have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

A team from BECOME worked with the Trust and New America Chicago to plan seven Community Conversations in collaboration with nonprofits from each neighborhood. The primary goals of the conversations were to understand the impact of the pandemic on Black and Latinx communities and learn community priorities for recovery.[1]

Community Recommendations

Participants had strong recommendations for support and resources to help their neighborhood economically recover from the pandemic. Fundamental to all the needs mentioned is the need for emotional and mental health support to be able to process living through an unprecedented time that affected all facets of life. The following are the most common recommendations.

- **Employment** is a primary need in order to be able to support family, get health care, reduce crime in the neighborhood, boost the local economy, and support local businesses. The government/city could support by providing incentives to get people back to work. Fear of the pandemic and/or vaccines also needs to be addressed before people can fully return to work. Access to accurate and rapid information on and awareness of the pandemic, COVID-19 vaccination, accurate information about COVID-19, and safety procedures is also needed. Businesses can support by raising awareness and leading by example on the importance of following safety procedures.
- **Support for local businesses** was important for participants and many felt businesses needed help from the government before they could help with economic recovery. They discussed how supporting local businesses would in turn support employment opportunities. They suggested tax breaks, free advisory services, grants to offer vaccines, grants for businesses to promote entrepreneurship, relaxation or grace periods on taxes, and relief packages for businesses. Participants also talked about the need to address unnecessary price hikes.
- **Support with meeting basic needs.** Participants also mentioned that despite important financial help from the government, many people are still recovering financially after losing work, savings, and in some cases, their homes. Community members still need help meeting basic needs, such as with paying rent, gas, and electricity. Participants also noted the importance of mapping need and targeting funds to the highest risk communities.
- **Other recommendations** included providing temporary financial support to those with employment instability, staffing support for overtaxed local nonprofits, financial counseling and guidance, childcare, assistance with food distribution fees and transportation, compensation for vaccinations,

[1] Community Conversations were held virtually via Zoom due to the pandemic between September and November 2021 in Cicero, Austin, South Lawndale, Chicago Lawn/West Englewood, Dolton/Harvey, Humboldt Park, and Roseland/Pullman/Riverdale/Altgeld. Because of the small number of people in each, findings should be considered insights from community members, and not fully representative of each neighborhood.

apprenticeships and scholarships for youth, investing in business collectives or support networks, and training Chicagoans to take advantage of the advancement in technology to digitize their work.

Community Conversations Key Findings

Consistently, across all neighborhoods, we heard that people struggled and continue to struggle economically and emotionally as a result of the pandemic. Still, most found unexpected positives in the midst of the pandemic.

Community Conversations Finding #1: The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the emotional and mental well-being of participants across all neighborhoods. In particular, participants expressed worrying about physical safety, emotional stability, the well-being of loved ones and neighbors, finances, providing for the family, and changes to their employment that significantly impact their way of living.

Participants shared feeling a range of negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, depression, paranoia, emotional stress, panic attacks, and feelings of isolation. Emotional effects were often tied to experiencing unemployment or reduced employment during the pandemic. Several incidents related to acute mental health issues and suicide were also shared. Participants also talked about the emotional toll having to stay home had on children. There was also a perception that the toll on mental health resulted in an increase in the use of drugs and alcohol, as well as increased crime. Participants described the emotional impact of losing friends and family members to COVID-19, as well as missing close contacts and worrying about others. The loss of loved ones caused trauma, stress, uncertainty, anxiety, and depression.

Community Conversations Finding #2: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the employment status of participants. In particular, participants talked about experiencing a high level of anxiety due to job loss, reduction in work hours or work status, and having to find ways to supplement their income to make ends meet during the ongoing pandemic.

These stressors were specifically rooted in a reduction of work hours, cuts to income (either personally and/or within the household), and, if they had one, a depletion in savings accounts. Participants mentioned applying for additional financial support to help supplement the loss in wages. These supports included taking out high-interest bank loans and applying for and receiving rental assistance from the government. In both instances, participants felt the funds just did not go far enough to cover the rising cost of groceries and utilities. Even for those who had family members that were able to give them money or pay some of their bills, these slashes in income resulted in participants feeling it necessary to undergo fundamental shifts in their lifestyles and spending habits in order to accommodate their current financial situations. There was also the perception that unemployment contributed to an increase in crime in the neighborhood.

Community Conversations Finding #3: Participants acknowledge some positives from living through the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, participants reflected on the importance of being united, opportunities due to the expansion of technology platforms, and reconnecting or bonding with family or neighbors.

One silver lining manifested within participants' homes and neighborhoods: the pandemic allowed people to carve out time to reconnect and deepen relationships with their family members and neighbors, something that had taken a backseat during the pre-COVID-19 hustle and bustle of daily life. Many were encouraged by how many neighbors and organizations had stepped up to help others. Innovative uses of technology and the general digital landscape also gave rise to other positive community responses, which include local businesses shifting to more flexible models that helped them stay afloat and/or profitable (e.g., delivery services). Participants' own personal digital behaviors shifted, particularly in how they purchased products and used services (e.g., banking or telehealth). With this in mind, participants listed a powerful growth area that can better shield individuals from similar, unexpected financial circumstances in the future: capacity building around freelancing) opportunities (in many instances, having multiple streams of income) and digital skills. Pumping resources into educating and training Chicagoans on how to stay employed and/or how to digitize their work could help many avoid significant negative financial impacts moving forward. All of these positive changes and areas of opportunities helped participants rekindle their belief in humanity and each other.

Community Conversations Finding #4: Basic needs of participants, such as housing and food security, were and continue to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants discussed not having enough resources to "*feed my family*." There were participants who skipped meals and others who were homeless. There were references to the quality of food available (scarcity), impacts of having children at home during the day to feed, and the effects on children in general i.e. "*more children are hungry*." Participants described the lack of grocery stores or grocery stores closing, the difficulty to get supplies, including food, and the rising cost of necessities like electricity and water. There were also descriptions of how some local organizations were collaborating to meet the need for food, such as in Cicero and Austin.

People are having to make adjustments to their living arrangements by moving in with relatives, moving to the suburbs or living without a home. In Austin, housing development has paused and overall, the cost of living has increased across every neighborhood. Participants anticipated an increase in homelessness given that the eviction moratorium recently expired, and more people are unable to pay.

Community Conversations Takeaway #5: The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted local businesses as well as neighborhoods' sense of safety.

Participants highlighted how local businesses were one of the most impacted areas in their neighborhoods. Now, businesses are slowly recovering from the curfew, lockdown, restrictions, and change in shopping habits (e.g., online shopping and use of delivery services). Participants further talked about how social life has changed due to the restrictions, stay-at-home order and fear of getting COVID-19. When it comes to going to the theater, football games, bars or clubs, church, malls, or local parks—people are more cautious or fearful of being out. Participants also talked about seeing an increase in local crime (e.g., burglary, carjacking), drug use/activity, and gun violence.

Community Conversations Finding #6: Being an undocumented immigrant in the U.S. intensified the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the neighborhoods of Cicero and South Lawndale.

Participants in these neighborhoods talked about the extra layer of difficulty being undocumented added to community members trying get through the pandemic. Some businesses that closed due to the pandemic, didn't pay workers who were undocumented. More and more, employers are asking for citizenship status, which is impacting employment opportunities for people who are undocumented. Other employers expected undocumented workers to work for less pay. In addition, immigration status drastically impacted how much relief people received. Due to being undocumented, participants shared how some people in the community couldn't receive stimulus funds or other resources. This is also impacting people's housing security as landlords are taking advantage of people who are undocumented by raising their rent or threatening eviction, knowing they have little recourse.

Individuals in Chicago's hardest hit Black and Latinx communities have been profoundly impacted by the pandemic. The loss of life and challenges of cobbling together work and paying for basic necessities while costs rose has taken a toll on people all over the city and suburbs. However, communities have responded with compassion and resilience, strengthening family and neighborhood bonds, and helping each other survive. For Chicago to recover equitably, city and business leaders must recognize that the pandemic is far from over and the impact will last for years. For our communities to recover, our people must recover first. Fortunately, together we can make a significant difference in the lives of Chicago region's hardest hit communities.