

Report of the Berks County COVID-19 Response Task Force

March 2021



**BERKS COUNTY
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**



United Way of Berks County

GRCA

GREATER READING
Chamber Alliance

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Preface

In January 2020, the first reported cases of the novel coronavirus were being documented throughout the United States. The county commissioners proactively declared a disaster emergency on March 12th, before the virus was present in the county. Berks County reported its first case on March 18th, 2020.

Fear and uncertainty ensued in the following months with stay-at-home orders, closures of “non-life-sustaining” businesses, and closures of schools. These measures led to unprecedented issues such as high unemployment rates, food insecurity, homelessness, decreases in protective social services, and less accessibility to preventive healthcare services. Berks County organizations and community members collaborated to address the ongoing issues but there was a need for leadership, better coordination, and more communication within the community.

In August 2020, Berks County Community Foundation, the United Way of Berks County, and the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance created a COVID-19 Response Task Force, including members who represented public and private sectors (see Appendix A). The purpose of the task force was to evaluate Berks County’s response to the pandemic, identify areas of opportunity for the future, and identify concerns about immediate and long-term public health needs.

Holleran Consulting, LLC, a research firm, was contracted to conduct an independent community survey. An online survey consisting of 13 questions was sent to 119 key informants in Berks County via email between September 8th and 25th, 2020. A total of 39 informants responded to the survey. Respondents represented government, education, healthcare, and nonprofit sectors. In addition, Holleran conducted 12 in-depth interviews to gather more information after the initial survey results were collected. The survey findings are attached in Appendix B.

The survey results showed the need to address issues in four main areas: community health, technology, communication, and vulnerable populations.

After reviewing and discussing the results, the COVID-19 Response Task Force has issued the following recommendations to help the county better prepare for and respond to the current health pandemic and the ongoing healthcare needs of Berks County residents.

Task Force Recommendations

1. Berks County Community Foundation should ensure that an independent in-depth analysis is completed that includes the cost and resources needed to create a local health department. The study will include an analysis of a range of options including, but not limited to:

- Creating a Berks County Department of Health
- Hiring staff at the county level
- Contracting with a nonprofit agency to serve as a local Department of Health
- Partnering with another county to serve as the Department of Health
- Forming a multi-county regional Department of Health

In addition to the benefits of responding to COVID-19 and future health emergencies, a local health department would allow Berks County to address long-term health effects of COVID-19, promote ongoing public health issues, and make a needed investment in the health of Berks County residents.

2. Berks County and the City of Reading should include a review of technology infrastructure in their 2030 strategic planning process and in the county's IMAGINE Berks Economic Development Action Plan. Berks County and the City of Reading should work with an existing technology committee. Berks County Intermediate Unit and the Wyomissing Foundation are currently reviewing Berks County residents' access to broadband connectivity. Berks County and the City of Reading should work with these agencies to analyze and address any gaps that are discovered. There were members of the community who weren't able to work from home, residents who couldn't see their doctor through telemedicine, and students who didn't have internet access at home.

3. Berks County Community Foundation should explore federal and statewide advocacy efforts and join a coalition that is advocating for an increase in funding and resources for the Pennsylvania Department of Health. According to the State Health Access Data Assistance Center, a healthy policy research program, Pennsylvania has significantly underfunded public health relative to other states, spending just \$14.50 per capita versus the national average of \$35. The lack of resources, like the number of employed staff at the Department, affected the state's response in tracking initial cases of the virus, ongoing contact tracing efforts, and support for counties. In 2020, the state employed 133 public health nurses who oversee 60% of the state's population. This translates to one nurse for every 56,000 people.

4. The Berks County COVID-19 Advisory Panel or a community advisory panel should ensure that the majority of the public feels comfortable with the COVID-19 vaccine. The advisory panel should advocate for community focus groups. Information needs to be gathered on where different segments of the population get healthcare information and who they trust to provide reliable healthcare advice. That information should be used to develop appropriate messaging. The information gathered from the

focus groups can be used during the current health pandemic and future healthcare initiatives by guiding healthcare messaging and effective methods of delivering the information. The specific focus groups should include students, the elderly, Hispanics/Latinos, Black/African Americans, and the plain communities.

5. The County of Berks should continue to update the “Stop the Spread” website and use that as the main source of COVID-19 information. Currently, organizations have to interpret the information from the PA Department of Health and turn to the commissioners for recommendations.

6. The United Way of Berks County and 211 should coordinate to provide up-to-date information on volunteer opportunities so businesses and individuals interested in volunteering can access all opportunities. Employers offer volunteer hours for their staff. Employers expressed the need for a central data system to refer their employees to these opportunities. A database will also help organizations meet their needs by posting the opportunities that need to be filled.

7. The United Way of Berks County should provide assistance and review the county’s charity food eco-system in an effort to assist Helping Harvest provide food assistance in the most efficient way and to serve individuals who need food. Food insecurity and access to food were a top concern for the community as the unemployment rates increased, the demand for food significantly increased, and the pandemic caused “panic buying,” leaving grocery stores without a surplus supply that would typically be donated to food banks. While the local food delivery system adapted to the changing needs, there were several issues with the availability of food, the need for better coordination, the need for volunteers, and the need for accessing enough food to meet the demands. Because agencies turned to Helping Harvest, the leading nonprofit food distributor, it’s important for the community to help address the issues highlighted by the pandemic and support Helping Harvest.

8. The Berks County COVID-19 Advisory Panel or a community advisory panel should provide guidelines and recommendations regarding anticipated healthcare concerns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Harvard School of Public Health and Mayo Clinic studies suggest that there will be an onslaught of health problems as a result of COVID-19. Research needs to be conducted on the effects of the pandemic in the community. Health and social issues of priority should be mental health, housing, food insecurity, school performance, and the long-term effects on COVID-19 survivors.

According to the National Institutes of Health, a considerable degree of normality is expected by the fall of 2021. In the interim, Berks County Community Foundation will work with task force members on the recommendations to meet the healthcare and social needs of the community.

Appendix A
COVID-19 Response Task Force Members

Abraham Amoros
Managing Director, City of Reading

Carolyn Bazik
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Daniel Egusquiza
Outreach Coordinator, Reading Public Library; Executive Director, Barrio Alegria

Jim Gerlach, COVID-19 Response Task Force Co-Chair
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Brian Gottschall, CEM
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Mary Kargbo
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Christian Y. Leinbach
County Commissioner, County of Berks Commissioners

Dr. Susan Looney
President, Reading Area Community College

Kevin Murphy, COVID-19 Response Task Force Co-Chair
President, Berks County Community Foundation

Sharon Strohecker
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David H. Turner
Regional Manager, External Affairs, FirstEnergy Corporation

Ramona Turpin
Board Member, Berks County Community Foundation

Tammy White, COVID-19 Response Task Force Co-Chair
President, United Way of Berks County

Appendix B

Holleran Consulting, LLC Report

Research Objectives:

1. To evaluate the response to the pandemic from the perspective of key community stakeholders.
2. To identify areas of opportunity for the future and gauge concerns moving forward.
3. To develop a list of key findings to share with the Community Task Force.

Methodology:

- Online survey consisting of 13 questions sent to 119 key informants in Berks County via e-mail during September 8th -25th. A total of 39 informants responded to the survey, a 33% response rate. Respondents represented four sectors: government, education, healthcare and other.
- Telephone in-depth interviews with 12 individuals, three of whom reside in counties bordering Berks County.

Key Finding: Overall pandemic response gets mixed reviews

Overall, a slight majority of individuals surveyed and interviewed believe that Berks County demonstrated appropriate levels of preparedness in the COVID-19 crisis.

- More than half (53%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with another sizable group of respondents (28%) saying they felt neutral and 18% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.
- Several individuals representing underserved populations felt like help was isolated and delayed: “No one reached out to us except the United Way and the Community Foundation. We had to figure things out on our own for the most part.” Another nonprofit leader said the pandemic shell-shocked the community and cooperation did not begin to happen until May, two months after the pandemic first emerged. It was also noted that local government and nonprofits, responding to Governor Wolf’s mandate, were all but completely shut down when organizations needed support and answers.

Key Finding: Local communication was adequate but not exceptional; less effective at state level

More than three-fourths of the key informants felt like agencies and organizations in the community collaborated to solve challenges caused by the pandemic, but only about 40% felt like communication was tailored appropriately to meet the needs of all demographic subgroups.

- The Spanish language programming on Albright College Radio was effective in communicating information through their Facebook page and several persons interviewed believed Senator Schwank’s message to essential workers was well-received via Facebook. One respondent stated: “We recognized that videos appear to be the most effective in educating the population in the middle of a pandemic.” However, the *Reading Eagle* was not seen as an adequate communications vehicle by a few respondents. Two-thirds of survey respondents believe the Berks County government was effective in its communication to the general community. Several of those interviewed by phone said they thought the commissioners did a credible job communicating to the public in a timely fashion.
- There was much confusion over Governor Wolf’s definition of an essential business and what was not an essential business. An employer stated that OSHA guidelines were helpful when it

came to safety protocols, but no interest by the PA Department of Health was shown until they called at the beginning of November. “Fortunately, we took the bull by the horns to ensure a safe workplace, and we didn’t need a lot of help from outside sources,” stated the employer. Another key stakeholder shared this perspective: “The state government was extremely short-sighted in shutting down businesses so sharply, which limited what businesses could be supported by the community.”

- Within the education sector, there were many mixed messages from different sources and criticism was expressed about how the PA Department of Education delivered their messaging. This led to each of the 18 school districts “doing their own individual thing” and inconsistent approaches throughout the County, which was confusing to administrators and parents of school-aged children. Another respondent stated: “Words can hardly express how worthless the PA Department of Education was. Requiring that schools submit their safety plans about ten days before PDE issued its guidelines served to undercut every school superintendent and school board.” However, the Berks County Intermediate Unit “has done a tremendous job supporting the schools,” according to one respondent from the education sector.
- Long-term care facilities did not feel supported by the local government or the state department of health. “Our local government absolutely could have actually responded to serious questions and concerns regarding long-term care facilities instead of sending direction to look at the DOH website, which was not providing any information.”

Key Finding: Support for county health department is strong

Both the online survey and the telephone interviews elicited comments in support of a county-wide health department.

- The need for a central online clearinghouse for accurate and up to date information that was scientific and valid was sorely missed by many who participated in the study. A stockpile of useable PPE is needed in case this happens in the future.
- Many, if not most, of the telephone interviewees mentioned how many in the community are not wearing masks, and the lack of any type of enforcement. A health department would ensure the virus is taken seriously, in the opinion of respondents.
- There are only six county health departments in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, so it is anticipated that applications to the state will be made in the coming months; Delaware County has already filed an application. The director of the health department in a neighboring county cautioned that the process would be long and involved, but believes that having a county health department will benefit Berks County.

Key Finding: Technology supports need to be better

Lack of reliable high-speed internet (especially in the city of Reading) and unfamiliarity with electronic communication formats frustrated professionals and community members, creating panic and havoc, especially during the early days of the pandemic.

- One person interviewed expressed her strong belief that a technology task force needs to be created so that the community can respond more proactively to these types of crises in the future. She recommends populating this task force with some younger community members. The Berks County judiciary system was confounded by the technology challenges it faced during the pandemic.

- Praise was given to the Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs for allowing school children to use their facilities to learn remotely with access to the internet. However, more support is needed for working families to allow students to successfully learn in a remote setting. Remote learning is a challenge for many learners, and having “coaches” in makeshift classrooms is important.
- Electronic health records and telehealth have emerged as important technologies since the onset of the pandemic. Several individuals mentioned the need for a telephone app during times like these for information regarding volunteer opportunities and sharing resources such as PPE. Montgomery County created a GIS map of food distribution sites and testing locations, which is cited as a best practice nationally.

Key Finding: The Homeless - Fear for their wellbeing during the colder months

- There was fear that when cold weather is in full force, there would be a lack of beds in the city’s homeless shelters, especially if the Pennsylvania governor lifted the eviction moratorium. One nonprofit reported cardboard boxes under the exterior awning of a FQHC location.
- Capacity at the shelters was reduced during the pandemic, so there was less ability to house people who needed a place to stay warm at night. Although the County Redevelopment Authority is trying to address this, the need is immediate and it is believed co-habitation is happening in greater numbers, which may be contributing to COVID “hot spots” within the city of Reading.
- The Coalition to End Homelessness went where others did not venture, talking to people, troubleshooting and deploying staff to meet needs. There is a need for a “boots on the ground” approach to address homelessness.
- Homeless individuals who tested positive were sent to Inn at Reading for a while, but this option no longer exists. Several individuals were asking where homeless individuals can seek support/housing.

Key Finding: Surrounding counties may have stronger unity and infrastructure than Berks County

- Leaders in Lehigh and Chester Counties rate the response in those counties very favorably, saying that the communication infrastructure is strong in those geographic areas and strong bonds of trust helped mitigate problems and misunderstandings. This led to a phenomenon called “The speed of trust,” which allowed quick problem-solving and optimal coordination. Those interviewed by phone said all entities within their community know each other and communicate regularly.
- These counties also are putting emphasis on the social justice dimensions of the pandemic, recognizing the crisis as an opportunity to share leadership and power more effectively with communities of color. As an example, many of the nonprofits realize their board compositions do not reflect the clients served. Equity practices are being discussed regularly in conversations among community leaders.

Key Finding: Other immediate needs exist

- Helping Harvest is widely praised for its efforts, but needs additional volunteers to distribute food. “There’s plenty of food,” stated one interviewee. “But getting it distributed efficiently is the issue.”

- Working parents are at their wits' end, according to professionals in the know. How do they work and take care of the children? The stress and mental health burden is substantial and more parental resources are required, especially for single mothers and essential workers. One piece of good news: The number of children testing positive for the virus has been low so far, in both the homeless shelters and according to the Berks Community Health Center pediatrician.
- Substance abuse is getting worse with COVID. With support groups not being able to meet in person, many are relapsing. Virtual meetings of AA are much less effective than traditional face-to-face meetings. The overdose rate will be worse than ever in Berks this year, predicts the executive director of the Council on Chemical Abuse. Many will now come to the ER when it is too late, instead of getting ahead of their disease by seeking detox and rehabilitation options.
- No one seems to know much about the status of the undocumented population. One interviewee stated "they have gone underground." It is suspected that they are co-habiting with local relatives, but no one is sure. Homeless shelters do not ask who is documented and who is not, so they claim there is no way of knowing. One educator participating in the research stated that, "We need to somehow help these families in the shadow."
- It is suspected that domestic violence is on the increase and that women and children require more support at a time when this is rising.
- Education about the deadliness of the disease is needed. "Many are still walking around without masks. A group of individuals in Berks County still do not believe this is real," stated a respondent.
- A plan for deploying a vaccine is not known by the respondents interviewed. They are unclear about who will develop the plan, but assume the local office of Emergency Preparedness will take the lead, supported by the hospitals.