

***COVID-19 Community Needs Assessment  
June 18, 2020 – Approved by the Board of Directors***



***This update to the Community Action Planning Council of Jefferson County, Inc. Community Assessment was completed in June 2020 in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic.***

## **I. Background**

This Community Assessment Update is in response to a global health pandemic that has not only affected every community in the United States but has also led to the most significant economic disruption since the Great Depression. This assessment is an initial effort to capture some of the emerging needs in the community as well as to forecast how those needs may evolve over the coming weeks and months.

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) was discovered to be the causative agent for acute respiratory and flu-like symptoms and began infecting increasing numbers of people in the Wuhan Province of China. The first case in the United States was confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on January 22, 2020. Despite efforts to contain the virus, by March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. By March 17, 2020, all 50 US States had confirmed cases of the virus.

Because of the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, the alarmingly high rate of fatalities associated with it and the lack of a vaccine or treatment, the only effective way to prevent mass illness is through restricted travel, physical distancing, frequent hand washing, coughing in elbows, not touching the face, and staying at home. By mid-March 2020, with the virus clearly past the stage of effective isolation and contact tracing, local, state and federal public health officials recommend extreme measures to minimize a public health catastrophe: mass quarantine, physical distancing, and a virtual lockdown of all public gatherings and economic activity.

While all types of people are getting sick from the disease, older adults and people of any age who experience serious underlying medical conditions, many which are more prevalent in African American communities, and, to some extent, Latin and Native American communities, are at increased risk for severe symptoms from COVID-19. Persons of color, immigrants, and women are also disproportionately impacted by underlying health conditions linked to poverty, face discrimination in medical care, and are more likely to work jobs that require them to leave their homes. Also, persons with disabilities or chronic conditions are more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to their inability to thoroughly isolate themselves (need for hands-on care), physical impairments, environmental barriers, or interrupted services. The following additional populations experience differential exposure and extensive corresponding implications as a result of the pandemic: frontline workers, persons experiencing homelessness, low-income communities under quarantine, especially in urban settings, rural communities, tribal communities, incarcerated persons and returning citizens.

Children, families, individuals, and Community Action Agency staff may experience heightened stress, anxiety, and trauma as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Loss of income, growing childcare needs, heightened food insecurity, housing and energy instability, lack of access to transportation, lack of basic supplies, and increased domestic violence are growing factors as the crisis unfolds.

**Because of the urgent and widespread needs affecting all sectors of the community, this Community Assessment update is intended to provide some initial information to describe the scope of this crisis on our community and to support the many different responses that will be required to address emerging, evolving needs. It is likely that as needs evolve, some of those needs will not be captured in this update and therefore some necessary community responses may not connect to the needs identified in this document.**

The *community* assessed in this document, related to the below information, is defined as the following: Jefferson County, New York.

The needs assessed will inform services to those affected by the crisis. It is significant to note that Congressional action will permit FY20 and special supplemental CSBG funding to serve families at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (as defined by [the US Census Bureau](#)). Specific programs or strategies will target the demographic groups most affected. Given persons of color are being disproportionately affected by both the health crisis and by the resulting economic disruption, an equity lens must be used to view current and emergent needs related to this crisis.

## II. State and Local public health response

- 1/26/2020 – NYS health department launches a coronavirus-specific informational site. <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>
- 2/2/2020 -As testing begins to grow in New York, the Department of Health starts a hotline (1-888-364-3065) for residents to ask questions about COVID-19.
- 3/1/2020- 1<sup>st</sup> confirmed case in NYS.
- 3/7/2020 - Gov. Andrew Cuomo declares State of Emergency
- 3/9/2020 – State prisoners begin producing hand sanitizer.
- 3/12/2020 – Gov. Cuomo announces that events with more than 500 attendees must be canceled or postponed
- 3/15/2020 – Gov. Cuomo uses executive order to waive 7-day waiting period for unemployment claims due to COVID-19.
- 3/16/2020 – Gov. Cuomo issues an executive order closing all schools statewide. He also partners with NJ and Connecticut and issues the following uniform standards:
  - Limiting recreational and social gatherings to 50 people
  - Closing on-premise service at all restaurants and bars and moving to take-out and delivery services only.
  - Closing movie theaters, gyms and casinos
- 3/18/2020 - Pennsylvania joins the NY-NJ-CT coalition, and all four states order the closure of indoor shopping malls, amusement parks and bowling alleys. Gov. Cuomo signs a bill guaranteeing paid leave to New Yorkers under mandatory or precautionary coronavirus quarantine.
- 3/19/2020 - Businesses that require in-office personnel are directed to [reduce that workforce by 75%](#). Cuomo announces 90-day mortgage relief for New Yorkers.
- 3/20/2020 – New York State on PAUSE -Cuomo signs the New York State on PAUSE executive order (effective 3/22/2020), closing 100% of [non-essential businesses](#) statewide. Shipping, media,

warehousing, grocery and food production, pharmacies, healthcare providers, utilities, banks and related financial institutions and some other industries critical to the supply chain are exempt from these measures. The order also cancels and bans non-essential gatherings of any size, institutes 6-foot social distancing requirements and bans contact recreational activities. Barber shops, nail and hair salons and related personal care services are specified as non-essential, and are directed to close. All “non-critical elective surgery are canceled/postponed. “Matilda’s Law” requires individuals age 70 or older to stay home and limit visitation to immediate family members or close friends in need of emergency assistance. A 90-day moratorium on any residential or commercial evictions is put in place. Cuomo request that companies capable of manufacturing personal protective equipment (PPE) begin doing so, and offers state funding to any company interested in obtaining the proper equipment and personnel. President Trump declares a major disaster in New York, allowing FEMA to step in and assist the state financially.

- 3/22/2020 - First COVID-19 diagnosis in Jefferson County (Jefferson County Public Health website)
- 3/25/2020 - At Gov. Cuomo’s direction, the Public Service Commission postpones rate increases for 2 million New York American Water and National Grid customer’s upstate originally scheduled to go into effect April 1.
- 3/27/2020 - Cuomo extends school closures by an additional two weeks. Cuomo announces a 60-day deferment of property and casualty insurances for consumers and small businesses impacted by COVID-19. This includes auto, homeowners, renters and other insurances.
- 3/26/2020 - Cuomo announces that 40,000 healthcare workers, including retirees and students, have signed up to volunteer for the state’s surge healthcare force. Another 6,000 mental health professionals begin providing free online mental health services.
- 3/29/2020 - Cuomo extends all NYS on PAUSE and non-essential work from home mandates for another two weeks. He also extends the duration of school closures and all other previously mandated business operations closures until April 15.
- 4/15/2020 – Cuomo signed executive order requiring all NYS residents to wear facemasks or coverings in public places where social distancing is not possible.
- 4/16/2020 – Cuomo extends the states stay-at-home order and school closures through May 15<sup>th</sup>.
- 4/22/2020 – Contract tracing begins in collaboration with New Jersey and Connecticut
- 5/1/2020 – Cuomo announces all schools will remain closed for the remainder of the academic year.
- 5/7/2020 – Cuomo extends PAUSE order to June 6<sup>th</sup>, allowing counties to begin opening May 15<sup>th</sup> if they meet set qualifications.
- 5/14/2020 - State of Emergency extended to June 13<sup>th</sup>.
- 5/15/2020 – North Country meets criteria to open under Phase 1. Phase 1 includes: construction, manufacturing, agriculture, forestry, fishing and curbside retail.
- 5/23/2020 – Cuomo modifies Executive order to allow gatherings of up to 10 people as long as able to practice social distancing.
- 5/29/2020 - North Country meets criteria to open under Phase 2. Phase 2 includes: Watertown’s Salmon Run Mall, hair salons, barber shops, massage therapy offices, furniture stores, lawyer offices and Realtors.
- 6/16/2020 – As of this date 6,619 persons tested in Jefferson County, NY - 82 have tested positive.
- 6/18/2020 – As of this date Jefferson County has not entered the Phase 3 and Phase 4. Phase 3 includes: tattoo and piercing parlors, massage therapy, tanning salons, nail salons, and spas. Phase 4 will include:

Schools, arts, entertainment, and recreation businesses — including theaters, movie theaters, and other entertainment venues, as well as museums and other artistic institutions

As a result of this unprecedented public health crisis, Community Action Planning Council of Jefferson County, Inc. is updating its Community Assessment because there is currently a significant impact on the community, and a number of short-, intermediate- and longer-term impacts are expected.

### **III. Immediate impacts on the community**

The immediate impacts of COVID-19 have been felt across all sectors of society. In particular, some of the greatest impacts relevant to the Community Action Network have been in the areas of health, education, employment, human services provision, and community resources. In this community, vulnerability is highest in the following areas:

- Population density is greatest ( $\geq 100$  persons per sq. Mile)) in Watertown, Fort Drum, Philadelphia, Carthage and Evans Mills.
- Population of Age 65 or older is greatest along the St Lawrence River/Lake Ontario (Dexter, Sackets Harbor, Chaumont, Three Mile Bay, Cape Vincent, Clayton, Fishers Landing, Alexandria Bay.)
- There are multiple senior housing complexes across Jefferson County.

Nationwide, early data suggest that the following groups have experienced disproportionately higher rates of infection and/or complications/death as a result the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Males
- Individuals 60+ years old
- People of color, particularly African Americans
- People with underlying health conditions (especially, lung disease, asthma, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, liver disease, severe obesity, and individuals with immunocompromised conditions)

The following outlines the variety of impacts to the local community thus far:

A brief survey was conducted via our Facebook site from June 1 – 10, 2020 to gauge concerns that both customers and community members are having based on experiences during this epidemic. Additionally, calls were made to community organizations that offer addiction and mental health services in our communities. Based on the survey results and discussion with community organizations the following impacts have occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Health impacts:

- Individuals over 60, especially those with underlying health conditions have been shown to be at particular risk for severe health implications from COVID-19.
- In anticipation of resources devoted to those sick with COVID-19, Community health resources limited to others.
- Mental health resources will need to be available in new and increased ways to deal with the many different stressors/traumas caused by the pandemic, especially its impact over an extended time period. Individual who responded to our survey, expressed concern about going out safely in public and experiencing a fear that they go back to work/school. Examples of

- answers to the question “Please tell us what concerns you have as a result of COVID-19?” (open-ended answers): “Fear of contracting virus, public health uncertainty, small business demise, economic impacts, mental health impacts, increased domestic violence and drug use” , “Having to shop with worry over safety, not enough stock when you do shop. Not being able to be with family if they are sick or having major surgery. Not being able to have special family gatherings such as child's birthday or anniversaries.”, “That I won’t be able to go back to work, I won’t have money to pay my bills or take care of my children, and my children won’t be able to return to school” and “Children being able to physically go to school safely”.
- Jefferson County Public Health Service issued an Overdose Activity in Jefferson County Alert on June 16, 2020: “The County has experienced 21 known overdoses from drug use in June, 2020. Fentanyl is the suspected primary drug, however other drugs or combinations of drugs are causing these overdoses. Of the 21 overdoses in June, 18 individuals survived; there are 3 fatalities. 12 overdoses occurred in the City of Watertown; 9 overdoses occurred outside the city. Individuals that are overdosing and surviving are requiring multiple doses of Naloxone.” There have been 13 confirmed overdose deaths for 2020 in Jefferson County, and include 3 in January, 1 in February, 5 in March, 2 in April, and 2 in May.
  - Nutrition for school-aged children previously accessing free/reduced breakfast, lunch, and snacks is impacted as many are now removed from that food source due to school closures.
  - Based on the 2019-2020 data from the National Center for Education Statistics through County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, 52% of students in Jefferson County, NY were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Therefore, approximately half of the 17,925 students in Jefferson County had a direct impact to their nutritional needs by the closure of schools and the lack of availability of free/reduced lunches.
- Employment impacts:
    - According to “COVID-19 Impact on Local Businesses – A Survey of Current Business Operations and Future Business Plans and Expectations” prepared by The Center for Community Studies at Jefferson Community College:
      - 61% of the Jefferson County employers who responded stated they cannot operate their business with employees working from home.
      - When asked if they expect to reopen after the COVID-19 pandemic ends and all business operations are able to be resumed; 15.1% in Jefferson County, were unsure, answering “possibly yes or possibly no”.
      - In the Additional Thoughts & Comments to Help Better Understand Your Situation and Concerns section, the responses are passionate and in some cases heartbreaking:
        - Many expressed frustration regarding the uncertainty they are facing.
        - Several expressed concern that they will have a hard time hiring employees and having employees return to work. The additional money received (during unemployment) from the Federal government has created an incentive to not re-enter the workforce.
        - 21.1% of the respondents represent tourism and recreation services. Many expressed concern that the lack of business will have both short and long-term effect.

- One respondent said it best: “Workforce related concerns – Morale & Retention for those who are essential amidst fear and uncertainty.” Another stated: “Lack of employees will hurt us more than COVID-19”.
  - Individuals in the health care field are at high-risk of exposure to COVID-19 and are under tremendous stress due to additional work hours and challenging work conditions. In particular many of those workers with close, frequent contact with vulnerable individuals are lower-wage individuals.
  - Individuals in the educational field – especially teachers and assistants in Head Start and Early Head Start as well as other early childhood care settings – are working remotely due to school shutdowns. Lower-wage workers in these fields are more vulnerable to layoffs and/or may lack the technology resources in their home to work remotely.
    - The Head Start and Pre-K programs may not have been offered in the traditional classroom setting; but learning was still accomplished. Head Start and Pre K teachers called families regularly to check in on them, they conducted Facetime and Zoom sessions, organized car parades, posted book readings on Facebook, dropped off care packages filled with learning activities and supplies (and sometimes food packages if families were in need). The staff miss the in-person interaction with the children and families but take joy when they are able to interact on line. No Head Start teachers were laid off during this time period.
  - Individuals in many sectors of the economy – but particularly the service sector, the retail sectors, and others most affected by quarantine policies – are currently experiencing sudden and unexpected unemployment. Some are unaware of resources available to them and their families as they are experiencing unemployment for the first time.
    - The unemployment rate (Watertown-Fort Drum) for April 2020 was reported at 16.9%. In April 2019 the rate was 5.4%. This is an increase of 11.5 %. Non-metro counties are reported at 14.4% vs 4.4%. <https://www.labo1r.ny.gov/stats/pressreleases/prlaus.shtm>
    - As of June 11, 2020, Jefferson County has experienced restaurant closures as a result of COVID-19, including, Denny's, Tin Pan Galley and Bob-Evans.
- Educational impacts:
  - Closings of public schools in the Community Assessment area are having an immediate impact on children’s education. Children with less access to resources (broadband internet, computers/tablets, technology expertise, language barriers, etc.) are most at-risk for suffering learning loss during a potentially protracted period of school closure.
  - Caregivers of school-age children must secure day care arrangements for their children or sacrifice employment to care for their children. These same caregivers are also expected to be primary teachers for their children during the period of the closure. Parents with limited resources face numerous challenges as a result of this situation.
- Impacts on human services provision:
  - Services to vulnerable populations continued to operate, the changed circumstances have required significant, immediate adaptations that will require additional resources to support over a longer period of time:



- The broad impacts of COVID-19 on this community have created an even more urgent need for coordination and collaboration of resources among the public sector, the public health sector, first responders, educators, the business community, the faith community and many others. Community Action Planning Council of Jefferson County, Inc. plays an important role convening organizations, people and resources to support families.
  - Currently, there are limited resources for assistance with security deposits when families find themselves needing to move.
  - There are limited public transportation options in Jefferson County. There is a bus system within the city of Watertown and taxi service for use both in Watertown and throughout the County. Additionally, Volunteer Transportation is available throughout the County.
  - We have received many calls into our agency, asking if we can assist with appliance replacement, car repairs, assistance with car insurance payments and utility shut-off. We currently work with local appliance stores to assist with appliance replacement through our Weatherization program. Through the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, we work with customers with issues of possible eviction and those with utility shut off notices. Both of these programs have limited funding and we anticipate greater need if unemployment remains higher than before the pandemic.
  - The emotional impact of COVID-19 is unknown at this time and we anticipate long-term impact. We recognize the need to partner with local organizations to address mental health and substance abuse challenges.
- Collaborations have been crucial during this challenging chapter of COVID-19.
  - Watertown School District has made delivery of meals to children in the district seamless. They dutifully show up every day with two school busses and a host of school volunteers to pick up breakfast and lunch prepared by our kitchen staff (and other Community Action staff) and then they delivered to seven sites throughout the city of Watertown from the beginning of the pandemic in March until the end of the school year.
  - Community Action partnered Watertown Housing Authority and Neighbors of Watertown to ensure senior citizens who live in their housing areas would receive food packages from our food pantry weekly. The goal was to limit the need for this population leave their apartments to go food shopping. We prepared 249 bags weekly that includes items such as peanut butter, tuna fish, beans, tomato sauce, soup, pasta, meat, fresh fruit and vegetables. We have also included face masks and hand sanitizer. Staff from Watertown Housing Authority and Neighbors of Watertown pick up the food bags and delivered throughout their respective housing areas. From March – May, residents received weekly bags. Starting June 1<sup>st</sup>, deliveries were decreased to once per month. Due to the decrease in local COVID-19 cases, availability of food and allocated shopping hours in local stores, we will discontinue this service on July 1st. We will continue to evaluate if the need arises to start this service in the future.
  - Dollar General has supplied countless totes for food pantry packages. Additionally, they provided sturdy containers for transporting children meals throughout Watertown and General Brown School Districts. Dollar General Staff braved the freezing rain on our

parking lot during the milk and dairy distribution on April 21<sup>st</sup> while cheerfully providing these products to families as they drove by.

- United Way of Northern New York has provided on a continuous basis much needed and hard to find supplies, such as cleaning supplies, toilet paper, baby formula and baby food.
- Renzi Food Service has always been a valued partner, but they have been an invaluable resource during our COVID-19 operations. They provided a refrigerated truck to park in our parking lot to store the additional food needed to maintain the children's feeding programs. Additionally, they have allowed us to store large quantity donations of dairy items from Cabot and the Dairy Farmers of America at their facility. Now that the economy is opening back up, Renzi's has notified us that they will need the truck back. As a result, we will need to lease a truck, as the Summer Food Service Program will be starting July 6, 2020.
- The Eastern New York Red Cross volunteers partnered with us to assist with our Food Box distributions. They have been available for each of the 10 sites (all take place on a Saturday).

#### **IV. Anticipated near- and long-term impacts**

The needs above are already established through initial data and anecdotal reports from customers, staff, board members and community stakeholders. Based on these already-observed events, it is likely that there will be near-term (1-3 months) and longer-term (greater than 3 months) impacts that that require immediate planning. A partial, but not complete, list of the anticipated impacts include:

- *Prolonged service disruptions*  
The disruptions in service delivery to customers are expected to continue for a substantial time. This is likely to lead to ancillary challenges for customers that may become long-term issues.
- *Prolonged employment issues*  
Sudden layoffs and other employment disruptions are being addressed by emergency response measures; however, it is anticipated that long-term recovery efforts will be required to help customers reconnect to the workforce, particularly those for whom employment assistance has not previously been required.
  - Community Action Planning Council currently has a close working relationship with The Work Place. In partnership with The Work Place, our Ready to Work program provides low-income individuals with tuition assistance for vocational education or continuing education programs that provide specific skills development and/or certification in a particular field, as well as vital supports that address barriers to gaining or maintaining employment or education, such as assistance with transportation, uniforms, work shoes, books, tools, child care, etc. We anticipate as the economy reopens, individuals may find themselves seeking a change in jobs. This may be due to the fact that their previous job no longer exists.
- *Prolonged agency capacity issues*  
Policies limiting in-person staff/customer interactions may be in place for an extended period of time and agencies will need to maintain remote work and remote customer-interaction infrastructure to be responsive to these needs in a more sustainable capacity.

- In an effort to ensure safety, Community Action Planning Council has limited customer access to our buildings since the beginning of the Pandemic in March 2020. The delivery of food and personal care items to customers is accomplished in our parking lot. Interactions with children and families through our Head Start, Pre-K and JLCP programs have taken place by Zoom, phone and leaving supplies on doorsteps.
- Our current IT infrastructure needs updating to accommodate a much needed VOIP phone system. Our current phone system is 13 years old. The equipment is no longer being made, making it challenging when it breaks. Additionally, we are having challenges with the voicemail that our current system offers.
- Additional laptop computers are needed to allow additional remote work arrangements when/if there is an increase in COVID-19 cases in the future.
- *Prolonged community resource/coordination issues*  
The short-term community coordination needs cited in this Assessment are presumed to continue into the long-term. Current conditions may persist for an extended period; recovery efforts will require coordination; ongoing community preparedness to guard against a future outbreak will also require ongoing convening and new community readiness strategies based on what is shown to be effective during the current crisis.
  - Community Action Planning Council is an active member of the Emergency Food and Shelter Board.
  - Community Action Planning Council of Jefferson County, Inc. has implemented policies for staff regarding social distancing, cleaning process, requirement for face masks while in the building and when serving our customers. Additionally, we have restricted use of building to staff only to lessen chance of exposure to the virus. As our building opens up for services to our customers, additional measures will be implemented to ensure safety of both staff and customers. Additional cleaning supplies, hand soap and towels, sanitizer stations and desk barriers will need to be acquired.
  - Community Action Planning Council of Jefferson County, Inc. has contracted with ACC Technical Services to develop and implement a browser-based web application for staff screening that can be used in any modern web browser. This application will interface for employees and/or organization administrators to enter in daily screening information. The screening questions are based on CDC guidelines. Screening results are available for management to review. It includes the option for employee self-screening or management administered screenings.

## **V. Addressing Equity Implications**

Though immediate data may not yet be easily obtained regarding the demographics of those most impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, previous Community Assessments, as well as countless government and academic studies have established that structural racism, xenophobia, sexism, stigmatization and othering persist – and are often exacerbated – in times of crisis. Community Action recognizes the obligation to ensure that the barriers of structural race, gender, and other inequities are addressed during this time of crisis and beyond. Therefore, it is with this lens that communities are invited to use the equity lens and the question, “why”, to understand the specific needs of the diverse populations served.

## **Conclusion**

Finding 1: Mental health and substance abuse resources will need to be available in new and increased ways to deal with the many different stressors/traumas caused by the pandemic, especially its impact over an extended time period.

Finding 2: Individuals in many sectors of the economy – but particularly the service sector, the retail sectors, and others most affected by quarantine policies – are currently experiencing sudden and unexpected unemployment. Additional educational and employment supports will be needed as individuals return to work or seek additional skills to further employment options.

Finding 3: The impacts of COVID-19 on community resources are numerous and include a reduction in the availability of resources (access to security deposits, appliance replacement, assistance with transportation costs (cost of insurance, gas, cab and bus fares), a scarcity of some resources (health care, food and emergency supplies, Personal Protective Equipment, cleaning supplies) and/or needs for resources that have not previously been required in this community in any significant capacity.

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