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ESSEX COUNTY
COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION

COMMUNITY THINK LAB

VIRTUAL | May 11-12, 2020 | Summary Report

Community Think Lab Overview

On May 11 and 12, 2020, ECCF convened **70 COMMUNITY LEADERS** at two virtual Think Lab sessions to explore the **FUTURE OF THE REGIONAL SOCIAL SECTOR,** post COVID-19.

WHAT IS AN ECCF THINK LAB?

Think Labs are interactive community convenings that lead participants through a design thinking process to creatively problem solve, define common goals and prioritize actions. These sessions are where coalitions are built, creative ideas blossom, priorities are honed and solutions are incubated.

THINK LAB GOALS:

1. Establish the place and space for cross-sector leaders to re-imagine the future of Essex County's social sector.

2. Build civic and human infrastructure to strengthen partnerships and solve current and future community challenges.

Attendees were selected for this invitation-only event based on their personal expertise in the Essex County social sector. All were encouraged to bring their perspectives as both community members and system-wide thinkers when **EXPLORING THE QUESTION:**

WHAT DOES THE RECOVERY AND FUTURE OF ESSEX COUNTY'S SOCIAL-SECTOR SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

To answer, attendees were led through a structured, interactive design thinking session and visioning process - navigating the following as they re-imagined the future...

- What people, roles and organizations should be involved in this journey?

- What are our observations from the field? What is happening - the good and bad - and why?

- What are the principles that will guide our journey and matter the most?

- What are the big ideas, future headlines, and possibilities that could be our vision?

- What are experiments, prototypes, or pilots we can try to start moving forward with agility?

This report summarizes more than
650 INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES
into major themes that emerged for each question.

WHO IS INVOLVED?
What people, roles and organizations should be involved in this journey?

For Profit Organizations
- Small to large businesses
- Trades/Unions
- Sector partnerships
- Local banks/CDFIs
- Entrepreneurs
- Innovators

Nonprofit Organizations
- Workforce Development
- Social services
- Hunger relief
- Housing/Shelter
- Economic Development
- Small business support

Government / Municipal
- Local/State/Federal Government
- Municipalities
- Public health
- Police/public safety
- Policy makers

Community Leaders
- Immigrant rights organizers
- IT/technology leaders
- Scientists/researchers
- Funders/social entrepreneurs
- Religious leaders

Healthcare Sector
- Public health experts
- Front line health and mental health workers
- Researchers
- Social workers

Education Sector
- Childcare
- Public school systems
- K-12
- Vocational education
- Higher education
- Teachers

Residents
- Parents/caregivers
- Children
- Seniors
- Vulnerable populations
- Marginalized populations
- Other than English speakers
- Gig economy employees

OBSERVATIONS

What are our observations from the field? What is happening - why?

Inequities have been exposed

- Exposed an economic divide in ability to access technology for education/businesses/healthcare****
- Structural issues from 40-50 years of regressive policy-making have been exposed*
- Vulnerable communities are disproportionately impacted***
- Housing shortages identified as a root cause to virus spread
- The new front-line worker may be your grocery clerk
- ACCESS to food and basic needs supplies are uneven**
- Language barriers are creating further obstacles**

Communities are collaborating to adapt

- Communities and organizations uniting to support most vulnerable***
- People/businesses reinventing themselves to adapt to new needs**
- Philanthropy and front-line services rising up to help each other*
- Renewed efforts to connect through innovative programming*

New needs and challenges are emerging

- Burgeoning mental health crisis**
- New populations of people needing services due to unemployment rates**
- Working/learning remote brings new challenges and requires new skill sets*
- Supply chains are broken resulting in food and basic necessity shortages*
- Learning gaps are being exacerbated*
- Technology use and acumen are and will be key to the future*

Economic challenges are significant for people and organizations

- High unemployment will rise when the Unemployment Insurance benefit ends - this will be exacerbated when the Paycheck Protection Program also ends this summer*
- Small, urban businesses that require social interaction and foot traffic are going to be disproportionately impacted by this crisis**
- Many nonprofits need to reconsider their economic models and seek to shift focus, affiliate or merge in order to be sustainable***
- Arts & Cultural organizations dependent on program revenue are significantly impacted

Some societal benefits are being witnessed

- Improvements to the environment with reduced pollution**
- Increase in use of outdoors and trail assets in the community**
- Reduction of commuting time spent per person*
- Openness to rethinking use of urban spaces to be more pedestrian/biker/small business friendly*

*Indicates thought was mentioned more than once.

PRINCIPLES
What are the principles that will guide our journey and matter the most?
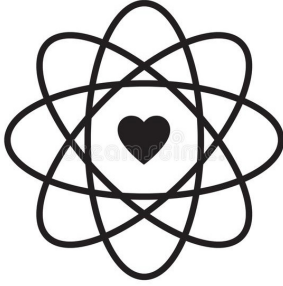
VALUES TO GUIDE US

Resiliency
Transparency
Sincerity
Inclusion
Equity
Selflessness   Kindness
Respect
Courage
Integrity
Access
Equality

MINDSETS TO EMBRACE

Long term focus
Open-mindedness
Inclusive economic growth
systems thinking
Holistic approach
Innovation/Creativity
Leveraging technology
Open to change
Focus on root cause
Resourceful   Self-reflection
Flexible/Nimble

IDEAS

What are the big ideas and possibilities that could lead our vision?

Encourage partnerships & collaborations for future sustainability...

- Foster and create collaborations for more efficient and effective delivery of social services/food distribution/etc.***
- Break down barriers between municipalities so partnering is easier
- Create a County Civic Corps by mobilizing the emerging volunteerism and underutilized young adults to collaborate with nonprofits and municipalities
- Understand the needs and foster dialogue for nonprofits, across the social sector, to partner, affiliate, and/or merge to optimize their value proposition and meet the needs of our community

Invest in future preparedness and planning...

- Convene Internet providers and municipalities to discuss how to provide equitable tech access*****
- Strengthen supply chains by creating and leveraging local partnerships and sources***
- Work towards increased food security/self-reliance through training and community gardens**
- Invest in improvements to healthcare/mental healthcare delivery (telehealth)
- Identify key metrics to measure the ongoing health of region post COVID**
- Develop a digital divide initiative to understand and reduce its impact in education/business/health across the county

Rethink the education system...

- Create more access to high quality, affordable education***
- Invest in training to expand and continue remote learning models for teachers and parents**
- Provide free/affordable early education (Pre-k) for all
- Rethink K-12 annual calendar and specifically summer programming with distance learning
- Break through higher education models with the use of technology
- Provide "reduced fee" community college education across the state/county

Focus on collaborative workforce development...

- Engage the workforce previously excluded from living wage jobs with new training in higher wage career pathways***
- Map workforce efforts to post pandemic employment demands and needs**
- Cultivate the innovative economy - create space for innovation, access to funds, workspaces for businesses and social enterprises
- Create pandemic proof jobs and workforces**
- Encourage healthcare organizations to prioritize training and careers for high-wage mental health jobs*
- Address workforce for licensed mental health professionals

Foster connections and community building...

- Create neighborhood associations, buddy systems, community groups****
- Rethink use of communal urban spaces to improve lives of citizens and small businesses
- Establish a National Act of Kindness Day/committee of kindness*
- Meaningfully connect with people living in isolated settings
- Annual Survey of Happiness/Gross Domestic Product, but for happiness (e.g. Bhutan)
- Develop a series of community based Think Labs across multiple sectors and regions

*Indicates thought was mentioned more than once.

EXPERIMENTS

What are experiments, prototypes, or pilots we can try to start moving forward with agility?

PILOT FREE INTERNET and Wi-Fi access for vulnerable populations

CREATE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES for nonprofits to understand how to partner, affiliate or merge

CREATE COUNTYWIDE digital nonprofit capacity building program

PLAN FUTURE CROSS-SECTOR THINK LABS around health, food security and education to rethink and strengthen each system

PERFORM COUNTYWIDE DIGITAL DIVIDE baseline study

RETHINK AND RECLAIM community spaces for human and community use

Snapshot of more than 100 other experiments mentioned:

- Link nonprofit, municipal and education sectors to share and thus accomplish "new normal" goals
- Funder communities to dedicate longer term funding in Venture Philanthropy based models to encourage collaborations and collective impact
- Encourage public/private job creation and community service opportunities to mobilize unemployed
- Create and expand school district partnerships to make sure families have technology access, robust education models and teacher and parent professional development
- Offer technology/digital trainings to each community (all stakeholders)
- Invest in tablets/hardware for vulnerable communities
- Advocate to make access to Internet a public utility**
- Develop capacity building/training/technical assistance program for nonprofits/small businesses to assist in recovery
- Enhance/adapt ImpactEssexCounty.org to focus on new demographics during/post COVID
- Understand and share the efficiency and effectiveness of nonprofits to donors to improve giving
- Pilot creative models to redesign downtowns to foster connectivity and assist businesses adopting reopening guidelines (e.g. parklets, parking lots, sidewalks)
- Leverage newly available space for affordable housing to mitigate homelessness
- Pilot outdoor learning efforts to enable school classrooms to meet distance learning requirements

*Indicates thought was mentioned more than once.

Think Lab Attendee Snapshot

Nearly 70 cross-sector leaders spanning Essex County participated, providing a diverse set of perspectives.

Nonprofit Organizations: 49%
Business Leaders: 14%
State, Federal and Municipal Leaders: 11%
Community Leaders: 11%
Funders and Philanthropists: 8%
Education Sector: 6%
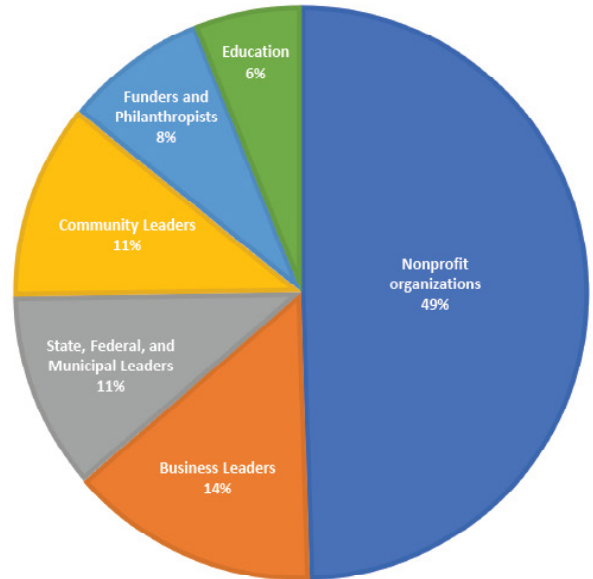
Attendee Follow-up Survey

After the event, all attendees were asked to participate in a follow-up survey. **Of 63 responses:**

97% of attendees reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with the session

97% of attendees see this type of cross-sector convening important or very important

82% of attendees are strongly interested in continuing their involvement in this work

ECCF Next Steps

→ Publish Summary Report and share with ECCF Board of Trustees and County Leadership Council

→ Prioritize experiments and collaborate with community partners to implement

→ Explore augmenting ECCF staff and volunteers to accomplish rebuilding and strengthening goals

→ Identify future ways to continue conversations and strengthen human infrastructure.

→ Understand the capacity building needs of nonprofits and prioritize virtual trainings needed

→ Identify partners to convene sector specific Think Labs in food security and digital divide (to start)

JOIN US.
If you would like to volunteer, fund or be more involved in shaping the future of Essex County's social sector, contact Stratton Lloyd at s.lloyd@eccf.org.

Essex County Community Foundation
978-777-8876 | eccf.org