The September 2018 Merrimack Valley gas explosions devastated the local economy. In response, the Merrimack Valley Business Relief (MVBR) Coalition, led by the Lawrence Partnership and ECCF, mobilized immediately to support, stabilize and revitalize the thousands of small businesses severely impacted by the crisis.

Through this work, the Coalition learned that a successful economic recovery lies in a systems approach that actively involves nonprofits, business and community leaders, state and municipal governments, funders and volunteers.

**ECOSYSTEM BUILDING**

The coalition also discovered that the road to recovery is long and spans three key phases - **RESPONSE, RECOVERY and RESILIENCY** - each with unique challenges that must be fully understood and approached with care to successfully support businesses along the way.

**THREE PHASES OF CRISIS RELIEF**

**RESPONSE**

Working to fully understand the direct and indirect acute needs resulting from the crisis, and developing integrated programming to support impacted business.

**RECOVERY**

Continuing to use community input and data to design and deliver interventions that support the evolving needs of the business community - getting them back to business as quickly as possible.

**RESILIENCY**

Investing in and building a small business ecosystem - providing resources, support and access to capital, to grow, thrive and withstand future stresses.
NEW CRISIS, SAME CHALLENGES: COVID-19

Just when many Merrimack Valley businesses were beginning to turn a corner from the 2018 gas disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, once again causing widespread disruption.

The MVBR Coalition responded by pivoting and expanding its work to support the business community through the new crisis, taking immediate steps to launch a response and recovery plan driven by data and the voice of the community.

DRIVEN BY DATA

An immediate survey of nearly 200 Merrimack Valley businesses revealed that more than 96% had been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with 78% reporting that they expected to be suffering an extreme impact within six months.

Additionally, in partnership with MassINC Polling Group and dozens of other supporting agencies, the Coalition conducted a statewide survey this summer revealing the depth of the challenges thousands of small businesses continued to face.

“Total shut down. We will have zero revenue for 2020.”
- Survey respondent

Of the 1,900 businesses surveyed...

- 46% have laid off or furloughed employees.
- 64% reported drops in gross revenue of at least 25% in the first half of 2020.
- 55% of the smallest businesses (reporting under $100,000 in revenue for 2019) saw declines greater than 50% for the first part of this year.

ACCORDING TO THE DATA

Smaller businesses, and those with customers on premises, experienced excessive impact.

Minority and women-owned businesses were more severely impacted.

Impact by sector shows major disparities, with the beauty industry and food/restaurants the most adversely impacted.

Very small businesses have not been able to access PPP loans.

View full survey findings at MassIncPolling.com
LOOKING AHEAD: RECOVERY & RESILIENCY

Looking ahead, the Coalition is actively listening, learning and working to shape the RECOVERY PHASE of work and build a sustainable and resilient small business ecosystem. Our vision is to make Merrimack Valley the best place for small business owners to create, grow and thrive.

Informed by survey data, the Coalition will deliver technical assistance to support small, minority and women-owned businesses via three strategies based on sector and size:

UNIQUE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES:

1. Strategy 1: Customized technical assistance (short-term, targeted support)
2. Strategy 2: Sector-specific support (focused on personal services and restaurants)

For real time RECOVERY PHASE updates and information, visit mvopenforbusiness.org.

In the meantime, the Coalition continues to plan for the RESILIENCY PHASE of work that will, over the next 12-18 months, help these businesses prosper and be better equipped to withstand future shocks and stresses.

Learn more and support the work at eccf.org.
"Not since the Civil War has our economy been hit like this. It is crucial that we get our businesses back up and running safely."
- Daniel Rivera, Mayor, City of Lawrence

"One of the reasons we keep coming back to size is that it also is very closely related to inequities. If you’re talking about the impacts on the smallest businesses, those are disproportionately likely to hit women-owned businesses and businesses owned by people of color."
- Steve Koczela, president, MassINC Polling Group

"The Coalition and MCCI helped me get the PPP loan very quickly and that loan has kept my business afloat during these tough times."
- Jenny Tucarella, Owner, Pure and Clean Non-Toxic Cleaning