

COVID-19 Response

Southern Region Community Development Extension Impacts

Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic's tremendous challenges continues as 2021 unfolds. As the Land-Grant System in the South responds, these issues are some of the central concerns that Community Development Extension professionals are seeking to address:

- How to navigate online working environments, both personally as we each adapted to our own new worlds, but also professionally as we sought to find ways to serve communities.
- Exploring ways to serve communities and individuals that lack broadband access.
- Shoring up businesses dealing with mandatory closures, disrupted supply chains, workforce issues, and the resulting reduction in profit.

At the same time, deep equity issues around diverse issues widened even further including:



Racial Trauma



Food Insecurity



Educational Gaps



Income Gaps

Any portion of these issues noted above reflect deep community challenges that must be addressed in order for resilience to occur. To that end, Community Resource Development (CRD) efforts within the Cooperative Extension Service are urgently working to identify innovations that help guide communities, businesses, and families toward a positive future. What follows is a series of brief vignettes designed to provide snapshots of some of the work that has occurred. While not capturing all the intense effort underway, these address some of the ways CRD has sought to:

- Reach out to people without reliable and affordable broadband access
- Help people make connections to new resources
- Pivot or reframe programming or information that would have been delivered face-to-face
- Supported resilience by those impacted by COVID- individuals, families, farms, businesses
- Develop new partnerships

Lessons learned from these experiences can help guide CRD efforts to promote recovery and resilience in both the near future as well as in the more long-term trajectory. Turn over to read COVID-19 response stories from around the region.

Alabama A&M University

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, AAMU transitioned CRD programs to digital. Webinar technology was made accessible by creating and strengthening 30 partnerships with schools and community centers, leveraging their audiences and infrastructure. With a long history of in-person programming, the team quickly learned new skills and transitioned the Career Countdown curriculum, teaching, and evaluation tools to an online format. Despite these challenges, the AAMU Extension team provided 77 Career Countdown webinar sessions to over 1,000 participants. This allowed data collection to continue during the pandemic but also supported the improvement and streamlining of our impact assessment systems.

Auburn University

Alabama Extension conducted a statewide campaign to promote the 2020 Census during the COVID-19 pandemic. The original campaign approach was heavily modified to leverage digital assets and grassroots strategies which followed COVID-19 safety protocols. Overall, campaign efforts led by local and state Extension staff reached over 54,603 individuals through Extension programs, secured 546 free media pieces, and generated over 2,000 social media posts reaching 206,306 individuals. Alabama reached a record high census participation rate and successfully retained its present number of US Congressional seats.

University of Arkansas

Extension economists analyzed pandemic effects on the state's agricultural and rural economies. We partnered with our congressional delegation, Arkansas National Guard, and Arkansas Farm Bureau to create a jobs website to connect veterans and service members seeking employment with farmers experiencing labor shortages. We met with business owners to discuss immediate needs, distribute signage, and connect them to appropriate resources. Based on these meetings, we created a web-based information hub with health and safety practices, developed a podcast series to share best practices of businesses that successfully pivoted during the pandemic, and released an online customer engagement and commerce video series.

University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Cooperative Extension Program received a grant as part of the national Extension Collaboration on Immunization Teaching and Engagement (EXCITE) project. This new partnership with Cooperative Extension and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention provides unbiased information to address vaccination hesitancy and strengthen immunization education. This allows us to address the health disparities issues in underserved communities. The main focus is to identify barriers for minority populations in the counties and communities we serve.

University of Florida

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Florida's businesses hard. When the state went into the lockdown in early March, Extension quickly shifted from delivering classes in-person to delivering classes entirely online. Workers who relied on trainings such as pesticide licensing and food safety certifications were able to attend classes and obtain or retain their license, which contributed to the 13,347 jobs that were created or retained.

Florida A&M University

FAMU's involvement in recidivism reduction activities has resulted in becoming a leader in the role of providing recidivism seminars and inmate training courses in FAMU's multi-county service area in the panhandle of North Florida. The model developed is becoming the standard for the Florida Department of Corrections with this type of job enhancing inmate training. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a general shut-down of all in-prison training. Because of this, the DOC and FAMU personnel involved in Recidivism Reduction training program development have had to shift the focus onto securing a method of distance delivery with a monitored or inter-active system method of quick response to student questions.

University of Georgia

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the communities that participate in the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing (GICH) as well as the programmatic activities of GICH. As a result of the pandemic, both GICH retreats were held virtually. Despite this new online format program participants felt that the retreat was still a success and provided communities with valuable information around housing and community development. The online approach also opened new opportunities for GICH to provide services such as facilitation and sharing content. The pandemic helped the program evolve and utilized new methods to assist communities around the state.

University of Kentucky

COVID-19 caused data collection for the 2020 Census to be greatly impacted. To help obtain an accurate count, Dr. Julie N. Zimmerman, University of Kentucky Extension faculty, provided regular updates on local census data collection efforts. A webinar was shared to provide information on the 2020 Census, COVID-19 impacts, hardest to count groups, and how to help people participate in the 2020 Census. Additionally, an activity for youth to engage with the 2020 Census was developed and featured in an issue of the "Healthy At Home" Extension newsletter distributed across the state. As a result of these efforts, Extension agents across the state provided 2020 Census information through social media platforms as well as in local newspapers.

Southern University

Recognizing an increased hesitancy to the COVID-19 vaccine and coupled with generational medical mistrust within our communities, the Southern University Ag Center partnered with several organizations, universities, and health professionals to facilitate a series of webinars aimed at increasing vaccination rates among African Americans in Louisiana. An "Ask the Expert" panel with medical professionals via Zoom allowed participants to ask questions. Through our efforts, we discovered that misinformation is a major factor in groups with vaccine hesitancy; thus, we are increasing our efforts to engage and educate these groups. Through this initiative, we hosted 4 webinars, and reached over 6,000 Louisiana residents collectively.

Mississippi State University

MSU-Extension Service assisted stakeholders with health, business, financial, and economic information using both new technology and more traditional digital media such as websites and email. Efforts included: interactive social media posts and conversations on COVID-19 (reached over 25,000); nationally recognized popular articles, policy briefs and a podcast addressing CARES Act funding; webinars focusing on small business, agritourism, and farmers' market reopening. Also a series of shopping local television and radio spots were created and aired to encourage residents to support local businesses (reaching over 40,000). MSU-ES quickly transitioned traditional learning into virtual options using podcasts, social media conversations, and hybrid workshops to meet the immediate needs of our clientele.

North Carolina State University

NC State Extension partnered with NGOs and state agencies to ensure that farmers' markets were labeled as essential businesses under the state Stay-At-Home Order in March 2020. Once markets were clearly deemed essential businesses, the challenge was to operate markets safely to protect market participants from the virus with the quickly evolving information. Extension provided education and technical assistance and facilitated a supportive network to over 100 farmers' market managers across the state.

Langston University

LU collaborated with other local stakeholders to establish satellite locations for farmers, market vendors, and others to participate in the annual Oklahoma Local Ag Summit held on March 1st - 2nd. The satellite centers were established to assist those without internet connection and help reduce the in-person meeting due to the dangers of Covid-19 pandemic. Thirty participants were able to attend the live streamed summit sessions through five locations set up in rural Oklahoma. The focus of the summit was to continue supporting the momentum for local food in Oklahoma by providing training, resources, and networking opportunities to strengthen producers, farmers' markets and agritourism capacity.

Oklahoma State University

Through the Rural Library Hotspot Loan Program / Free Wi-fi Access Point initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, OSU Extension provided 4 rural libraries with a total of 20 hotspots that allowed patrons to have an internet connection at home. These have been loaned out over 400 times during the past 12 months. Additionally, our Extension office in Kay County worked with the statewide internet provider, OneNet, to offer a free high-speed wireless access point in the parking lot. Kay County has household internet adoption rates 13 percent lower than the national average, so providing a free access point is addressing an important need.

University of Puerto Rico

Volunteer women leaders of the Puerto Rico Agricultural Extension Service in the municipality of Hatillo protected themselves from COVID-19 and generated income for their families by making masks. They began to sew masks for themselves and their families, but then demand increased and the doors were opened to make for the general public, relatives living in the United States, and people in other countries. The project has been very successful in assisting with the prevention and control of COVID-19, keeping the leaders physically busy, and helping to improve family budgets, generating an income of more than \$18,000.

Clemson University

The pandemic greatly affected several Extension activities. For example, Extension staff working in a newly designated Opportunity Zone had agreed to lead a community-based visioning charrette designed to promote citizen participation. However, due to the pandemic, direct interaction with community stakeholders was severely limited. Rather than face-to-face meetings, Extension representatives had to rely upon interactions with community stakeholders via email, virtual focus groups, Zoom interviews, and an online survey. Nonetheless, the project was successful as local community members are now envisioning a community-driven master plan, based on local knowledge, and produced by community partnership that helped to empower local residents.

University of Tennessee

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, University of Tennessee Extension developed a website to coordinate and streamline decision-making resources to help Tennessee citizens. The Extension team developed 72 Extension publications, and presented 19 presentations to support farmers, families, students, producers, agribusinesses, value-added agriculture, small businesses and the workforce. Additionally, Extension expanded library mobile hotspot lending programs to six public libraries and 11 elementary schools and conducted Digital Literacy Skills Training programs in 34 counties.

Texas A&M University

Facing COVID-19 travel restrictions, the Texas Working on Wellness Environments program funded development of two online business planning classes, providing online and blended business planning opportunities. More than 120 learners enrolled in the basic course, and 72.2% of respondents reported being prepared or very prepared to write a two-page plan. Almost 40% of those completing the course plan to draft a full business plan within the next year. Learners are transitioning to an advanced course, released late December 2020, to develop a full business plan.

Virginia Cooperative Extension Service

COVID-19 increased food insecurity nationally, and communities, like Petersburg, already struggling with food insecurity issues, were blindsided by the pandemic. In response, the Harding Street Urban Agriculture Center, established with USDA-NIFA AFRI funding and operated in collaboration with Virginia Cooperative Extension, coordinated efforts to feed families and improve access to healthy food. Harding Street served as a community food hub as it sourced, processed, and distributed food. In collaboration with local government, libraries, schools, farmers' markets, faith-based groups and other feeding program partners, 11,321 food-insecure, at-risk, low-income individuals received healthy foods with a total retail value of \$112,786.