

COVID-19 Committee – Final Report and Recommendations

Better Together

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Purpose

The purpose of this study could be considered as two-fold. For this study, we sought to gather input from various residents of Nacogdoches County when it comes to the impacts that COVID-19 has had on the community. In addition, the participants' recommendations about ways in which they feel the community might need resources or support were sought via the focus group and key informant interview that were conducted. The findings from this study can be used to help inform productive changes to be made for Nacogdoches County as a result of COVID-19.

Method

Through holding a focus group and a key informant interview (via Zoom for social distancing purposes), approximately one dozen questions were asked and answered of the study's participants when it comes to their observations and/or experiences with COVID-19, as well as their recommendations when it comes to community needs in response to COVID-19. The focus group was held on November 23, 2020 with three individuals who reside in Nacogdoches and represent various job sectors (an art teacher at Cushing Independent School District, an Executive Director at Brown Family Health Center, and the Executive Vice President at the Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce). The key informant interview was held on December 18, 2020. The participant who attended that interview is an Occupational Therapist for local special education departments of school districts. Though she does not work in Nacogdoches County anymore, she lives in Nacogdoches County. Informed consent was received verbally from each of the participants prior to the start of the recorded interviews.

After the first focus group's hour-long interview process, the audio transcript was automatically typed by Zoom. After the automated transcript writing process, the transcript was edited by this researcher to be made ready for insertion into Google Sheets, edited to ensure the proper participant was labelled as the speaker of each line, edited for spelling purposes, etc. As for the key informant interview, the interview was recorded by Zoom, but a transcriptionist company was utilized to ensure the transcript was typed as needed, which helped to ensure it was ready for insertion into Google Sheets prior to the analysis process. This researcher reviewed the completed transcript, as well as corrected minor typos.

A revised/adapted version of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) (Rodwell, 1998) was used for the purposes of identifying themes & sub-themes from the study respondents' narratives. Units, which could range from a relevant cluster of words to full sentences, were pulled from the transcripts, so long as they related to the study's purposes. After this step, themes were established, and similar units were labelled by their related themes. Next, sub-themes were created and labelled for overarching themes (Rodwell, 1998). The aforementioned data was maintained on a password-protected Google Drive document.

Results

In terms of the themes, there were a total of six that were identified, which are as follows: Community Needs, COVID-19 Updates, Impacts of COVID-19, Personal Perceptions of COVID-19, Public Perception of COVID-19, and Stress/Anxiety Relief. In terms of the sub-themes that exist within these overarching themes, those are explained throughout this report.

Community Needs

In terms of the respondents' opinions about community needs, those ranged from students needing more Internet access, needing to ensure every child has access to a computer, parents needing support with being able to use technology, and the need for increased mental health services, among others. The potential need to provide extra support for students to help ensure they are on track academically was reported (e.g., spending time in school for a few weeks or so over the summer). Also, in terms of supporting the community more, there was also some discussion regarding the need to support local businesses, with the idea of knowing that one's money is being used to support another local member from the area. It was also stated that accurate information and the delivery of that information in regard to things like the pandemic, vaccines, and side-effects are needed for the community. Also, it was recommended for there to be local vaccination stations made available for community members with the inclusion of eligible personnel to administer vaccinations (i.e., personnel other than solely registered nurses, doctors, etc.). The aforementioned points were the main points that were brought up when it comes to community needs in Nacogdoches.

COVID-19 Updates

The respondents were asked to report where they typically go in order to receive updates about COVID-19. Responses that were made about where the respondents typically look for these updates included the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Chamber of Commerce, Dr. Anthony Fauci, personal doctors, the Governor's Office, the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the news, the State of Texas, and the Texas Association of Business. Additionally, a participant reported she follows updates by Dr. John Campbell (a YouTuber who synthesizes updates regarding COVID-19), as well as engages in her own research. It was also reported that a participant felt that for a period of time, the CDC did not seem to be a reliable source, which was concerning.

Impacts of COVID-19

As for the impacts that COVID-19 has made/is making, the respondents had an array of thoughts about this. For instance, two participants spoke about kids being seemingly impacted academically by COVID-19, as multiple are now testing behind and regression has been observed. There were many points made about the changes that have been made in high school and college students' academic experiences, due to COVID-19, such as when it comes to friends having to quarantine in college, classes not being completed face-to-face, and not having a traditional college campus experience. The changes in one participant's daughter's academic experience were reported, as her daughter has had to quarantine, complete course work online, and experience the cancellation of Spring Break. The difficulty of children having to complete their

schoolwork at home was also reported. On related notes, the participants also reported about the difficulty for parents juggling to balance their own professional work and their children having to get their schoolwork done remotely, as well as parents having to leave their children at home alone and try to find childcare during these times. A participant reported she does not believe that students completing their academic work remotely is as effective as physically attending school. The importance of students physically being around their peers was also reported.

The changes made regarding social gatherings in multiple settings were brought up several times when it comes to family gatherings, providing mental health services, the academic/school settings, the workplace, and community events. A newfound difficulty with communicating as it relates to wearing masks was discussed, as well. It was reported that in the Cushing area, economic instability has been observed. The increased workload and stress for adults and children alike (likely as a result of COVID-19) was also discussed, along with one member mentioning they lost a loved one, due to COVID-19. One participant reported that as a teacher, she has made more “referrals” this year than “since Katrina”. Another participant reported that she has observed her clients (kids) behaving quite differently (in a negative way) when they are at home than they do when they are in the school setting.

In terms of having to make work-related adjustments, one participant mentioned that transitioning to working on a small laptop was not an easy transition for her, but that once the months progressed, she felt more stability and comfort in her own schedule. A lack of proper Internet access was brought up several times, particularly when it comes to students who are trying to complete their school requirements. Likewise, the Internet’s impact on local businesses was also mentioned, as an online presence is apparently vital for businesses. The general business-related negative impacts that COVID-19 has brought about were also mentioned, as businesses have had to close, lay-off their employees, etc. It was reported that business owners had to get innovative in the adjustments they made as a result of COVID-19, as some were brought into “a whole other realm of online shopping, curbside delivery, and services”. Additionally, a few restaurants in the area added a drive-through, which is reportedly helping them continue to thrive. Another participant reported she has seen shortages in food availability/options while shopping. She also discussed the existing and potential growing issues with food insecurity within Texas and throughout the United States. This participant discussed the importance of taking preventative measures in order to try to avoid the public experiencing similar COVID-19-related hardships in the future in the event that society finds itself in a similar situation again. She also discussed the importance of emotionally dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 (e.g., a sense of collective grief) appropriately, as opposed to avoiding them.

Not all thoughts about the impacts of COVID-19 were negative, as one member reported about being able to work well with community partners and local media sources via conference calls held on a weekly basis. This member also informed the group about a breakfast meeting that is held monthly for those who are comfortable meeting in-person. For those who are not comfortable meeting face-to-face, they can view it online. Kudos were given to local bankers for working hard toward supporting local businesses. Regarding food insecurity, it was reported that Nacogdoches Hope has made positive strides in helping to fulfill food supply needs for community members. A member discussed how being in a small town in East Texas, one can have the benefit of being able to rely on relatives and good friends who are near enough to provide support, as well as having less limitations than those who live in urban areas. One member

reported they are hopeful that things will grow in terms of the economy, academics, and in general.

Personal Perceptions of COVID-19

Regarding the respondents' personal perceptions of COVID-19, feeling a sense of hesitancy toward dining out was reported. One participant reported that she ordinarily opted for dining out once per week prior to COVID-19, but she is no longer doing that. The preference for opting for curbside, to-go, and online ordering options was also mentioned. One participant mentioned that for her personally, she experiences difficulties with having reliable Internet and cell phone service access. Additionally, this participant discussed the fact that she takes this pandemic quite seriously in terms of its vast exposure, the fact that it can be deadly, that it can have lasting effects on people, and that she anticipates COVID-19 will have changed us post-pandemic. She also discussed the many unanswered questions that are related to the pandemic (e.g., being unsure of whether things will revert to how they used to be). It was also reported that the pandemic caused her stress, as well as the required work adjustments that had to be made.

Public Perception of COVID-19

Regarding the participants' opinions about the public's perceptions of the seriousness of COVID-19, one participant mentioned that according to a recent survey report that she and colleagues completed, the respondents' division when it comes to the seriousness of the pandemic was split about 50/50. It was also mentioned that it appears that members of the public do question the seriousness of the pandemic and have "from the get-go", as well as a participant hearing people saying that COVID-19 is "just the flu". Likewise, when it comes to their opinions about the public's willingness to wear their masks and socially distance, a similar sentiment was shared. In other words, these notions/actions are taken more seriously in some areas than in others. Regarding the disproportionate effects that COVID-19 has had on African Americans, one participant reported it appears to her that generally speaking, Caucasian Americans have not taken the pandemic as seriously or taken the needed preventative measures, as they feel they are not as affected by the virus. This participant did indicate that this phenomenon does seem to be changing, as it is clear that the virus affects varying racial backgrounds. The perceived preference of members of the public when it comes to the option of having alcohol to-go from local establishments was also mentioned.

Stress/Anxiety Relief

In terms of stress and anxiety relief, many tools were reported to be used by participants. The participants reported that watching movies, listening to music, reading, and going on walks outside were all helpful stress and anxiety relievers during these times. Additionally, a participant reported that the ability to be outside remotely (due to where she lives) without having to worry about others being around has been an advantage for her.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that need to be addressed. Despite reaching out to many other individuals and inviting them to participate in this study (in some cases, multiple invitations were sent), this researcher was only able to secure four study participants who participated, in total. There were also instances where potential participants confirmed their availability, yet cancelled or did not follow-through. Due to the low amount of participant involvement, it is not possible for us to know whether saturation was reached in terms of the data that was collected from the study's participants, which is of concern.

Implications

Regarding the implications of the aforementioned findings, they can be used to have an idea of this study's participants' experiences and perceptions as related to COVID-19. Additionally, the participants' recommendations for the community's biggest areas of need as a result of COVID-19 were used as part of the Committee's decision-making process for working toward further supporting the Nacogdoches County community.

After meeting as a group, the Committee members who were present decided to recommend that the Appreciative Inquiry Team consider spending the funds allotted for COVID-19 on assisting with current local efforts to provide central coordination of vaccines and information. Specifically, the committee believes that everyone who wants to have the vaccine should have access to it. Also, the committee believes that information about the vaccine needs to be widely publicized, i.e., why it is safe, how to access it. Furthermore, it is necessary to be creative with disseminating information about the vaccine, even if it is just basic information (e.g., flyers, churches, public announcements on the radio or television, nonprofits' influence and leveraging their connections/access, etc.). Endorsements of the aforementioned efforts from city and county officials, as well as influential community members, will be helpful with efforts to coordinate and disseminate information. In terms of research, the committee is interested in finding someone who has a research background, such as public health or a related field, and utilizing their skills to assist with the aforementioned processes. Specifically, the individual could help with conveying what is needed to the public.

References

Rodwell, M.K. (1998). *Social Work Constructivist Research*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc.