

CENTRAL SHENANDOAH PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY PLAN

Prepared by

**Central Shenandoah
Planning District Commission**

112 MacTanly Place
Staunton VA, 24401

August 2022

ABOUT THE CSPDC

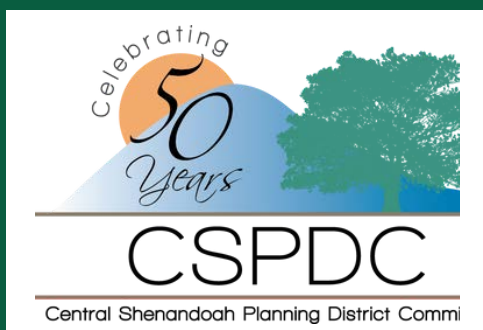
WHO WE ARE

The Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission (CSPDC) is comprised of the Counties Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockbridge, and Rockingham; the Cities of Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, and Waynesboro; and 11 incorporated towns.

WHAT WE DO

The CSPDC's vision is to be recognized as a leader in regional and local planning issues by providing support to the local governments of the Central Shenandoah region. The CSPDC aims to help communities and agencies within the Central Shenandoah region work together by providing high-quality planning, technical assistance, and facilitation services that address local, regional, and state needs in an innovative, timely, and cooperative manner.

The CSPDC provides assistance to local governments and their citizens in the areas of community development, comprehensive planning, disaster mitigation and preparedness, economic development, emergency management, environmental programs, GIS mapping, housing, transportation, transit, and water and wastewater utilities.



Acknowledgements

The Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission would like to thank the following for their participation in the planning process:

- The 21 Localities in the Central Shenandoah Region:
 - Counties of Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockbridge, and Rockingham
 - Cities of Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, and Waynesboro
 - Towns of Bridgewater, Broadway, Craigsville, Dayton, Elkton, Glasgow, Goshen, Grottoes, Monterey, Mount Crawford, and Timberville
- Blue Ridge Community College
- Board of Commissioners, Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission
- Central Shenandoah Health District, Virginia Department of Health
- Chambers of Commerce in the Central Shenandoah Region:
 - Bath County Chamber of Commerce
 - Greater Augusta Regional Chamber of Commerce
 - Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce
 - Highland County Chamber of Commerce
 - Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce
- Chmura Economics & Analytics
- Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge
- Harrisonburg-Rockingham Business Resiliency Task Force
- James Madison University
- Shenandoah Community Capital Fund
- Shenandoah Valley Partnership
- Shenandoah Valley Regional Workforce Development Board
- Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center
- Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro Disaster Recovery Task Force
- Staunton Downtown Development Association
- U.S. Economic Development Administration
- United Ways of
 - Harrisonburg and Rockingham County
 - Staunton, Augusta County, and Waynesboro
 - Rockbridge, Lexington, and Buena Vista
- Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development
- Virginia Economic Development Partnership
- Virginia Housing
- The businesses and organizations throughout the Central Shenandoah Region for their creativity and adaptability that informed many of the best practices included in this Plan.



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Photo Source: Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance

Introduction

It is rare that the world shares a common experience at the exact same time. Even more extraordinary is when this experience stretches beyond weeks and months, into years. This has been the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic as it has traveled several times around the globe, dramatically impacting communities worldwide. In addition to the tremendous toll on human life, the pandemic had an unprecedented impact on local economies. These effects were felt throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia as economic and social activity ground to a halt in March 2020. As the severity of the pandemic declines, the focus turns to how communities can flourish in the wake of COVID-19. The purpose of the Central Shenandoah Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan is to assist the counties, cities, and towns in the Central Shenandoah Region with their present pandemic recovery efforts and to increase their resiliency to withstand a variety of shocks in the future.

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission (CSPDC) is designated as an Economic Development District (EDD) by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Economic Development Administration (EDA). As an EDD, the CSPDC created and is responsible for updating the region’s Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The CEDS brings together individuals, organizations, local governments, educational institutions, and private industry leaders to engage in meaningful conversation to leverage strengths and overcome barriers to improve quality of life and attract residents and businesses to the region. Having a CEDS in place better positioned the region to respond to the impacts of the pandemic and provided the catalyst for the development of this Plan. Going forward, the Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan will complement the CEDS by identifying additional strategies to help with immediate- and long-term economic recovery.

CEDS Vision Statement

The Central Shenandoah region is committed to collaborating across sectors to create a prosperous environment that encourages sustainable development, supports a diversity of employment opportunities, provides a high quality of life for residents, and preserves the many natural resources that make the Shenandoah Valley a unique place to visit, live, and work.



Central Shenandoah
Planning District Commission
Comprehensive Economic
Development Strategy



August 2018
Prepared for:
Central Shenandoah Planning
District Commission
112 MacFarly Place
Staunton, VA 24401

PLANNING PROCESS

In Summer of 2020, the CSPDC applied for and received EDA “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Securities Act” (CARES Act) funding. Through this funding, the CSPDC created this Plan to guide the region’s efforts toward economic recovery. The planning process occurred between the Spring of 2021 and the Summer of 2022. It involved several steps;

1. Capturing critical data about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,
2. Gathering information regarding beneficial response and recovery practices that occurred in the region during the pandemic, and
3. Developing long-term recovery and resiliency strategies.

The first step in the process was to collect a variety of data that could quantify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The CSPDC hired Chmura Economics & Analytics to research available data and based on the findings of their analysis, to develop recommendations that could assist the region's local governments with their current recovery needs and future resiliency goals. Chmura's report can be found in the Plan's Appendix 3.

The second step in the planning process was to summarize many of the best practices and lessons learned during the pandemic. The CSPDC staff conducted a survey of local stakeholders to gather best practices used throughout the pandemic. Additionally, the CSPDC hosted several roundtables to equip communities with resources to help them navigate evolving guidelines, identify programs and services, and provide networking opportunities. Throughout the Plan, best practices, lessons learned, and real-world experiences are showcased to ensure they are not forgotten and can be implemented in the future as needed.

The final step in the planning process involved reviewing the data analysis and best practices to develop long-term recovery and resiliency strategies. The strategies contained in the Plan provide local governments with useful tools that focus on four key areas; People, Places, Businesses, and Services. These four categories, and the goals and strategies within, offer communities a holistic approach to recovery and resiliency planning.

Photo Source: Bath Recorder



Friends and family continued to safely gather by practicing outdoor dining and social distancing.

PLAN ORGANIZATION

Through analysis of data, descriptions of innovative regional best practices, and input from stakeholders, the Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan hopes to guide the region's recovery and resilience building efforts. The Plan is organized into the following sections.

The Pandemic's Impact:

This section outlines the history of the pandemic, detailing its impact on the region's economy to provide a comprehensive understanding of how our region was uniquely affected by the pandemic.

The Community's Response:

Throughout the pandemic, the Central Shenandoah region proved that it is a resilient community. This section highlights the creative ways our communities responded to minimize the pandemic's impact and form the foundation of the region's ongoing recovery process.

Opportunities and Challenges for Growth & Innovation:

To guide the region's path toward economic recovery, this section discusses three key areas that presented challenges during the pandemic and that now offer strategic opportunities for recovery and resilience building. These include workforce attraction, teleworking, and broadband. How the Central Shenandoah region adapts to these rapidly changing dynamics will play a key role in determining how the economy recovers and grows in the wake of COVID-19.

Ensuring the Recovery is for Everyone:

The pandemic disproportionately impacted minority, women, and low-income individuals. This section recognizes equity as an important element of the region's holistic recovery by providing a snapshot of how the pandemic exacerbated socio-economic disparities and prompted new programs and policies to reduce imbalances.

Recovery & Resiliency Strategies:

To provide a roadmap toward recovery and resilience building, this section presents strategies that actively position the region to recover stronger from COVID-19. The identified strategies promote goals and action items for four key focus areas: Resilient People, Resilient Places, Resilient Businesses, and Resilient Services.

The global scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread economic impacts disrupted local communities and left them searching for ways not only to immediately recover but to ensure they would not face similar experiences in the future. This Plan was developed to address current recovery needs as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and to offer local communities recommendations, tools, and resources to become more resilient. Resiliency is the key. It enables communities not only to survive amid future shocks but to thrive in spite of them.

Best Management Practice #1

Businesses provided PPE kits by localities and community partners

The Economic Development and Tourism departments from Staunton, Augusta County, and Waynesboro (SAW) collaborated with the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge, Greater Augusta Regional Chamber of Commerce, Shenandoah Valley Partnership, Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center, Shenandoah Community Capital Fund, Staunton Downtown Development Association, and the United Way of Staunton, Augusta County & Waynesboro to share resources and information relating to the COVID-19 crisis. Known as the SAW MSA Recovery Task Force, the group focused on providing resources to small businesses to ensure a safe and speedy recovery.

As part of its first group initiative, the SAW task force organized the distribution of 200 free PPE kits. Each kit included 50 masks, 100 pairs of gloves, 18 oz bottles of hand sanitizer, hospital grade disinfectant wipes, printed signs, and reopening guides. The kits were distributed in June 2020.



Greg Hitchin (Waynesboro Economic Development & Tourism) and Amanda DiMeo (Staunton Economic Development) distributing PPE to local businesses.

VISION

Empowering communities to prevent, prepare for, and respond to future disruptions

THE VISION

The Central Shenandoah region is committed to working together to empower resilient communities by preventing, preparing for, and responding to the impacts of pandemics and future disruptions.

THE PATH FORWARD

The Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan presents actionable strategies to create communities of resilient People, Places, Businesses, and Services positioned to recover stronger from COVID-19 and withstand future disruptions.

Communities:

- Empowered by **People** trained and equipped with the tools to adapt to and overcome disruptions,
- Enlivened **Places**, whose downtowns, housing options, and community amenities thrive under any circumstances,
- Activated by **Businesses** positioned to flourish in the post-pandemic economic landscape, and
- Powered with the **Services** to stay open, stay connected, and spark innovation.



Resilient People



Resilient Places



Resilient Businesses



Resilient Services



Curbside pick-up at White Oak Lavender Farm & the Purple WOLF Vineyard - Rockingham County

The Pandemic's Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most disruptive global public health crisis in recent history. The pandemic's far-reaching impacts on social, mental, and economic well-being were felt globally, but each community in the Central Shenandoah region was dramatically affected as schools closed and businesses shut down. As the recovery process begins, efforts to respond must be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of how our region was uniquely impacted. Detailing how the pandemic affected our communities can highlight key strengths and vulnerabilities that shape how we prepare for and respond to future disruptions. This section will briefly outline the pandemic's history before detailing its impact on the region's economy.

History of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Merriam-Webster defines a pandemic as “an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area and typically affects a significant proportion of the population.” Not included in this definition are the economic and societal impacts that stem from pandemics, such as with the recent COVID-19 pandemic. These impacts are felt globally, nationally, at the community level, and individually.

COVID-19, which is caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was first identified as an outbreak in Wuhan, China in December 2019. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a “Public Health Emergency of Concern, and COVID-19 was classified as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. As of March 25, 2022, there have been an estimated 477 million cases and 6.11 million deaths worldwide, making COVID-19 one of the deadliest pandemics in history.

Worldwide economic and social disruptions were triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused the largest global recession since the Great Depression. Food and supply shortages occurred due to panic-buying and supply chain disruptions. Issues such as racial and geographical inequities in public health response and the balance between public health imperatives and individual rights made headlines worldwide.

Globally, countries put strict restrictions on travel, school, and work in place to limit the spread of COVID-19. Widespread mitigation measures, such as installing plexiglass dividers, requiring workers to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), and individual mitigation practices such as social distancing, mask wearing, and hand-washing were implemented as countries waited for reliable vaccines to be developed.

Distribution of vaccines began in various countries in December 2020. However, the availability of vaccines differed throughout the world with more affluent national governments having ample vaccine supplies while other countries struggled to obtain even minimal quantities of the vaccine. This inconsistency of vaccine distribution was a contributing factor in increasing not only the pandemic’s life span but the number of COVID-19 variants that developed. In March 2021, the delta variant was identified in India, and the omicron variant was detected in South Africa in November 2021. Both variants created additional waves of large numbers of COVID-19 cases worldwide.

COVID-19 Pandemic Timeline



Best Management Practice #2

Retail

When the pandemic hit, retail businesses with storefronts had to pivot quickly from serving in-store customers to finding other ways to sell their products safely, including on-line sales, curbside pick-up, and delivery. The Pufferbellies Toy Store in Staunton updated their website to offer options for free local delivery and curbside pick-up while the store was closed to the public. When the store re-opened, these new options continued to be available as well as offering shortened in-store hours with limited customers in the store at one time. Pufferbellies also widened their selection of in-home entertainment items such as jigsaw puzzles and family board games. Another example of retail pivoting was the Green Valley Bookfair in Mount Crawford; they moved from being open periodically several times a year to offering online ordering for either mail delivery or curbside pick-up. When restrictions were lifted, the Bookfair reopened every week, Tuesday - Saturday, allowing for less customers in the building at the same time.

Masked shoppers at Pufferbellies Toys & Books in Downtown Staunton

Photo Source: Kate Simon



COVID-19 IN THE U.S. & VIRGINIA

The first COVID-19 case in the U.S. was reported on January 20, 2020, and President Trump declared the U.S. outbreak a public health emergency on January 31, 2020. A national emergency was declared on March 13, 2020. By mid-April of that year, disaster declarations had been made by all states and territories.

The pandemic affected the U.S. in several waves as safety restrictions relaxed and different variants of COVID-19 were introduced. The second wave came in June of 2020 leading to daily U.S. cases surpassing 60,000. By mid-October 2020, there was a third surge; December 2020 and January 2021 saw national daily cases surge over 200,000. A fourth rise in cases occurred in March 2021 followed by a fifth rise in cases in the summer of 2021 due to the delta variant. In January 2022, another COVID-19 variant, the omicron variant caused the most recent rise in cases.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the deadliest pandemic in U.S. history. In 2020, COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death behind heart disease and cancer. As a result of the pandemic, average life expectancy decreased by 3 years for Hispanic Americans, 2.9 years for African Americans, and 1.2 years for White Americans between 2019 and 2020, highlighting inequities in public health response. In 2021, these effects persisted in the U.S. as COVID-19 deaths exceeded those in 2020.

Figure 1: COVID Cases in the CSPDC by Month

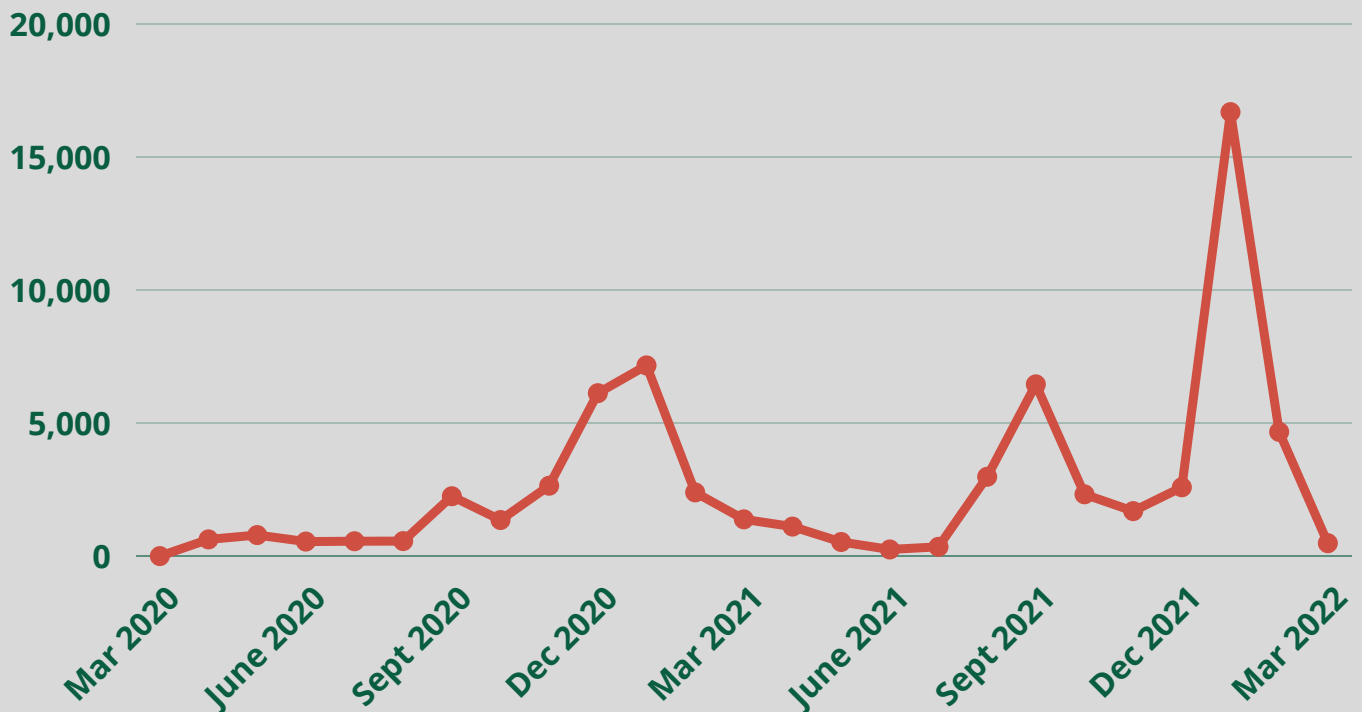




Photo Source: Central Shenandoah Health District

A mass testing clinic at JMU before students left for Thanksgiving break in 2020. 1,700 tests were administered in 5 hours.

Like other countries around the world, the United States dealt with a myriad of economic and social disruptions as a result of COVID-19. Economically, the pandemic triggered a crash in the stock market followed by an economic recession. The need for social distancing caused consumer behavior to shift from in-person retail and service provision to primarily on-line experiences. This change created mass unemployment and the need for businesses to quickly pivot business models. Emphasis was placed on safer workspaces and social distancing, and phrases such as “working from home” and “curbside pick-up” became common place in Americans lives.

Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley were heavily impacted in the same ways as the U.S and the rest of the world by shortages, supply chain issues, and the need to alter the way service provision happened in areas including education, healthcare, and business. As of July 31, 2022, there have been 1,962,140 total cases of COVID-19 and 20,938 deaths in the State of Virginia. In the Central Shenandoah region, as of July 2022, there have been 72,643 reported cases and 948 deaths.

The Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan examines the regional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in more detail, with a focus on the economy. The effects of the pandemic are revealed through analysis of data, descriptions of innovative regional best practices, and input from stakeholders. It is hoped this information will be beneficial to your community as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and moves to be more resilient if another pandemic were to occur.

COVID-19's Economic Impact on the Region

The purpose of this Plan is to provide a blueprint that can be used by local governments, regional leaders, and stakeholders to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and similar future events. To provide the research and data analysis needed to support this effort, the CSPDC hired Chmura Economics & Analytics in 2021. Through a four-step process, Chmura provided a thorough analysis of COVID-19's impact in the Central Shenandoah region:

- The impact of the pandemic on small business, the industrial sector, downtowns, the agricultural sector, the tourism industry, and national/regional supply chains were analyzed and modeled.
- Short- and long-term impacts and exposed economic gaps that have affected business, industry, and workforce in the region were analyzed.
- Emerging new business sectors, industries, growth opportunities and trends the region may begin to see or continue to market were identified.
- Using the collected and analyzed data, useful recommendations on how Central Shenandoah communities can promote successful economic recovery and expansion were provided.

The findings of Chmura's analysis informed the development of the Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan and played an important role in identifying recovery strategies that target and alleviate the pandemic's greatest impacts on the region. Five key findings from Chmura's economic analysis are listed on the following page. To see the detailed Chmura report in its entirety, please see Appendix 3.



Photo Source: RubySky Photography

The Blackburn Inn in Staunton held socially distanced events at their outdoor SummerStage.



Photo Source: Geoff Johnson

A group of masked shoppers explore Downtown Staunton.

Key Takeaways from Chmura's Economic Analysis

1. At the height of the pandemic, more than 15,000 jobs based in the region were lost, equivalent to 10.7% of the regional workforce; regional GDP dropped by \$315 million.
2. The pandemic had a disparate impact on various segments of the regional economy. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors were more resilient and thus experienced smaller impacts, while the accommodation and hospitality sectors were the hardest hit due to restrictions on travel and public gatherings.
3. Small businesses and downtown areas experienced more damaging impacts, such as loss of revenue and employment, compared with the rest of the region.
4. Long-term impacts on commercial and residential development, remote work, and new industries emerging from the pandemic remain to be seen. Industries such as e-commerce, certain types of manufacturing, health sciences, IT, and construction are expected to benefit from pandemic trends and grow in the near term.
5. Housing prices increased significantly, making it more difficult for lower-income earners to become homebuyers and increasing cost burden for both owners and renters.



Photo Source: Staunton Public Library

The region's public libraries adapted to continue serving their clients during the pandemic. The Staunton Public Library held socially-distanced outdoor story time sessions in Gypsy Hill Park and other locations around the community.

The Community's Response

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Shenandoah region demonstrated that it is a responsive and resilient community. This section outlines the community's response to the pandemic, including actions by local government entities, community partnerships, and key stakeholder input. To mitigate the pandemic's impact, local governments, businesses, and community members quickly and creatively responded to ever-changing public health protocols. Local governments distributed resources and coordinated safety measures to keep public services functioning and residents healthy. Area businesses adapted to allow for teleworking, online sales, delivery services, and outdoor activities. Community members observed safety recommendations, volunteered time, and intentionally shopped local to support their neighbors. These response efforts kept the community connected, combatted economic fallout, and jumpstarted the region's recovery process.

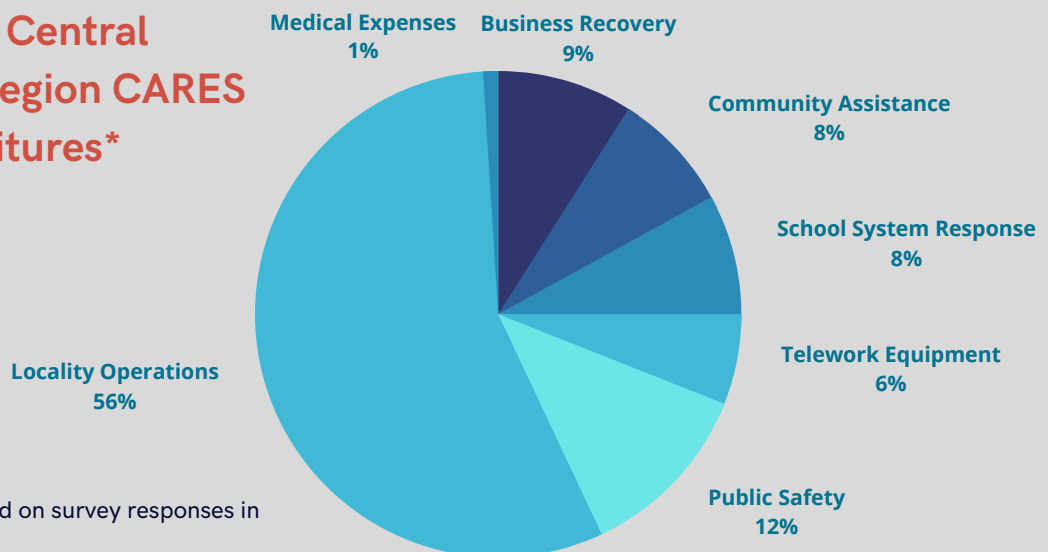
Local Government Response

Local government response was largely shaped by two COVID-19 relief packages from U.S. Congress: The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Congress passed the CARES Act in March 2020 and granted states the option to distribute local recovery funds. With guidance issued by the State Secretary of Finance, Virginia allocated CARES funding to cities and counties in two waves - the first in May 2020 and the second in July 2020. In total, localities in the Central Shenandoah region received approximately \$52 million in CARES funding. Localities were initially expected to spend their CARES funding by 2021. This prompted swift decision-making and intentional collaboration by local government staff and elected officials. The CSPDC actively communicated with local governments to follow the region's CARES expenditures.

Localities in the Central Shenandoah region used CARES funds for:

- Operational Expenses, such as PPE and payroll costs for public safety personnel,
- Public Safety Modifications, such as cleaning services, emergency response equipment, and social distancing modifications,
- Medical Expenses, such as equipment for testing sites,
- School System Response for distance learning technology and PPE,
- Technology and Telework Equipment, such as remote meeting equipment and online billing software, and
- Business and non-profit recovery and support grants.

Figure 2: Central Shenandoah Region CARES Expenditures*

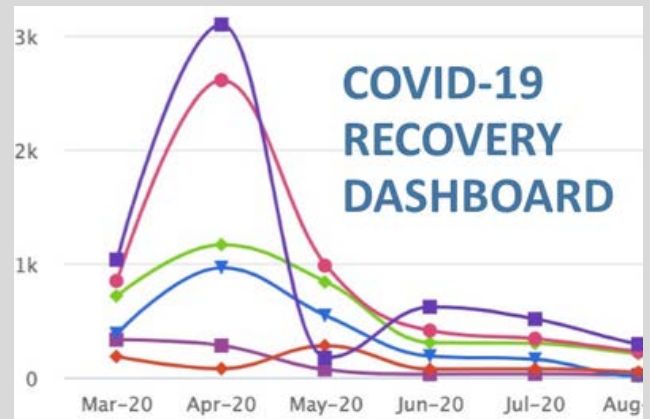


*expenditure data based on survey responses in June & October 2020.

Best Management Practice #3

The CSPDC's COVID-19 Recovery Dashboard

To track the impacts of COVID-19 and recovery efforts across the Central Shenandoah region, the CSPDC launched an online Recovery Dashboard. The CSPDC's Recovery Dashboard features interactive graphs showcasing data on localities' unemployment rates, unemployment benefit claims, COVID-19 cases and vaccinations, and tax revenues. The dashboard also includes recovery resources and news reports. It is accessed on the CSPDC website and was supported by funding from the Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.



A year into the pandemic, March 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) was signed into law. This legislation distributed local fiscal recovery funds directly to Virginia's counties, independent cities, and incorporated towns. In total, the Central Shenandoah region's localities received approximately \$118 million in ARPA funds. U.S. Treasury guidance indicates that ARPA funds must be committed by 2024, providing local governments with additional time to plan and coordinate spending. The CSPDC continues to follow ARPA expenditures and anticipates funding will go towards:

- Broadband Infrastructure,
- Capital Improvement Projects, such as improvements to police department buildings, government centers, and park facilities,
- Water and Sewer Infrastructure,
- Lost Public Sector Revenue,
- Premium Pay for Essential Workers,
- Public Health Expenditures, and
- Economic Impacts caused by the pandemic, such as economic hardships to workers, households, small businesses, and industries.

Partnerships & Collaborations

Regional collaboration was essential to withstand the pandemic's economic shocks and public health crises. To meet specific community needs, public, private, and non-profit organizations established partnerships, shared resources, and coordinated efforts. Many community stakeholders began to use virtual meeting platforms to communicate safely and efficiently. The region's city managers and county administrators started and continue to meet weekly via Zoom, and the region's town managers meet virtually on a monthly basis. The CSPDC also hosted a webinar series called "Regional Roundtables" to discuss relevant recovery topics. The virtual roundtables fostered regional collaboration and engaged economic and community development staff, elected officials, local managers and planners, tourism offices, and other regional stakeholders. The CSPDC hosted six roundtables over two years and discussed rural attraction, telework, broadband, housing, economic recovery, and downtown resilience topics.



The Rockbridge Outdoors Partnership holds an 'outdoor meeting' in Buena Vista.

Numerous task forces and working groups formed in response to COVID-19. The following descriptions highlight collaborative programs and initiatives focused on mitigating the pandemic's local impact.

Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro (SAW) Recovery Task Force

Partners: Augusta County, City of Staunton, City of Waynesboro, CSPDC, United Way of Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro, Shenandoah Valley Partnership, Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center, Shenandoah Community Capital Fund, Staunton Downtown Development Association, Greater Augusta Chamber of Commerce, and the Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge.

Purpose: Establish a public-private partnership to meet community needs in the immediate recovery phase and for future recovery efforts.

Impact: The SAW Task Force published and distributed the "Shenandoah Valley Guide to Re-Opening," and provided 200 PPE kits to local businesses.

Small Business Resiliency Team (SBRT)

Partners: Harrisonburg Economic Development, Frederick County Economic Development, Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center, and Lord Fairfax Small Business Development Center.

Purpose: Provide technical assistance to area businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funded by GO Virginia, the program deployed "Business Resiliency Navigators" to assist small businesses in the fields of e-commerce, financial management, and marketing. SBRT prioritized severely impacted sectors, such as tourism, retail, and healthcare.

Impact: SBRT supported 56 businesses, each of which are still operating today.

CARES Business Recovery Grants

Participants: Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockbridge, and Rockingham Counties, and the Cities of Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, and Waynesboro. Counties and cities worked in conjunction with their local Economic Development Authorities to establish and oversee recovery grant programs.

Purpose: By providing grants to eligible businesses, localities utilized CARES funding to help preserve small businesses.

Impact: \$4,072,645 in CARES funding was allocated to business recovery, serving over 473 businesses.



Photo Source: Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce

Despite economic disruptions during the pandemic, our regional economy remained resilient. The Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce celebrated several local business ribbon cuttings.

CARES Non-profit Recovery Grants

Participants: Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockbridge, and Rockingham Counties and the Cities of Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, and Waynesboro. Counties and cities worked in conjunction with their local economic development authorities and community foundations to establish and oversee recovery grant programs.

Purpose: By providing grants to eligible organizations, localities utilized CARES funding to support non-profit and community service organizations.

Impact: \$1,929,578 in CARES funding went towards supporting non-profits, serving approximately 70 non-profit organizations.

Bath Highland Network Authority (BHNA)

Partners: Bath County, Highland County, MGW, and the CSPDC.

Purpose: Pursue universal broadband coverage across counties and seek funding from the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Impact: BHNA secured a \$7 million VATI grant. The project will serve 2,156 locations in Bath County and 314 locations in Highland.

Reopening SAW Initiative

Partners: Greater Augusta Regional Tourism, Staunton, Augusta, and Waynesboro Tourism.

Purpose: Help tourism-related businesses affected by COVID-19 closures. Funded through GO Virginia, the outreach program encouraged locals and visitors to discover the region as a safe destination for travel.

Impact: The outreach initiative created an online platform and video series highlighting safe travel and business practices in the Shenandoah Valley.

Stakeholder Engagement

In order to incorporate input from regional stakeholders into the Plan, an online survey was created in Fall 2021 to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local governments, business and economic development leaders, and non-profit organizations. Twenty-two (22) key stakeholders throughout the region completed the survey. Respondents were asked to share their experiences through the pandemic by answering four key questions:

1. What were you most unprepared for with the pandemic?
2. What tools/resources were most helpful for you to continue operations during the pandemic state of emergency?
3. As a result of the pandemic, what current obstacles are you facing? What in your organization has not bounced back (or forward) yet?
4. What ideas, activities, strategies, or practices are you going to keep from the past year that worked extremely well?

In addition to answering the above questions, respondents were asked to share any lessons learned or provide additional input.

Working groups continued to hold outdoor, socially distanced meetings to remain active during the pandemic.

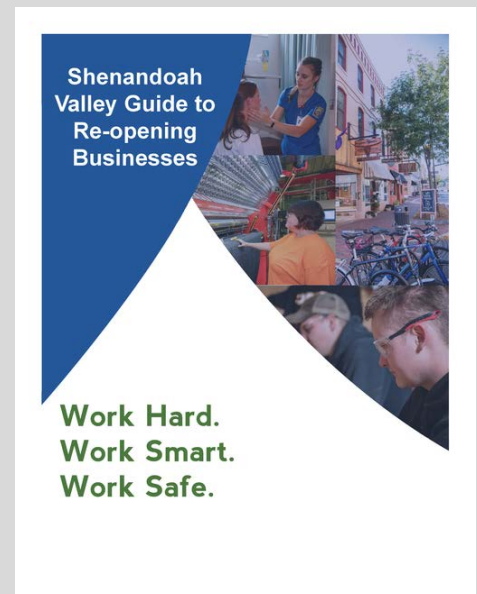


Photo Source: Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce

Best Management Practice #4

The Shenandoah Valley Re-opening Guide

The *Shenandoah Valley Guide to Re-opening Businesses* was released in May 2020. The Guide helped businesses navigate the beginning stages of the pandemic. The guide was spearheaded by the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, with input from the region's Chambers of Commerce and the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Business Resiliency Taskforce. The document provided industry-specific guidance for re-opening, as well as general guidelines, such as cleaning and disinfecting best practices, PPE guidance, and hiring and HR considerations.



WHAT WERE YOU MOST UNPREPARED FOR WITH THE PANDEMIC?

When stakeholders were asked what they were most unprepared for with the COVID-19 pandemic, three common themes emerged:

1. the dramatic economic and social effects of community-wide shutdowns of businesses and organizations,
2. the rapid shift from doing business and/or providing services in-person to telework and virtual business, and
3. the requirements to implement safety measures, provide personal protective equipment (PPE), and practice rigorous cleaning and disinfecting that were an added burden to the standard tasks of doing business.

The impact of community-wide shutdowns extended beyond individual businesses experiencing loss of revenue and staff shortages; local governments reported that local tax revenues were also affected. Additionally, the mass movement to telework and virtual business required the unexpected costs of purchasing additional equipment such as laptop computers for employees and the need for reliable internet access. Trying to implement safety measures, provide PPE, and increase cleaning and sanitization proved difficult due to a lack of needed materials and supply chain issues. Such a drastic shift in conducting business and service provision had not been experienced in recent history until the pandemic, and it came with a steep learning curve.



The Highland County EDA utilizes the Highland Center for a hybrid meeting with a state agency.

WHAT TOOLS/RESOURCES WERE MOST HELPFUL FOR YOU TO CONTINUE OPERATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC'S STATE OF EMERGENCY?

The most valuable resources for respondents during the pandemic's State of Emergency included:

- technology that assisted with telework and remote meetings,
- relaxed local zoning requirements in areas such as parking and use of outdoor space that helped accommodate curb-side pick-up and outdoor dining,
- loan assistance through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), and
- re-opening guides such as the "Shenandoah Guide to Re-opening Businesses" that provided information on how to safely open up after the shutdown.

AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC, WHAT CURRENT OBSTACLES ARE YOU FACING? WHAT IN YOUR ORGANIZATION HAS NOT BOUNCED BACK (OR FORWARD) YET?

For local governments, businesses, and community organizations, the biggest obstacles continue to be the "human side" of the pandemic. This includes widespread staff shortages across the board. Respondents also noted the continual need to create ways to interact with people safely when supplying information, providing services, or selling products. Local governments cited lower revenues in sales and meals taxes as people continue to avoid places that require close contact with others as an ongoing obstacle. Another challenge mentioned by respondents was obtaining new equipment and software such as telephone and financial systems. Some were able to use pandemic relief funding to pay for new technology, but many had difficulty installing and maintaining the equipment. Local governments and community organizations also noted the difficulty of finding the best strategies for helping businesses in their communities recover.

WHAT IDEAS, ACTIVITIES, STRATEGIES, OR PRACTICES ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP FROM THE PAST YEAR THAT WORKED EXTREMELY WELL?

Responses regarding best practices that will continue to be implemented after the COVID-19 pandemic fall into three categories:

1. Safety Measures,
2. Communication, and
3. Coordination.

Safety measures such as modifying space to create social distancing through physical barriers, providing drop boxes and signage to reduce human interaction, and readily available PPE were enthusiastically embraced by respondents. Respondents indicated that the use of technology to allow for other methods of communication besides in-person interactions will continue beyond the pandemic. The convenience, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of virtual meetings, e-mail blasts and monthly newsletters, videos, and virtual tours has become a valuable resource for local governments and businesses alike. Another resource created out of necessity due to the pandemic - partnerships, task forces, and other collaborative efforts - have flourished. Respondents stated that they would like these opportunities to continue. Partnerships have taken many forms, from collaborations between business and relief organizations to assist businesses with PPE and other safety measures to coordinated initiatives among community organizations and donors to aid in community relief efforts.

Best Management Practice #5

Museums offered virtual tours and then transitioned to visits by appointment

Museums, theaters, and tourist attractions were among the first businesses to be shut down in March 2020 and remained closed well into the summer. Many museums made a transition into “virtual tours” in an effort to market their attraction and maintain awareness. Grand Caverns, located in Grottoes, video-recorded their Cavern tours and posted them to their website and social media outlets. By offering free tours, Grand Caverns engaged many locals and increased sales starting in June 2020 when they were allowed to partially re-open.

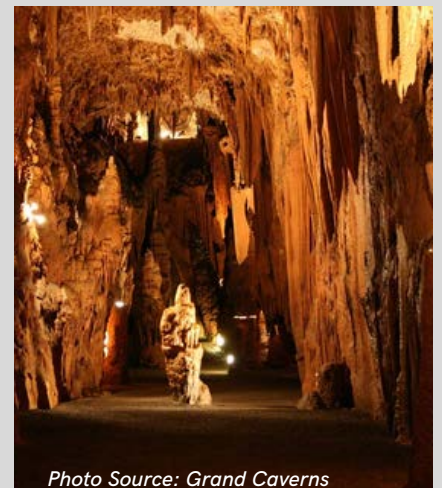


Photo Source: Grand Caverns

ADDITIONAL INPUT AND LESSONS LEARNED

At the close of the survey, respondents were given space to provide any additional feedback or lessons learned. The responses can be tied up in one phrase, “Be Nimble.” The myriad of unknowns, long duration, and the unexpected impacts of the pandemic forced our local jurisdictions and businesses to be creative, pivot communications and service provision, and diversify income streams to stay afloat. Input regarding individual personal choices and treatment of others were also common responses. Some respondents expressed concern that people often choose individual wants over community needs and viewed this as an impediment to full recovery. Finally, other respondents stated that the pandemic’s labor shortage was not only caused by those directly affected by COVID-19 but those not wanting to return to the workforce at all.

Augusta Health holds a community vaccine clinic.

Photo Source: Augusta Health





Photo Source: Fields of Gold Trail Member

Opportunities & Challenges for Growth & Innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered the fabric of our economic systems and operations. Office staff worked from home, commerce shifted online, and teleworkers were free to move to more desirable destinations. As cases decline, the magnitude of these shifts may diminish, but the trends are here to stay. Adapting to the new economic landscape will be a vital component of the recovery process.

These shifts simultaneously present the Central Shenandoah region with key opportunities and important challenges for growth and development. To guide the region's path toward economic recovery, this section will discuss three key areas that presented challenges during the pandemic and that now offer strategic opportunities for recovery and resilience building. In particular, it will highlight, Workforce Attraction, Teleworking, and the need for Universal Broadband. How the Central Shenandoah region adapts to these rapidly changing dynamics will play a key role in determining how the region's economy recovers and grows in the wake of COVID-19.

Workforce Attraction

REMOTE WORK PRESENTS NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE REGION

New public health and safety regulations ignited a nation-wide remote work revolution, revealing new opportunities for work-life balance, relocation, and talent attraction. With the increased flexibility for many Americans to work from anywhere, states and cities capitalized on the opportunity to attract new residents. In order to evaluate relocation trends to Virginia, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) conducted a National Survey of Remote Workers. The survey found that approximately 3 million remote workers are likely to consider relocating and concluded that community size and connection to place were the most influential factors in workers' relocation decisions (VEDP 2021).



The 'remote work revolution' is allowing many employees greater flexibility and work-life balance.

Best Management Practice #6

Shenandoah Valley Partnership creates landing page for co-working spaces in the Shenandoah Valley

The pandemic illuminated opportunities for creative and adaptable work environments. The Shenandoah Valley Partnership developed a landing page that lists co-working, remote work, and business incubation spaces throughout the Shenandoah Valley.

The list features the Staunton Innovation Hub and nine other co-working/incubation spaces in Harrisonburg, Monterey, Lexington, Broadway, Waynesboro, Strasburg, and Luray. The landing page includes information on services offered and location.



The Central Shenandoah region's high quality of life and outdoor recreation opportunities position it to be an attractive destination for remote workers looking to relocate. To take advantage of this growing opportunity, regional stakeholders expressed strong interest in capitalizing on remote work-related growth. In the Spring of 2021, the Shenandoah Valley Partnership launched the Shenandoah Valley Living website to promote the region's career opportunities and quality of life assets. The Greater Augusta Regional Chamber of Commerce formed a Visioning Committee to discuss remote work's potential for growth. During the CSPDC's Regional Roundtable discussions, localities revisited outreach campaigns, such 'Live Rockbridge' in Rockbridge County and 'Elevated Living' in Highland County, as well as teleworking centers which exemplified pre-pandemic efforts to attract remote workers.

The Central Shenandoah region has an opportunity to leverage its quality of life assets and telework opportunities to develop successful workforce and residential attraction initiatives. The region should continue to pursue partnerships, improve telecommunications services, and support specialized programming so that localities are best positioned to attract and retain remote workers. Expanding cell phone coverage in Highland and Bath Counties, as well as updating broadband infrastructure to provide reliable high-speed internet (preferably fiber optic) throughout the region are both recommended to support a remote workforce.



Photo Source: Pete Emerson

The Central Shenandoah region can become more resilient by emphasizing job training and talent pipeline programs in critical and emerging industries, such as manufacturing and technology.

LOW LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION EMPHASIZES NEED FOR WORKFORCE RETENTION AND ATTRACTION

While remote work enabled some employees to continue work with relative ease, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many employees to step away from the workforce completely. The pandemic had a significant negative impact on the region's labor force participation. According to Chmura's economic analysis, the labor force participation rate in our region dropped to its lowest level in May 2020, and the rate remained well below pre-pandemic levels as of March 2021 (Chmura 2020). United Way's COVID-19 Impact Survey identified difficulty finding employment, finding jobs that pay enough, childcare, and fear of catching COVID-19 as the top four barriers in looking for work in the Shenandoah Valley (United Way 2020). As the public health crisis evolved, the region continued to experience notable shortages in the manufacturing, transportation, and hospitality/tourism industries.

The Central Shenandoah region's low labor force participation rate during the pandemic calls for additional focus on workforce solutions. Workforce development strategies including reskilling programs, job boards, talent pipelines, and improved employee benefits will be a vital part of the region's recovery process. Continued collaboration with regional partners, such as the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, the Shenandoah Valley Regional Workforce Development Board, and higher education institutions will be an important part of engaging the local workforce to fill in-demand positions.

Telework

Teleworking has been a critical factor in creating economic resilience throughout the pandemic. This practice enabled many sectors of the region's workforce, industries, and educational institutions to provide services virtually, rather than in-person. When business shutdowns and social distancing requirements began in March 2020, only essential services were permitted to remain open to the public. Businesses were forced to adapt in order to safely offer their services and continue operations.

VEDP's 2020 national survey on remote work found that an estimated 42 million workers had made the transition to teleworking nation-wide. Industries such as technology, professional and technical services, administrative support, financial services, and education were able to pivot more easily, while industries such as manufacturing, retail, tourism, or food services struggled due to the nature of their business requiring in-person labor.

Prior to the pandemic, businesses were largely reluctant to adopt a remote work model. Many lacked the infrastructure and equipment to pivot quickly, and business owners had operational, security, and safety concerns. Employers feared loss in productivity if they could not 'see' their employees. However, the pandemic challenged this notion. Employees have reported significant increases in work-life balance and businesses have continued to operate smoothly. Additionally, telework presents an enormous opportunity for cost savings. Reduction in utilities, supplies, and office space have encouraged many industries to rethink their operation models, and some employers have committed to permanent remote work (Bonne 2021).



Teleworking in Highland County.



Photo Source: Eugene Bare

Broadway Co-Working is used as a business incubation, remote work, and networking space.

Due to the increase in remote work, co-working spaces have emerged throughout the pandemic. These establishments offer shared workspaces for members to use while providing amenities typically found in a traditional office setting. The CSPDC region currently has eight co-working spaces scattered throughout the region (see Figure 3). These spaces provide opportunities for remote workers who do not have adequate office infrastructure at home. When considering remote work and talent attraction strategies, having co-working spaces available throughout the region will be essential.

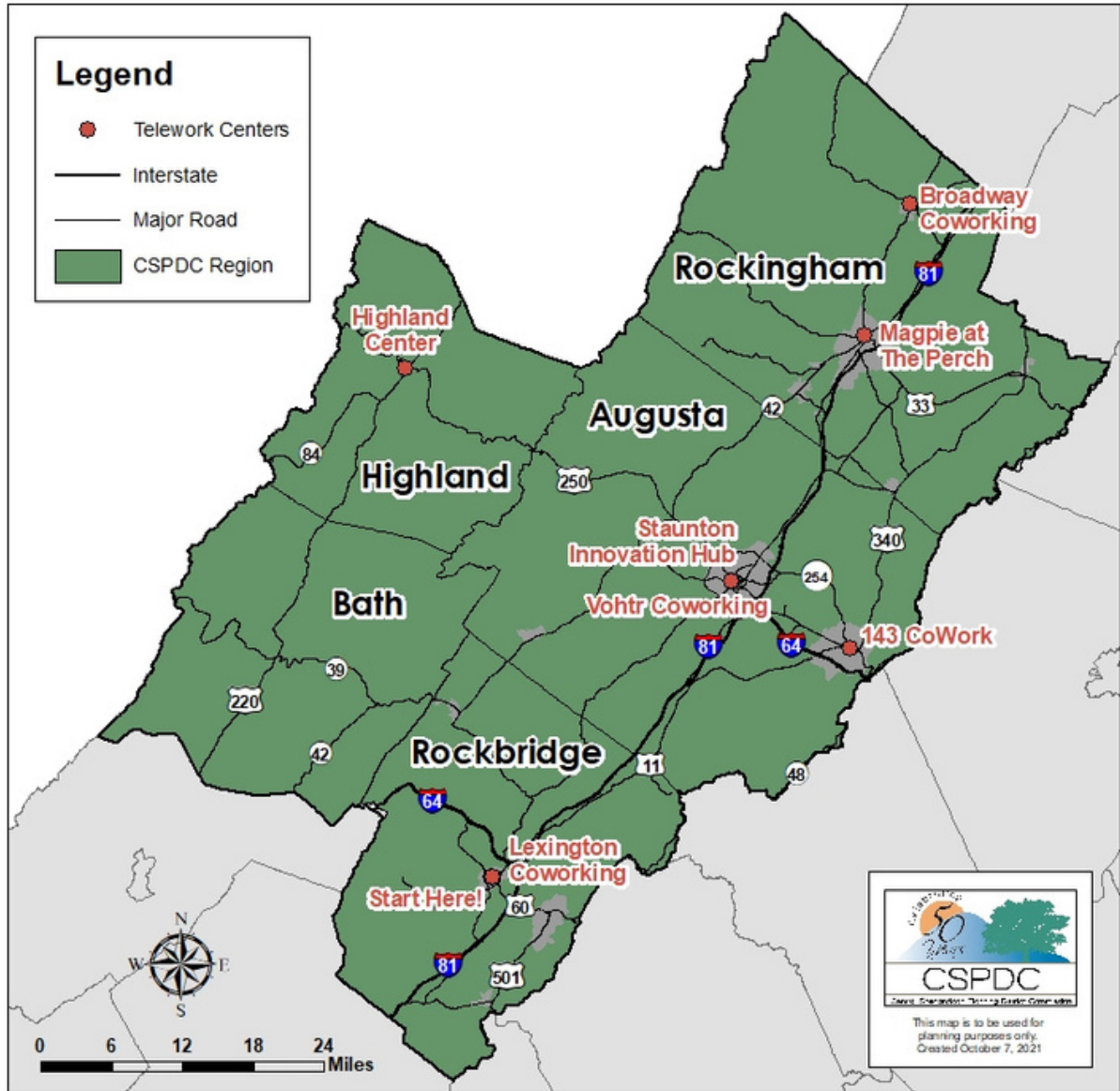
As COVID cases decline, businesses will have three options:

1. return all employees to the office,
2. adopt a “hybrid” model, allowing employees to telework part of the week, and
3. permanently transition to full-time remote work.

Determining how much of the market will pursue each option is difficult to predict. However, industries and regions that are capable of adapting their business models to meet rapidly changing market conditions and public health concerns will be better positioned for a strong economic recovery.

While the immediate shift to remote work was a major obstacle for many organizations at the beginning of the pandemic, the ability to smoothly transition between remote and in-person models provides a safeguard against outside economic stressors. Businesses should continue to improve their technological capabilities regardless of whether they adopt a permanent or hybrid remote work model. Without the capability to quickly adapt during an unexpected event such as a pandemic, economic resilience will prove difficult.

Figure 3: Telework Centers in the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission



Coworking Space	Location	Website
143 CoWork	Waynesboro	www.143cowork.com
Broadway Coworking	Broadway	www.broadwaycoworking.net
The Highland Center	Monterey	www.thehighlandcenter.org
Lexington Coworking	Lexington	www.lexcoworking.com
The Perch at Magpie	Harrisonburg	www.theperchworkspace.com
Start Here!	Lexington	www.highh Meadowproperties.com/start-here/home
Staunton Innovation Hub	Staunton	www.stauntonhub.com
Vohtr Coworking	Staunton	www.vohtr.com/coworking

Broadband

The pandemic amplified the need for broadband access in the Central Shenandoah region. Stay-at-home orders forced thousands in our region's workforce and education system to work and learn from home. While some areas had existing broadband infrastructure in place, many households in the region's rural areas were met with limited options and inadequate internet coverage. Gaps in broadband coverage impacted the region in three key areas: Education, Workforce, and Public Health.

Education: In March 2020, Virginia schools were required to close in-school instruction and provide education virtually. Those without in-home broadband lacked the opportunity to continue their studies effectively.

Workforce: As the economy shifted to teleworking, residential broadband became essential to keeping communities safe and the economy functioning. Households without teleworking capabilities faced new dilemmas, such as risking exposure to COVID-19 at the workplace or dropping out of the workforce entirely.

Public Health: To limit exposure to COVID-19, health providers began providing telehealth options, which enabled patients to receive medical services virtually. Individuals with broadband access were able to take advantage of the benefits of telehealth, while those without access were subject to longer waiting periods and increased risk of exposure to the virus.

Recognizing the vital importance of broadband coverage, several federal, state, and regional initiatives, most notably the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI), are in the process of investing millions of dollars into broadband infrastructure in the Central Shenandoah region. These targeted investments will provide broadband access to thousands of previously unserved residents and businesses. Continued collaboration among regional stakeholders to pursue broadband funding opportunities will be a necessary in order to achieve universal broadband coverage to all Central Shenandoah residents.

While federal, state, and local agencies work to expand broadband coverage, Wi-Fi hotspots popped up throughout the region during the pandemic to serve households without internet access. As schools and offices closed and moved online, many students and workers visited the parking lot of their local library, school, or community center for public Wi-Fi. One local internet service provider established ten “drive-in” free Wi-Fi sites across Augusta, Bath, and Highland Counties. In May 2020, Commonwealth Connect launched an interactive map inventorying Wi-Fi hotspots as a resource for local communities. There are approximately 31 public Wi-Fi hotspots in the Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro area, seven in the Rockbridge area, eight in Bath County, five within Rockingham County, and four in Highland County.

Commonwealth Connect launched an interactive WiFi Hotspot Locations map in May 2020.

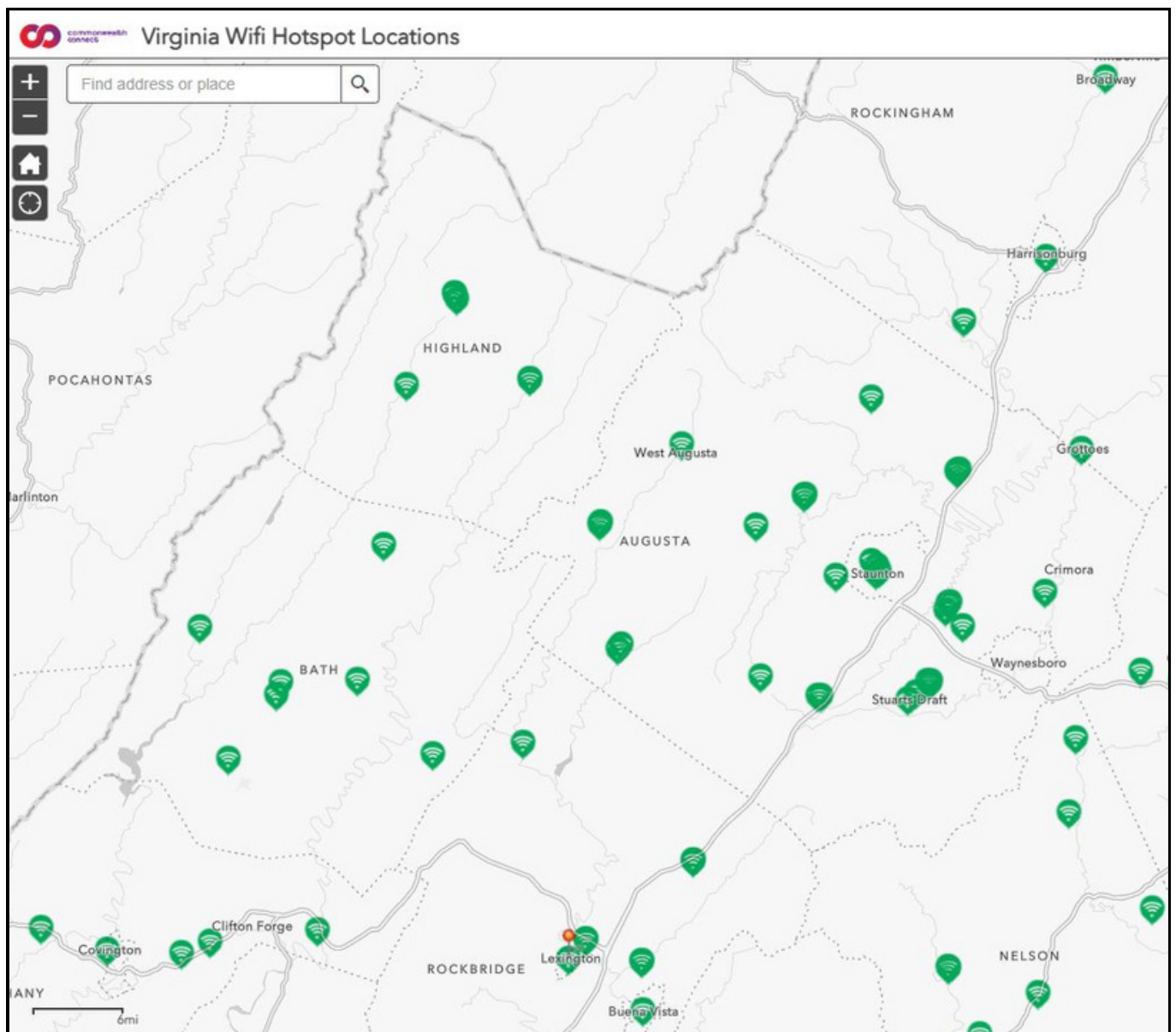


Photo Source: Commonwealth Connect



Workers install fiber optic cable to expand broadband coverage.

The cost of broadband is a major barrier to universal coverage, as many citizens cannot afford the expense of continued service. During the pandemic, the Federal Communications Commission offered the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, which provided substantial monthly discounts to eligible customers. This program enabled many to afford internet service during the pandemic. Going forward, localities should work with internet service providers to ensure broadband is affordable and accessible.

Achieving universal broadband coverage unlocks many economic and social benefits. Rural areas with broadband infrastructure are more likely to see business investment, both creating jobs for local citizens and increasing the tax-base for the community (Commonwealth Connect 2020). A recent study conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Amazon found that state-wide broadband coverage could empower growth in rural and small businesses, creating 9,415 jobs and adding \$1.29 million to gross state product.

Access to broadband during the pandemic increased our region's resiliency and allowed for greater flexibility to adapt to federal and state emergency response measures. It is vital that our region continues to partner with service providers to expand broadband access for all. With unprecedented federal and state funding, this historic investment in broadband has been compared to the nationwide investment in electricity in the 1930s. Broadband's benefit to our community is, similar to the electric grid, unmeasurable.



Photo Source: Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance

Families gathered to enjoy Harrisonburg's first Best Weekend Ever outdoor festival in summer of 2021.

Ensuring the Recovery is for Everyone

As Americans navigated the spread of the COVID-19 virus existing equity issues became more pronounced. The CSPDC recognizes that equity is an important element to holistic recovery as a region. While the COVID-19 pandemic affected every household differently, its externalities exposed systemic structures which tend to disproportionately impact minority, women, and low-income individuals. This section provides a regional snapshot of how the pandemic exacerbated socio-economic disparities and prompted new programs and policies to reduce imbalances.

ESSENTIAL WORKERS

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) reports that racial disparities in COVID-19 cases were most pronounced during the early stages of the pandemic. According to VDH's reporting, early disparities in cases can be traced to outbreaks among front-line and essential workers, specifically those in the meat and poultry industry. These outbreaks disproportionately impacted workers of color. In Summer 2020, VDH data found that the case rate for the Latino population was five times the rate of the white population in Virginia, while the Black population experienced case rates twice that of the white population (VDH 2021).

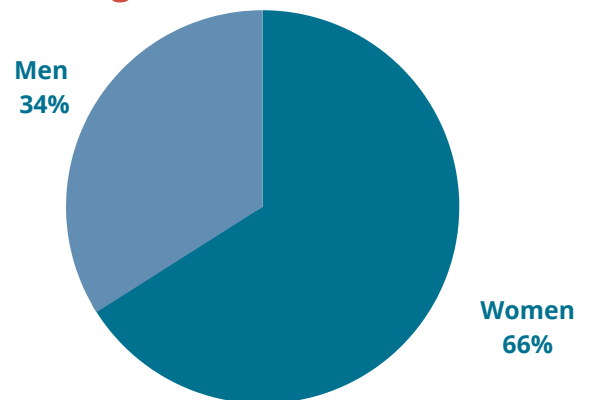
In March 2020, Governor Northam issued Executive Order 53 which restricted non-essential businesses from remaining open and defined health care, food service and production, public transportation, and others as essential industries during the pandemic. While the stay-at-home order emphasized essential workers' critical role in society, it also revealed inequities in the demographic makeup of frontline industries.

Around 760,000 Virginians are categorized as essential workers, and American Community Survey data indicates that they are disproportionately women, people of color, and low-income individuals (ACS 2018). Approximately 66% of Virginia's essential workers are women (greater than their share of overall employment - 48%), and almost a third of Virginia's essential workers are Black (greater than their share of overall employment - 19%) (The Commonwealth Institute 2020).

In specific front-line industries, minority groups and women are particularly overrepresented. Women make up 78% of childcare and 87% of health care industries in Virginia, and 43% of all Latino essential workers are in Virginia's building and cleaning services industry (The Commonwealth Institute 2020).

There are notable disparities in essential workers' compensation and benefits, as well. Twenty percent of Virginia's essential workers support their families with low incomes and 11% do not receive health insurance through their work (The Commonwealth Institute 2020). The working conditions essential workers faced during the pandemic prompted new policy proposals, such as additional pay or compensation (including hazard pay), comprehensive health insurance, paid sick and family leave, and free childcare. Both the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan Act incorporated programs for essential workers, including funds for Pandemic Premium Pay and the Families First Act.

Figure 4:
Virginia Essential Workers



Best Management Practice #7

Community Foundation COVID-19 Local Response Fund

The Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge established a COVID-19 Local Response Fund in March 2020 to support local residents and small businesses. The Community Foundation made an initial contribution of \$100,000, and as of March 2021, over \$1.8 million had been contributed by community partners. The funds have been used for a variety of purposes, including childcare options for working families, direct assistance to families, mental health needs, COVID-19 prevention, food access, shelter and homeless services, student support, and non-profit support.

CHILD CARE

Due to school and childcare closures, women were disproportionately affected by job loss and caregiving burdens during the pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between February and September 2020 there were approximately 2.6 million fewer women in the labor force nation-wide (Chmura 2020). In October 2020, the United Way organizations in the Shenandoah Valley conducted a COVID-19 impact survey on "ALICE households" (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). ALICE households hold steady employment and are above the federal poverty line but are still unable to cover the basic costs of living. Out of the ALICE survey respondents with children, 47% reported that child care issues impacted household members' ability to work during the pandemic; 20% reported household members' working reduced hours due to child care issues, and 6% reported that household members had quit a job in order to care for children since the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, compared to survey respondents above the ALICE threshold, survey respondents below the ALICE threshold were more likely to report working reduced hours or quitting a job due to childcare issues.

Chmura's Economic Impact Analysis of the Central Shenandoah Region reports that women's labor force participation rates have been consistently lower than men's throughout the pandemic and the recovery period (Chmura 2020). Looking forward, childcare will be key element in recovering our regional labor force and creating an economy where women can return to work. Partners within the region, such as Chambers of Commerce, United Way, and local childcare providers can continue to collaborate to address workforce barriers.

HOUSING

The pandemic has exacerbated issues of housing affordability and accessibility that existed prior to 2020. Anecdotally, regional housing stakeholders have noted exponential increases in rental and home prices, families having difficulty paying for housing costs, rapidly shrinking housing inventory, and a lack of housing options in proximity to job opportunities. In January 2022, Virginia Housing and the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) completed a statewide housing study as directed by Virginia House Bill 854. The study examined current housing trends, forecasted future needs, and proposed strategies for addressing the statewide affordable housing crisis. The study also offered quantitative evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on housing affordability and access, supporting regional anecdotal knowledge.

The study found that as of August 2021, nearly one in five (18.5%) of Virginia's households were behind on rent or mortgage and risked losing their home. Although Virginia responded to this crisis with a comprehensive rental relief program, the pandemic demonstrated that many Virginians do not have sufficient financial reserves to withstand a prolonged loss of employment. Individuals in rural areas faced even greater barriers to financial recovery, as total employment levels lagged behind urban areas. Federal and state eviction and foreclosure moratoriums served as a social safety net to help families stay in their homes during the height of the pandemic, and the Virginia Rent Relief Program alone assisted more than 70,900 households. Moratoriums have since come to an end, with Virginia's statewide moratorium ending June 30, 2022.



A family moves into their new home built by Rockbridge Area Habitat for Humanity.

Best Management Practice #8

Hotels

Personal, business, and vacation travel was drastically curtailed during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the initial stages. Although occupancy rates were decimated during the pandemic, some hotels chose creative ways to provide space for housing and work to those who needed it most. For example, a variety of hotels offered rooms to people who needed co-working spaces. Several hotels also offered rooms to individuals and families who had been evicted, and partnered homeless shelters with to temporarily house people in hotel rooms. These rooms provided families with the social distancing that traditional congregate sheltering is unable to offer.

The Sleep Inn in Harrisonburg closed its hotel entirely for transient occupancy, and offered its rooms to medical staff who were required to quarantine. Some medical staff lived at the hotel for months while they were exposed to Coronavirus at their workplace, providing them with the opportunity to isolate themselves and prevent exposing their families to COVID-19.



The Sleep Inn in Harrisonburg allowed medical staff to quarantine during the pandemic.

Homelessness also emerged as a key impact of the pandemic. Over the past decade, Virginia has made significant strides in homelessness prevention, and the number of homeless individuals at any given time in 2020 was around 6,000. However, the study cautioned that the lasting impacts of the pandemic may reverse the downward trend of homelessness in the state, and recommended increased supply of permanent supportive housing and “deeply affordable housing” for chronically homeless individuals. The study demonstrated that Black Virginians represent over 50% of those experiencing homelessness, demonstrating racial disparities in housing stability. Additionally, the study noted that individuals without access to housing were not able to effectively quarantine and/or socially distance, highlighting systemic inequities in public health response.



A completed home in Rockbridge Area Habitat for Humanity's Greenhouse Village neighborhood.

The Shenandoah Valley COVID-19 Impact Survey conducted by the United Way found that 54% of households below the ALICE threshold were concerned with housing costs, compared to only 13% of households above the ALICE threshold. Twenty-six percent of households below the ALICE threshold said that housing costs were their largest concern during the pandemic, while only 4% of non-ALICE households expressed the same view. The survey also found that families with children below the ALICE threshold were even more likely to be concerned about housing costs (56%). This finding highlights the compounding burden on low-income families with children, who also struggle to balance the rising costs of childcare with other necessary household expenses.

Over the past two years, the CSPDC has responded to regional housing issues through targeted programs and initiatives. In July of 2021, the CSPDC was awarded \$2 million through Virginia Housing's PDC Housing Development Program, a pilot program aimed at supporting regional housing initiatives. Through this program, the CSPDC was able to work closely with the region's housing partners to address the need for affordable housing. Specifically, the CSPDC was charged with facilitating the development of at least 20 new affordable units affordable to families at 80% of Area Median Income (AMI) or less. In March 2022, the CSPDC selected seven affordable housing projects to receive \$1.66 million in total funding awards. The selected projects represent 60 total affordable units; 35 for homeownership and 25 for rental. The projects include three Habitat for Humanity developments, two permanent supportive housing projects for chronically homeless and other vulnerable individuals, rental units for seniors with accessibility needs, and efficiency units for low to moderate-income 1-2 person households.

In December 2021, the CSPDC held a Regional Roundtable to introduce the PDC Housing Development Program, present regional housing-related data trends, and facilitate a discussion around affordable housing opportunities and challenges. Several themes emerged from the discussion, most notably the correlation between affordable, accessible housing and a strong economy. The roundtable revealed broad recognition that without access to housing choices, workforce attraction and retention is difficult. Similarly, industry leaders will be less likely to choose the region as a location if housing options are insufficient. Additionally, participants were interested in the impact of the 'second home' and short-term rental market on housing inventory and affordability. With the increase in remote work and a more mobile workforce, short-term rentals and increased housing demand are sure to cause pressures in the region's housing market and strain those who need to live where they work.

Additionally, the CSPDC received a \$200,000 Community Impact Grant through Virginia Housing in April 2022 to complete a Regional Housing Study. The study will analyze an array of housing-related data, including the impact of COVID-19 on affordable housing, the correlation between housing and workforce attraction, the effect of the student population on housing affordability, and the second home and short-term rental market. The study will also offer a comprehensive menu of strategies and recommendations for addressing housing issues for the region as a whole, as well as for each locality within the region.





Photo Source: Visit Staunton

The City of Staunton closed Beverley Street to allow patrons to dine safely outside through their Shop & Dine Out in Downtown initiative. This best practice became so popular within the community that it has been continued for 2022.

Recovery & Resiliency Strategies

The Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan seeks to empower communities to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the impacts of pandemics and future disruptions. This section provides an actionable roadmap to achieve this vision by presenting strategies that actively position communities to recover stronger from COVID-19. The identified strategies focus on developing resilient **People**, **Places**, **Businesses**, and **Services** to support communities that are:

- Empowered by **People** trained and equipped with the tools to adapt to and overcome disruptions,
- Enlivened by **Places**, whose downtowns, housing options, and community amenities thrive under any circumstances,
- Activated by **Businesses** positioned to flourish in the post-pandemic economic landscape, and
- Powered with the **Services** to stay open, stay connected, and spark innovation.

For each focus area, strategic goals and associated action items are identified to provide the region with a path toward recovery and resilience building.



Resilient People



Resilient Places



Resilient Businesses



Resilient Services

Resilient People



GOAL 1: WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Attract, develop, train, and retain an agile workforce capable of adapting to rapidly changing economic conditions and fueling the region's economic recovery.

COVID-19 amplified workforce development's long-held position as a pillar of economic development. The mass exodus of workers, often known as "The Great Resignation," created and exacerbated workforce gaps, forcing large corporations and small businesses alike to adapt, automate, and limit services. Filling critical skills gaps with targeted workforce development programs, talent pipelines will be crucial to the region's economic recovery and long-term vitality.

ACTION ITEMS

- Engage the business community to identify skills gaps and workforce needs.
- Support the formation of workforce development programs, talent pipelines, and vocational job training to key sectors and emerging industries.
- Pursue grant opportunities to fund the development of new workforce training programs.
- Collaborate with workforce development partners to market existing and upcoming training programs.
- Prioritize and implement strategies for wrap-around services such as childcare, transportation, housing, and language interpreters to overcome barriers to training and employment.

A student in Blue Ridge Community College's Welding Program practices their skills.



Resilient People



GOAL 2: COMMUNITY-DRIVEN RECOVERY

Increase citizen engagement through the use of new technology embraced during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as traditional formats to reach as much of the whole community as possible.

For our communities to thrive, they must be connected, they must be informed, they must be engaged, and they must have a voice in decisions that affect them. Providing creative opportunities for the community to inform and shape ongoing recovery efforts is an important part of strengthening the effectiveness of the recovery process in the long-term. Since the pandemic forced so much of life to be done virtually, greater portions of the population have become comfortable using virtual forms of communication. This newfound digital competency provides opportunities to diversify engagement efforts across a broad range of outlets, mediums, and technologies as a means to ensuring everyone has a voice in developing community-based solutions to the issues the Central Shenandoah region is facing.

ACTION ITEMS

- Use online meeting platforms for communication with stakeholders.
- Create a communication plan prior to citizen engagement activities that includes a variety of technology and traditional outlets.
- Provide staff training on ways to reach multiple sub-sections of the citizenry through public engagement activities.
- Consider surveying the local community about proposed uses of funds.

The Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce presents Spencer Home Center with the People's Choice Employer of the Year Award in 2020.



Photo Source: Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce

Resilient People



GOAL 3: PUBLIC HEALTH

Ensure the region is prepared to protect the public health, safety, and welfare from future health crises.

The great challenge of the pandemic was finding ways for economic and educational activities to continue without endangering the health, safety, and welfare of our communities. Most of the goals of this Plan focus on generating renewed economic activity. However, proper care must be given to public health preparedness to ensure our recovery efforts do not jeopardize the public well-being or make the region ill-prepared for future pandemic-level events. Pairing economic growth with public health preparedness will ensure that the people of the Central Shenandoah region are resilient to future hazards.

ACTION ITEMS

- Update and maintain emergency operations plans and preparedness plans to address pandemic response.
- Identify and retain vaccine distribution locations.
- Coordinate with state and local health departments and emergency planners to ensure state, regional, and local pandemic response efforts are consistent and mutually reinforcing.

Best Management Practice #9

A Highland County company used 3D printers to make face shields

IMADE3D, a company based in Highland County, used their 3-D printers and laser cutters to manufacture protective face shields. IMADE3D provided personal protective equipment to healthcare workers at the Highland Medical Center, as well as other frontline workers fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the Augusta County Public Library also used their 3-D printer to make protective face shields.

Resilient People



Best Management Practices #10 & #11

Breweries made and bottled hand sanitizer

When business shutdowns and COVID-19 health precautions began in March 2020, supply chains for basic products became backed up and delayed. Health care professionals, first-responders, and essential businesses had major difficulties in obtaining hand sanitizer, creating significant concern for these workers and those they provided services to. Local breweries and distilleries changed their distilling operations to create hand sanitizer and donated their products to those in need.

Volunteer quilters sew masks. Companies switch to making masks.

Local small businesses and individuals with the ability to sew stepped up to produce masks for our region throughout the pandemic. Smooth Athletics, an embroidery company in Fishersville, shifted day-to-day production in April of 2020 to make masks for local health care workers and first responders. Song Eavey, owner of Song Sewing Shop in Staunton, used her personal supplies as well as donated materials to sew over 1,000 masks for local healthcare workers, police departments, social service providers, and non-profits. The S-A-W Community Emergency Response Team picked up cloth masks sewn by quilters in Rockbridge County and delivered them to Virginia Department of Health staff for use in nursing facilities and homes.



Resilient Places



GOAL 1: EXPANDED HOUSING CHOICES

Prioritize expanding housing choice to accommodate regional workforce needs.

The pandemic highlighted the connection between the vitality of our region's workforce and the housing options needed to support it. The region is primed for significant economic growth, and should consider policies that support expanded housing choice across all income levels to ensure that supply keeps pace with demand. The region's private, public, and non-profit housing providers play an essential role in expanding housing supply. However, local governments can also support housing that is affordable and accessible to citizens by engaging with the community to understand housing needs and providing tailored solutions to ensure people are able to live where they work.

ACTION ITEMS

- Participate in the CSPDC's Regional Housing Study and utilize its findings to create actionable next steps that support expanded housing choice.
- Consider waiving development-related fees for developments that address affordability needs.
- Consider matching state, regional, and federal grant dollars that support affordable housing development.
- Work with regional industry partners to identify housing needs as a result of new and/or expanding business.

Central Valley Habitat for Humanity holds a dedication for a newly constructed home.

Photo Source: Central Valley Habitat for Humanity



Resilient Places



GOAL 2: CAPITALIZING ON TOURISM & OUTDOOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

Promote and develop outdoor recreation opportunities that enhance residents' quality of life and encourage tourism.

The Central Shenandoah region has an abundance of outstanding natural, historical, and recreational amenities that attract millions of visitors every year. While the tourism and accommodation industry took a major hit during the pandemic, visitation to Shenandoah National Park and the area's state parks increased dramatically. Continuing to build on the region's position as an outdoor recreation destination will be an important foundation for the region's economic growth and recovery. As an essential component of the region's attractiveness as a destination for remote workers and talent attraction, outdoor recreation also supports broader resiliency and recovery goals.

ACTION ITEMS

- Convene tourism partners to coordinate tourism marketing and information sharing on outdoor recreation marketing.
- Identify grant funding sources and conduct preliminary planning to develop new outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Complete and expand local trail systems, such as the Brushy Blue Trail System, the Shenandoah Rail Trail, and the Waynesboro South River Greenway.
- Discuss and implement policies to preserve natural assets and regulate the impacts of outdoor tourism.
- Ensure outdoor recreation opportunities are accessible to all.

The Central Shenandoah region is an ideal destination for bikers and outdoor recreation enthusiasts.



Resilient Places



GOAL 3: REVITALIZED DOWNTOWNS

Support and encourage downtown and storefront businesses.

The pandemic brought the beating heart of our communities, our downtowns, to a standstill. Reactivating our downtowns and reenergizing our commercial centers will be a crucial part of restoring the vitality of our communities in the wake of the pandemic. Post-pandemic revitalization efforts across the country focus on giving patrons a reason to experience the downtown. Coupling business development with placemaking and events provides a wholistic experience that draws people back and renews economic activity. In this way, focusing recovery efforts on main streets and downtown simultaneously facilitates economic growth and improves the region's quality of life.

ACTION ITEMS

- Pursue grant programs that support downtown revitalization.
- Ensure that street-level properties are creatively enlivened.
- Coordinate placemaking strategies to market small businesses and attract patrons.
- Cultivate and maintain a strong business community and culture.
- Activate downtowns as Wi-Fi hot spots.
- Promote downtowns with targeted marketing and events.
- Provide economic incentives and grant funds at the local level (i.e. revolving loans).

Basic City Brewery in Waynesboro utilized parking space to expand seating options outside.





Photo Source: Visit Staunton

Outdoor dining at Split Banana and Baja Bean Co. in Staunton

Best Management Practice #12

Restaurants

Restaurants had no choice but to become resilient, by being forced to limit inside dining and promote outdoor dining options that were available throughout the pandemic.

Restaurants implemented a variety of creative solutions in order to stay afloat. Most restaurants created new and improved delivery services and offered curbside pickup to provide convenient and safe delivery to their customers.

Virginia's Alcoholic Beverage and Control Authority (ABC) allowed for flexible alcohol sales. The ABC allowed restaurants to sell "to-go" cocktails, beer, and wine, providing restaurants an added revenue stream during the pandemic. Restaurants worked with localities to allow flexible outdoor dining. For example, Staunton temporarily closed Beverley Street downtown and added tables for outdoor seating. The Town of Elkton offered their picnic tables to local restaurants to increase outdoor seating. Restaurants such as the Reunion Bakery and the Split Banana constructed new walk-up windows at their businesses, creating a safer pick-up option for staff and patrons.

Resilient Businesses



GOAL 1: ADAPTIVE BUSINESS IN THE TELE-ECONOMY

Build upon the success of our region's co-working spaces to strategically strengthen our workforce attraction efforts.

Providing the resources, facilities, and services to ensure teleworking is an available option for businesses and workers across the region can be a foundational tool to position the region for a resilient economic recovery. The ability to smoothly transition between remote and in-person models provides a safeguard against outside economic stressors by enabling businesses to adapt to rapidly changing market conditions and public health concerns. Promoting teleworking opportunities also offers synergistic opportunities with workforce attraction and e-commerce goals as teleworking opportunities support efforts to attract remote workers as they look for attractive places to live.

ACTION ITEMS

- Capitalize on resources such as Telework!VA to support the development of teleworking policies and plans.
- Identify additional sites for telework facilities.
- Retrofit and design spaces for teleconferencing.
- Consider the inclusion of co-working spaces in future entrepreneurial hubs.
- Use co-working spaces as incentives for talent and remote worker attraction.
- Market the region's quality of life as an ideal teleworking destination.
- Improve technology infrastructure, including cell phone coverage and high speed internet availability.

Best Management Practice #13

Co-Working Space Launched in Broadway

Broadway Co-working opened its doors in September 2021. The space is for entrepreneurs, mobile workers, freelancers, and small businesses to enjoy a modern workspace that fosters collaboration. The space is open 24/7, and features meeting spaces and conference rooms, a copy and print center, bike and personal storage, and high-speed WiFi. As of September 2021, the space has already secured five member small businesses.

Resilient Businesses



GOAL 2: E-COMMERCE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Position the region to capitalize on the accelerated growth of e-commerce.

The shift toward e-commerce presents a promising opportunity for economic growth in the Central Shenandoah region. As a transportation and logistics hub, the region is uniquely positioned to capitalize on the growing demand for the distribution and delivery of online sales. At the same time, providing local retailers, downtown establishments, and other regional businesses with the resources necessary to establish and market an online presence is a vital part of ensuring the economy stays open during pandemic-level disruptions.

ACTION ITEMS

- Engage the business community to identify barriers to capitalizing on e-commerce opportunities.
- Provide local businesses and retailers with the support, training, and resources to establish and market online shopping platforms.
- Consider opportunities to create and market region-wide online shopping platforms for local businesses.

Entrepreneurs gathered at JMU in April 2022 for the Shenandoah Community Capital Fund's Techstars Startup Weekend, a program allowing entrepreneurs to immerse themselves in the logistics of startups.

Photo Source: Shenandoah Community Capital Fund



Resilient Businesses



GOAL 3: RESILIENT SUPPLY CHAINS

Build and develop supply chains that are more resilient to national and global disruptions.

The pandemic revealed the fragility and interdependency of many of our region's supply chains, and the limited availability and delayed production of many goods and services created economic turmoil across the region. Identifying and fortifying vulnerable supply chains will support the goal of ensuring Central Shenandoah businesses can flourish even in the face of global supply chain disruptions. Addressing supply chain issues will also provide opportunities for the region to become more self-sufficient in key industries by utilizing local production.

ACTION ITEMS

- Collaborate with agribusiness to understand where supply chain vulnerabilities are and encourage local connections to fill vulnerabilities.
- Review institutional purchasing policies and consider promoting policies that prioritize local purchasing by institutions, such as schools or hospitals.
- Support site development and improve our region's readiness for new investment (specifically PPE needs).

Employers around the region worked hard to keep our local supply chains running smoothly throughout the pandemic.



Photo Source: Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce

Resilient Services



GOAL 1: UNIVERSAL BROADBAND COVERAGE

Pursue universal broadband coverage in the CSPDC region.

Universal broadband coverage provides a vital foundation for Central Shenandoah's recovery and resilience efforts. Broadband keeps communities connected, enabling essential services such as education, health care, and commerce to be provided virtually and unlocking key opportunities for adaptive economy growth. Continuing to pursue all available opportunities to extend broadband coverage to unserved areas will empower the region's recovery efforts by positioning each community to fully capitalize on the growing importance of e-commerce, teleworking, and workforce attraction in today's economy.

ACTION ITEMS

- Address the digital divide through the promotion of universal broadband to ensure all residents have equal access to business and educational opportunities.
- Pursue grant opportunities for broadband infrastructure expansion and affordability.
- Identify areas that are unserved or underserved.
- Support DHCD's creation of a Virginia Broadband Availability Map to provide accurate information about the location of broadband coverage and speeds available.
- Establish working relationships with regional broadband providers to identify opportunities for public-private partnerships that may help reduce the cost of service.
- Ensure all residents have equal access to reliable cell service by expanding cellular wireless coverage to unserved areas.

A BARC Electric worker provides broadband maintenance.



Resilient Services



GOAL 2: PUBLIC TRANSIT & MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION

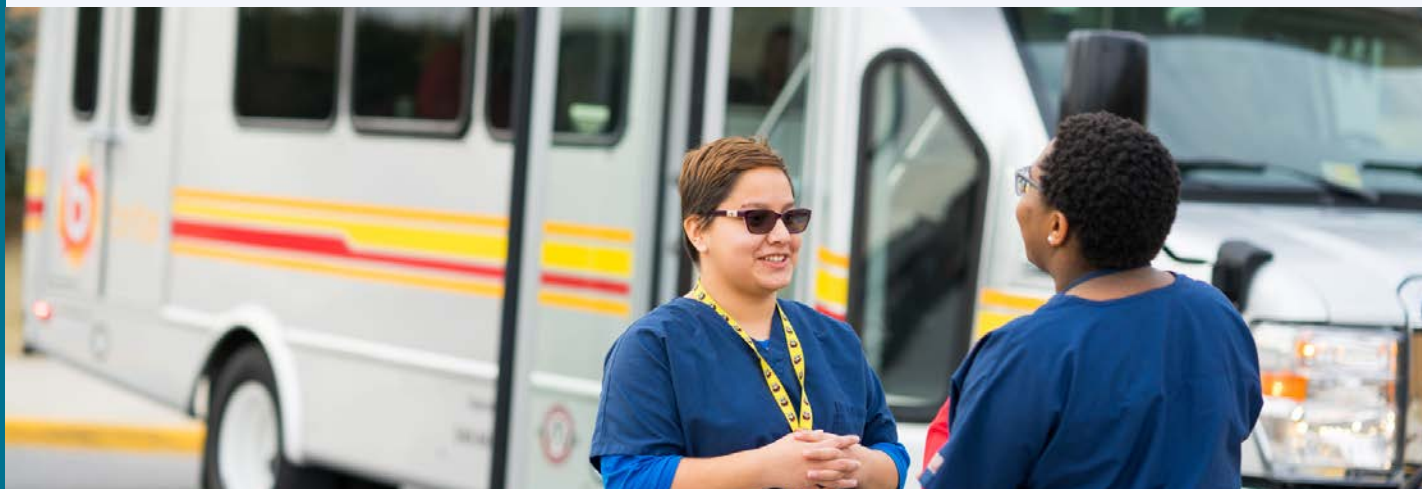
Respond to future unforeseen events in a manner that maintains rider and operator safety while providing essential transportation, both for public transportation services and other alternative modes of transportation.

While businesses across the region closed their doors during the height of the pandemic, essential services such as transit had to quickly pivot to maintain smooth operations. Public transit and other alternative modes of transportation serve as a vital source of community connectedness, and for many are the sole means of access to work, healthcare, community amenities, and other services. The pandemic underlined the importance of balancing continuation of essential transportation services with protecting the public safety of both passengers and essential workers.

ACTION ITEMS

- Develop and provide clear and consistent communications and messaging to all utilizing public transit and other alternative modes of transportation.
- Deploy response efforts such as procuring and distributing PPE and other best practices that promote health and safety.
- Enhance future resiliency through activities such as developing continuity of operations plans and exploring options for sustainable/continued funding.

BRITE Bus was fare-free from March 2020 to June 2021 to provide bus service to essential workers during the pandemic.



Resilient Services



GOAL 3: MULTI-HAZARD RESILIENCE

Maintain a multi-hazard approach to emergency preparedness, hazard mitigation, and continuity of government that provides resilience at the local level for natural and man-made disasters.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an enduring disaster, lasting several years. During this time, it has not been the only emergency to affect the region. Between 2020 and 2022, the Central Shenandoah region experienced a significant flood, a wildfire, heavy rains from Tropical Depression Ida, and two tornadoes. A multi-hazard approach is essential because events can happen concurrently. This approach is also important to effectively use and conserve emergency response staff and resources that are not always plentiful in rural communities. Being ready for more than one hazard at a time increases community resilience.

ACTION ITEMS

- Review and update local Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) as needed. Train local government staff on their responsibilities within the EOP.
- Complete Continuity of Government/Continuity of Operations (COG/COOP) Plans that outline how government services will continue during an active emergency situation.
- Adopt and update local mitigation strategies annually.
- Update local comprehensive plans to include Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan recommendations.

At the height of the pandemic in Summer 2020, Downtown Staunton was also impacted by a severe flood. This event drove home the importance of multi-hazard resilience and disaster planning.



Resilient Services



Best Management Practices #14 & #15

Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center hosted educational series for small business and restaurant owners

The Shenandoah Valley Small Business Development Center (SVSBDC) held regular online workshops for small business recovery, providing owners and managers with strategies to “pivot” their business and succeed during the pandemic. These workshops took place on a monthly basis and featured topics such as Action Planning for COVID-Adjusted Goals, Making Meaning in the Crucible of COVID-19, and Sales & Selling in a Post-COVID World. SVSBDC also hosted Restaurant Roundtables to serve local restaurant owners and help them navigate the continually changing health policies.

CSPDC hosted weekly Zoom “managers meetings” with local County Administrators and City/Town Managers

In April 2020, the region’s county administrators and city managers began to meet virtually via Zoom to discuss and coordinate responses to the COVID-19 health pandemic. The administrators and managers continued to meet weekly into 2022, discussing emergency response policies, local CARES Act Funding, and other recovery measures. The meetings have proven to be immensely beneficial for coordination and information-sharing purposes.

During a “Regional Roundtable,” CSPDC and Virginia Telecommunications Initiative (VATI) staff meet via zoom with local stakeholders to discuss available funding.





Appendix 1: Resources

UNDERSTANDING COVID-19'S IMPACT

[Chmura's Regional Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan](#)

[The United Way's COVID-19 Impact Survey: 2020 Shenandoah Valley, Virginia Results Report](#)

RECOVERY RESOURCES

[Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission COVID-19 Recovery Resources Page](#)

[FEMA Resource Roadmaps](#)

[U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Resiliency Toolkit](#)

[National Disaster Recovery Framework: Strengthening Disaster Recovery for the Nation](#)

[Disaster Resiliency and Recovery Resources A Guide for Rural Communities](#)

[Building Back Better: A Sustainable, Resilient Recovery after COVID-19](#)

[Equitable Recovery and Resilience in Rural America](#)



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Photo Source: Kate Simon

The Sparrow's Nest in Staunton, along with countless other businesses across the region, adopted health and safety measures to keep indoor shopping safe for customers throughout the pandemic.

Appendix 3: Chmura Economics & Analytics Report

As a first step in the pandemic recovery planning process, the CSPDC hired Chmura Economics & Analytics to conduct a comprehensive analysis of COVID-19's impact on the Central Shenandoah region. Their report offered a detailed understanding of how COVID-19 uniquely affected our communities and provided an important foundation for developing the recovery and resiliency goals and strategies outlined in the Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan. Chmura's Economic Analysis Report is provided in its entirety in this Appendix.