



LISTENING TO MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

# THE CASE FOR EQUITY DURING COVID-19

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs is also a key partner in this report and is recognized as its main publisher.

Thank you to the interviewees whose responses and insights as frontline service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic provided the formative content for this report. We also honor and express gratitude for all frontline workers that have distributed, advocated for, and provided necessary services for communities during this crisis.

## HOW TO REFERENCE REPORT

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# WORKSHOP STRUCTURE & PROCESS

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This semester-long workshop was facilitated in partnership with the Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs to provide a real-world, community connection to the intention of listening. COVID-19 response has been a significant effort led out by the division at the state level and students were provided with insight from practitioners and frontline service providers on how equity is being centered and could better be centered in emergency planning and response.

The culmination of these capacity-building experiences prepared students to perform interviews with frontline service providers to help inform reporting and analysis of COVID-19 impacts among multicultural communities in Utah that the division will engage in into 2021. Interviewees were identified by the Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs through extant partnerships and initiatives that involved frontline service providers who could provide anecdotal information to possibly improve and shed light on the functionality of emergency response among communities of color and disenfranchised groups.

This summarizing report focuses on the importance of actively listening to communities and grassroots leaders in a crisis and elevates key themes of interviews with frontline service providers who are actively engaged in providing resources to hardest-hit groups. Critically, the qualitative data discussed will also affirm the need for equity now and into the future.





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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PURPOSE STATEMENT

This report is a continuation of the "[Local Needs Among Utah's Multicultural Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)" report released by the Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs (MCA) in April of 2020. It is the result of a collaborative effort between MCA and the University of Utah - College of Architecture & Planning. Information provided in the report was collected by university students who conducted interviews with frontline service providers in order to gather data about the experiences and challenges that Utah's multicultural communities are facing. The purpose of this report is to provide further and ongoing insight into the immediate needs and unique barriers faced by marginalized communities during the COVID-19 outbreak to inform state leaders and solve concerns through a systemic and equity-centered approach. Our hope is that the qualitative data discussed in this report will elevate the importance of actively listening to marginalized communities and underscore the importance of equity in times of crisis.

## INTERVIEW THEMES

The four research topics for which students gathered anecdotal data during interviews with frontline service providers were (1) communications, (2) health equity, (3) housing and social services, and (4) economic impacts and employment. Students conducted interviews with four frontline service providers working in each of the four sectors listed. Key themes emerged for the chosen topics as well as policy and action recommendations, which are outlined below. Further details on the workshop structure and process, research topics, key themes, and recommendations are provided in the body of the report.

# COMMUNICATIONS

## *Main Themes*

Students interviewing frontline service providers specializing in communication focused on identifying gaps in accessible and effective information delivery. Generally, the pandemic has aggravated many deep-seated disparities across social constructs, and misinformation and delay has only created more barriers. The levels of misinformation and disconnect have been elevated during the ongoing pandemic and interviewees shared the specifics of why this has been the case in their respective communities and target groups as shown in the following themes. Students identified the most stark themes to be:

1. The digital divide,
2. The need for representation of multicultural communities among crisis response leaders,
3. Cultural resonance and awareness in information delivery, and
4. The need for responses to be tailored at a community level.

## *Policy & Action Recommendations*

Based on the key themes, the main policy and action recommendations provided in the report are:

1. Employ a variety of multimedia approaches to communication,
2. Offer help unconditionally,
3. Provide equal representation for all languages, and
4. Strive for diverse representation at all levels within government.

# HEALTH EQUITY

## *Main Themes*

Students conducted interviews with community healthcare workers to gain insight into inequity in the pandemic response in terms of healthcare and health needs. Generally, widespread health-related misinformation, lack of efficient testing, and lack of connection between trusted community leaders and the health community has exacerbated existing disparities in health equity across Utah's communities. Students identified the three main themes as follows:

1. Lack of information surrounding health resources,
2. Need for more COVID-19 testing facilities, and
3. Presence of community leaders.

## *Policy & Action Recommendations*

Based on the key themes, the main policy and action recommendations provided in the report are:

1. Provide widespread and universal access to healthcare,
2. Seek language accessibility in health guidelines, and
3. Consider transportation accommodations in healthcare.

## HOUSING AND SOCIAL SERVICES

### *Main Themes*

Students conducted interviews with frontline services providers working in providing housing and social services in order to identify gaps in services. Housing and social services culminate basic human needs from food, shelter, social cohesion, and family assistance. The pandemic has generally aggravated and highlighted existing issues and gaps in provision of these social services. Housing insecurity has increased as well because of unemployment and a general inaccessibility of services. The three main themes that emerged from interviews with service providers were:

1. Lack of accessibility to services,
2. Lack of trust in service providers and systems, and
3. The need for resilience and self-care resources for providers.

### *Policy & Action Recommendations*

Based on the key themes, the main policy and action recommendations provided in the report are:

1. Continuing to conduct interview-based research,
2. Updating existing aid applications and requirements, and
3. Providing increased support for service providers.

## ECONOMY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

### *Main Themes*

Students conducted interviews with frontline service providers working in economy and unemployment services. As communities of color are disproportionately represented among “essential” workers and service sectors, which have been most affected by unemployment, these groups have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic on the job front. Students identified the following three key themes relating to economy and unemployment:

1. The lack of an effective and substantive safety net and protective benefits for essential workers,
2. Systemic issues with the unemployment system in applying for benefits, and
3. Issues with access and transportation to work.

### *Policy & Action Recommendations*

Based on the key themes, the main policy and action recommendations provided in the report are:

1. Address the needs of essential workers by providing healthcare and funding for businesses with less than 500 employees,
2. Address issues with the unemployment system through a variety of specific changes, and
3. Address issues with access to work by focusing on childcare, transportation, and the digital divide.

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For further insight into any of the key themes identified or policy and action recommendations provided, please reference the given section in the body of the report where further explanation and anecdotal details are provided.

SECTION

2

RESEARCH  
TOPICS



## SECTION 2:

# DETERMINATION OF RESEARCH TOPICS

The research topics for this qualitative study were determined by an analysis of the Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs' baseline report, "Local Needs Among Utah's Multicultural Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic". Communications, Health Equity, Housing & Social Services, and Economy & Employment emerged as key social constructs that were hardest hit by the pandemic among racial and ethnically diverse communities. The systemic and multidisciplinary approach also aligns with the public health concept of the social determinants of health that asserts that a person's health is ultimately determined by where they live, work, play, and build community. The Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs, under the direction of the past governor, Gary R. Herbert, and current governor, Spencer J. Cox, has led the Multicultural Advisory Committee of the State of Utah COVID-19 Response to address these systemic impacts.

Strategy workgroups were formed for targeted needs and have focused on finding sustainable connections and ways to fill immediate gaps. Stakeholders and leaders from across the state and sectors have been brought together for a common purpose: to respond to this crisis with equity at the center. The work of the Committee, Division, and its partners including the partnership with the University of Utah that has actualized this report, have increased awareness of the need for equitable distribution of resources, access to personal protective equipment, and the creation of language accessible information through translation, interpretation, and literacy skills considerations. This community engagement structure and equity-based motivation relies on actively listening to and elevating marginalized voices, because with diverse and representative participation comes intentional connection and sustainable solutions.

SECTION

3

# KEY INTERVIEW THEMES

3.1 COMMUNICATIONS

3.2 HEALTH EQUITY

3.3 HOUSING & SOCIAL SERVICES

3.4 ECONOMY & UNEMPLOYMENT

A background image showing two people, a woman on the left and a man on the right, looking out a window. The man is wearing glasses and has a beard. The image is in a blue-tinted, semi-transparent style.

## SECTION 3.1:

# COMMUNICATIONS

## INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

A total of four communications and media experts were interviewed to gather insights provided in this section. These included individuals directly involved in information delivery and messaging campaigns with various community health workers, public information officers, and the general members of multicultural communities.

## SUMMARY OF THEMES

After successfully completing the interviews, students identified the four most stark themes to be 1) the digital divide, 2) representation of multicultural communities among crisis response leaders, and 3) cultural resonance and awareness in information delivery, and (4) the need for a community tailored response. A main takeaway was the importance of cultural values in how information is conveyed. Two interviewees from the Latinx community urged the importance of incorporating values of their culture into official information regarding COVID-19. The importance of family and socialization is relevant within many multicultural communities, bringing to light how critical it is to disseminate information on how to stay socially connected while being physically distant. Additionally protecting family and respecting trusted community leaders are prevalent values among multicultural groups. While the virus has shown to have a disproportionate spread among these communities, throughout the Latinx and Pacific Islander populations especially, there is also a strong sense of personal responsibility to practice healthy behaviors and revitalize community empathy and resiliency. Therefore, providing culturally relevant messages about COVID-19 prevention has been expressed as a principal intervention in addition to spreading the information by partnering with trusted members of the community.

# THEME BREAKDOWN

1

## DIGITAL DIVIDE

There is a vast digital divide that exists within Utah's communities. Even before the pandemic, many people did not have access to certain technologies or were limited in digital literacy. These technologies include: the Internet, smart phones, computers, and other mobile devices. Though the use of a mobile phone is becoming more common, even these users still experience the digital divide because their preferred mode of information delivery may not always come in the form of Internet usage or social media. Printed materials such as flyers, billboards, and mailed information are modes that have not been as heavily considered, but can be lifelines for communities with a lack of ready access to digital sources such as rural areas, according to respondents

2

## DIVERSE REPRESENTATION

Utah's racial and ethnic demographics are quickly changing and respondents share that outreach and communication strategies must take into consideration the multicultural makeup of constituents. This includes having an equitable distribution of community representation across crisis response teams and decision-makers. The Multicultural Advisory Committee of the State of Utah's COVID-19 Response is an example of a dedicated task force set to promote this representation, as well as elevate communications needs to the state level. The work of Community Health Workers is also vital because they are trusted sources of information and embedded advocates of their communities. Interviewees affirmed the need to continue to elevate the work of groups like this and other community-based organizations that are seen as pillars of advocacy and information for their respective communities. Partnering with them to create a triage system of information delivery would be key. There are also around 20 languages spoken just within Salt Lake City and more across the state, meaning for each of these languages, there needs to be a group or individuals identified who can communicate effectively about multilingual needs and create positive feedback loops for that information to be translated accurately and in a timely manner.

3

## CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism can be understood as an idea where communities that possess cultures that are foreign to one's own should be approached without the projection of any personal cultural biases. Instead, they should be understood under their own values or social and cultural contexts. This was a major theme that emerged amongst all interviews of this topic, especially in terms of finding solutions that best suited each individual community for the improvement of communication strategies. Ultimately, engaging with communities and understanding the inner workings of how their identities and cultures affect information seeking was vitally important in promoting healthy behaviors in a sustainable way. It was also expressed that this could create long-standing and effective relationships with communities so that in the future there were positive expectations set for how to respond to and act on personal responsibility during a crisis.

4

## TAILOR THE RESPONSE

As discussed above with cultural relativism, different communities have different experiences from one another and therefore have different needs and values. Once a community is understood, communications should be tailored to fit their needs and wants. This can have a much greater impact than following guidelines simply because the leading entity says so. For example, in the Latinx community and many other multicultural groups, there is often a great emphasis on caring for and protecting family. In this case, communications can be given not only in multiple languages, but can also appeal to cultural values that may be more effective in the long-term so that as circumstances in a crisis fluctuate, the reasons and motivations for compliance remain consistent.

# POLICY & ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

1

## MULTIMEDIA APPROACHES

When a major ongoing event like COVID-19 happens, there needs to be reliable, accessible & relatable information in all forms; meaning that every method through which individuals prefer to consume information needs to be thoughtfully considered. These forms of communication should be carefully planned so that official information regarding COVID-19 is unbiased and caters to everyone. These forms of communication can include many methods, including: analog, active digital, and passive digital communication. Analog methods include: pamphlets, flyers, or billboards; while active digital forms of communication include: websites, social media pages, and mobile applications (i.e. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger). Passive digital forms of communication like televised news, state mandated television and social media broadcasts, etc. should also be taken into account to provide diverse modes of information delivery.

2

## OFFER HELP UNCONDITIONALLY

Many people who are undocumented will not seek the help they may need in fear of deportation or legal repercussions, but a resounding point that came up in the interviews was that COVID-19 doesn't discriminate, so the allotment of resources and information should not discriminate either when offering help in the midst of a deadly pandemic. A person's socioeconomic status, first language, citizenship status and race should not be a factor in receiving help during a global pandemic. Simplifying the application process for different forms of aid such as unemployment benefits, food assistance, and rental assistance would create more convenient access to this aid and would encourage more people to apply. Ensuring that the questions do not neglect or threaten certain populations, such as people who are undocumented, would also help distribute aid more inclusively. Some mutual aid groups have established service systems that expedite resource distribution and largely do not ask many personal questions, perhaps encouraging more people who need help to access that aid. Government and nonprofit entities should take care to collaborate more closely with these groups

3

## REPRESENT ALL LANGUAGES EQUALLY

Utah State Code (Utah State Code, 63G-1-201) does not require any official state documents to be written in any language other than English. This law has many flaws that became especially apparent within the context of a global pandemic. Interviewees expressed a desire for a policy action to remove this law and replace it with a requirement that all tier-one languages spoken in the state should be represented equitably in official documents and communication - especially in a crisis. There was a lag between March and August where there was little reliable information for non-English speakers, putting communities behind the curve of protecting themselves from COVID-19 and misinformation. Enacting a more formal language access plan and policy requirement would ensure more timely and equitable distribution of information.

4

## INCREASE & OPERATIONALIZE DIVERSE REPRESENTATION

Interviewees expressed the vital need for diverse representation at all levels within government. Multicultural communities were impacted by a delay in the translation of public messaging into different languages. In addition, the cultural understanding of the unique struggles of some groups were not necessarily clear to leading members of the state's COVID-19 response group at the onset of the pandemic. Before appointing representatives from diverse communities, the state response lacked understanding on how to mitigate disproportionate health and socioeconomic impacts to certain groups. The severely delayed communications response that affected multicultural communities spurred the formation of the Multicultural Advisory Committee of the State of Utah's COVID-19 Response, which happened in late April. With this, there is a need for multicultural perspectives and formal committees covering various subjects and in different levels of government so that a lapse in response to the needs of diverse communities is avoided in the future.



## SECTION 3.2:

# HEALTH EQUITY

## INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Four community healthcare workers were interviewed to provide insights on the health equity plights facing communities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While each of the interviewees had a fairly similar title of “Community Healthcare Worker” their job description extended broadly and they have been regarded as incredible assets to the communities they serve. These advocates help people that are at risk in a variety of ways and assist in connecting individuals to necessary resources and services.

## SUMMARY OF THEMES

The questions that were posed to the interviewees sparked great responses and conversations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, health disparities in multicultural communities, and our health care system in general. Based on the interviewees’ responses, it was asserted that, as frontline health care workers, there were some common themes between their answers based on shared occupation. Participants had a vast amount of experiences and insight allowing for the major themes of health-related misinformation, lack of widespread testing, and the need for a higher presence of trusted community leaders in determining community health action.

# THEME BREAKDOWN

1

## LACK OF INFORMATION SURROUNDING HEALTH RESOURCES

Misinformation surrounding healthy behaviors and COVID-19 prevention was a common theme throughout the interviews. This was presented through a variety of factors such as language inaccessibility and a lack of understanding surrounding the healthcare system and insurance processes in the context of COVID-19. Interviewees indicated that in the early stages of the pandemic, there was either a lack of translated information in general, or what information was provided was poorly translated to begin with. Ultimately, information was often inaccurate or difficult to understand.

Similarly, the healthcare system in the United States is complex and can be easily misunderstood; this is especially true for people unfamiliar with it such as immigrants, refugees, or anyone else who has not had the time or assistance necessary to navigate the intricacies of the system. For example, an interviewee who worked with tribal communities shared that a member of the Navajo Nation could be sick and just need basic medicine like an analgesic. Instead of paying out of pocket for this, they could have their doctor write a prescription which would allow the Indian Health Service (IHS) to pay for the cost, but processes like this are often not common knowledge to those who could benefit most from them.

2

## CAPACITY OF COVID-19 TESTING FACILITIES

The next point that was brought up several times was how much COVID-19 testing is lacking. Again, several factors add into this such as transportation, cost concerns, and time. If people are unable to get to a testing site, they cannot get tested unless their employment or insurance allows for remote testing kits. The lack of free testing and the cancelling of free testing in areas of Utah has discouraged people from getting tested because they are unsure of how it will affect their insurance (Larsen, 2020). Others may not want to get tested because they have to present identification, which may put them at risk because of their documentation status. Trying to figure out a way to test with a different form of ID is an urgent issue. Another concern is that although there are many testing sites, they are closed on the weekends; this conflicts with the schedules of the many people working essential jobs throughout the work week. Having more testing times available outside of work hours is likewise necessary and urgent.

3

## PRESENCE OF COMMUNITY LEADERS

The last theme that was touched on is the need to have community leaders present throughout response teams at every level of government. It is effective to have a community leader be the one to help convey information about COVID-19 because people in the community are more likely to listen to someone they trust. In Utah this often takes the form of a pastor or ward leader. Community leaders also typically speak the language of their community which helps in translation and information conveyance, so involving these leaders is key to good communication.

# POLICY & ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the recurring recommendations that emerged from the interviews is that the state as a whole needs better access to health care, more availability for testing, information presented in languages other than English, and access to transportation. With those recommendations implemented, people in multicultural communities can be better informed of new guidelines and act on them in a more timely manner; better protecting themselves and their families from the risk of COVID-19. Interviewees presented facts and explained how this gap will affect the multicultural community in a very harmful way. For example, the Hispanic community has the highest rate of COVID-19 cases of all ethnic groups in Utah. The reason why is because when they have the virus they do not know what to do, and they end up spreading the virus more than keeping other people safe. This happens because of the lack of information and the unfair treatment in the healthcare system.

1

## **MORE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE**

The first recommendation that emerged is that there is a fundamental need for access to healthcare. Many people do not have access to healthcare because of lack of information or accessibility issues, such as difficulty getting to healthcare facilities.

2

## **INCREASE LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH POLICY**

Another recommendation is to make language more accessible. Since Utah is an English-only state, many people who are not native English speakers are having a difficult time understanding their rights and the most effective way to address their health concerns.

3

## **INCREASE TRANSPORTATION ACCESSIBILITY**

The third recommendation is to make transportation more accessible. Many members of these multicultural communities lack the resources needed to easily reach healthcare facilities. Interviewees suggested that house calls provided by health care providers would increase health access, as well as reduce the spread of COVID-19.

# HOUSING & SOCIAL SERVICES

## INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

The service providers interviewed to gain insight into issues of housing and social services were staff from local non-profits, state research leaders, and grassroots service providers. This combination of experts provided a cohesive overview of the impacts on housing, food access, and other social service related topics.

## SUMMARY OF THEMES

The three main themes that emerged from these interviews were lack of accessibility, lack of trust, and need for resiliency. The first theme, lack of accessibility, relates to barriers that members of the public faced while trying to obtain resources provided by the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The importance of establishing trust between service providers and clients - and the current lack thereof - was a second theme that was frequently discussed. The third theme that emerged was the need for resiliency among service providers as they engage in difficult but also vitally important work.

# THEME BREAKDOWN

1

## LACK OF ACCESSIBILITY

Lack of accessibility was a recurring theme in interviews; interviewees frequently discussed barriers that their clients face while trying to obtain resources or services provided by the public, private, and voluntary sector. Inaccessibility encompasses a range of barriers and challenges, but the ones most frequently mentioned were language and literacy challenges, lack of access to needed technology, challenges with transportation to services and resources, and inability to receive assistance based on the qualifications required. These specific barriers have made accessing resources and services more difficult for community members in need. Often, assistance forms and applications are not available in needed languages or contain overly complex language and unexplained terminology. Access to aid is also limited when application forms are only provided in an online format or in a physical location that requires time and transportation to access. Additionally, when aid is contingent upon information being provided that could reveal citizenship status or other sensitive information, this creates a barrier to access for those in need who may be fearful of sharing private information.

2

## LACK OF TRUST

The need to establish a relationship of trust between service providers and their clients was frequently highlighted. Because of the nature of the pandemic, and in an effort to preserve health and safety, face-to-face interactions between service providers and their clients have been severely limited throughout the pandemic. This lack of in-person interactions has created difficulties for service providers attempting to build trust with their clients. The lack of in-person interactions has resulted in fewer individuals who are in need of housing or food assistance actually seeking or accepting these services. Many clients in need of assistance may suffer from general mistrust of the government or social services related to past negative experiences as well as issues with immigration status. Without the ability for service providers to establish personal and trusting relationships with these individuals, it can be difficult to understand their needs and provide assistance.

3

## RESILIENCY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

The third theme that emerged was the need for resiliency among service providers as they are doing such difficult but also vitally important work. Interviewees observed from personal experience that working as a frontline service provider in a pandemic can, at times, be extremely demanding and emotionally draining. Thus, there is a great need for resiliency, self-compassion, strong support networks, and accessible resources for service providers. In order to maintain the quality of services provided, frontline service providers should be supplied with resources to promote resiliency and good mental health. Establishing a workplace culture of compassion and trust and resiliency can provide frontline workers with needed support as they fill some of the most demanding yet vital roles in serving our communities during the pandemic.

# POLICY & ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

1

## CONTINUED INTERVIEW RESEARCH

Continued interviews of frontline service providers and additional interviews of multicultural community members could provide greater insights into specific challenges and opportunities being faced by multicultural communities at this time. Continuing this research specifically by talking to members of multicultural communities receiving or seeking housing and social services could provide deeper insights into gaps in the services being currently provided.

2

## UPDATING & MORE STREAMLINED AID APPLICATIONS

Updating the process and requirements for applying for and receiving aid could greatly increase accessibility of services. Ensuring that all applications can be filled out online, over the phone, or safely in-person provides options for clients with limited access to technology or transportation. Revising the complexity of forms as well as expanding languages in which forms are available would also be beneficial. Lastly, the requirements to qualify for aid can be updated and simplified to require less possibly sensitive personal information from clients that could deter them from seeking aid.

3

## INCREASED SUPPORT FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Due to the demanding nature of work that frontline service providers are dealing with during this time, increased support for service providers could be helpful for maintaining the quality of services provided. This support could come in the form of additional funding for service agencies, but could also mean ensuring service providers have access to mental health resources and strong support networks. Lack of funding to hire sufficient staff was an issue mentioned by service providers, so providing additional funds and resources for these agencies could allow them to hire additional staff or provide better support for current staff.



## SECTION 3.4:

# ECONOMY & UNEMPLOYMENT

## INTERVIEWEE PROFILE

Interviewees included four different service providers who all work in fields related to economy and employment in Utah. From chambers of commerce, to financial empowerment non-profit arenas, the interviewees reported insightful perspectives on the impacts of COVID-19 on economic sustainability and the intersectional nature of unemployment.

## SUMMARY OF THEMES

From this process, three main themes emerged: the needs of essential workers, issues with the unemployment system, and issues with access to work. Each of these main themes is further explained and outlined below. For each of the main themes identified, specific policy and action recommendations are provided based on service provider recommendations and insights as well as student research.

# THEME BREAKDOWN

1

## NEEDS OF ESSENTIAL WORKERS & OVERARCHING SUPPORT

One of the main themes that emerged in our interviews was that essential workers need better support, specifically better benefits and more access to safety equipment, especially personal protective equipment (PPE). As one interviewee put it, "People who are exposing themselves and at a higher risk deserve to be paid more and [to] have access to the same benefits as corporate workers." While access to PPE has increased for essential workers since the beginning of the pandemic, this remains an issue for people working on the frontlines. Essential workers also rarely have access to benefits such as paid time off and health insurance, leading some people to have to choose between following guidelines for quarantine or isolation and providing for their families. Hazard pay is another benefit that many essential workers are not given, meaning that even though they are putting themselves at greater risk of catching the virus, they are not paid any extra for the risk they are incurring.

2

## ISSUES WITH THE UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE SYSTEM

A second theme that became evident throughout the interview process was the importance of addressing issues in the existing unemployment system. The system was overwhelmed by a flood of patrons, which compounded the difficulty of navigating the already complex process of applying for and obtaining unemployment benefits. One interviewee with personal experience seeking unemployment benefits during the pandemic observed: "Here I am, highly educated, perfectly fluent in English, and I was having difficulties! So imagine someone who didn't have those advantages. Didn't have a fast computer. Didn't understand absolutely what was needed." The number of people seeking unemployment assistance increased very quickly and this resulted in the Utah Department of Workforce Services website, live chats, and phone lines being overwhelmed and generally inaccessible for long periods of time. One interviewee reported computers crashing when attempting to access unemployment benefits on state websites. The combination of navigating regular unemployment assistance with the added layer of navigating pandemic related unemployment assistance added complexity to the process of obtaining help because it was often unclear which types of assistance a person could qualify for or when. Many of the terms used on the forms required to apply for unemployment assistance are not intuitive and could be difficult to understand without assistance, even for those who speak English as a first language. One example of this is the term "annualized income" given as a prompt with no context or clarification. Generally, language barriers have also been an issue as the Department of Workforce Services has had limited capacity and faced very high demand for assistance. Language related resources on the website are limited and additional personalized help has been delayed and limited.

3

## ACCESS TO WORK

Access to work was the third theme that emerged from these interviews. This theme is related to several different things because the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for multicultural communities to have easy access to work because of outstanding family responsibilities and lesser reliable access to transportation and technology. As one interviewee stated: "It was really because other responsibilities prevented them from actually getting to work. And unfortunately, for most of these people in the retail sector, in the hospitality sector, the church tourism sector, you know, they're not at a professional level. They're at the service level. So remote work was not available to them." The majority of service level workers, especially in the multicultural community, are women. With schools closed down and other childcare places closed as well many of these workers are having difficulty managing work while having to look after their children. This has put many in a tough spot because they need to look after their children, but can't afford to leave their job. While many in the service industry among the multicultural community lost their jobs due to COVID-19, some moved to remote work. Access to reliable and appropriate technology has become a problem because many did not possess them or couldn't afford them, making it more difficult for them to be engaged with work. Along with access to technology, there is a digital literacy gap because many are not familiar or do not know how to use computers for remote work. The pandemic has also influenced major changes to public transit, among those being reduced trip times and service. Less people are using public transit now which has driven the Utah Transit Authority to increase intervals between trains and to reduce service to some areas. Many essential workers rely on public transit to get to and from work, with these changes they have been forced to make adjustments to their schedule or find other ways to get to work.

# POLICY & ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

One thing that became clear over the course of these interviews was that frontline workers not only have important insights into what multicultural communities are experiencing, but that they have also put thought and consideration into what could be done, on a variety of levels, to help alleviate some of these issues. Some of these key recommendations included ideas for making benefits available to employees working at businesses of any size, increased communication between businesses and the Department of Workforce Services, and making sure that transit options remain as open and varied as pre-COVID levels of service. While some of the suggestions that emerged from these interviews may have eventually been suggested by planners or government employees, there is an undeniable benefit to talking to frontline workers. Having immediate, real-time access to the issues that members of the community are facing means that they have a unique and direct understanding of these needs; listening to their suggestions could create a more efficient and effective way to address the challenges facing communities of color during this pandemic.

## 1 ADDRESS ESSENTIAL WORKERS' NEEDS

Making sure that there is ready access to healthcare - whether by providing health insurance or making sure employees are aware of resources - is a critical need for essential workers. Another way to support essential workers' needs is to make funding available specifically for small businesses to provide benefits for employees. Under the CARES Act, businesses with more than 500 employees must provide two paid weeks off in case of quarantine, but smaller businesses such as restaurants do not reach that minimum standard. Providing funding especially for those businesses would immensely help their employees. Essential workers would also benefit from an emphasis on safety measures and their enforcement; support is especially needed for employees dealing with members of the public who may not want to follow social distancing or mask guidelines.

## 2 ADDRESS ISSUES WITH THE UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

Another way to support the economic sector during the COVID-19 pandemic is to find ways to facilitate direct communication between businesses undergoing layoffs and the Department of Workforce Services. This would streamline the process of obtaining unemployment for groups of employees that have experienced job loss instead of being left to navigate the system on their own. Increasing capacity and staff in the housing and social services entities in order to provide more personalized help for people navigating the process of obtaining unemployment benefits, especially those with specific translation needs, is another way to ease access to these benefits. Providing additional information about mental health and other resources that could be helpful to those undergoing the stress of job loss as part of the process would also be useful. Finally, providing or publicizing ways for those without consistent internet access to navigate the process of obtaining unemployment benefits. With limited access to resources like public computers during the pandemic, it can be difficult for those without personal computers to navigate the unemployment system.

## 3 ADDRESS ISSUES WITH ACCESS TO WORK

One way to ease access to work would be to expand access to childcare. This includes allowing more leniency with scheduling to allow workers to make schedule adjustments to make sure their children are efficiently supervised. When appropriate, allowing workers to bring their children to work so that they can directly supervise their children in a safe environment would be useful. The digital divide is another issue with work access. If workers are transitioned to remote work, there need to be reassurances that they will have access to reliable and appropriate technology. Employers can help supply these resources. If workers cannot afford the necessary technology there is the possibility for other pathways such as the state providing technology loans. There should also be an increased education on remote work, focusing on workers who have little or no experience working with computers. Finally, transportation issues can also impact work access. Reinstating transit services to pre-pandemic levels would help essential workers get to their places of work, as would increasing or adjusting service to better serve current ridership. Providing additional information to transit riders on future changes regarding service during the COVID-19 pandemic would also be useful to those commuters relying on public transportation.

# CONCLUSION



## LISTENING IS ACTION.

Moving forward will require engaged listening followed by action. Once we know better we must do better.

The anecdotal evidence brought up in these interviews includes both an emotional and qualitative element that when combined, paints a powerful picture that articulates both what multicultural communities are facing in light of this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and what would be helpful to them in overcoming those challenges. Of course, this picture is only impactful if it is backed with action. The key to its impact is in actively and intentionally listening.

When creating policies that are meant to empower or assist multicultural communities, it is imperative that policy makers listen to the firsthand experiences of the people they are trying to help. In this way, policies can be more targeted, sustainable, and effective in assisting those disproportionately impacted by this pandemic and ultimately promoting a more equitable social outcome for generations into the future.

SECTION

4

APPENDIX

4.1 SOURCES CITED

4.2 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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## SOURCES CITED:

\*References in APA (American Psychological Association) format

Larsen, L. (2020, June 23). Salt Lake County Health cancels free coronavirus testing due to shortages Salt Lake Tribune. <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2020/06/23/salt-lake-county-health/>

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

### COMMUNICATION QUESTIONS

1. What has been the most difficult communication barrier you have faced as a service provider for multicultural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What efforts have been actively made to remove communications barriers and have they been successful to relay accurate information
3. How do you go about communicating with people seeking assistance from your organization? Has the pandemic forced you to adapt to using different communication methods?
4. What have been your biggest concerns regarding language access? How have those been addressed in your organization in providing services to individuals whose primary language is not English?
5. What strategies have you found to be most effective in combating misinformation?

### HEALTH EQUITY QUESTIONS

1. What efforts have been made to improve access to health services and were they successful in being used by communities?
2. In your opinion, what health disparities have been aggravated as a result of COVID-19?
3. How do you envision health equity centered policies or statewide action for marginalized communities as a result of COVID-19?
4. What bottlenecks have you encountered in getting important health related information to communities?
5. Community mobilization includes the collaboration of trusted community leaders, religious groups, and other representatives of diverse groups working to communicate planned and accurate messages for maximum reception. How has this been used as a tool to reach communities during this time?

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (CONT'D):

### HOUSING & SOCIAL SERVICES QUESTIONS

1. What have you observed as the most common reason for food insecurity during this pandemic?
2. What improvement or declines have you seen in housing security for your clients since the pandemic began?
3. How has COVID-19 impacted your ability to help people access affordable housing?
4. How can we move from spotlighting gaps in social services to solutions? Beyond identifying the needs, how can the system of social services be more equity-based?
5. What unforeseen gaps in basic needs have you encountered with your clients as a result of COVID-19?

### ECONOMY & UNEMPLOYMENT QUESTIONS

1. In what employment sectors have you seen multicultural communities been impacted the most as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has the pandemic impacted your clients' access to work? Have they encountered difficulty getting to and from their employment?
3. What does the term "essential worker" mean to you? How can the "essential" component be more effectively addressed?
4. If your clients became unemployed due to the pandemic, please describe the process to successfully gain unemployment benefits. For what reasons were they unable to do so, if not?
5. How do you envision economic justice-centered policies or statewide action for marginalized communities as a result of COVID-19?

## HOW TO REFERENCE REPORT

University of Utah - College of Architecture & Planning (Undergraduate and Graduate Students), Listening Workshop: Listening to & Elevating Multicultural Communities: The Case for Equity During COVID-19. (2020). Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs.