



As soon as it arrived on our doorstep, COVID-19 began impacting businesses and communities around Western North Carolina. Organizations and residents quickly adopted social distancing measures to help flatten the curve in the COVID-19 infection rate, and the lives of thousands of local workers changed overnight. While leaders in industries like advanced manufacturing considered how to incorporate social distancing practices into their workplaces, small business owners in hospitality, retail and personal services made wrenching decisions to halt operations, close their doors or lay off their staff.

As an organization that serves over 1,700 member businesses across the Greater Asheville Metropolitan Statistical Area, the work of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce is guided by the perspectives and needs of our business community. To learn as much as we could about business needs emerging from the COVID-19 crisis in real time, we developed the COVID-19 Business Impact Survey. We partnered with organizations like Mountain BizWorks, Land of Sky Regional Council and local governments to distribute the survey widely, and within a few short days, we had accumulated more than 540 responses from business leaders across Western North Carolina.

The survey results are a snapshot of how the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected our regional economy. We intend to use the needs and recommendations expressed by our business community to guide our advocacy efforts throughout this crisis.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

- **Responses came from business leaders in a variety of industries.** They include: Food and Beverage (17%); Retail (12%); Arts and Entertainment (9%); Professional Services (9%; category includes marketing, printing and design, law firms, architecture, event services, business consulting, videography, etc.); and Personal Services (8%; category includes salons, wellness/fitness, massage, pet care, etc.).
- **Most responses came from small businesses.** 73% of respondents represented businesses with 20 or fewer employees, and 8% of respondents represented businesses with 100 or more employees.
- **Responses came from businesses that operate across Western North Carolina.** While about 90% of respondents said their businesses operate in Buncombe County, many respondents also reported operating in Madison County (14.7%), Henderson County (22.9%), Transylvania County (13.8%), McDowell County (10.8%), Haywood County (15%), Yancey County (8.8%), Jackson County (10.6%) or elsewhere (26.5%)

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Where possible, businesses have adapted operations to fit the circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis.** 27% of respondents said they've remained open with changed hours, 25% said they've remained open but changed their services, and 25% of respondents said their employees are telecommuting.
- **But COVID-19 has caused many area businesses to close their doors or lay off workers.** More than 31% of respondents from 168 businesses said their organizations had already closed as a result of COVID-19. 26% said their employees have been furloughed or laid off.
- **Maintaining a skilled, experienced and healthy workforce is still a concern for businesses impacted by COVID-19.** Some respondents said maintaining salaries, steady income, and the safety and health of their employees among their top workforce concerns, while others worried that employees who are laid off or furloughed may not be able to return to work at the end of the COVID-19 disruption.
- **Area business leaders share uncertainty and anxiety about keeping their businesses afloat.** Respondents named inability to generate revenue, difficulty paying rent and bills, outstanding debts, inability to receive payments due, looming threat of a recession, uncertainty about the length of the disruption and concerns about needing to close their businesses permanently among their concerns.
- **Businesses stand ready to help our communities weather this crisis.** Respondents identified a number of ways they can help, including waiving rent for tenants, sharing their professional expertise through free webinars or virtual tutorials, providing food or an empty venue, or volunteering with the 211 helpline.

HOW GOVERNMENT CAN HELP

- **Continue providing clear, immediate and decisive guidance to businesses and community members.** Respondents asked for clear government directives, including definitions of who is eligible for expanded unemployment benefits and which businesses are classified as essential during the COVID-19 disruption.
- **Remove roadblocks to small business relief.** Respondents explained that a three- to four-month waiting period for a U.S. Small Business Association (SBA) loan would be too long for their businesses to survive, and expediting the approval process would help. With uncertainty surrounding the length of the disruption, several respondents also expressed a need for grants or zero-interest loans to help them avoid additional debt burden.
- **Pass stimulus legislation that helps ensure the COVID-19 disruption is temporary, not permanent.** 66% of respondents named cash flow assistance as a resource they need. For many businesses that have taken the step to close or lay off employees, payroll has stopped, but rent payments haven't. Financial relief that addresses existing business debt burdens and financial responsibilities now will help prepare them to reopen and rehire later. Respondents also requested waivers or deferments for various taxes, including sales, use and excise taxes, as well as deferred utility payments.

For more information, take a look at the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce's [COVID-19 Business Response Survey results dashboard here](#).

Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce

36 Montford Ave, Asheville, NC • www.ashevillechamber.org • 828-258-6101