

Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds Asheville Area Chamber Proposal

Name of Project:

Community Connector Pilot Program

Amount of Funds Requested:

\$610,000

Recovery Fund Eligible Category:

Aid to impacted industries

Brief Project Description:

Provide a short summary of your proposed project.

1,000 characters – 994 currently

The Community Connector pilot program and communications campaign helps address the negative impacts of COVID-19 in the city's primary business districts. The project relies on cross-sector collaboration to reimagine public safety, support district stabilization, economic resiliency, and connect people in need to services.

COVID-19 impacted businesses through abrupt closures, health safety measures (e.g., social distancing, PPE, and capacity limits), and widespread unemployment. A sharp decline in tourism exacerbated these losses. Many businesses closed, and now numerous organizations, public and private, face staffing and service provision challenges.

COVID-19 also highlighted social inequities. The racial justice movement prompted cities across the country to reimagine public safety. Many people experiencing homelessness set up camps or slept in the streets.

This program addresses these varied issues through proactive services and a new community-driven approach to public safety.

Project Plan:

Explain how the project will be structured and implemented, including the time frame.

3,000 characters – 2,977 currently

The Community Connector program uses a two-pronged approach: 1) provide direct services to support business districts, and 2) develop comprehensive communications to enhance effectiveness and awareness of the program and to develop other community-driven communications-based tools to support public safety. The program is informed by case studies and consultation with Chief of Police, David Zack and City Manager, Debra Campbell.

Community Connector Street Teams:

1. Form and coordinate with an advisory group of businesses and property owners as well as other strategic partners to review similar programs in other cities, develop the program's priorities, inform the scope of work and job descriptions for the Community Connector street teams and assist with the City-led RFP process to solicit proposals for service.
2. Reach out to strategic partners – public, private, nonprofit and business organizations – who could collaborate on related initiatives, like a low barrier shelter and community health workers, to support the success of the program. Utilize existing nonprofit networks to develop referral processes for the Community Connector street teams who encounter people in need/crisis, experiencing homelessness, and causing nuisance disturbances.
3. Work with the City of Asheville to hire a firm with expertise in supporting business districts to train and deploy Community Connector street teams Downtown, WAVL (Haywood Road), and other commercial districts as available. Teams will facilitate pro-active education and coordination to address key issues and concerns (e.g., sidewalk access concerns, litter issues, noise ordinance and busking concerns, prohibition on feeding programs in public parks, safety escorts by request, etc.), in collaboration with local organizations.
4. Launch this as a 3-year pilot program.
5. Work with the advisory group and the community to monitor the impact that the teams can have on improving the districts for residents, employees, and customers. Consider long-term strategies (beyond the 3-year program) for sustained funding and management based on the programs' outcomes.

Communications & Collaboration Campaign:

Develop a comprehensive communications campaign to encourage residents, business leaders, and customers to feel empowered to do their civic duty in keeping Asheville safe and welcoming. Ask community stakeholders to assist in particular aspects of the campaign and material distribution.

Examples of Tools and Strategies:

- Develop guides for citizens to support safety and security, including self-reporting options to enhance police follow-up efficiency.
- Enhance or establish neighborhood watch initiatives.
- Community organized clean ups in Pritchard Park in collaboration with the City to support beautification.
- District residents participate in a "leave it better than you found it" program for cleaning up and/or using the Asheville App to identify trash/graffiti as well as potential safety issues.

Statement of Need:

Describe the need that this project will address. Include data to demonstrate the need and cite the source of the data.

2,000 characters – 1,980 currently

Support economic recovery.

Buncombe County had the lowest unemployment rate in North Carolina for five years before the pandemic.¹ Beginning with the shutdown in March 2020, thousands of people lost their jobs, placing the County amongst the highest unemployment rates in the state and decimating businesses in Downtown and other business districts.²

COVID-19 impacted businesses directly, causing abrupt closures, requiring increased health safety measures (e.g., social distancing, PPE, and capacity limits), and forcing many people to exit the labor pool. It also caused a sharp decline in tourism, a consumer segment many businesses heavily rely on. Now, surveys show business owners are concerned about safety, nuisance issues, and beautification.³

Stabilize business districts.

COVID-19 highlighted social inequities as well. The racial justice movement prompted cities across the country to reimagine public safety. The Asheville Police Department, like other departments nationwide, face record levels of resignations, leaving them understaffed. A reduction in services⁴ has left residents, business owners, employees, and customers with many questions and concerns.

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness increased from 65 to 116 leading to visible widespread camping. Trash became a major issue and the number of nuisance complaints increased. And, the use of needles by those suffering substance abuse created unsafe situations for campers and residents.

Downtown generates significant property tax revenue, the highest per-acre value of tax in the region. Downtown and WAVL have a unique mix of small, locally-owned restaurants and shops that depend on a customer base of both residents and visitors. They are also outsized sources of the sales tax that comes back to the City and County government. Restoring a sense of

¹ "Local Area Unemployment Statistics Map," accessed July 13, 2021, https://data.bls.gov/lausmap/showMap.jsp;jsessionid=40D0912FAF17EDB4E427EFB9414433A1.t3_06v.

² "BLS Data Viewer," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LAUCN370210000000003>.

³ "State of Downtown Update – Recording and Survey Results – Asheville Downtown Association," AshevilleDowntown.org, accessed July 14, 2021, <https://ashevilledowntown.org/state-of-downtown-update-recording/>; Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, Survey Results – ARPA Business Priorities.

⁴ Joel Burgess, "Year after Asheville Protests, APD Attrition Remains High as Cops Cut Services," *Asheville Citizen Times*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/2021/06/04/asheville-police-violence-protests-apd-police-officers-quitting-cops-cut-services/7528501002/>.

security for residents, businesses, employees, and customers through additional service provision is essential to rebuilding the County's economy.

Link to COVID-19:

Identify a health or economic harm resulting from or exacerbated by the public health emergency, describe the nature and extent of that harm, and explain how the use of this funding would address such harm.

2,000 characters – 1915 currently

The Buncombe County unemployment rate went from among the lowest in the state to the highest.⁵ Buncombe County shifted from tier 3 status to tier 2 because of an increase in unemployment.⁶

The misery created by unemployment exacerbated substance abuse and caused many people to lose their homes. The number of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness increased, with reports that some individuals living in camps experienced crime and death. Property owners in business districts have had increases in property crime⁷ while stakeholders continue to express concerns about their safety.⁸

Businesses in Downtown, WAVL and RAD suffered severe economic impacts. COVID-19 deeply impacted tourism; visitor spending dropped 32% statewide.⁹ Though local businesses are eager to re-capture tourism spending, an increase in visitors adds pressure on public services, stresses businesses with limited staff, and highlights the complexities of interactions with members of unsheltered populations. A well-coordinated Community Connector program can direct individuals to community services, prevent the need for enforcement and help proactively prevent illegal camping, littering, and other issues negatively impacting businesses.

[A survey administered by the Asheville Downtown Association in February of 2021](#) indicated that COVID-19 led to a decrease of 261 full-time jobs, 216 part-time jobs, and more than 32 contract positions. More than 75% of businesses reported revenue losses during 2020.

The top services that respondents said they would like to see were:

1. Outreach and resources for those experiencing homelessness
2. Cleaning and pressure washing of sidewalks and public spaces

⁵ "Local Area Unemployment Statistics Map," accessed July 13, 2021, https://data.bls.gov/lausmap/showMap.jsp;jsessionid=40D0912FAF17EDB4E427EFB9414433A1.t3_06v.

⁶ "NC Commerce: County Distress Rankings (Tiers)," accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/county-distress-rankings-tiers>.

⁷ Asheville Police Department, "Public Safety Committee APD Update," Public Safety Committee, June 22, 2021, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1SJius26_QQfbXW0xx_ZRhBXqfJ_DZBYT.

⁸ "State of Downtown Update – Recording and Survey Results – Asheville Downtown Association," AshevilleDowntown.org, accessed July 14, 2021, <https://ashevilledowntown.org/state-of-downtown-update-recording/>; Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, Survey Results – ARPA Business Priorities.

⁹ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "NC Commerce: Annual Tourism Spending Report Released," Nccommerce.com, May 5, 2021, <https://www.nccommerce.com/news/press-releases/annual-tourism-spending-report-released>.

3. Police presence

This program will aim to directly serve these underlying needs - exacerbated by the pandemic - and help support the economic viability and resiliency of our local business districts.

Population Served:

Define the population to be served by this project, including volume and demographic characteristics of those served.

2,000 characters – 978 currently

Downtown has a population of 13,790, which swells to 142,799¹⁰ during the daytime due to employees. In non-COVID years, the population is even higher due to those who come to eat in our restaurants, shop in our stores, and visit our attractions.

Asheville-Buncombe is the hub of a five-county Metropolitan Statistical Area of almost a half-million people.¹¹ Workers commute in and out of the County daily from a 12-county labor shed, the center of a 22-county region. As such, it is imperative that the County rebound to robust economic health.

WAVL has a population of approximately 43,597 and is arguably the County's second-largest commercial center. WAVL also has a high rate of visitation which drives the success of small, locally-owned restaurants and shops.

Both Downtown and WAVL have concentrations of people experiencing homelessness, mental illness, and substance abuse. The situation is compounded in warmer months when those living "home-free" choose to come to town.

Results:

Describe the proposed impact of the project. List at least 3 performance measures that will be tracked and reported. If possible, include baselines and goals for each performance measure.

2,000 characters – 1,875 currently

The Community Connector program envisions a way to restore confidence and self-determination amongst residents, property owners, employees, and customers of Downtown Asheville and WAVL.

The program, initiated as a pilot, could serve as "proof of concept" for the differences that such teams could make in the livability of both downtown and WAVL, making them worthy of a sustained source of funding, whether public, private or a combination of the two. The program provides our community with an ideal platform to explore funding and service models that adequately support the needs and resiliency of our business districts.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 5-year estimates, Riverbird Research

¹¹ Riverbird Research, "Asheville Demographics," Asheville Chamber, accessed July 13, 2021, <http://research.ashevillechamber.org/demographics.html>.

Key performance indicators could include:

1. A first-year survey could establish baseline data for sentiment surveys among business owners and residents in the service areas on issues such as safety, cleanliness, and improved quality of life. Surveys in the two subsequent years would provide comparative data to the baseline, with a proposed goal of an improved environment for living, working, and playing.
2. Data comparisons on interventions and referrals to partner organizations could measure the teams' success in responding to needs. Establishing benchmark data from the police department for both areas pre-COVID would be essential.
3. Comparisons of data related to property crime and nuisance issues pre-COVID and throughout the 3-year pilot could show whether there is a change in behaviors due to the teams' presence.
4. Annual reports on the teams' activities, with opportunities for community response to their work, could be held.
5. Regular evaluation of progress from a community advisory body.
6. Measures to the number of social media posts, likes and shares can measure the impact of the communications aspect of the project. Column inches of coverage, minutes of air time and editorial support of the initiatives can also be measured.

Evaluation:

Describe the data collection, analysis, and quality assurance measures you will use to assure ongoing, effective tracking of contract requirements and outcomes.

2,000 characters - 1511 currently

Community Connectors will be the primary source of real-time data collection. The suggested firm currently uses a 'SMART' reporting system that will help collect data, track incidents and issues, and evaluate effectiveness. Any contract would ask Community Connectors to collect and evaluate data. Data points may include, but are not limited to:

- Contact with vulnerable populations, visitors, merchants, and partner organizations;
- Items distributed (e.g., referral cards, care/agency guides, safety information, etc.)

The Asheville Chamber, Explore Asheville, West Asheville Business Association, and Asheville Downtown Association can collaborate on surveys to collect feedback on the program. Survey data combined with Community Collector 'SMART' data will evaluate opinions of the program, including:

- Effectiveness, awareness, visibility, support of continuation, and extension of the program into other districts, the potential for program management by districts/private sector.

Case study research of cities currently using similar approaches could be made to determine best practices for evaluation. Benchmarking could provide metrics for future evaluation. All data could be communicated through annual meetings of the collaborators in the program, providing them with opportunities for sharing successes and improvements that need to be made in the program. Similarly, we will ask the communications firm to include recommendations for reporting out progress and results of the Community Connector program.

Equity Impact:

How will this effort help build toward a just, equitable, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery? How are the root causes and/or disproportionate impacts of inequities addressed?

2,000 characters -1,992 currently

COVID-19 rapidly changed many lives and exacerbated existing inequities within our society. Within the business community, business owners of color faced extreme challenges. Black business ownership dropped by 41% in the first three months of the pandemic, the largest decline in any racial group.¹² Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the growing need for changes in how communities address public safety.

At the April 2020 shutdown, over 36,000 people lost their jobs overnight. The most immediate and hardest-hit sectors were Leisure and Hospitality (L&H), comprising 15% of employment. However, many small businesses fall into the Retail Trade category, comprising 14% of employment.

EMSI is used by Riverbird Research to estimate Total Diversity percentage by industry (Hispanic, Black, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Two or More Races). L&H Total Diversity is estimated at 26%, Arts, Entertainment & Recreation is estimated at 14% and Retail Trade at 19%.

The Community Connector program supports the call to reimagine public safety while contributing to the social and economic stability needed for business and neighborhood stabilization post-COVID. This program provides a more equitable solution to supporting healthy business districts by providing a district approach instead of on an individual business basis.

The program can provide an equitable approach to behavior change in individuals causing disturbances through proactive engagement. Addressing concerns early through frequent touchpoints and proactive intervention can help individuals avoid fines prohibitive to unsheltered populations. It will also help identify individuals and connect them to services, avoiding justice involvement and supporting potential future employment and housing opportunities. While these are complex social issues with complex solutions, the identification

¹² "Committee Report Outlines COVID's Devastating Impact on Black-Owned Small Businesses," Small Business Committee, February 26, 2021, <https://smallbusiness.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=3578>.

of people in need of support and intervention makes these portions of our community safer for all.

Project Partners:

Identify any subcontractors you intend to use for the proposed scope of work. For each subcontractor listed, indicate:

- 1.) What products and/or services are to be supplied by that subcontractor and
 - 2.) What percentage of the overall scope of work that subcontractor will perform
- Also, list non-funded key partners critical to the project.

2,000 characters – 1,942 currently

The program's advisory committee and partner organizations will inform a final description of products and services. Examples:

1. Community Connector Street Team

- Hiring & management by Block by Block¹³ (or similar)
 - Service provision could include:
 - Safety & Outreach Services (e.g., public engagement interaction & maximizing visibility, interacting with members of street & homeless population, reporting with 'SMART' technology, security escorts upon request)
 - Landscaping & grounds maintenance
 - Cleaning
 - Hospitality Services
 - Business and property owners to serve as advisory board
 - City to contract with firm, support with additional service provision (e.g., crime and public nuisance intervention-APD & trash/graffiti remediation-Public Works & Parks & Recreation) and community engagement as needed.
 - Homeless Intervention: Homeward Bound, ABCCM, WNC Rescue Mission, Sunset Community, Jordan Peer Recovery, BeLoved.
 - Mental Health Intervention: Buncombe County HHS, Community Health Workers.
 - Substance Abuse Intervention: Buncombe County HHS, Community Health Workers, Community Paramedic Program.

2. Strategic Communications Plan

- Communications firm to develop a strategic communications plan, strategy, and materials.
- Rely on the City, area businesses, nonprofits, and other community organizations to assist with communication and distribution of materials.

Additional partners could include:

¹³ "Block by Block," Blockbyblock.com, accessed July 14, 2021, <http://www.blockbyblock.com/>.

- ABCCM
- African American Business Alliance
- Asheville Downtown Association
- Asheville GreenWorks
- Asheville Grown Business Alliance
- Asheville Police Department
- BeLoved
- Buncombe County HHS
- Buncombe County EMS
- City of Asheville Public Works
- City of Asheville Parks and Recreation
- City of Asheville Homeless Services
- Community Paramedic Program
- Downtown Asheville Residential Neighbors
- Explore Asheville
- Homeward Bound
- Jordan Peer Recovery
- Sunrise Community
- The Block Community Collaborative
- The Haywood Street Congregation
- West Asheville Business Association
- WNC Rescue Mission
- YMI Cultural Center

Capacity:

Describe the background, experience, and capabilities of your organization or department as it relates to capacity for delivering the proposed project and managing federal funds.

2,000 characters - 1,880 currently

The Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce has experience working with teams of volunteers from the business community, regularly engaging 1,700+ members through activities like communications, events, and member surveys. These activities provide regular data and feedback on business needs, opportunities for improvement, and the private sector perspective on service provision and strategies to collaborate with partners to address challenges.

Additionally, Riverbird Research and the Economic Development Coalition are housed under the Chamber, allowing for increased access to data, research, and understanding of the economic needs of the City and County.

The City of Asheville has expertise in public works, public safety, code enforcement, and community engagement. The City also has experience contracting with and managing service providers and coordinating across districts. We suggest a collaborative approach to this project, with the Chamber bringing together business representatives from the various areas to be served, and the City facilitating the company's hiring to manage the Community Connectors.

During the pandemic, communications officers from the public sector as well as private organizations joined together to support the distribution of public health messages. As part of this initiative, the amplification of ways that residents, businesses, employees and customers can enhance safety and security in the areas in which they live and work will be undertaken. Using the variety of communications systems each of the partners have at their disposal--social media, email distribution lists, distribution of fliers, posters and other collateral material--a message of our strength in numbers will be promoted. The campaign will build the confidence of our citizenry and empower them to impact their own destiny and that of their community.

Budget:

Provide a detailed project budget including all proposed project revenues and expenditures, including explanations and methodology. For all revenue sources, list the funder and denote whether funds are confirmed or pending. For project expenses, denote all capital vs. operating costs, and reflect which specific expenses are proposed to be funded with one-time Buncombe County Recovery Funds.

Download a copy of the budget form. Complete the form, and upload it using the button below.
Upload a file [15 MiB allowed]

Special Considerations:

Provide any other information that might assist the County in its selection.
2,000 characters - 2,214 currently

The cost of the Community Connectors program would be shared by the County, with matching dollars from the City of Asheville and the Tourism Development Authority. Just as the County must go through the grant making procedure, both entities would have to go through the processes to officially approve the expenditures.

However, we are confident that this approach of buttressing the safety and stewardship of our most prominent business districts will provide an excellent return to prosperity for our community, and thus a return on investment as well.

A successful Community Connectors program aligns with the county's priorities. It directly supports equitable outcomes for those who have been most impacted by the pandemic.

The combined funding leverages this one-time infusion of dollars at a moment when we most need it.

The program can have a lasting impact on these important centers of residency, employment and commerce by providing a model that can be replicated in other areas of the county, proving it worthy of financial support. The involvement of the advisory committee in establishing the priorities for the Community Connectors sets an excellent precedent for ongoing involvement.

Footnotes

⁷Asheville Police Department. <https://tinyurl.com/2u8fthth>.

¹³Block by Block. <https://tinyurl.com/yzz7wv8e>.

- ²U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://tinyurl.com/45mn596s>.
- ⁴Burgess, Joel. <https://tinyurl.com/z944ux34>.
- ¹²Small Business Committee. <https://tinyurl.com/2hj23sb>.
- ^{1, 5}"Local Area Unemployment Statistics Map." <https://tinyurl.com/r5d9h73h>.
- ⁶"NC Commerce: County Distress Rankings." <https://tinyurl.com/wn8v33hj>.
- ⁹North Carolina Department of Commerce. <https://tinyurl.com/4d7ard4a>.
- ¹⁰U.S. Census Bureau. <https://tinyurl.com/nkv7jvfh>.
- ¹¹Riverbird Research. <https://tinyurl.com/yr5rsuuz>.
- ^{3, 8}"State of Downtown Update – Asheville Downtown Association." <https://tinyurl.com/vuhedy2m>.