

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The economic and personal impact of COVID-19 has been deeply felt by the residents of Lincoln. In April 2020, the unemployment rate for Lancaster County reached 9.4%, which is the highest that rate has been since at least 1990, when such data started to be collected at the county level [1]. Total small business revenue in Lancaster County has declined by over 50% over the course of the pandemic when compared to pre-pandemic levels [2]. Sectors critical to Lincoln's economy and quality of life have been particularly impacted by COVID-19 from both a revenue and jobs perspective, including the accommodation and food services sector, arts and recreation sector, personal care sector, manufacturing sector, and more. Low-wage workers and residents of color have not only contracted COVID-19 at a greater rate, but they have also lost jobs and businesses at a greater rate [3].

*In the midst of this crisis, thousands of Lincolniters are engaged in a process of recovery and renewal. They are wearing masks, washing hands, and practicing physical distancing. They are retooling business operations, lending support to neighbors, and patronizing local businesses. They are reaching out and not letting physical isolation become emotional isolation. They are demonstrating courage, compassion, and creativity in the face of crisis.*

The Mayor's Economic Recovery Task Force was not created to solve all the complex challenges created or made worse by COVID-19, or to replace community-led efforts with a set of external, top-down fixes. Instead, the task force was asked to come up with a few recommended strategies, on a short time frame, for supporting economic recovery and renewal from the standpoint of local businesses and employment.

*Rather than displace community-led recovery efforts, the goal of the task force has been to support and augment these efforts, as residents, employers, and public and private sector leaders each have a critical role to play in these complex times.*

The following **principles** helped guide the work of the task force:

- **Timely and implementable.** To make this work as meaningful as possible as quickly as possible, the task force focused on developing recommendations that can be implemented and acted upon within a short-to-intermediate time frame. Some recommendations call upon action by residents while others call upon action by employers and private and public sector leaders. Potential implementation leaders are identified throughout the report.
- **Locally relevant.** To ensure recommendations were data-driven and locally sensitive, the Local Business Strategies Subcommittee distributed a survey – the COVID-19 Business Support Survey – to organizations throughout the community to gain a better understanding of opportunities and challenges facing local businesses. The survey had over 265 respondents and results are included throughout the report and in the Appendix. These results directly informed recommendations included in the report.
- **Durable.** Task force members applied a lens of public health, inclusion, and resilience (ability to weather future shocks) to the recommendations included in the report. These principles were baked into the mission of the task force and provide a basis for fostering Lincoln's long-term renewal and economic stability.
- **Asset-driven.** In the spirit of asset-based community development, the task force focused on strengthening and leveraging local resources, knowledge, capacities, and relationships, rather than solely focusing on local needs or deficiencies.

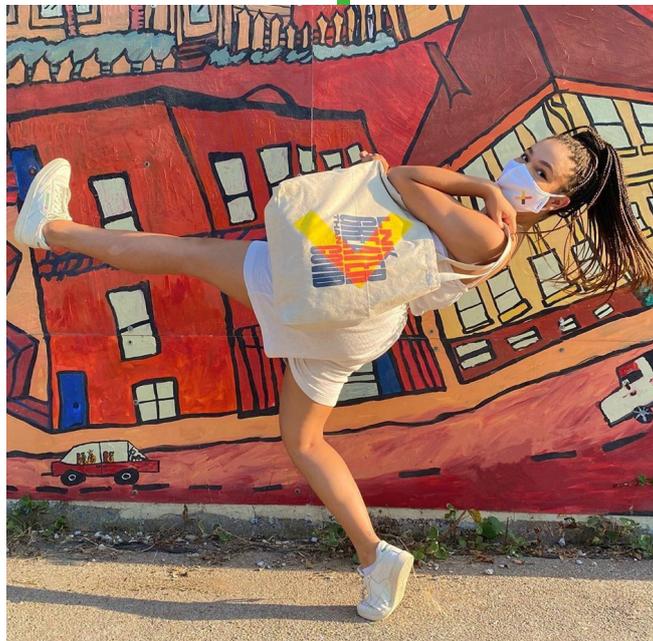


Photo courtesy of Archival (LNK Greater than COVID Campaign)

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## Local Business Strategies Recommendations

### *Cultivate Opportunities for Business-to-Business (B2B) Support*

Almost 75% of organizations that responded to the COVID-19 Business Support Survey said they were interested in participating in opportunities for direct business-to-business support. We recommend organization of **B2B town halls** or forums in which businesses directly share resources, information, and experience with one another on topics relevant and timely for the business community. Based on survey results, topics should include creating a safe working environment; accessing financial assistance and personal protective equipment; and supporting employee mental health and social connectedness, among others.

### *Promote Economic Resilience and Inclusion*

Evidence shows that we can meaningfully and sustainably grow our community's wealth by strategically **investing in local businesses, small businesses, and women- and minority-owned business enterprises (WMBE)**. To that end, it is recommended that a directory of local businesses be established with information on company services, size, ownership, and type. It is also recommended that the City of Lincoln, employers, and residents target spending toward the businesses mentioned. The City should re-evaluate and revise its procurement policies and practices with an eye toward providing local, small, and women- and minority-owned businesses with greater access to City contracting opportunities. Employers in a position to do so are encouraged to sign a pledge to spend 1% more locally, and residents are encouraged to buy more locally and to prioritize spending at small businesses and WMBEs. In view of the importance of childcare to economic resilience and inclusion, employers are encouraged to continue to provide flexible work arrangements to employees and subsidize or **support employee childcare** where possible.

## Local Workforce Strategies Recommendations

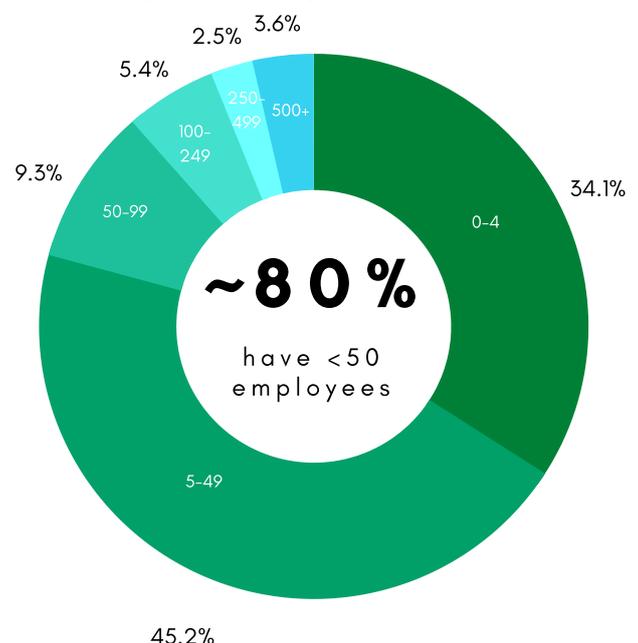
### *Connect Employers with Local Workforce Resources and Opportunities*

Local resources exist to address Lincoln's pressing unemployment and underemployment challenges, but many of these resources are under-utilized. We recommend that employer participation in existing workforce programs and networks like **NEworks**, **EmployLNK**, and the **American Job Center** be simplified and amplified. Additionally, we recommend that workforce partners prioritize identification of in-demand skillsets and match jobseekers with employment opportunities based on a robust skills analysis. Finally, employers are encouraged to utilize existing resources to revise and simplify job descriptions.

### *Upskill and Reskill Lincoln's Workforce*

To adapt to COVID-19 and the ever-shifting jobs landscape, continual upskilling and reskilling of Lincoln's workforce is required. Professional development must occur on an ongoing basis. The City of Lincoln should create public **incentives** for upskilling and reskilling workers displaced by COVID-19. We also recommend that workforce partners increase jobseeker awareness of publicly available resources for **professional development**. Finally, workforce partners, in collaboration with employers, should develop a "ready to work" strategy that connects skills-based courses and initiatives with employment opportunities.

COVID-19 Business Survey  
Respondents by Workforce Size



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## Local Sector Strategies Recommendations

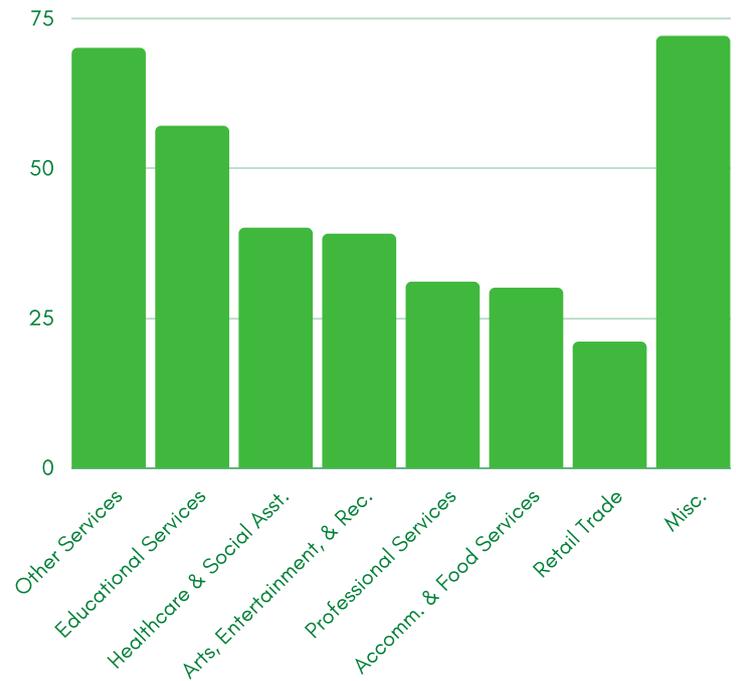
### Create a Safe Working Environment and Restore Consumer Confidence

Our public health and economic recovery are closely intertwined – we cannot have one without the other, especially if we want to preserve the strength of those sectors that have been particularly impacted by COVID-19 like hospitality and arts, among others. We recommend an awareness **campaign to highlight businesses** employing commonsense and innovative public health measures. We also recommend strategies to enhance access to **personal protective equipment** (PPE).

### Provide Financial Assistance to Impacted Businesses and Invest in New Businesses

In view of the significant financial impact of COVID-19 on existing businesses, we recommend that the City of Lincoln create a **fund to provide grants** to eligible local businesses particularly impacted by COVID-19. Additionally, we recommend creation of a hotline or navigator program to help businesses navigate available financial opportunities. Finally, we recommend that Lincolniters continue to invest in new businesses and support a **culture of entrepreneurship**, as startups play a key role in fostering economic recovery and resiliency.

COVID-19 Business Survey  
Sectors Represented



To the extent any of the task force recommendations require additional financial investment on the part of the City of Lincoln, the task force recommends that the City of Lincoln advocate for coronavirus relief funding from the state and federal government. The City of Lincoln has a comparative advantage when it comes to distributing funds to local businesses and residents given its relationship to the community and ability to assess local needs. If the City of Lincoln is not able to access coronavirus relief funding from the state or federal government, the City is encouraged to draw upon its own Fast Forward Fund, which was created in 2008 out of surplus special assessment revenue to support economic development-related infrastructure projects. The task force feels it is appropriate, given the circumstances, to dedicate a portion of that fund to COVID-19 related economic recovery and renewal.

#### LOCAL BUSINESS STRATEGIES RECOMMENDATIONS

Business-to-Business Support

Economic Resilience & Inclusion

#### LOCAL WORKFORCE STRATEGIES RECOMMENDATIONS

Leveraging Local Workforce Resources

Upskilling & Reskilling

#### LOCAL SECTOR STRATEGIES RECOMMENDATIONS

Workplace Safety and Consumer Confidence

Financial Support