



**Lanark County and Smiths Falls  
Community Check-In Survey**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Prepared by The Table Community Food Centre**

**November, 2020**



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This survey is the result of a great many people's efforts. The idea came into being through the numerous people involved in the COVID19 Community Service Collaborative. Staff from The Table Community Food Centre, North Lanark Community Health Centre and Lanark County Situation Table drafted the survey and almost 800 community members from across Lanark and Smiths Falls took the time complete it. Cat's Cove Communications provided marketing support while the Perth and District Community Foundation provided financial support.

## **COVID19 COMMUNITY SERVICES COLLABORATIVE MEMBERS**

Big Brother Big Sisters Lanark County - Carebridge - Carleton Place Library - Community Employment Centre - Community Home Support – Lanark County Community Justice - Food For Thought Partnership Lanark County – Leeds Grenville Lanark District Health Unit - Hunger Stop – Lanark County Interval House - Kelford Youth Services - Lanark Community Programs - Lanark County Mental Health - Lanark County Social Services - Lanark Transportation – Mississippi Mills Youth Centre – Municipality of Mississippi Mills - North Lanark Community Health Centre - Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth – Perth Enrichment Program (PEP) - Perth and District Community Foundation – Parent's Lifeline of Eastern Ontario (PLEO) - Red Cross - Rideau Community Health Services - RNJ Youth Services - Salvation Army – Smiths Falls Nurse Practitioner Clinic – Smiths Falls Police – Lanark County Situation Table - The Table Community Food Centre - Trinity United Church - United Way East Ontario - YAK Youth Services – Lanark County Youth and Family Services Collaborative

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning early on in the COVID19 pandemic, The Table Community Food Centre convened discussions with non-profit health and social service providers in Lanark County and Smiths Falls through occasional online meetings. These meetings developed into the informally structured COVID19 Community Services Collaborative. The collaborative provided an opportunity to share information, update each other on program changes and identify gaps in services that the participants could help to fill. In addition to information sharing, several concrete initiatives came from this collaboration. These included establishing an isolation centre, developing grocery delivery services, and conducting a county-wide survey of wellbeing related to the impacts of the pandemic. This report is a summary of the findings of this survey.

The survey was drafted by staff from collaborative participants The Table Community Food Centre, North Lanark Community Health Centre and the Lanark County Situation Table. Conventional and social media were used to promote the survey throughout Lanark County and Smiths Falls. Responses were collected from late July to the end of August of 2020. A majority of surveys were completed online using the application Survey Monkey, with some paper-based surveys completed at the North Lanark Community Health Centre and the Hunger Stop in Carleton Place. These surveys were subsequently entered into the online survey. The number of responses far exceeded our expectations with a total of 797 surveys completed.

Survey respondents were from all municipalities in Lanark County and Smiths Falls, with a higher proportion of respondents from Perth and Lanark Highlands. This does not reflect population numbers, but is not surprising given this is where two of the lead agencies are situated (The Table in Perth, and North Lanark Community Health Centre in Lanark Highlands) and have their greatest reach (Figure 1).

Respondents were relatively evenly distributed across household income groups below \$85,000 / year with the category \$85,000 and higher having more than the other categories (Figure 2).

We were interested in knowing how the impacts of the pandemic were related to people's income level so we have analyzed the data in aggregate and for each of the income groups. It is through the analysis based on income that one of the main tendencies in the results emerges. While people across all income groups are feeling challenged by the pandemic, people living on lower incomes consistently reported a greater degree of challenge.

This summary presents findings from the survey grouped along the themes of General Challenges, Income and Employment, Mental Health and Substance Use, Food Access, and Housing. No statistical tests of significance have been performed on the data, so interpretation must consider this. Also of note regarding the data analysis is the fact that many questions allowed respondents to check more than one response category, so in some cases percentages of responses will add up to more than 100%.

This summary provides only a glimpse at the results and in particular the hundreds of individual comments. Anyone wishing to do more with the survey data may contact the Table to explore what more could be done.

## GENERAL CHALLENGES

In the first two questions of the survey we asked how the pandemic had impacted a range of factors in people's lives. Respondents were asked to rank whether the factors had improved, stayed the same, worsened, or worsened a lot. Respondents did not have to indicate a response for each factor. The factors we asked people to consider were:

- Ability to meet care-giving demands
- Access to care and treatment for medical conditions
- Access to food
- Access to information
- Adequate access to the internet
- Employment
- Exercise
- Housing,
- Income,
- Isolation
- Mental health (stress, anxiety, depression)
- Personal safety (for example domestic violence)
- Physical well being
- Substance Use
- Transportation

Of the above the impact noted by the largest number of responses was isolation with 408 people (53%) indicating it worsened and 102 (13%) indicating it worsened a lot.

Access to medical care was a problem for a large number of respondents as well with 327 people (44%) indicating it worsened and 65 (9%) indicating it worsened a lot.

The impact of the pandemic on physical activity/exercise was mixed as it was one of the only responses that had a high number of responses indicating a positive change by 124 people (17%). Despite this there were many more who indicated a negative impact - 272 people indicating it had worsened (37%) and another 45 (6%) that it had worsened a lot.

There were also 213 (28%) respondents who indicated that their income had worsened or worsened a lot.

Most people were concerned about planned reopening of services in September/October of 2020. Of 794 respondents to this question, 265 (33%) indicated they were very concerned and 309 (39%) indicated they were somewhat concerned. Twenty-eight (4%) responded "neutral" and 192 people (24%) indicated they were cautiously optimistic or feeling good about reopening plans.

When asked about access to masks, most people indicated they had an adequate supply, but there is a distinct difference between the lower income groups with a higher portion of people indicating they had

some but possibly not enough masks for themselves and their household. Twenty-one per cent of respondents with household income below \$50,000 indicated they may not have enough masks, while 12% of those with over \$50,000 shared the same concern. It is interesting to note that even in the highest income grouping, there were still 10% of the respondents with this concern, suggesting a concern about availability and supply as well as possible concerns about affordability of essential PPE.

An open-ended question “Are there any other important changes that have occurred to you because of the pandemic?” had a wide range of responses, including some very personal reflections. Unfortunately, the 410 responses are too numerous to include here, but there are distinct themes from the responses we can observe and can provide some examples of the responses.

By far the most common theme was **isolation**, with 85 (21%) of the responses. Other repeated topics in the comments related to missing opportunities to visit with friends and family, missing physical connections not possible through online interactions, missing milestones including happy occasions and grieving with loved ones. Several of the comments connected the isolation to inability to access key supports.

***Are there any other important changes that have occurred to you because of the pandemic?***

**“Over 70 yrs of age, at risk and haven't seen my family for over 6 months. Very depressing situation.”**

**“Having to keep physically distance from other takes a mental toll. I see people over zoom, but I feel a distance/lack of connection from that lack of close face-to-face talking. The idea that this is the new normal. It is a significant adjustment.”**

**“Increase in my husband’s symptoms of dementia due to isolation and postponement of day programmes.”**

**“Loss of contact [with] friends and family. Losing a parent in a Long Term Care facility during this time and not being to properly grieve with family has been challenging.”**

Closely related to isolation were comments about mental health, including anxiety and depression where isolation wasn’t named per se. There were 55 comments (13%) in this theme including the following:

**“My emotional state has become not as stable as before. All the uncertainty is taking its toll on me.”**

**“Decline in mental health for my children - inadequate access to mental health and wellness resources.”**

**“Incredible stress - trying to balance work-at-home; school-at-home and parenting. Problems with spouse's mental health due to loss of work.”**

**“Change in mental health - I have anxiety, controlled well with medication for the past fifteen years. The pandemic has caused a huge shift in my ability to manage it, multiple panic attacks over four months at a level I haven't had since diagnosis.”**

Several of the mental-health themed responses related to **accessing services**. Another 55 people made comments specific to the challenges they are having accessing various services. Health care was the most common concern, but daycare, grocery and other retailers, home repairs, exercise classes and church services were also mentioned. One person noted the cascading impacts of not being able to get home repairs completed in a timely way.

**Unable to get repair services. I am a senior citizen and when I got a leak in the wall I could not get a repair person in to fix it due to us being in isolation. As a result we got some mould inside the wall and I have to tear down the drywall myself, remove cupboards and tear down the ceiling as a small female senior citizen who is very sensitive to mould. I also can not get anyone to repair the dryer and when the refrigerator broke down, I had to move it 40 feet to the front door so someone could remove it and then move the new one 40 feet to the kitchen by myself.**

The last main theme in the responses to this open-ended question is **income and work**. Among the 36 responses (9%), people noted mostly negative impacts, but a few people did note that they had more work and some noted qualitative changes.

**“I’m a small business owner. So the loss of business has been catastrophic. I’m a sole proprietor so it’s been very difficult to get government support (still haven’t managed). Shipping is an issue, supply chains are an issue.”**

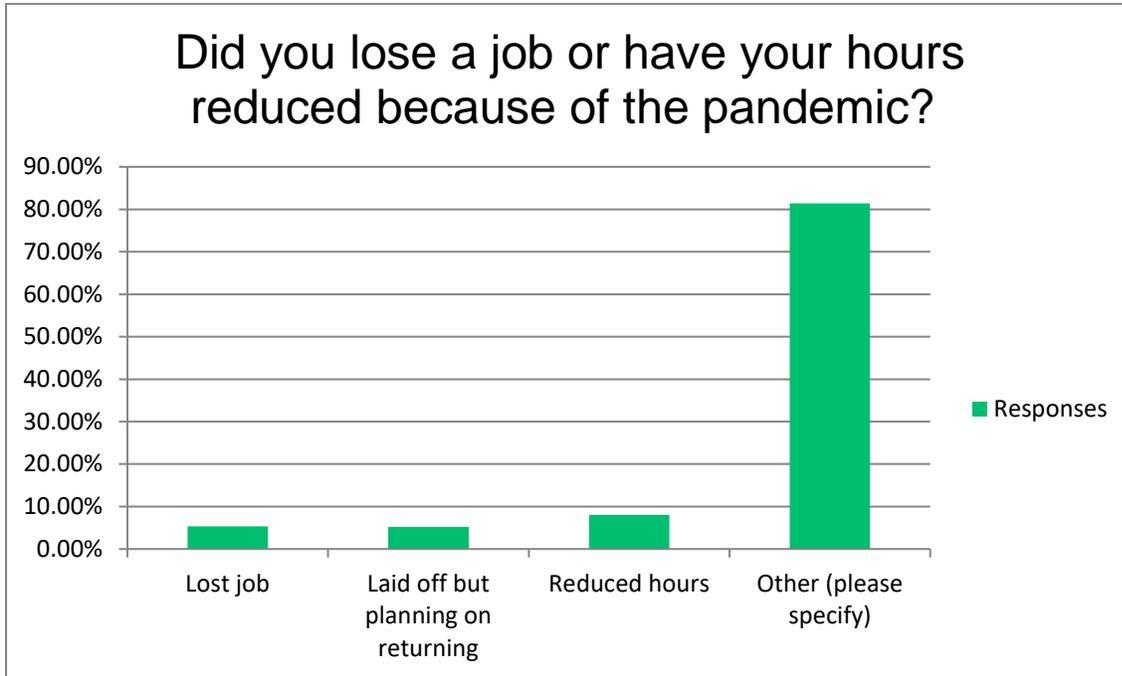
**“Mandated to work as I am in health care, no time off. Myself and co-workers are burnt out”**

**“I can't get a job because I have to wait for daycare spots but they're all closed and the lists aren't moving.”**

## **INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT**

As demonstrated above, many people have had their work and income situations impacted by the pandemic. However, responses to direct questions on employment suggest that, overall, Lanark County and Smiths Falls are faring relatively well. The survey showed 5.6% of respondents indicated they had lost a job and 5.2% indicated they had been temporarily laid off. In comments made under “Other,” another 5% of respondents indicated they had been laid off but were already back to work. Impacts on employment were not evenly distributed across income groups. Those with household incomes

between \$30,000 and \$50,000 were more likely to have lost work (7.8%), been laid off (10.2%), or have their hours reduced (8.7%).

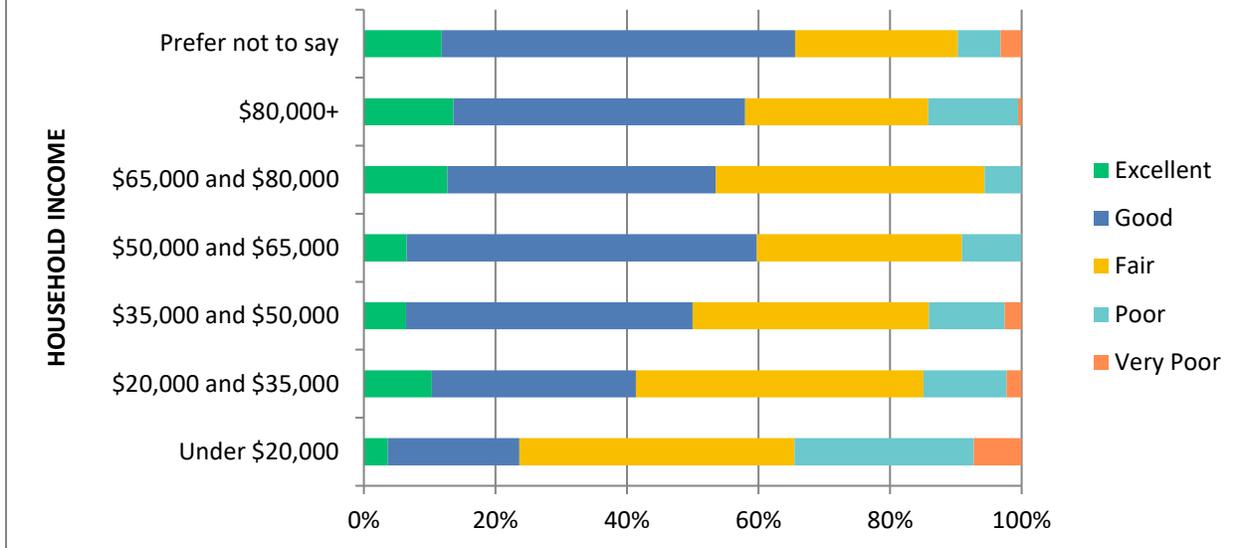


The Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) was an important lifeline for many Canadians during the pandemic. Of the survey respondents, 14% had applied for and received CERB. Most of those who applied were concerned about the end of the program as 10% of respondents indicated they anticipated being in a difficult financial situation when CERB ended.

#### **MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE/ABUSE**

From the responses to the open-ended question at the beginning of the survey it is clear that isolation and mental health were key concerns for people. When asked how their mental health was, just over half (51%) said it was good or excellent, while 33% indicated their mental health was fair and 15.6% indicated it was poor or very poor. Responses to this question indicate a clear tendency for lower rankings of mental health among people with lower incomes. For example, in the lowest income group (under \$20,000) only 23.6% of respondents indicated their mental health was good or excellent.

## How would you rate your current mental health?



***Self-rankings of mental health by income groups.***

When asked to choose between a group of potential stressors, the most common selected was isolation, with just under half of the people selecting it (48%). Family was the next at (41%), followed by physical health (35%) and finances (33.5%). Work, children, intimate relationships, and friends were each chosen by between 20% and 30% of people. A fortunate minority, 13% of people, responded that they did not have any stressors.

Though a source of stress for many, family relationships also seem to be fundamental for many people to cope with the stress of the pandemic. More than half of respondents (51%) checked family and/or friends (58%) as one of the ways they are coping. Other options offered in the list were selected by many fewer respondents: help lines (1.8%), online groups (12.5%), and online counselling (6.4%). An alarming 8% of respondents indicated they did not have any supports and that they needed them.

Fifteen per cent of respondents added a comment to this question. The most common response was counselling, particularly phone counselling. Others noted activities, spirituality and meditation, the outdoors and work as helping them get by. One person's other response included both telephone support and a friendly volunteer delivering groceries.

***What supports, if any, have helped you with your mental health during the pandemic?***

**Telephone counseling from Lanark Mental Health once a week. Getting groceries delivered once every two weeks from Plan B by a person we know who would take the time to stop and ask if we were ok and chitchat for a few minutes. She was someone else to talk to other than each other, for a change.**

When asked what else could improve their mental health, respondents came up with a wide variety of solutions. Reducing isolation and improved access to affordable mental health services, including professional counselling and peer support groups, were the most commonly given responses.

***Is there anything that you can think of that would help improve your mental health?***

**Access to affordable mental health supports. Medical coverage does not include therapy or counseling of any kind. I cannot afford to pay \$150+ per hour. My children's mental health is declining and we are struggling.**

**I miss playgroup but also thinking about going to playgroup during this just doesn't seem feasible. My kid just needs other kids to play with. I don't know?**

**Not being isolated. Being able to see medical professionals and counsellors face to face. Financial help for people on CPP disability or ODSP as we did not receive anything during these times. People say our lives have not changed so we did not need anything. Prices of food and necessities have changed though affecting us. Prices have risen putting a burden on our already low incomes.**

Other themes in the responses included more activities and especially physical activities, access to medical care, increased income, improved clarity of information, clarity and enforcement of rules and, of course, an end to the pandemic or a vaccine.

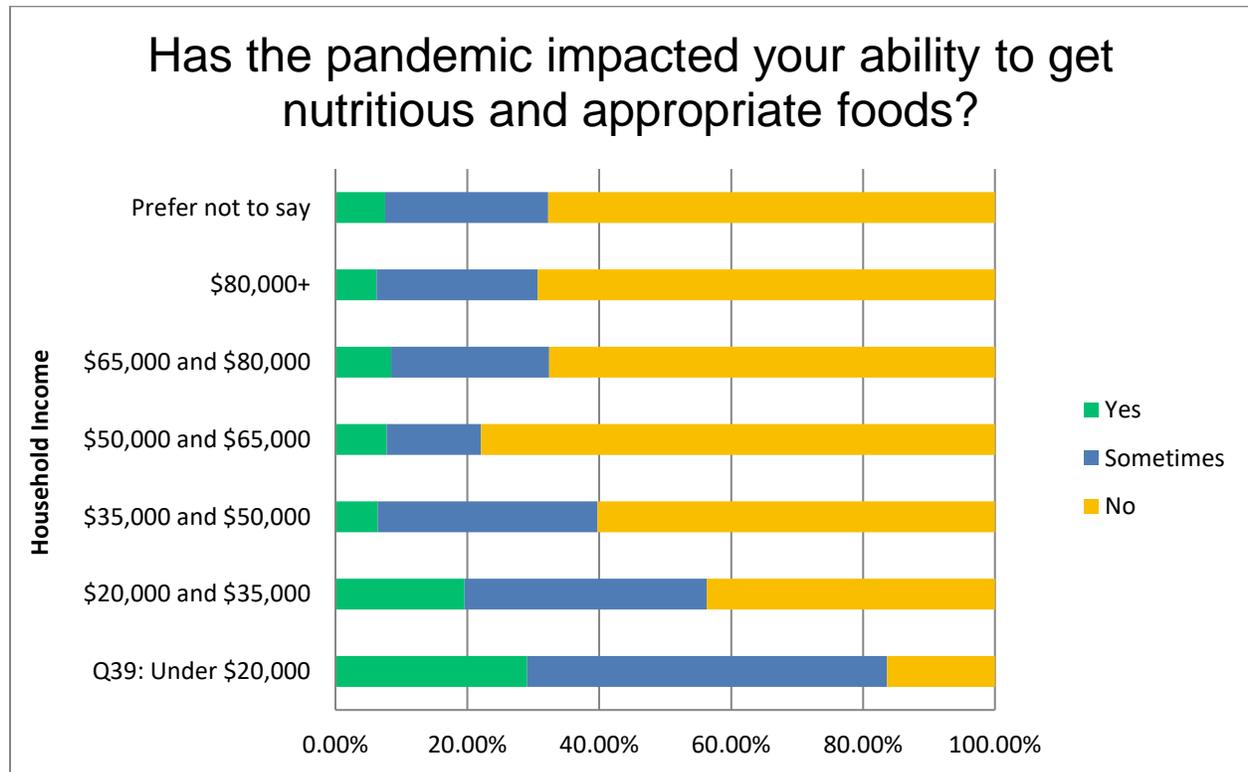
Given the mental health challenges related to the pandemic, we asked survey respondents to comment on their use of drugs and alcohol and whether they or people they know had access to supports to help them with substance use/abuse. Almost 30% of people indicated their use of drugs or alcohol had increased, though mostly by a little (22%), with a small portion of people indicating their use had increased moderately (6%) and fewer that it had increased a lot (3%). Only 4% of people indicated a concern about their substance use. When asked if they were lacking access to services all respondents indicated they were not, though in later questions some individual text responses did note challenges accessing addictions specific services.

**FOOD ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY**

Responses to questions about access to food, concern over being able to afford food, and the impact of the pandemic on access to food all showed patterns relating to income with lower income groups having a much more difficult time and more concern about their ability to access and afford adequate healthy food. Overall, 80% of people indicated they felt they had access to adequate healthy food, while 16% said this was the case sometimes and 4% indicated they did not have adequate access. In our lowest income grouping (under \$20,000), 42% said they had access to adequate food while 68% of our next income group (under \$35,000) indicated they had adequate access.

In terms of affordability, 84% of the lowest income group were concerned about affordability and 62% of the second lowest income group were concerned all or some of the time. Interestingly, while lower income groups showed markedly more concern for affordability, even in the \$80,000 and above income group there were still 28% of the respondents who were concerned about affordability.

When asked specifically about impacts of the pandemic the same 84% of lowest income and 54% of the next income group indicated the pandemic had impacted their ability to get nutritious and appropriate food, while across all income groups 41% of people indicated the pandemic had this impact.



***Impact on ability to get food by income groups.***

The most common method for accessing food during the first months of the pandemic was personal shopping (85%) followed by take-out meals (42%), personal gardens (41%), and curbside pick up (33%). While grocery delivery services were used by a relatively small percentage of the population (8%), the many positive comments received in the survey about these services indicate their importance to those who did make use of them. With some exceptions, the patterns were fairly consistent across income groups. Curbside pick up was much less (16%) in the lowest income group, likely due to people on lower income not having access to personal vehicles as often as those with higher incomes. Personal garden use was lower in the lower income groups, but was still indicated by 25% of respondents. Food banks were used by 29% of the lowest income group and 5% in each of the next two income groups. Of note is the relatively low number of people in these income groups who used food banks compared to the percentages of people who indicated they were not always able to access or were worried about affording sufficient healthy food.

The most common responses to why people did not use a food bank in the lowest income group was that “someone else needs it more than I do” (32%) and “I do not want to ask for help” (31%). Twenty-seven per cent of people in the lowest income group indicated they did not need it, while 20% did not have transportation to pick up food. In the next two income groups (26%), “Someone else needs it more than I do” was the second most common response after “I do not need it” (64% and 78% respectively).

In response to the question “What could improve your access to healthy food?” by far the most common responses related to increased income or reduced prices. The next most common responses were related to gardening, including getting access to land to garden, the knowledge needed to garden successfully, or the inputs for gardening like seeds. Other less common responses related to improving access to retail outlets, delivery services, and increased availability of local foods.

### ***What could improve your access to healthy food?***

**Increase in Pension. We are definitely spending more money on food of any kind with the increase on the food prices. The \$300.00 doesn't go very far until you are dipping into savings.**

**Things are more expensive with the pandemic and when you're on a fixed pension it makes it tough to always have the healthiest food.**

**Community gardens or shared gardens in a neighborhood.**

**If there was an option for people to get funding to start their own personal garden**

**My area does not offer on line shopping at the grocery stores.**

**Travelling local farmer trucks, going to neighbourhoods**

## HOUSING

When asked if the pandemic had impacted their housing situation, 13% of respondents said it had. While the two lowest income groups had higher rates of responding yes (15% and 14%) than the higher income groups, the difference between lower income respondents and higher income respondents was not as pronounced as in other questions. For example, 10% of respondents in the \$50,000 to \$65,000 household income also indicated the pandemic impacted their housing situation.

Difficulties paying rent or mortgage and utilities were the most common impact chosen of a list provided in the survey (25% and 27% respectively). Comments on this question included notes about anxiety, difficulty with getting construction work done, and merging households.

### *How has the pandemic impacted your housing situation?*

**My landlord offered a discount in rent for April and May. I'm working again, and trying to increase my hours to make sure I can continue to pay my rent, but I'm worried that I won't be able to manage now that I've maxed out my CERB.**

**Again with the loss of my job just worried about the budgeting**

**House needs renovations new roof etc. leaks, mould. Cannot afford and no contractors were allowed**

**I have less income to look for a new place. Having lost my job due to covid and now having a new job making a lot less money, and having a huge student loan it looks like I can't afford rent.**

**None luckily thanks to CERB**

**2 adults moved in with me in March, I am used to being alone.**

We posed three questions about Lanark County's Rent and Mortgage Bank. Only 18% of respondents were aware of this program and 21% said they would use it. Lastly we asked people why they would not use the program. Believing they didn't qualify or not being sure about qualifying were the most common responses, together accounting for more than half of the responses. Another 18% of people indicated they did not know how to apply.

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

At the end of the survey we asked three questions about the overall community response during the pandemic:

- “Is anything missing from our community’s response to the pandemic, or anything that could be done better?”
- “ Is there a local story that stands out for you as a successful response to the pandemic?”
- “What lessons do you think you or the community have learned about our capacity to respond to an emergency?”

In response to the question “Is anything missing from our community’s response to the pandemic, or anything that could be done better?” 69% of people responded “no” suggesting a fairly high degree of satisfaction. There was no noticeable trend in satisfaction with the community response between income groups. Regarding what was missing or could be improved, 191 comments were made offering specific suggestions. Of these, 25% related to improving clarity and specificity of information about the pandemic and related services, 10% of the comments related to people following rules and enforcement of rules, and 7% of the comments related to leadership - in particular a desire for more and more appropriate local leadership.

### ***Is anything missing from our community’s response to the pandemic, or anything that could be done better?***

**More local information about Covid 19 and updates.**

**I expected more announcements from Town Hall.**

**By-law enforcement of non mask/shield usage.**

**Some kind of relief for parents from round the clock child minding, without exposing kids to indoor group situations**

**More monitoring of parks for gatherings. Reconfiguration of nursing home beds and bathrooms. Prevention of staff working at more than one facility. Disallowing wearing of uniforms to and from work.**

**More testing centres. I live an hour's drive from Smith's Falls which seems to be the only one.**

**More for kids to do. I think families with children that have complex needs are forgotten. We can't access child care due to age and respite isn't available because of social distancing and it is limited to an hour outside... Try to do grocery shopping for a family of 6 in 1 hr!!**

In terms of successes that people observed during the pandemic, we received 206 comments. Grocery stores and grocery delivery services doing their best to make sure people could still access food and other essentials were top of mind for respondents. These made up 18% of the responses. Other local businesses were acknowledged for their contributions in making goods available through curbside pick-ups and online ordering in 14% of the comments. Included in these comments, the two local distilleries were acknowledged for shifting to producing hand sanitizer. The variety of community food programs including meals, food boxes, and food banks that supported people with access to food were recognized as a success in 12% of the comments. Cooperation was another recurring theme, with numerous comments (10%) about neighbours helping neighbours, online communities and other informal responses. Frontline medical staff, the various efforts to ensure access to PPE, community agencies' varied responses, and the efforts of long-term care facilities were other recurring themes.

***Is there a local story that stands out for you as a successful response to the pandemic?***

**Our local stores, banks etc did/continue a superior job in putting safety protocols in safe for their employees and the public - they were way ahead (we had to travel to downtown Toronto on wknd of March 27/20 where nothing was in place at that time vs Perth).**

**We started a garden co-operative at our farm with 6 local families. We work weekly on gardens that we hope will provide us with winter veggies. It has helped us have outdoor social time while safely distancing.**

**It really brought the best out of the community. We saw lots of volunteers helping the elders with shopping, some donating coffee and donuts to the hospital staff, or pizza deliveries to the nursing homes. Everyone stood behind the front line workers and supported them. And some did their part by staying home and not getting sick.**

**I have been impressed with how the community has pulled together, how well local businesses have responded to make shopping as safe as possible, and how thoughtful people are about social distancing, wearing masks, hand sanitizing etc.**

**In the Perth Grocery Program a senior mother and daughter living in rural Lanark Highlands received groceries via porch drop off when her son/brother called Barnabe's from Florida and paid with his credit card. He continued to use the service weekly to assure they had nutritious food delivered to the door.**

**Lots of small, local efforts that go un-noticed. For instance, my wife has made lots of face masks for family and friends. I like the Top Shelf distillery hand sanitizer story as well.**

**Over 20 local ladies were recruited to sew masks for Perth Hospital and did so until they could secure a reliable supply of their own.**

**Just simply all the front line workers who have done so much, so selflessly, during this period. All the medical staff, store staffs, cleaning staffs, -- and the many others I am not mentioning, who have really kept things running despite the exposure and risk to their own health. That has been greatly appreciated.**

**Yes. Getting Veggie food box paid. I just picked it up at the restaurant. I didn't need to go into Perth. It was very handy**

According to respondents, there are many lessons that have been learned through the pandemic, though a minority feel we have not learned much, or what is important. Of the 336 comments made, the vast majority were positive. The most common theme (17%) was the collaboration of people and a sense that everyone is in this together. Other comments that were repeated but only occasionally (less than 10% of responses) included learning how adaptable we can be, the pre-existing issues in long-term care facilities, being grateful, assessing priorities, the importance of communication and the importance of being prepared and, in some cases, comments focussed on being better prepared.

***What lessons do you think you or the community have learned about our capacity to respond to an emergency?***

**I think we learned we are more flexible and adaptable than we thought. I definitely learned that I love living in the country in the middle of a pandemic.**

**We have communities with heaps of folks that are ready and willing to support/care for one another. Leveraging that is key to responding to an emergency. I think also having community-based supports for resilience/change and self-care would go a long way.**

**With the dedication of so many wonderful folks who put others first and help wherever possible, I think we're getting through this!**

**Serious issues around long-term care homes... not sure whether there will be improvements forthcoming. I hope the Ontario government comes through in this respect, but I am not feeling very confident that real change will occur.**

**How unprepared we were for a pandemic and how limited our supplies are.**

**Amazing things have been happening all around us and most people know that we are in this together & are willing to help wherever possible!**

**We can and are willing to do whatever it takes to stay safe as long as the messaging is clear and accurate.**

**I am pleased to see a heightened sense of social consciousness—community driven and supportive. I am hopeful that certain aspects of this ensuing consciousness lasts past the pandemic.**

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Thanks to the hundreds of people who completed the survey, we have been able to create a snapshot of the impact of the 2020 COVID19 pandemic on the communities of Lanark County and Smiths Falls. It is clear that a majority of the population has experienced a variety of impacts from the pandemic, mostly challenging but also some positive. Several of these impacts have been felt more by those who were already grappling with challenges associated with living on a low income and the pandemic has shone a light on some of the pre-existing inequalities in our communities.

Principal among the challenges identified by respondents was isolation. As we face the potential of continued restrictions and the winter ahead, finding ways for us to connect in meaningful ways will be critical to continued success in managing well through the rest of the pandemic. Informal neighbourly or family-based supports will play a key role for many, but formal programs and affordable accessible mental health services are also very much needed.

Our communities showed great adaptability in ensuring people could access food by developing grocery delivery programs, community meals and the continued operation of the food banks. It is clear, however, that food banks are considered an option by only a small percentage of people who are challenged to afford sufficient healthy food. During the pandemic as in “normal” times, supports to address food insecurity are very much needed. Rather than assuming a large portion of the population will turn to food banks, income-based measures such as the CERB should be prioritized.

Though there are concerns about how prepared we were and the vulnerabilities in our long-term care facilities, there was also a lot of appreciation shown for the efforts of businesses, agencies and neighbours to adapt and support the community. Throughout the responses there was a strong sense of collective effort to address the challenges and gratitude for all that was done by so many.