



Family and Community Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Interview Findings

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic has changed how people navigate daily life everywhere. To better understand the impact of COVID-19 and capture the experiences of community organizations, children, and families, First 5 Santa Barbara County commissioned VIVA Social Impact Partners to conduct a series of interviews with families and representatives from community-based organizations, school districts, and agencies across the social service sectors.

Thirteen interviews with community organizations were conducted between May and July 2020. Six family interviews were completed and 20 family survey responses gathered in June 2020. Family interviews and surveys were conducted in English and Spanish.

Interview and survey responses were analyzed and synthesized to highlight participants' challenges, needs, and ideas for change in their communities.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

The following themes and topics emerged throughout the interviews, across participants and lines of questioning.

Community Collaboration

Families and community partners discussed community collaboration at great length during their interviews. Community partners acknowledged the collective effort between organizations to adjust focus and coordinate service delivery to address the emerging community needs during the pandemic. Many referenced the 2017 Thomas Fire as a similar experience — a crisis that put a spotlight on the strength of Santa Barbara County and community collaboration. They expressed a desire for this collaborative approach to continue. Families voiced appreciation for the culture of community between neighbors, organizations, and social groups, and hope that a stronger sense of community and empathy for each other develops beyond the pandemic.

Mental Health

Interview participants acknowledged an increase of experiences related to mental health and identified this as a priority area of support during and after the pandemic. Families are experiencing overwhelming levels of anxiety, uncertainty, and fear — stressors that risk the health and well-being of children and families. Similarly, service providers have also experienced a surge of stressors and secondary trauma during the pandemic. All participants shared concerns about the immediate and long-term effects of isolation and loss of connections for children, their caregivers, and service providers.

Structure of the Service Sector

While community partners value the existing collaborative efforts between organizations in the service sector, interview participants expressed interest in more strategic efforts to build on the existing structure. Participants identified short and long-term planning as opportunities to develop program and funding structures with more flexibility to allow for crisis management and innovation. In addition, increased alignment across organizations and service sectors was a priority for participants, to effectively meet the needs of the community.

Access and Availability

Community partners and families shared concern for communities that are very under-resourced and subcommunities within well-resourced communities — such as rural communities and Black communities — that lack culturally appropriate information and awareness of and access to resources. Especially during the pandemic, with shelter-in-place and social distancing restrictions, access to basic needs, services, and supports, including economic relief, is more difficult for families in these communities.

Technology

During the pandemic, community organizations have relied on technology to maintain connection with families and to provide virtual services and supports. This has presented innovative opportunities for programming moving forward, although the quality and effectiveness of virtual services was reported as uneven, with some providers and families having positive virtual experiences and others less positive. However, the long-standing barriers to technology for families and specific communities became even more apparent during COVID-19. Access to quality internet and sufficient devices were gaps identified by families and community partners. In many examples, access issues were associated with the cost of internet service, lack of conducive environments for virtual participation, and absent structural foundation for internet services in specific communities.

Equity

Interview participants, both families and community partners, talked about economic and racial equity and noted that the pandemic illuminated the existing inequalities across the system of care.

- **Education and distance learning** during the pandemic has been difficult for many children. Families expressed concern about the challenges of online education moving forward and the disruption of learning their children may experience. Community partners also shared concerns about education, especially for children in under-resourced communities and families already experiencing difficulties with access to technology, availability of caregivers to oversee learning, and other resources.
- Equity in **health and mental health** was also discussed by community partners and families. The barriers for children and families to access health and mental health resources and services are not new and have existed prior to the pandemic. Families and community partners expressed a need for more culturally responsive communications and information sharing to increase awareness and access among communities of color and those most under-resourced.

- Access to equitable **housing and economic support** were discussed by interview participants as priorities moving forward. Community partners shared that housing and economic security are foundational for the wellbeing of young children and families. Housing and economic insecurity increase stressors for families and communities, which may result in ongoing poverty, trauma, and health issues.

Recommendations

While recommendations for next steps or actions was not an explicit focus of the interviews, many ideas were shared by participants. The following overarching recommendations emerged in reviewing participant responses and analyzing themes.

- 1. Leverage the existing energy around collaboration:** Support collaborative approaches to address the post-COVID-19 needs identified by partners and families. Create opportunities to build on the ideas highlighted by community partners and families, including opportunities to strengthen the resiliency and community-focused culture of the county.
- 2. Adjust programmatic and funding approaches:** Using the pandemic as a source of learning, invest in short and long-term planning that allows for flexibility in program implementation and funding streams. Support more coordinated, localized community approaches to ensure that families' needs can be met in their communities without significant access barriers.
- 3. Provide support to strengthen the service sector:** Build the capacity of community partners in crisis management, racial equity, and addressing vicarious trauma. Increase shared knowledge, language, and tools available to service providers for greater alignment and coordination across the county and within communities, especially those historically marginalized. Engage multi-sector, non-traditional partners who can help create systemic changes.
- 4. Provide support to ensure families' well-being:** Increase access to basic needs and to mental health services. Identify opportunities to ensure parents and caregivers have strong connections to peers and within their communities, minimize isolation, and ensure children's learning and development are appropriately supported.
- 5. Promote and support continued use of technology:** Encourage programs to increase provision of virtual services and fund training opportunities about best practices in telehealth/teleservices. Advocate for technology and internet access for families — especially in under-resourced communities, and invest in services and training that will help improve community access to technology.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

Community Partners

Challenges Facing Organizations

Community partners shared similar experiences about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their programs. The most mentioned challenge was attempting to maintain continuity of programming while addressing the emerging needs of families in the midst of the pandemic. These were conflicting priorities that quickly overwhelmed the workforce. Additional challenges were shared by participants.

- Conflicting priorities within organizations/communities
- Demands/burden on staff
- Recognized need for racial equity and diversity training
- Rapid growth in demand for services
- Effectively disseminating health information/messaging

"How do you create the environments where people can put aside their own financial worries or whatever keeps them from working together and just say, 'We have to do this. Let's get over it and do that.' I would love to see that happen."

- Jon Clark, President, James S Bower Foundation

"It's hard enough doing trauma work under the best of circumstances for our staff, the secondary trauma aspects of this work are real and pervasive. I think doing this work in the midst of a global trauma is impacting not only the clients, but it's impacting every single one of us. And if you know the whole analogy of putting the oxygen mask on yourself before you help, we're not taking care of our mental health staff, not just at home, but all of the agencies. We're doing the very best that we can to do that, but I think as organizations face funding cuts and increased stressors in this new normal that we're building, oftentimes the first things to go are professional development or team building or staff support."

- Alana Walczak, President and CEO, Child Abuse Listening Mediation

"[We were] looking at how inequities in health care delivery and healthcare access are exacerbated by the pandemic, things like that. And then...the sense of urgency around racism and addressing racism and talking about racism really has kind of exploded in the last couple of weeks. In prior years, it was pretty standard for us to get maybe one or two inquiries a month from organizations who might want to work with us. In the last three weeks, we're up to about 3,435 inquiries from organizations that all want to address systemic racism and racial inequity."

- Jarrod Schwartz, Founding Executive Director, Just Communities

"Our conversation with our contacts [during contact tracing] is maybe 20 minutes, 30 minutes. And we're trying to get as much information and education out as possible."

How do you even begin to develop trust in those situations, [for example] to get a family to disclose that there are five other families living in a smaller household?"

-Ed Tran, Assistant Deputy Director, Community Health

Positives Experienced by Organizations

While the pandemic created many challenges for Santa Barbara County, participants also shared positive experiences during the uncertainty of COVID-19. Eleven of thirteen participants named "community collaboration" as a positive experience and more than half said the "ability to be nimble and innovate" was also positive. Additional experiences were viewed as positive during the pandemic.

- Community collaboration
- Ability to be nimble and innovate
- Resiliency
- Telehealth and virtual services
- Commitment to continuation of services

"You know, our county is interesting. Incredibly collaborative. And so I feel like, starting out, we were already wonderful, but I think that it's happening even more now. And I'm hoping that that will continue after this because... our county has been hit with a few different disasters and every time we learn more about agencies and who we can pull in and who can help. And I think this experience is increasing that. And I'm just hoping that will continue."

-Florene Bednersh, Executive Director, Welcome Every Baby

"The whole thing this time has really evolved to where we've had an increase of internal resource building and sharing, increased contact with families, increased responsiveness to basic needs."

- Patty Moore, Manager, Family & Advocacy Services, Alpha Resource Center of Santa Barbara

Organizational Needs Moving Forward

Beyond the current pandemic, participants identified collaboration as one of the priorities for organizations and communities moving forward. They expressed interest in leveraging the current collaboration in a shared attempt to meet the needs of children and families. Policy, advocacy, and systems change were additional areas for the community to focus on moving forward.

- Collaboration
- Finding ways to reach families not connected with services
- Policy and advocacy
- Systems change (racial equity, public safety)

"Because our school district serves as really a hub of the community, I can see us bringing more of these different agencies together and helping them connect and deliver more of the services and the higher expectation of the quality of life in the area. We have to do a better job, I have to do a better job of bringing folks together to increase their awareness of what other resources should be in town and listen to our families about what they need and what they want, and start facilitating those agencies and better access in our community."

-Emilio Handall, Superintendent, Guadalupe Union School District

"I hope that there's a systemic approach to recovery and a recognition of racism, classism, sexism, all of the inequities that preceded this crisis, and that would be everlasting from this crisis, and the growing inequities that we're likely to face. Hopefully philanthropic dollars can really look at those systemic issues."

- Alana Walczak, President and CEO, Child Abuse Listening Mediation

Ideas for Change Related to Organizations

While collaboration during the pandemic has been positive, interview participants agreed that there is opportunity to further strengthen the community. Strategic and coordinated program planning, short and long-term, was brought up as a way to ensure focus on addressing what is most needed and leave behind what was not working. Additional ideas for change related to organizations were also shared.

- Community-wide training (speak same language)
- Flexible support and funding streams
- Strengthen community
- Short and long-term planning
- More localized community support and approaches

"Working with funders to revisit what's practical and revisit what's right and that might even mean a new service entirely. Like, 'Hey, we've been paying for this, but that doesn't really work in this setting or that's certainly not a priority. Let's add this too.' So I think that's just what I would add at the funder level, whether you're in philanthropy or government public funds."

-Ashleigh Irving, Family Support Services Program Director, Family Service Agency

"There's so many nonprofits and organizations within Santa Barbara County, but how do we ensure that what's happening is shared across the multiple agencies within the county? This is an issue of coordination, I think it's not unique to this current state we're in. I think it's a challenge and it's hard work to really ensure that everyone is kind of on the same page about what's needed, what the plan is, and what role does each organization agency have to play? So I think that work is starting, but I think there is a need to ensure that the information is being shared more broadly."

-Ama Atiedu, Program & Evaluation Manager, Cottage Health

Families

Challenges Facing Families

Challenges faced by families were mentioned by both families and community partners. Most mentioned as a challenge was mental health. The disruption of daily life due to COVID-19 has been traumatic for many families, causing fear, uncertainty, isolation, depression, and anxiety. Community partners shared that families are experiencing increased stressors and for families of children with special needs, the challenges are exacerbating. Among other challenges, access to basic needs, technology and quality internet, and effective education approaches were also mentioned.

- Mental health: fear, stress, uncertainty
- Loss of income; income insecurity
- Technology and internet access
- Education and lack of child care
- Isolation; feeling disconnected from community
- Work-life balance; time management and routines
- Loss of education; kids taking care of siblings

"Losing her income is a significant thing. We have all the bills, food, home and car payments — all of that came down on me [my income]. When she worked, let's say, her paycheck made \$700 or \$800, as an example. Every month without that, for me alone, all the expenses are a bit difficult. I'm able to make a living during all of this because my salary is a salary, thank God, I worked one week and not another week and my employer pays me anyway. That's the good thing, and lucky, let's say, because, if it were by the hour, things would be very difficult."

- Federico Montiel, Parent, Guadalupe

"To me that was difficult but it's just part of the same process in the sense that you're just in there alone. Just like in the C-section alone, you have to go to the doctor alone. You know, you can't go to the pharmacy...easy things are becoming complicated and it's just kind of — not ruining [having a new baby], but making it different and not as magical as people would experience it otherwise."

- Anonymous, Parent, SB County

"The parents who are working in the fields...have to leave their little children with the older ones. These kids — I was looking at messages from the school — there are a lot of kids who are not attending their virtual classes or the meetings they do on Zoom. It hurt me a lot that these parents have to go work in the fields and save that child care money and leave the responsibility to the kids. Maybe they're thinking... they're 12, they're 14. No, those kids have to be in their classes, too. Those kids have to focus on their studies and not take on responsibilities that don't belong to them."

- Marisol Chavez, Parent, Guadalupe

"One mom, a single mom who's with her adult daughter 24/7 with significant challenges, just is, so, almost distraught at times with her inability to help her daughter understand why everything in her life, her routines, her friends, has stopped. After going through this, I think we're going to be very fragile for a long time."

- Patty Moore, Manager, Family & Advocacy Services, Alpha Resource Center of Santa Barbara

"They didn't feel comfortable going online in their household because there wasn't a quiet space, or they felt embarrassed about having their screen on, but then educators would say, 'No, you have to put your screen on.' We heard from college age students who were working out of their cars, and didn't feel comfortable having their screens on because of, you know, feeling a sense of shame or embarrassment...."

- Jarrod Schwartz, Founding Executive Director, Just Communities

Impact on Children

Families expressed concern about the experiences of their children during the pandemic. Education and distance learning has been difficult for many children. Most discussed was the negative impact of lacking social interaction and extracurricular activities. Explaining the pandemic to children and the change of routine has been challenging for parents. They worry about the long-term health and mental health consequences.

- Lack of social interaction and extracurricular activities
- Education and distance learning
- Long-term health and mental health consequences

"It's a concern for me that my daughter is going to associate this, like her brother was born and all of a sudden we don't see anybody anymore. It's been a little bit hard for me to navigate that, especially communicating this to a toddler. I don't really want to scare her so I don't tell her too much. But I also kind of explain things, like when we hung out with friends a couple times and we're trying to keep a distance and she wants my friends to hold her because they always pick her up. And when you have to tell the toddler like, 'Oh, you can't touch her, stay away.' I don't want her to think there's something wrong with her. Which I try to explain, but so sad to be like, don't touch them, stay away from them. You know, it's so weird. I feel like it's really bad for the kids."

- Sara, Parent, Goleta

"There is summer school for my second grader, and it sounds like an adult needs to be with him during the [class] time, which I can't do. It makes me sad I can't do more."

- Anonymous, Parent, SB County

"The side effect of social isolation on young children, we don't even know yet what that's going to look like. There are studies that I've been reading that show 30% of children that have that are, and this isn't with respect to this crisis, it's the studies that

were based on other crises that resulted in social isolation or social distancing. And it showed that 30% of children went on to develop PTSD symptoms. So I don't even think we have an understanding of how that is going to manifest and how it shows up."

-Ashleigh Irving, Family Support Services Program Director, Family Service Agency

Families' Needs (Immediate and Moving Forward)

Needs mentioned by families and partners were both immediate and anticipated moving forward. Economic support and basic needs were a priority area for families. Mental health and early care and education were additional needs mentioned by many participants as important during the pandemic and moving forward.

Needs mentioned by families and community partners:

- Economic support & basic needs: food, food security, food distributions, housing
- Early care and education
- Mental health and trauma support
- Internet and technology access
- Connections to family and friends
- Better access to services (due to logistical challenges and/or eligibility requirements)

Additional needs mentioned by community partners:

- Effective virtual services
- Public health education
- Transportation
- Better access to services in underserved areas
- Education supports

"Food is very, very expensive. We have limited many things, but we still have not received any kind of help. But we are healthy. We are fine. My husband is working and one way or another he is bringing us things to the house. So in that way I guess we're getting by. There are food distributions but they're not enough for us. Once it was gone by the time I went. Last week I was able to receive a little bit and my children were very happy because we had run out of groceries, potatoes, carrots. So I said I'm going to see if they'll give me something and they did. My children helped carry a cart of groceries that they offered us and we were happy. Then a neighbor gave us a piece of cheese and I said "look, we are going to have quesadillas," something different."

- Marisol Chavez, Parent, Guadalupe

"We heard about a program where I could apply for a thousand dollars, but it was asking for [employment verification] from the company where I worked. I don't have the proof that is being asked for since I stopped my farm labor with a company in March before coronavirus. We also heard rumors that this could also have consequences for us. That if we apply we would get an immigration report and if we filed to fix our immigration, we would not be able to fix it. So I told my husband, 'You

know what? I better not.' I don't want to go through any difficulties, then it'll be better. So we'll get through it little by little. We didn't receive anything.

- Marisol Chavez, Parent, Guadalupe

"The work of home visitation is tactile, it's being with families developing trust. I'm handling the infant, providing coaching with breastfeeding, those types of things. Now it is a completely different way of doing that. And it may take longer periods of time to establish that trust."

- Ed Tran, Assistant Deputy Director, Community Health

"Second to that, recognizing that this is also a time where intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect and substance abuse are all three high risk areas. What are becoming chronic stressors. So we quickly looked at how we could provide support to parents. And on April 1st we launched a parenting warm line and the first month we had a hundred calls. For an entirely new service."

- Ashleigh Irving, Family Support Services Program Director, Family Service Agency

Positives and Sources of Support for Families

Amongst the fear, uncertainty, and the layers of challenges during the pandemic, families have also experienced positive changes in their lives. Half of the family participants shared appreciation for new family routines and practices that strengthen family relationships. In addition to the internet, participants shared that family and friends, as well as community organizations, continue to be their source of support.

- Early learning programs, educators, schools and school districts
- Existing contacts (home visitors, social workers, churches, community programs, and service programs)
- Increased family togetherness; new family routines and practices
- Family and friends
- Internet

"I think the positive, right now, is that we go for walks as a family and that is something very positive, because, really, we didn't do it before. In all this bad, there is something good, right? I think that it brings out the best in us and also, for the children, it is something very useful for them. The way they are in the house and they are eating and so we say, "hey we are going to walk for a while." It's good for exercise. I view that as one of the benefits of all this."

- Federico Montiel, Parent, Guadalupe

"I've been Googling a lot of things. And there's also a website that WEB staff told me about called KellyMom.com. I think Cottage also uses that website for resources. So I'll go on there and see what it says, or sometimes I'll text Kathy or Trail an update or if I have a question. Yeah, or that gal through Sansom. I've been able to ask her a lot of questions, and the lactation consultant, so that's been really great."

- Sarah, Parent, SB County

Ideas for Change Related to Families/Communities

Interview participants, families and community partners alike, shared their ideas for change in their communities. Partners and families are hopeful about the current community collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic and would like to see continued community support for schools and distance learning. Addressing systemic inequities was brought up by both families and community partners. For community partners, equity in education and housing was the focus. For families, equity was more broadly discussed in relation to the system of care.

Ideas shared by families:

- Parent engagement and parenting support
- Address systemic inequities

Ideas shared by partners:

- Support educational equity
- Better access to resources, housing

Ideas shared by both:

- Community collaboration and community support
- Increased and improved telehealth/teleservices
- Supports for schools and remote learning

"That all residents of our small community come together for the better of everyone — more community outreach, community functions, community restoration."

- Anonymous, Parent, SB County

"Our public health department has not done culturally competent outreach to Black members in our community. Black people are over-represented in positive COVID cases, and so it is very disheartening that even at this date, there has not been a concentrated effort to speak directly to Black organizations and Black people and Black communities, where they are, about the risks. So that will be something that I want changed. There are ongoing health crises, ongoing pandemics, like forever, in the Black community — diabetes, high blood pressure, stuff like that. And so I'm like, why wasn't public health involved in this community before? We have had long-standing inequities there."

- Anonymous, Parent, SB County

"It's about creating an experience for someone so that they remember the experience is positive. So if this experience with a pandemic is scary, it makes us feel vulnerable, if it's frustrating — if it's all that stuff, but what we remember is the ways that we reached out and stay connected to others, and what we remember is seeing the creative zoom birthday parties for kids taking place, if what we remember is that my neighbor next door was always waving and saying, 'Hey, do you need anything?'"

Those are the things that we remember. We walk away from this experience with remembering the good stuff that creates resilience. I think we need to just keep doing and keep highlighting it, keep supporting one another to create that."

- Suzanne Grimmersey, Chief Quality Care & Strategy Officer, SBC Behavioral Wellness

"There are things that we have access to that we don't think about, we take for granted, and here in Guadalupe there's just no idea of a higher quality of life or the availability of resources. Things that should be only a couple minutes drive away, instead of having to load everyone up or take the bus and take the whole day to go to a dentist's appointment."

- Emilio Handall, Superintendent, Guadalupe Union School District

"Schools need so much support. We should have an FRC and advocate. We do and some of our FRCs do, but we need to be able to be in schools, have funding that supports schools so that every community has a local FRC, a robust local FRC."

- Ashleigh Irving, Family Support Services Program Director, Family Service Agency