

HOW DOES A RURAL AND SEMI-URBAN REGION RECOVER FROM THE LONG-LASTING PANDEMIC IMPACT.

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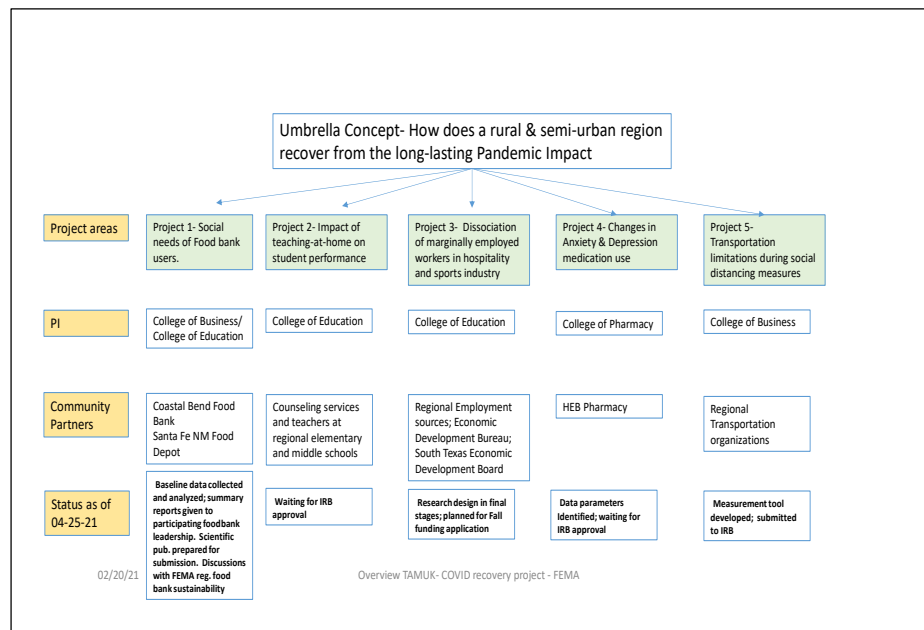
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In mid-2020, at the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the College of Business Administration faculty reached out to other colleges at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK) with the initiative to organize and optimize community efforts for pandemic assessment and recovery. Given that rural America is disadvantaged in healthcare access and has less diverse economic drivers and therefore being proportionally more impacted by the pandemic, the focus of the overall project is on rural and semi-urban regions, the primary market for TAMUK. Participating faculty developed specific projects under the pandemic recovery umbrella addressing specific community needs (e.g., Kingsville Chamber



of Commerce, Food Bank, FEMA, Christus Spohn Hospital, H-E-B food, etc.) and based on faculty expertise and research interests in the world of long-term recovery of community crises. Currently the College of Business Administration, College of Education and Human Performance, and Texas A&M University Irma Lerma Rangel College of Pharmacy are represented in the project “How does a rural and semi-urban region recover from the long-lasting pandemic impact.” The thematic projects cover the following areas of the pandemic recovery and address many social aspects of the community: (1) Social needs of Food bank users with the local Food Banks; (2) Impact of teaching-at-home on student performance; (3) Dissociation of marginally employed workers in hospitality and sports industry; (4) Changes in anxiety and depression medication use with H-E-B Pharmacy; (5) Transportation limitations during social distancing measures.

The “Social needs of Food bank users” project to date is the work done with regional food banks, addressing the social changes that people experienced during the pandemic. The survey followed the Social Determinants of Health guidelines, as utilized by Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in assessing health status. Baseline data of over 1000 food bank users in South Texas and Northern New Mexico have been collected and analyzed and compared to a 3-month follow up assessment. Baseline findings indicate that food bank users increased dependence on food distributions during the pandemic as they encountered greater challenges in providing food for their families. Employed and unemployed customers experienced greater levels of stress & anxiety while indicating a worsening of their financial status. Despite these difficult times, half of the respondents had a positive outlook for the next two years. Follow up data show however, that pandemic related social stressors are decreasing 3 months later. While pressures on social needs persist, fewer people report difficulties obtaining food for their families with lower levels of stress and anxiety, and fewer people reporting financial difficulty. The collaboration with the respective foodbanks has been a win-win, since foodbanks need this type of information as part of their strategic positioning in their service area.

A second initiative focuses on the effect that teaching children remotely has on K-12 teachers and counselors in elementary and middle schools. A survey has been created and validated with regional independent school districts. This will mostly be a retrospective view as many schools are currently struggling to return students to the classroom.

Knowing the effect of the pandemic on the regional economy, part-time and seasonal workers have been heavily impacted. A study has been developed to determine attitudes to -and impact of- job lay-offs of these part-time workers. The study intends to combine survey tools and interviews to assess workers’ attitudes towards these part-time employments in partnership with regional workforce organizations and economic development centers.

Mental health changes have reportedly worsened during the pandemic, in part due to financial pressures, social isolation and other stress factors. To assess mental health impact on rural communities, TAMU Pharmacy faculty is working with H-E-B pharmacy chain to determine changes in anxiety & depression prescriptions during the 2020 year in comparison the previous year. The study will be based on de-identified multi-year data streams for regional pharmacies and –depending on community participation- be linked to medical data for mental health

The pandemic impact on transportation is another critical factor that affects the social fiber of a community and a family. With social restrictions decreasing public transport services, people are less likely to travel and –if they needed to travel-transportation dependency has been difficult and cumbersome. This project is conducted with support of a regional public transportation company.

In summary, the focus on pandemic recovery as an overall theme is well timed and addresses many social aspects of a community. Region VI of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is encouraging these initiatives and TAMUK has joined its HiED group. A FEMA funding request for program completion has been submitted to establish a data resource aggregation center on campus in support of future emergencies. While still early in its implementation, results so far have been revealing and serve as a basis for continued exploration and reporting.