



JEFFERSON CIVIC LEADERSHIP  
ACADEMY 2020 GROUP PROJECT

# ERIE COUNTY BUSINESS SERIES

Resources for Building Resiliency  
During Uncertain Times

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## Introduction

The 2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort (“Cohort”) was tasked with examining the topic of “Leadership in a Time of Crisis: Proposing a Preparedness Model for Erie County.” The Cohort explored this topic during the COVID-19 global pandemic that began in December 2019. The newly identified virus, COVID-19, is transmitted by “respiratory droplets or small particles, such as those in aerosols, produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, sings, talks, or breathes.” The virus spreads very easily from one person to another, causing a high risk of community spread. “Community spread means people have been infected with the virus in an area, including some who are not sure how or where they became infected.”<sup>1</sup> In an effort to avoid overwhelming hospitals with limited resources to treat this novel disease, immediate measures were taken.<sup>2</sup> One example of early measures to limit community spread of the virus in Pennsylvania was a state-mandated closure of all nonessential businesses for a total of 54 days, from March 16, 2020 through May 8, 2020. After researching the early effects of the pandemic, conferring with business assistance organizations, and interviewing local businesses and nonprofits, the Cohort confirmed that the mandated shutdown severely impacted many businesses within Erie County. Even after businesses were permitted to reopen, limits on capacity and other health and safety requirements necessary to protect the public continued to have impacts on businesses. As a result of this research, the Cohort decided the best way to address the topic of “Leadership in the Time of Crisis” was by sharing business resiliency tactics and information through a business speaker series.

Although many of the most extreme restrictions were lifted within several months of the pandemic, the negative impact on the regional economy is far from over. Because this issue loomed large while researching topics for this group project, the Cohort recognized the struggles of business owners and decided to address some of the identified challenges in an effective and timely manner. Typically, past Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy cohorts would be responsible for creating an academic paper with policy proposals, which are housed on the Jefferson website. However, given the extenuating circumstances of the pandemic, the Cohort explored whether there were ways to utilize its time and efforts to provide immediate assistance to businesses. In light of these considerations, the Cohort evaluated potential deliverables and projects, including, but not limited to a centralized website for pandemic information, a proposed pandemic plan involving a variety of private and public stakeholders, a podcast series, and resources for small businesses to create their own pandemic preparedness/business continuity plans. Ultimately, the Cohort decided to address the topic of “Leadership in the Time of Crisis” by sharing resiliency information and tactics with businesses through a free and easily accessible speaker series.

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<sup>1</sup> *COVID-19 and Your Health*. (2020, February 11). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

<sup>2</sup> *One chart explains why Disneyland, Broadway, and sports arenas are all going dark to stop the coronavirus epidemic*. (2020, March 13). Business Insider Nederland. <https://www.businessinsider.nl/coronavirus-protective-measures-keep-outbreak-from-overwhelming-hospitals-2020-3?international=true&r=US>

In order to create an effective speaker series, the Cohort performed research including conducting interviews, reviewing academic material and news articles, and listening to expert speakers on relevant topics. This paper describes those efforts and addresses the following:

- the background of the COVID-19 Pandemic;
- its impacts on Pennsylvania and the Erie region;
- Erie County responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic;
- creation of speaker series, marketing, and surveys;
- overview of the JCLA Business Speaker Series: Resources for Building Resiliency during Uncertain Times;
- a reflection on the project and potential future opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic persisted as the Cohort finalized this project. The full extent of the social and economic impacts of the pandemic are still being evaluated but are serious and significant. It was our intention to create a project that could facilitate the exchange of important information to support the Erie business community in real time.

### **Background Information Regarding COVID-19 Pandemic**

An outbreak in Wuhan, China in late 2019 was identified in January 2020 as severe acute respiratory system coronavirus 2 (SARS CoV-2, COVID-19) (“COVID-19”). The United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Washington state confirmed the first American patient was diagnosed with COVID-19 on Jan. 20, 2020. On Jan. 23, 2020, Wuhan, China entered a lockdown to mitigate further spread of COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a global health emergency on Jan. 30.<sup>4</sup> During this declaration, the WHO stated, “all countries should be prepared for containment, including active surveillance, early detection, isolation, and case management, contact tracing and prevention of onward spread of 2019-nCoV infection, and to share full data with WHO...[C]ountries should place particular emphasis on reducing human infection, prevention of secondary transmission and international spread, and contributing to the international response through multisectoral communication and collaboration and active participation in increasing knowledge on the virus.”<sup>5</sup> Human-to-human transmission of the virus was found in several countries, including the United States, Germany, Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam.

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<sup>3</sup> Harcourt, J. (n.d.). *Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 from Patient with Coronavirus Disease, United States*. Emerging Infectious Diseases Journal. [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/6/20-0516\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/6/20-0516_article)

<sup>4</sup> *COVID-19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) Global research and innovation forum*. (n.d.). World Health Organization. [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-\(pheic\)-global-research-and-innovation-forum](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-(pheic)-global-research-and-innovation-forum)

<sup>5</sup> *COVID-19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) Global research and innovation forum*. (n.d.). World Health Organization. [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-\(pheic\)-global-research-and-innovation-forum](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-(pheic)-global-research-and-innovation-forum)

By Feb. 25, the CDC declared fourteen cases of COVID-19 in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Four days later, the United States reported its first death from COVID-19 in Kings County, Washington.<sup>7</sup> At that time, Nancy Messonnier, M.D., director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, stated that COVID-19 met only two of the three required factors to declare a pandemic: illness resulting in death and sustained person-to-person spread.<sup>8</sup> Worldwide spread was the third criterion not yet met at the time. Less than two weeks later, on March 11, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic.<sup>9</sup> At that time, there were more than 118,000 cases reported in 114 countries with 4,291 deaths. The WHO stated:

If countries detect, test, treat, isolate, trace, and mobilize their people in the response, those with a handful of cases can prevent those cases becoming clusters, and those clusters becoming community transmission. Even those countries with community transmission or large clusters can turn the tide on this virus. Several countries have demonstrated that this virus can be suppressed and controlled. The challenge for many countries who are now dealing with large clusters or community transmission is not whether they can do the same – it's whether they will.<sup>10</sup>

The cases of COVID-19 continued to grow in March, which caused the shuttering of many cities globally. While there was not a uniform approach, lockdown efforts included quarantine measures, closing of non-essential businesses, curfews, travel restrictions, and other restrictions based upon national and local mandates.<sup>11</sup> Death tolls continued to increase throughout the month as well. On March 13, then-U.S. President Donald Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency. The Trump administration also issued a travel ban on non-Americans who visited 26 European countries (the Schengen Area) within two weeks of coming

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<sup>6</sup> Jernigan, D. B. (2020, February 27). *Update: Public Health Response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 ...* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6908e1.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Mansell, W., & Schumaker, E. (2020, March 4). *President Trump confirms 1st known death in US from coronavirus.* ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/high-school-student-washington-latest-coronavirus-community-spread/story?id=69301655>

<sup>8</sup> Inzerro, A. (2020, February 25). *CDC Warns That COVID-19 Is Likely Headed Toward Pandemic Stage, Could Affect US Schools, Businesses.* AJMC. <https://www.ajmc.com/view/cdc-warns-that-covid19-is-likely-headed-toward-pandemic-stage-could-affect-us-schools-businesses>

<sup>9</sup> Staff, A. (2021, January 1). *A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments in 2020.* AJMC. <https://www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020>

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization. (2020, March 11). *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020.* The WHO. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

<sup>11</sup> Levenson, M. (2020, January 23). *Scale of China's Wuhan Shutdown Is Believed to Be Without Precedent.* The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/asia/coronavirus-quarantines-history.html>

BBC News. (2020, March 29). *Coronavirus: Strict measures could last "significant period."* <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52082781>

to the United States. By that point, several major cities in the United States had confirmed cases of COVID-19, including San Francisco, New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago.<sup>12</sup>

## Mitigation Efforts and Impacts on Pennsylvania and Erie County

States started taking action to limit the spread of the virus as it became clear that cases were not slowing down. Pennsylvania joined a coalition of several states (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut) to slow the spread of the virus.<sup>13</sup> On March 19, Pennsylvania was one of 42 states in the country to issue mandatory stay at home orders, specifically requiring all business that were not life sustaining to close. Erie County was one of 2,355 counties nationwide and more specifically was among 18 of 67 counties that issued a mandatory stay-at-home order in Pennsylvania, one day after the first COVID-19 death reported in Pennsylvania on March 18.<sup>14</sup> The following day, Pennsylvania Governor, Tom Wolf and Pennsylvania Secretary of Health, Dr. Rachel Levine issued a directive that all nonlife-sustaining businesses across the state must shutter for two weeks beginning March 23.<sup>15</sup> The directive advised that all the state's residents' shelter at home and limit movement outside of their homes to essential needs, such as traveling to grocery stores, pharmacies, doctor appointments, etc.

As the number of Covid-19 cases rose, County Executive Dahlkemper issued Erie County's Stay-at-Home Order on March 25, days prior to the Pennsylvania statewide stay-at-home order.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Erie County government independently took the initiative to keep the public informed on the growth of the pandemic. Dahlkemper informed county residents of restrictions as they went into effect as well as county-wide updates on COVID-19 cases within Erie. In March, Erie County residents were informed of state-wide precautions. The Local Erie government continued providing updates and responses to help manage the impact of the virus as the pandemic continued to spread.

With widespread business closures and anticipated stay-at-home orders, the United States Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act ("CARES Act") on March 27, to assist businesses and individuals already feeling the economic impact of the pandemic. The 1.4 trillion-dollar relief package was the largest economic stimulus package in United States history.<sup>17</sup> While the CARES Act included various funding outside the scope of this paper, 500 billion dollars was allocated to assist eligible businesses, states, and municipalities,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Pennsylvania Joins New York, New Jersey and Connecticut's Regional Coalition to Combat COVID-19. (2020, March 23). Governor Andrew M. Cuomo. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/pennsylvania-joins-new-york-new-jersey-and-connecticuts-regional-coalition-combat-covid-19>

<sup>14</sup> Moreland, A., et al. (2020, September 4). *Timing of State and Territorial COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Orders and Changes in Population Movement — United States, March 1–May 31, 2020*. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6935a2.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Roderick, E. (2020, March 20). *Gov. Wolf, Secretary Levine Provide Updated Guidance, Stress Need for Compliance as Cases Rise*. Governor Tom Wolf. <https://www.governor.pa.gov/newsroom/gov-wolf-secretary-levine-provide-updated-guidance-stress-need-for-compliance-as-cases-rise/>

<sup>16</sup> *Breaking: Stay at home order issued for Erie County*. (2020, March 24). YourErie.Com. <https://www.yourerie.com/health/coronavirus/breaking-stay-at-home-order-issued-for-erie-county/>

<sup>17</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures. (n.d.). *COVID-19 Economic Relief Bill*. <https://www.ncsl.org/ncsl-in-dc/publications-and-resources/covid-19-economic-relief-bill-stimulus.aspx>

as well as a 699-billion-dollar small business loan program called the Paycheck Protection Program (“PPP”), which is described in more detail below.<sup>18</sup>

The first week of April saw increased confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Pennsylvania. At that point, Gov. Wolf issued a stay-at-home order for the rest of the state through the end of April.<sup>19</sup> Gov. Wolf also adjusted the timeline for school closures and nonessential businesses, closing them indefinitely. These measures continued, affecting roughly 10 million Pennsylvania residents. By the week’s end, nearly 1 million unemployment claims had been filed.<sup>20</sup> Starting in April, schools resolved to remain closed through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Every county in Pennsylvania had at least one confirmed COVID-19 case. Unemployment continued to rise and there were difficulties with processing the increased number of unemployment claims. To manage the rise in demand, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor planned to hire 100 people.<sup>21</sup>

As unemployment numbers increased dramatically, businesses remained closed for an extended period. There were increased public demands to begin reopening and lifting restrictions. In response to pressure from Pennsylvania lawmakers, Wolf’s administration stated in mid-April, “Irresponsibly going against the direction of the Secretary of Health and reopening businesses too early will only extend the length of the economic hardships created by the pandemic.”<sup>22</sup> Gov. Wolf worked with the coalition of governors of surrounding states to create a plan to roll back the “stay-at-home” orders, and non-essential business ban. On April 22, Gov. Wolf announced a red-yellow-green coding system for plans to reopen the state:<sup>23</sup>

The initial benchmark we’re setting is for the population to have an average of less than 50 cases per 100,000 individuals over the course of 14 days in order to return to work ... but we’re also going to continue to look at areas like testing rates, the ability to investigate cases, contact tracing capabilities and proximity to high-risk settings. The phased approach of the reopening model developed by Gov. Wolf read as follows:

Red – Life Sustaining Businesses Only; Masks Are Required in Businesses; Congregate Care and Prison Restrictions in Place; Schools (for in-person instruction) and Most Child Care Facilities Closed.

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<sup>18</sup> Snell, K. (2020, March 26). *What’s Inside The Senate’s \$2 Trillion Coronavirus Aid Package*. NPR. <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2020/03/26/821457551/whats-inside-the-senate-s-2-trillion-coronavirus-aid-package>

<sup>19</sup> *COVID-19 Timeline - PA*. (n.d.). ArcGIS.Com. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=223dd517a8664935b649d17836202db3>

<sup>20</sup> Rose, A. (2020, April 19). *Pa. adds workers to handle unemployment claims*. Herald Media. [https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/news/special/coronavirus/pa-adds-workers-to-handle-unemployment-claims/article\\_06399dfa-9d4e-5d76-ad95-0e4d22c5c694.html](https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/news/special/coronavirus/pa-adds-workers-to-handle-unemployment-claims/article_06399dfa-9d4e-5d76-ad95-0e4d22c5c694.html)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> J.M. (2020, April 16). *Gov. Tom Wolf will veto bill that would allow more Pa. businesses to open during COVID-19 crisis*. Penn Live Patriot News. <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/04/gov-tom-wolf-will-veto-bill-that-would-allow-more-pa-businesses-to-open-during-covid-19-crisis.html>

<sup>23</sup> Marroni, S. (2020, April 23). *Governor’s color-coded chart outlines steps to reopen Pa. from coronavirus shutdowns*. Penn Live Patriot News. <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/04/see-the-color-coded-chart-outlining-steps-to-reopen-pa.html>

Yellow – Telework Must Continue Where Feasible; Businesses with In-Person Operations Must Follow Business and Building Safety Orders; Masks Are Required in Businesses; Child Care May Open Complying with Guidance; Congregate Care and Prison Restrictions in Place; Schools may provide in-person instruction only in accordance with Department of Education guidance.

Green – Telework Must Continue Where Feasible; Businesses with In-Person Operations Must Follow Updated Business and Building Safety Requirements; All Businesses Operating at 50 percent Occupancy in the Yellow Phase May Increase to 75 percent Occupancy, Except Where Noted for Bars and Restaurants; Masks Are Required in Businesses; Child Care May Open Complying with Guidance; Congregate Care Restrictions in Place; Prison and Hospital Restrictions Determined by Individual Facilities; Schools Subject to CDC and Commonwealth Guidance <sup>24</sup>

Erie County was subject to Pennsylvania mandates, including the above-referenced phased reopening plan. According to Gov. Wolf, assessment for reopening would be determined by individual counties. Wolf also stated that all of Pennsylvania was in the red phase and reiterated that May 8, 2020 was the target date for phased reopening. From the time of the announcement on April 22 through the rest of April, Erie County amassed a record 16.9% unemployment rate. <sup>25</sup> According to Kenneth Louie, Ph.D., a professor at Penn State Behrend and director of the Economic Research Institute of Erie, the Erie economy lost more than 22,000 jobs due to the pandemic between January and April 2020. <sup>26</sup>

As part of the phased reopening, on May 1, Pennsylvania golf courses, marinas, guided fishing trips, and private campgrounds were able to open with strict guidelines. Construction work was allowed to resume or start as normal. Gov. Wolf allowed 24 counties to transition from the red phase to the yellow phase on May 8. <sup>27</sup> This included Erie County and 23 other counties, mainly in rural northern Pennsylvania. This allowed the reopening of retail businesses, childcare centers, state-owned liquor stores, shooting ranges, real estate activities, and car dealerships.

Businesses were permitted to reopen by complying with mitigation efforts. Group gatherings were limited to 25 people and restaurants were prevented from allowing dine-in

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<sup>24</sup> *Process to Reopen Pennsylvania*. (2020, November 23). Governor Tom Wolf. <https://www.governor.pa.gov/process-to-reopen-pennsylvania/>

<sup>25</sup> Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Unemployment Rate - Erie County, PA (October 2020)*. Argus Leader. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://data.argusleader.com/unemployment/erie-county-pa/CN4204900000000/>

<sup>26</sup> The Editorial Board, Echo Pilot. (2020, September 7). *Our view: Labor Day comes in trying times*. Erie Times-News. <https://eu.echo-pilot.com/story/opinion/editorials/2020/09/07/our-view-labor-day-comes-in-trying-times/42391249/>

<sup>27</sup> Swanseger, M. (2020, May 6). *What Yellow Phase Means For You*. Erie Reader. <https://www.eriereader.com/article/what-yellow-phase-means-for-you>



service. Indoor recreational facilities, including gyms, fitness centers, yoga studios, spas, nail salons, hairdressers, and other businesses, remained closed under the yellow phase. The phases were contingent upon the number of positive COVID-19 cases. Charlotte Berringer, director of Community Health Services at the Erie County Department of Health, stated, "We expect to see a doubling or tripling of numbers" in regard to Erie moving to the yellow phase. This created fears of returning to the red phase or a prolonged yellow phase interrupting business.<sup>28</sup>

The closure of businesses had a profound impact on the unemployment rate. The Department of Labor and Industry would typically receive 40,000 claims a week prior to the pandemic. It is worth noting that the impact on Pennsylvania mirrored other comparable states. Between September 2019 to June 2020, Pennsylvania's GDP decreased by 11.56%. Comparatively, Ohio lost about 10.96% and New York about 11.37% of GDP. All three states were the hardest hit in arts, entertainment, and recreation (which is reflected in which businesses were forced to close). Other commonly affected business included mining and agriculture.<sup>29</sup>

As the cases increased and businesses started to close, Pennsylvania Unemployment Compensation Department received nearly 350,000 claims per week.<sup>30</sup> Many people experienced issues getting into the system to file or receive their payments. The average wait time for an email response was 41 days.<sup>31</sup> The closure of businesses and increased demand on the unemployment compensation system were examples of the strain placed on government agencies, the economic impacts on businesses, and employees.

## Erie County Government Structure

The Cohort evaluated how prepared Erie County was for this crisis and how it might fare in the future. Erie's government structure allowed policymakers options that aren't available in every municipality. Erie County was poised to take decisive action because of its government structure. As a result of Pennsylvania adopting Act 62 in 1972, local governments are permitted to choose their structure. Out of 67 counties in Pennsylvania, only seven adopted a Home Rule Charter. The impact of Erie County adopting the Home Rule Charter changed its structure from a three-person commission form of government to a strong-mayor form of government with separate executive and legislative functions, including an executive and seven-member council.

Erie's position as a home rule county gives the county executive control of the executive branch functions of county government. This centralizes decision making based on local needs, instead of using municipal code decided at the state level. As a result of this structure, the

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<sup>28</sup> GoErie.com Staff. (2021, January 29). *Home*. GoErie.Com. <https://eu.goerie.com/>

<sup>29</sup> Mosteller, A. (2020, December 22). *COVID-19 Economic Impact: A State-by-State Analysis*. Business.Org. <https://www.business.org/finance/accounting/covid-19-economic-analysis-by-state/>

<sup>30</sup> Ivey DeJesus, idejesus@pennlive.com. (2020, May 24). *Be patient, don't send multiple emails and other tips from Pa. unemployment compensation official*. Pennlive. <https://www.pennlive.com/coronavirus/2020/05/be-patient-dont-send-multiple-emails-and-other-tips-from-pa-unemployment-compensation-official.html>

<sup>31</sup> Yonkunas, R. (2020, May 14). *Wait Times to Hear Back on PA Unemployment Claims Exceed 40 Days*. Fox 43. <https://www.fox43.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/email-backlog-for-unemployment-claims-exceeds-40-days/521-e2cca852-a1ee-43b1-94a5-c9679a0ae9f6>

County Executive, Kathy Dahlkemper was able to issue a countywide stay-at-home order before one was issued for Pennsylvania as described above.

Erie County is also one of only six counties (plus four municipalities) with health departments in Pennsylvania.<sup>32</sup> The Erie County Department of Health has staff and resources to address areas that were specifically impacted by COVID-19, including emergency preparedness. Department employees performed tabletop exercises and worked jointly with other departments to prepare for different types of emergency events, although the nature and scope of the pandemic had not been anticipated. Nationally, health departments at the state and county level prepared for potential pandemics by creating these preparedness plans. As a result, county employees could modify existing plans.<sup>33</sup> These actions would become pivotal as Erie County prepared and responded to the impacts of the pandemic.

### **Erie County Pandemic Impact, Effect, and Response**

State officials announced their decision to keep Erie County in the yellow phase at the end of May. The decision was made even as larger counties with higher proportional positive COVID-10 cases, such as Allegheny County (home to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's second largest city) were able to move to the green phase. Remaining in the yellow phase sparked frustration among local businesses and public officials alike, including County Executive Dahlkemper, who said she had lobbied for Erie County to move into the green phase even as the Erie County Health Department expressed reservations. The Erie County Health Department reported 100 new cases in two weeks, as well as four deaths. Dahlkemper also stated, "Unfortunately, our cases in Erie County continue to rise and have consistently risen in the past few weeks, and for this reason, the state informed me earlier today that they determined that we were not ready to go green. ... I, however, do feel that Erie County is ready."<sup>34</sup>

The Commonwealth's decision was based on three factors: the rate of new cases in the past week, the percentage of positive cases seen over two weeks, and contact-tracing capabilities. Pennsylvania officials told County Executive Dahlkemper they had concerns over rising cases and the ability to conduct contact-tracing to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Dahlkemper also said that the Erie County Health Department had been responsible for contact-tracing but was stretched thin due to the rise in confirmed cases. She asked officials to provide more resources for contact-tracing and for the community to continue social-distancing, and for the community to continue following masking best practices. These actions were established as methods to lower COVID-19 case numbers.

Erie County was able to enter the green phase on June 26, 2020 per Gov. Wolf's mandate. In a media release dated June 25, Governor Wolf continued to encourage, social-distancing, and handwashing. The green phase adjusted allowances and restrictions including: continuing telework where feasible; requiring in-person business operations to update their physical safety requirements; increasing from 50 to 75 percent occupancy (excluding bars,

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<sup>32</sup> PA Dept. of Health. (n.d.). *County-Municipal Health Depts.* <https://www.health.pa.gov/About/Pages/County-Municipal%20Health%20Depts.asp>

<sup>33</sup> J. Durlin, personal communication, November 5, 2020

<sup>34</sup> O'Neill, M. (2021, January 29). *Erie County Stalls in Yellow Phase.* GoErie.Com. <https://eu.goerie.com/>

restaurants, health and wellness facilities as well as personal care facilities); continuing required masking; and the opening of childcare in compliance with issued guidance.<sup>35</sup>

These actions allowed businesses to adapt to the new environment. Moving to the green phase may have given businesses and the public a sense of optimism, but it was important to understand that such progress could not be taken for granted. With news of moving to the green phase, Dahlkemper stated, “We must remember that COVID-19 is still very present in Erie County. ... Recently we have seen large spikes of cases in other counties and states that opened prematurely, and we certainly do not want to find ourselves in that situation.”<sup>36</sup>

The economic impact in Erie County has been significant. According to the Manufacturer and Business Association, the Erie economic sectors hardest hit by COVID-19 included rural nonfarm,<sup>37</sup> leisure and hospitality, and retail trade.<sup>38</sup> Many businesses had challenges presented by the pandemic, whether filing for bankruptcy, closing permanently, or modifying service models to remain in business. Many businesses determined it necessary to adjust their service models in novel ways, including the development of online ordering systems, adding outdoor patios for seating, and moving fitness classes from the studio to the parking lot or other outdoor areas. Despite the restrictions, Erie regained over 8,000 jobs from those that were lost by early September 2020.<sup>39</sup>

There were other impacts of the pandemic beyond economic losses such as working from home, homeschooling children, caring for family and friends, isolation from social-distancing, as well as the fear of contracting the virus. According to the Mayo Clinic, the CDC and W.H.O., all of these stressors can lead to declining mental health. The CDC noted that “Taking care of your emotional health during an emergency will help you think clearly and react to the urgent needs to protect yourself and your family. Self-care during an emergency will help your long-term healing.”<sup>40</sup> As a result of the cumulative influences from the health-related restrictions to protect our community, the public could visibly see business closures and job losses, but the impact on the well-being of individuals could not be overlooked.

In response to COVID-19, the Erie Regional Chamber, Corry Chamber and Growth Partnership organized information for local business owners in the Erie County area.<sup>41</sup> This information, located on its website, was periodically updated with the main goal of “helping

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<sup>35</sup> Dixon, M. (2020, June 25). *Erie County moves to green phase of reopening on June 26 – Erie County, PA*. Erie County, PA -. <https://eriecountypa.gov/erie-county-moves-to-green-phase-of-reopening-on-june-26/>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Rural Non Farm Sector*. (2019, August 20). Manifest las. <https://www.manifestias.com/2019/08/20/rural-non-farm-sector/>

<sup>38</sup> Manufacturer & Business Association. (n.d.). *Manufacturer & Business Association 2021 economic forecast and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our region. [Facebook Watch Webinar]*. Facebook. [https://m.facebook.com/watch/?t=2174&v=569423897259786&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/watch/?t=2174&v=569423897259786&_rdr)

<sup>39</sup> Jim Martin, GoErie.com. (2020, September 4). *Labor and COVID-19: The virus’ effect on Erie County workers, businesses*. Erie Times-News. <https://eu.goerie.com/story/news/local/2020/09/04/labor-and-covid-19-virus-effect-on-erie-county-workers-businesses/42382487/>

<sup>40</sup> *Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event*. (n.d.). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>

<sup>41</sup> Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership. (n.d.). *Business Resources - Coronavirus - Erie Regional Chamber & Growth Partnership*. <https://www.eriepa.com/coronavirus-erie>

business owners prepare to implement strategies and techniques to protect their workforce while ensuring continuity of operations.” There are five subcategories on the website broken down into information on: COVID-19 general information, resources for reopening, small business resources, nonprofit resources, and Erie Regional Chamber Updates.<sup>42</sup>

Comparatively, Butler County, PA with a population 188,068 (92,498 fewer residents than Erie<sup>43</sup>) implemented a seven-page document available on the county’s website to assist small businesses.<sup>44</sup> The document includes business resource links, emergency disaster loan opportunities, advice for small businesses, workforce issues, and where to find donations and additional supplies.

Additionally, Lackawanna County, PA, with a population of 214,437, developed a similar tool to educate its small-business owners. This tool came in the form of a polished PDF e-portfolio with 17 pages full of similar information for small-business owners. The document includes information about funding for small businesses in Lackawanna County.<sup>45</sup> Understanding what other counties did to assist businesses was an important factor in evaluating how Erie County fared. This comparison also assisted in evaluating what the Cohort could do to address the question of preparedness in Erie County.

In a COVID-19 study performed by McKinsey, that surveyed 200 organizations across myriad industries (i.e., industrial, retail, and communication services), more than 90 percent of executives reported that the COVID-19 public health crisis will “fundamentally change the way they do business over the next five years” with many asserting it will have a lasting impact on customers.<sup>46</sup> The survey also determined that the crisis will create significant new opportunities for growth with variation by industry. The McKinsey Report noted that “Many businesses simply cannot operate as they have in the past. What made a company successful historically may no longer be possible during or after the crisis.” Specifically, “channels may have radically shifted to accommodate new needs or work around new constraints.” Rapid changes in response to the pandemic include: (1) Changing sales models with less reliance on in-person meetings to conversion to more reliance on digital engagement; (2) new offerings, such as “direct to consumer channels”; (3) increased demands resulting from changed consumer behavior; and (4) influx of competitors from different industries.<sup>47</sup> The ability for businesses to evolve is necessary to address the disruptive landscape created by COVID-19.

Many programs were available to individuals and small businesses to build resiliency through professional networking in and around Erie County prior to the pandemic. Some of this peer-to-peer support was given in the form of monthly chamber meetings, marketplace

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Butler County, Pennsylvania*. Census Bureau QuickFacts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/butlercountypennsylvania/BZA210218>

<sup>44</sup> *COVID-19 Resources: Business Resources*. (n.d.). Butler County Pennsylvania. Retrieved November 16, 2020, from <https://www.butlercountypa.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1266/For-Business-Owners>

<sup>45</sup> Lackawanna County Government. (n.d.). *Lackawanna County COVID-19 Creative Community Resources: FAQ on Guidance and Funding for our Creative Community*. <https://www.lackawannacounty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-13-Lack-Creative-Community-Resources.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Bar Am, J., Furstenthal, L., Jorge, F., & Roth, E. (2020, December 14). *Innovation in a crisis: Why it is more critical than ever*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/innovation-in-a-crisis-why-it-is-more-critical-than-ever#>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

platforms and advertisements, and the sharing of economic business ideas. The Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership hosted some of these programs, which included but were not limited to: Business After Hours,<sup>48</sup> Connect for Coffee,<sup>49</sup> the Erie Ambassador Program,<sup>50</sup> and Young Erie Professionals (YEP).<sup>51</sup> Other organizations, such as the Manufacturer & Business Association in Erie, gave support through the services and benefits their association offered to individuals in Erie County like specialized training.<sup>52</sup> A common theme among localized programming was the need for adaptability and advanced preparations. Businesses were challenged with developing new and unique ways to adapt to the rapidly changing economy.

Some common methods of changing service models included online platforms for advertising and transactions, transitioning to curbside pickup and moving some services outside. Online business and e-commerce became a salvation for many businesses when safety precautions and social distancing became more common. In the entertainment industry and museums, some service model innovations included creating and increasing efficiency for digital content and “generating new content (for example, sports retrospectives) to fill the void in programming created by the suspension in sports leagues.”<sup>53</sup> The Erie County Economic Development Corporation, along with the Dorn Foundation and Erie County Community Foundation, offered to provide financial support to small businesses that were “making strategic pivots to keep their business going strong despite the pandemic” by offering the RISE Small Business Innovation Grant. Many of the companies that received grants had some element of shifting business online as part of their pandemic response.<sup>54</sup>

On March 19, 2020 in response to COVID-19, Erie County Council and the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (“ECGRA”) created the Erie County COVID-19 Response Fund, which included zero-interest loan programs for small business and civic institutions negatively impacted by COVID-19. Of the available two million dollars, \$800,000 of those dollars were designated to small business loans and \$250,000 to the Erie County Redevelopment Authority for mid-size business loans.<sup>55</sup> In early April 2020, it became clear that the economic shutdown

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<sup>48</sup> ECGRA. (n.d.). *Business After Hours - Erie Regional Chamber & Growth Partnership*. <https://www.eriepa.com/get-connected/business-after-hours>

<sup>49</sup> ECGRA. (n.d.). *Get Connected in the Erie Community - Erie Regional Chamber & Growth Partnership*. <https://www.eriepa.com/get-connected/connect4coffee>

<sup>50</sup> ECGRA. (n.d.). *Erie Ambassadors - Erie Regional Chamber & Growth Partnership*. <https://www.eriepa.com/take-action/become-erie-ambassador>

<sup>51</sup> Young Erie Professionals. (n.d.). *Networking for Young Professionals - Young Erie Professionals*. <https://www.yeperie.org/>

<sup>52</sup> Manufacturer & Business Association. (2021, January 20). *COVID-19 Employer Resources*. <https://www.mbausa.org/covid-19/>

<sup>53</sup> Ross, S. (2020, October 25). *ALL HANDS ON DECK IN SUPPORT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP - MOVING ONLINE*. Erie County Economic Development. <https://www.eriecountyedc.org/post/all-hands-on-deck-in-support-of-entrepreneurship-moving-online>

<sup>54</sup> Erie County, PA. (2020, November 18). *Erie County COVID-19 Emergency Business Grant Program – Erie County, PA*. <https://eriecountypa.gov/covid-19/erie-county-covid-19-emergency-business-grant-program/>

<sup>55</sup> YourErie.com. (2020a, March 19). *ECGRA to earmark gaming revenue and tax dollars for COVID-19 relief*. <https://www.yourerie.com/news/local-news/ecgra-to-earmark-gaming-revenue-and-tax-dollars-for-covid-19-relief/>

would cause unprecedented damage to small businesses.<sup>56</sup> As described above, the CARES Act was enacted at this time at a federal level. Almost immediately, experts noted that the federal funding for small businesses would not be sufficient and that local funding would play a key role in the economic sustainability of small businesses. ECGRA's Bridge Fund Loan was highlighted in a report by Nowak Metro Finance Lab in collaboration with the Accelerator for America as an example of one of the early public authority driven funds to address getting access to the most vulnerable businesses. The funds were provided to Bridgeway Capital, a community development financial institution, to process loan applications and distribute the money.<sup>57</sup> The white paper also highlighted other types of funding opportunities created across the country. In the conclusion, recognition that local efforts to keep businesses viable would have to go beyond federal relief. "[L]ocal funds are intensely focused on the smallest of the businesses, particularly microbusinesses owned by people of color which often operate outside the mainstream banking system...we conservatively estimate that local relief funds should be capitalized at \$25 billion to meet the magnitude of need before them."<sup>58</sup>

Local businesses have been challenged to innovate to meet the evolving impacts of the pandemic. Across the country, local governments and private businesses are working together to solve the issues presented by COVID-19.<sup>59</sup> For instance, Giles County, Virginia implemented a centralized gift card program for local businesses that can be purchased online through the county to promote local businesses that increased the value when redeemed. The additional purchasing power was subsidized by local meal taxes and other tourism-related tax revenues. The Erie Downtown Partnership was also able to offer this for downtown businesses.<sup>60</sup> Dane County, Wisconsin, created a curbside challenge to promote the use of curbside services through a monthly drawing for gift cards for those that posted pictures of using curbside pick-up with an applicable hashtag. In Erie County, restaurants and businesses, as well as the Erie County Library, began offering curbside.<sup>61</sup> The Erie Reader published updated lists of eateries that were open for business, including those that were available for carry-out, delivery and/or patio and continued to update the site as businesses began reopening.<sup>62</sup> Evaluating what other counties did to support local businesses, whether through local funding programs or creative programs, provides Erie County an opportunity to benchmark its responsiveness to the

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<sup>56</sup> Drexel University. (n.d.). *Relief Fund Lessons*. Nowak Metro Finance Lab. [https://drexel.edu/nowak-lab/publications/reports/Relief\\_Fund\\_Lessons/](https://drexel.edu/nowak-lab/publications/reports/Relief_Fund_Lessons/)

<sup>57</sup> Katz, B., Higgins, C., Saadine, M., & Schalliol, F. (n.d.). *Saving Small Business: Emerging Typologies of Local Relief Funds*. Drexel University. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d9f9365f67b454b1ce2dc2f/t/5e88ae0e94f18a065238576a/1586015768358/Saving+Small+Businesses%E2%80%94Emerging+Typologies+of+Local+Relief+Funds.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> National Association of Counties. (n.d.). *County Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Small Business Support*. <https://www.naco.org/covid19/topic/county-economies/small-business-support>

<sup>60</sup> Erie Downtown Partnership. (n.d.). *Shop Local, Support Local*. <https://www.eriedowntown.com/members/gift-certificates/>

<sup>61</sup> YourErie.com. (2020, November 18). *Erie County Public Library transitioning to virtual and curbside services*. <https://www.yourerie.com/health/coronavirus/erie-county-public-library-transitioning-to-virtual-and-curbside-services/>

<sup>62</sup> Erie Reader. (2020, June 9). *Erie Dining Guide: Patio, Takeout, and Delivery*. <https://www.eriereader.com/article/erie-local-takeout-delivery-guide>

needs of local businesses. As described above, Erie County mobilized in several significant ways to mitigate some of the impacts on local businesses.

### **JCLA Business Speaker Series: Resources for Building Resiliency during Uncertain Times**

After researching the pandemic and its effects on Erie County, the Cohort concluded that an effective way to address crisis preparedness was to assist local businesses. Through discussions with business advocacy organizations and small business owners, the Cohort learned that local businesses were most likely to face challenges because of the economic impacts of the pandemic. In the process of interviewing these organizations, interviewees opined that the Erie region provided many resources to support local businesses, but there were some factors that led to businesses not utilizing these avenues. Some of the themes identified during our interviews included, but were not limited to:

- Inaccurate contact information
- Business owners' reluctance to seek assistance
- Unfamiliarity with business resources
- Limited networks becoming more difficult to utilize during the pandemic
- The membership costs associated with organizations
- Lack of response from support organizations

This information and analysis became the framework and foundation for the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Class of 2020 Erie Business Educational Speaker Series. The mission was to support small businesses and provide them with the information they need to weather a crisis with economic implications. The Cohort created four public sessions that each addressed an area of significant impact to businesses due to COVID-19, along with the support of several professionals and experts. The sessions provided live resources and guidance to local businesses and the residents of Erie County.

After interviewing local businesses, nonprofits, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, as well as the Gannon University's Small Business Development Center, the Cohort determined that this project should focus on Erie businesses. There are several other important aspects of preparedness that impact the viability of businesses, which include financial preparedness, business preparedness, flexibility in service models, and physical safety. The Cohort created and delivered four sessions during its ***JCLA Business Speaker Series: Resources for Building Resiliency during Uncertain Times*** ("JCLA Speaker Series"). The presentations were delivered over four, one-hour sessions through Jefferson's Facebook Live platform during January and early February 2021, as described in more detail below. Once completed, the sessions were posted on the Jefferson Educational Society's website to stream on-demand as a free resource.

#### **SESSION 1: "How to Help Your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Financial Resources Available for Erie Businesses"**

The first session of the JCLA Speaker Series was entitled, "How to Help Your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Financial Resources Available for Erie Businesses" and took place

on Tuesday, January 12, 2021.<sup>63</sup> This session was designed to address one of the most important pieces of business survival during the COVID-19 pandemic, financial resources. The CARES Act's Paycheck Protection Program ("PPP") provides loans targeted to small businesses to help keep their workers employed during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.<sup>64</sup> It also offers loan forgiveness to borrowers maintaining a high percentage of employees on payroll.<sup>65</sup> Given the limited availability of PPP money, the extended length of this pandemic, as well as the social distancing restrictions necessary to maintain the safety of citizens, the PPP loan program was not sufficient and led to and will continue to lead to business closures. Since not all businesses in Erie that applied for Payment Protection Plan ("PPP") funding were granted the loan, and for those who received an 8-week loan, such loans have already expired and are in the forgiveness phase. Loans that were issued for 24 weeks are going to enter their forgiveness phase this winter. This session provided Erie County businesses with information on the types of loans that are available and how to prepare to submit applications for such loans.

The objectives of the session were to provide information to Erie small business about Small Business Administration (SBA) loans and what other options were available to keep businesses afloat amidst the challenges of this pandemic to help address the financial bottom line. The session addressed misconceptions about obtaining financing and provide information about how to best prepare to apply for these loans and what type of information will be requested. Lastly, the session focused on the CARES Act PPP loan forgiveness and ongoing PPP loan opportunities.

The presentation was a panel discussion with Nathan Ross, Commercial Credit Analyst at Northwest Bank, Rebecca Styn, Director of Special Initiatives for the Erie County Redevelopment Authority and Chris Groner, President of Capital, Finance, and Lending at Erie County Redevelopment Authority. The conversation was moderated by Daniel Salamone from the 2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort.

Nathan Ross addressed PPP loans, highlighting the differences of the first phase of funding in 2020 (first draw) and the second phase in early 2021 (second draw), loan amount calculations addressing evolving formulas used for certain sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. He also described the Small Business Administration ("SBA"). financing opportunities for loans, including the Economic Injury Disaster loans from the SBA. He compared these with conventional bank financing and provided advice on opportunities for businesses to prepare its balance sheet for future bank financing needs.

Chris Groner described opportunities available for through the Erie County Redevelopment Authority ("ECRA"), which included project funding opportunities, requirements for funding including bank financing approval prior to seeking ECRA funding. He also shared his work with the Erie City Redevelopment Authority which lends in a similar manner to Erie County businesses but is limited only to businesses within the Erie City limits.

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<sup>63</sup> Jefferson Educational Society. (n.d.). *Upcoming Events & Classes*. <https://www.jeserie.org/events/details/how-to-help-your-business-survive-the-covid-pandemic-financial-resources-available-for-erie-businesses>

<sup>64</sup> Morgan Lewis. (2020, March 27). *CARES Act: Paycheck Protection Program Provides Small Business Loans to Support Employees*. <https://www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2020/08/cares-act-paycheck-protection-program-provides-small-business-loans-to-support-employees>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



Rebecca Styn, as both the owner of a local business and position as the Director for Special Initiatives for the Erie County Redevelopment Authority shared the past grant opportunities arising from the CARES Act and discussed the process for checking when new opportunities become available. She also discussed the Artesian Entrepreneurial Grant available through the CARES Act funding. And shared how business owners may learn of new grant opportunities, she also discussed information for startup businesses looking for grant funding. This session is housed in the Jefferson archives and can be accessed in the future by local business.<sup>66</sup>

## **SESSION 2: “Making the Pivot to New Models of Service”**

The second session of the JCLA Speaker Series was titled, “Making the Pivot to New Models of Service” and took place on Tuesday, January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021. In this session, four local small business owners. R.J. Messenger (Iron Empire Clothing), Sara Kim (Lollie & Co.), Jason Lavery (Lavery Brewing Company), and Josh Layhue (Ghost Creativ) took part in a roundtable discussion to share their COVID-19 stories and the impact it had on their businesses. They discussed the pros and cons, as well as the creative opportunities that they pursued, and whether they will keep some of the changes.

All four business owners were faced with challenges out of the gate. Lavery’s second location in Titusville, PA couldn’t withstand the pandemic and was permanently closed. Iron Empire and Ghost Creative work mostly with Business-to-Business clients and these two businesses were hit hard. Prior to the pandemic, Iron Empire’s screen printing was 90% of sales for the previous two years. Ghost Creativ signed two of their biggest contracts to date before COVID-19 and one month into the pandemic, cancelled both contracts. Lollie & Co. was solely a brick-and-mortar store and once the pandemic hit, Sara quickly had to change to an online presence to survive.

Of course, each business found a silver lining in the challenges they faced. Lavery’s has not had to touch their savings account. In addition to this massive achievement, Lavery’s has had one customer “Mr. Mark” who comes every business operating day to purchase to-go food & beer. Iron Empire started “Locals Supporting Locals” which was a way for small businesses to print T-shirts without having an overhead cost. This helped not only Iron Empire but small businesses who were struggling as well. Ghost Creativ reached out to small businesses in the beginning of the pandemic and was looking to just help anyone who needed it. This worked in their favor when Lollie & Co. showed up to learn more and ending up hiring Ghost Creativ to build their online presence. Once Lollie & Co took off online, they had over 200+ subscription boxes they sent out each month. This proved to be terribly overwhelming, but it meant all 6 full time employees could stay on board. Moving forward, each business plans to continue to

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<sup>66</sup> Jefferson Educational Society. (2021, January 12). *How to Help your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Financial Resources Available for Erie Businesses*. Facebook.  
<https://www.facebook.com/JeffersonErie/videos/4072519926091752/>

pivot their models of service as needed to keep up with the changing pandemic. This session is housed in the Jefferson archives and can be accessed in the future by local business.<sup>67</sup>

### **SESSION 3: “Strategies for De-escalation and Improving Mental Health”**

The third session of the JCLA Speaker Series was entitled, “Strategies for De-escalation and Improving Mental Health,” and took place on Tuesday, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. This session was attended by 12 people and had 217 views the very next day. This session was designed to address the need to build coping skills and resilience, as well as to understand methods for de-escalation. De-escalation strategies and techniques to address mental health are especially critical during a time of crisis.

There were two goals for the presentation. The first goal was how to build personal resilience. The session emphasized improving self-awareness as it related to de-escalating others. The second part was identifying signs of escalation and learning methods for successful prevention and reduction of escalation.

During the session, Mandy Fauble, PhD, LCSW, Director of Clinical Care Services at UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Safe Harbor, addressed specific methods to improve mental health and identified how personal styles impact communication. Dr. Fauble discussed effective communication during crisis. Coping strategies were reviewed to reduce stress responses. Methods detailed include self-awareness, preparing for change, and embracing and practicing uncomfortable situations. Dr. Fauble explained there are three methods to build resilience. These include reducing stress that you can control, building upon coping skills and resources, and increasing positivity and self-talk.

The session is housed in the Jefferson archive and can be accessed for those who could not attend.<sup>68</sup>

### **SESSION 4: “How to Help Your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources”**

The fourth and final session of the JCLA Speaker Series was entitled, “How to Help Your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources” and took place on Tuesday, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. The fourth session included business preparedness plans and human resource policies. The topics were primarily grouped together because both focused on mitigating risk. Additionally, both topics require diligent updates based on changing business needs and practices.

The Risk Management section of session four was presented by Gary Sullivan, Program Directory & Assistant Professor at Mercyhurst University. The Cohort’s declared objectives included an introduction to business preparedness plans, a walk-through of creating a plan,

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<sup>60</sup>Jefferson Educational Society Of Erie. (2021, January 20). *Making the Pivot to New Models of Service*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAws\\_2KuOF4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAws_2KuOF4&feature=youtu.be)

<sup>68</sup> Jefferson Educational Society of Erie. (2021, January 27). *Strategies for De-escalation and Improving Mental Health*. Facebook. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWGP33uha5I&feature=youtu.be>

stressing the importance of revisiting the plan and modifying as necessary, and an opportunity to consult with the subject matter expert in the form of questions and answers.

The Human Resource section in the latter half of session four was presented by Rachel Tserkovniak, Human Resources Consultant and Trainer at the Erie Manufacturer & Business Association. During initial planning sessions multiple objectives were discussed in and around HR, however a common theme of maintaining staff levels, staff health, and staffing flexibility were most frequently identified as desired discussion points. This session is housed in the Jefferson archives and can be accessed in the future by local business.<sup>69</sup>

### **Strategic Marketing for the JCLA Speaker Series**

A strategic marketing plan was implemented to support the creation and dissemination of the JCLA Speaker Series. Marketing materials were created, which included a Jefferson Educational Society (“JES”) Flyer that was shared with partner organizations (see Appendix II), Facebook event pages were created for each of the four sessions (see Appendix III), and Facebook covers were designed for Facebook promotions posts (see Appendix IV). In conjunction with the JES, these materials were posted on the JES website, promoted through JES’s listserv, as well as shared through the JES Facebook page.

The Erie Times News ran an article on the Speaker Series on December 29, 2020. (See Appendix V). Erie News Now ran a piece promoting the event. Other grassroots' efforts to publicize the Speaker Series included but were not limited to sharing the marketing material with the Corry Chamber of Commerce and the Borough of Edinboro Manager as well as the Edinboro Neighbors, Concerns for Corry and McKean Neighbors and Outskirts community Facebook groups. Additionally, the City of Erie government also broadcasted the session live on its website during each session. Members of the JCLA Cohort and speakers participating in the speaker series were also encouraged to share these materials with their networks.

### **Evaluation of Speaker Series**

During the creation of the project plan for the Speaker Series, the Cohort noted the importance of developing a measurement tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the sessions. One survey was created for all sessions and was housed and disseminated using Google Workspace.

At the conclusion of each session, participants were provided with a short program evaluation. This survey identified the effectiveness of the provided resources. A brief 13-question survey identified our attendee's business sectors, opinions about program effectiveness and usefulness, along with the most preferred means to have resources sent to them. They were able to identify not only the reaction and feedback to such resources, but the best method to help continue providing such resources to interested businesses in need. See Appendix VI.

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<sup>69</sup> Jefferson Educational Society of Erie. (2020, February 3). *Small Business Resilience Toolkit: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources*. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/JeffersonErie/videos/209206207603624>

Survey data results were positive; however, the amount of survey responses fell short of the Cohort's original expectations. All respondents ranked the sessions as helpful, and the length of session time, 1 hour, as "perfect." All survey responses indicated that weekdays, in the later evening (5-8) were preferred for this type of content. Facebook was the number one choice for broadcasting this type of content as well. Most importantly, all respondents said they would be interested in attending this type of content in the future. Following the tabulation of survey results, the Cohort discussed the results and reflected on the number of low responses. The Cohort did not have a baseline to evaluate what an expected ratio of responses would be but recognized that it was lower than anticipated.

There were also opportunities for improvement. There was no link for non-Facebook viewers. Survey links were posted at the beginning and end of each session but viewers who did not attend for the entire session were not aware of the survey. Finally, the survey link directed participants to a Google Form which was not integrated into Facebook. Lastly, the final session took place shortly before the conclusion of the academy, providing little opportunity for evaluations to be provided.

## **Conclusion**

Despite an unprecedented global pandemic, the 2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort was able to assess community needs through research, experience, and interviews with local businesses, business support organizations, and nonprofits. As a result of the Cohort's research, they determined that the mandated closure of all nonessential businesses, in addition to the mitigation efforts that followed, had a vastly negative impact on the Erie County economy.

The Cohort's group action project choice reflected the desire to provide freely accessible information in a timely manner to businesses in Erie County. This resulted in a four-part business speaker series where each part addressed different areas of need – financial resources, new business models, mental health resources, and preparedness plans. These topics were consolidated from a broader list of possible subjects related to business resiliency. Unfortunately, due to time and resource constraints, additional sessions were not developed. However, the Cohort identified possible topic recommendations for the future to benefit Erie businesses. Additional sections have potential to focus on opportunities, challenges, and considerations for minority business owners in Erie County. Highlighting collaborations between businesses, such as the Lake Erie Wine Trail, can provide insight into how such partnerships are successfully implemented and beneficial. A diverse group of panelists from the public and private sectors could offer free or low-cost support services to educate business owners and address common misconceptions about barriers to entry and use of such services.

The Cohort's hope was that the Speaker Series would allow business owners continued access and support from these resources. The information covered in these sessions was intended to assist with business pandemic preparedness and increase resiliency, even during these unprecedented times.

## Appendices

### Appendix I. – News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **JES Announces JCLA Business Speaker Series Resources for Building Resiliency during Uncertain Times**

**(Erie, Pennsylvania, Date)** – As the world finds itself facing unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the **2020 cohort of the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy**, a well-established seven-month long exercise in civic education and engagement in Erie County offered by the Jefferson Educational Society, was tasked with a group action project addressing “Leadership in a Time of Crisis.” After interviewing local businesses, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, the Corry Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Gannon University Small Business Development Center, the cohort decided that there are important aspects of preparedness that contribute to the strength of a small business. Therefore, the Jefferson will sponsor a four-part speaker series implemented by the Leadership Academy to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Erie County’s small business community. The series will address financial and human resource preparedness, flexibility in service models, and physical and mental safety.

The series opens **January 12, 2021** with “**How to Help your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Financial Resources Available for Erie Businesses.**” Join Rebecca Styn, director of Special Initiatives for the Erie County Redevelopment Authority (ERDA); Nate Ross, a commercial credit analyst at Northwest Bank; and Chris Groner, president of Capital, Finance and Lending at ERDA as they provide information about Small Business Administration loans and what other private and public options are available to keep businesses afloat during the pandemic. This session will address misconceptions about obtaining financing, how businesses can best prepare for these loans, and PPP loan forgiveness.

On **January 19, 2021**, the cohort will present “**Making the Pivot to New Models of Service.**” Local small business owners R.J. Messenger (Iron Empire Clothing), Sara Kim (Lollie & Co.), Jason Lavery (Lavery Brewing Company), and Josh Layhue (Ghost Creativ) will take part in a roundtable discussion to share their COVID stories and the impact it had on their businesses. They will discuss the pros and cons, as well as the creative opportunities that they pursued, and whether they will keep some of the changes.

During the **January 26, 2021** session, the group will discuss “**Strategies for De-escalation and Improving Mental Health**” with Mandy Fauble, director of Clinical Care Services at UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Safe Harbor in Erie, Pennsylvania. She will present strategies for helping customers who may be agitated about following safety measures, such as wearing a mask. Fauble, who has a Ph.D. in Social Welfare, will also offer tips for keeping or achieving good mental health during challenging times.

The series concludes **February 2, 2021** with “**Small Business Resilience Toolkit: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources.**” Gary Sullivan, program director & assistant professor at Mercyhurst University’s F.W. Hirt Erie Insurance Risk Management Program; and Rachel Tserkovniak, Human Resources consultant and trainer at the Manufacturer & Business Association, will supply the tools necessary for building a resilient business and the human resources tools that should be included in that effort.

All sessions will be **livestreamed at 7 p.m.** on the Jefferson Educational Society’s Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/JeffersonErie](http://www.facebook.com/JeffersonErie)) and will be made available later for on-demand streaming on the Jefferson’s website ([www.jeserie.org](http://www.jeserie.org)).

About the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy: Launched in 2015, the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy prepares Erie professionals, ages 25-45, for meaningful, fulfilling, and impactful engagement in their community by providing a dynamic and unique environment that fosters teamwork, growth, and learning through a transformative experience for those seeking to be change-agents for their community.

The 2020-21 JCLA cohort includes: Lauren Azotea, James Omar Clea, John Durlin, Shelby Graml, Randalee Gross, Michelle Hartmann, Antonio Howard, Sara Little, LeeAnn Pukylo, Deng Rag, Belinda Rogers, Nate Ross, Daniel Salamone, Drevell Showers, Antonio Stapp, Jeff Styborski, Robert Tate, and Kristen Weibel.

More information on the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy can be found at [www.jeserie.org/civic-leadership-academy](http://www.jeserie.org/civic-leadership-academy).

For comments or more information about this speaker series or to request interviews, please contact:

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Appendix III. – Facebook Event Pages

*2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces*  
**How to Help Your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic:  
Financial Resources Available for Erie Businesses**  
January 12 || 7:00 PM || Jefferson FaceBook Live



**Chris Groner**  
President of Capital,  
Finance and Lending at  
Erie County  
Redevelopment Authority



**Rebecca Styn**  
Director of Special  
Initiatives for the  
Erie County  
Redevelopment Authority



**Nate Ross**  
Commercial Credit Analyst  
at Northwest Bank

**JEFFERSON**  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

*Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency  
During Uncertain Times  
1/12 | 1/19 | 1/26 | 2/2*

*2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces*  
**Making the Pivot to New Models of Service**  
January 19 || 7:00 PM || Jefferson FaceBook Live

RJ Messenger



**RJ Messenger**  
Owner, Iron Empire  
Clothing; Co-Owner,  
Underdog BBQ

Sara Kim



**Sara Kim**  
Owner, Lollie & Co.

Jason Lavery



**Jason Lavery**  
President and  
Co-Founder of  
Lavery Brewing

Josh Layhue



**Josh Layhue**  
Owner of  
Ghost Creativ

**JEFFERSON**  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

*Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency  
During Uncertain Times  
1/12 | **1/19** | 1/26 | 2/2*



2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces

## Strategies for De-Escalation and Improving Mental Health

January 26 || 7:00 PM || Jefferson FaceBook Live



Director of Clinical  
Care Services at  
UPMC Western  
Behavioral Health at  
Safe Harbor

Mandy Fauble

**JEFFERSON**  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency  
During Uncertain Times  
1/12 | 1/19 | **1/26** | 2/2

2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces

## Small Business Resilience Toolkit: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources

February 2 || 7:00 PM || Jefferson FaceBook Live



Program Director &  
Assistant Professor  
at Mercyhurst  
University of the  
F.W. Hirt Erie  
Insurance Risk  
Management  
Program

Gary Sullivan



Human Resources  
Consultant and  
Trainer at  
Manufacturer  
& Business  
Association

Rachel Tserkovniak

**JEFFERSON**  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency  
During Uncertain Times  
1/12 | 1/19 | 1/26 | **2/2**

## Appendix IV. – Facebook Promotion

2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces

Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency During Uncertain Times.

How to Help Your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic:  
Financial Resources Available for Erie Business  
With: Rebecca Styn, Chris Groner, and Nate Ross

Tuesday, January 12, 2021 || 7:00 PM

JEFFERSON  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

This banner features a dark grey background with a yellow diagonal stripe on the left and three vertical yellow stripes on the right. The text is white and yellow.

2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces

Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency During Uncertain Times.

Making the Pivot to New Models of Service  
With: RJ Messenger, Sara Kim, Jason Lavery, and Josh Layhue

Tuesday, January 19, 2021 || 7:00 PM

JEFFERSON  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

This banner features a dark grey background with a yellow diagonal stripe on the left and three vertical yellow stripes on the right. The text is white and yellow.

2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces

Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency During Uncertain Times.

Strategies for De-escalation and Improving Mental Health  
With: Mandy Fauble

Tuesday, January 26, 2021 || 7:00 PM

JEFFERSON  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

This banner features a dark grey background with a yellow diagonal stripe on the left and three vertical yellow stripes on the right. The text is white and yellow.

2020 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy introduces

Erie County Business Speaker Series:  
Resources for Building Resiliency During Uncertain Times.

Small Business Resilience Toolkit:  
Preparedness Plans and Human Resources  
With: Gary Sullivan and Rachel Tserkovniak

Tuesday, February 2, 2021 || 7:00 PM

JEFFERSON  
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

This banner features a dark grey background with a yellow diagonal stripe on the left and three vertical yellow stripes on the right. The text is white and yellow.

## Appendix V – Erie Times News Article

LOCAL

# Jefferson Educational Society series: COVID-19's effects on Erie County small businesses

**Erie Times-News**

Published 3:43 p.m. ET Dec. 29, 2020 | Updated 12:32 p.m. ET Dec. 30, 2020



Open sign in a small business shop after Covid-19 pandemic. The Jefferson Educational Society will present a speaker series addressing the COVID-19 impact on Erie County small businesses. *LeoPatrizi, Getty Images*

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The Jefferson Educational Society is sponsoring a four-part speaker series to address the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on Erie County's small business community.

The society's Civic Leadership Academy was tasked with a group project addressing "Leadership in a Time of Crisis."

After interviewing local businesses, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, the Corry Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Gannon University Small Business Development Center, the cohort decided there are important aspects of preparedness that contribute to the strength of a small business.

The speaker series will address financial and human resource preparedness, flexibility in service models, and physical and mental safety.

All sessions will be streamed live at 7 p.m. on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JeffersonErie/](https://www.facebook.com/JeffersonErie/) and will be made available later for on-demand streaming at [www.jeserie.org/videos](https://www.jeserie.org/videos).

## Appendix VI. - Survey

Which presentation did you attend?

Session 1: How to Help your Business Survive the COVID Pandemic: Financial Resources  
Available for Erie Businesses

Session 2: Making the Pivot to New Models of Service

Session 3: Strategies for De-escalation and Improving Mental Health

Session 4: Small Business Resilience Toolkit: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources

Did you find the content helpful?

Yes, very helpful

Somewhat helpful

Not at all helpful

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you find the length of the session appropriate?

Yes (perfect)

No – could have gone longer

No – it was too long

4. How did you hear about this session?

Radio ad

Word-of-mouth

Business/trade association

Facebook/Linked In

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your industry:

Advertising & Media

Business & Professional Services

Employment & Staffing

Government & Education

Industrial & Manufacturing

Pets & Veterinary

Religious Organizations

Sports & Recreation

Arts, Culture & Entertainment

Communications

Family, Community & Nonprofit

Health Care

Lodging, Travel, Tourism

Public Utilities & Environment

Restaurants, Food & Beverages

Automotive, Aviation & Marine

Computers, IT & Technology

Finance & Insurance

Home & Garden

Personal Services & Care

Real Estate & Construction

Shopping & Specialty Retail

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your company:

Sole proprietor

Family business

Micro business (3-24 employees)

Small business (24-249 employees)

Large business (249+ employees)

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the best time of the day/week to attend this type of content?

Weekends 8-12

Weekends 12-4

M-F 8-5

M-F 5-8

M-Tu 8-5

M-Tu 5-8

Do you have any feedback for the speaker(s)?

Were you able to take one (or more) idea/point/takeaway that will help you?

Yes

No

Maybe

Are you likely to share this speaker series with a friend, colleague, or trade group?

Yes

No

Maybe

Would you be interested in attending additional sessions?

Yes

No

Maybe

What is the best way to advertise this type of content to you?

Radio ad

Word-of-mouth

Business/trade association

Facebook/Linked In

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any additional topics you would like to see covered in future sessions?

## **Appendix VII. – View Statistics**

- “How to Help your Business Survive COVID Pandemic: Financial Resources Available for Erie Businesses” on 1/12/21
  - 673 Facebook Views
  - 6 YouTube Views
- “Making the Pivot to New Models of Service” on 1/19/21
  - Part 1- 1.3K Facebook Views
  - Part 2- 960 Facebook Views
  - 19 YouTube Views



- “Strategies for De-Escalation and Improving Mental Health” on 1/26/21
  - 280 Facebook Views
  - 16 YouTube Views
- “Small Business Toolkit: Preparedness Plans and Human Resources” on 2/2/21
  - 158 Facebook Views
  - 4 YouTube Views

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