

City of Evanston

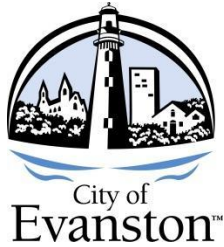
Post-COVID19 Action Plan

Draft: For Community Input

Building a Healthier, Thriving, and More Resilient Community



Once thriving business districts need out attention, investment and love.



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May 10, 2021

Dear Evanston Community Members,

Fourteen months ago, on March 15, 2020, I declared a local State of Emergency to enhance our City's ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, Evanston has embraced a "whole-of-community" response, working hand in hand to meet the needs of our neighbors and to achieve one of the lowest infection rates and highest vaccination rates in the state. This didn't happen by chance — it happened because we all worked together to coordinate and implement an organized, community-wide response.

Today, I'm asking that we take this same approach, which has produced such remarkable results, toward our community's recovery. No single individual, activist, or organization will solve all of our many challenges. It will take all of us, working in unison, to build back better.

Despite our tremendous efforts to date, there is much work to do. People are struggling with their mental, physical, and economic health. Inequalities have been laid bare in our health and education systems. Businesses are struggling after months of being closed or limited in their operations. The list goes on.

These challenges are great, but our opportunities are even greater. I am confident that if we continue to implement an organized, whole-of-community approach, our recovery will be just as strong as our response to this pandemic.

Please take some time to review the Post-COVID-19 Action Plan outlined in the following pages of this document. **This plan is a draft**, and is intended to solicit your reactions, feedback and ideas. Your input will help Mayor Biss, the 81st Evanston City Council, and the City Manager's Office decide how best to rebuild an Evanston that is more vibrant, healthy, sustainable, resilient, equitable, and inclusive.

Sincerely,

Stephen H. Hagerty
Mayor, City of Evanston

The purpose of this document is to share information that the City of Evanston has compiled coming out of COVID19, provide a brief history of actions taken to address the pandemic, establish the principles and goals of actions that need to be taken, and lay out a comprehensive list of strategies for each action.

Factors Affecting Evanston's Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Evanston's ability to recover from the pandemic and move forward into a new post-pandemic world must take into account the following factors:

- Health disparities that existed in the City of Evanston before COVID have grown
- Retail/commercial areas need to be re-imagined
- Restaurants and retailers need help to re-establish their businesses
- Outdoor activities might be safer than being indoors
- Educational attainment may be decreasing for all
- Human interactions will adjust
- More focus needs to be placed on achieving a state of well-being instead of treating illness to overcome health disparities
- Uncertain time frame for the City budget to recover
- A hybrid model of in-office and remote work may reduce office space requirements
- Seniors may be less inclined to move into congregate settings and less comfortable returning to in-person activities in crowded settings
- The inequality gap between the rich and the poor has grown
- Strategic use of funding from the American Rescue Plan is critical to Evanston's successful recover

Current Situation

COVID-19 transmissions across the U.S. have come in distinct waves both nationally and locally, with concurrent waves experiencing progressively higher rates of infection and death. Illinois experienced two distinct waves of infection, with variants of the COVID

virus emerging into more contagious strains. The physical and economic challenges associated with mitigating this virus are becoming increasingly complex.

Additional variants reported by the Centers for Disease Control (C.D.C.)

have also emerged from South Africa, called 1.351, and Brazil, called P.1. As COVID continues to spread, the potential for viral mutations to proliferate grows and the opportunity for variants to become deadlier exists.

Across the globe, COVID-19 transmissions and mortality rates have had a disproportionate impact on our elderly population and our BIPOC. Data nationwide supports that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities have been hit hardest by the coronavirus.¹ Black Americans, according to the CDC, are 2.5 times more likely to die from COVID-19 compared to their White counterparts.²

Lower socioeconomic communities who have barriers to accessing routine health care are typically minorities and more notably Black and Latinx populations. Multigenerational living arrangements tend to foster viral transmissions more quickly in congregate settings, with the Centers for Disease Control estimating 53% of secondary SARS COV2 infections result from household transmissions.³

These populations have also experienced greater exposure by working primarily in essential service

industries. Black and Latinx communities are further compromised by experiencing decades of limited access to healthy food supplies and limited healthcare services which have paid a significant toll.⁴

Before the pandemic, the City did not have sufficient shelter beds to accommodate all persons experiencing homelessness within the community. With the onset of the pandemic, Evanston's homeless population has grown with many unstably housed individuals and families; for example, people living in close quarters with multiple family members, those living with relatives in nursing homes, etc., being forced out onto the streets. Additionally, due to the closure of faith-based day shelters, limited hours at libraries and other public buildings, the City has fewer safe spaces for residents experiencing homelessness to congregate and safely access toilet/washing facilities.

According to local mental health and social service providers, Evanston's mental health network was stretched prior to COVID-19 and has now become even more strained during the pandemic.

Residents have experienced compounded trauma as a result of the pandemic. If unaddressed on a community-wide scale, residents will experience more severe mental health

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dr-fauci-coronavirus-black-communities-havoc-covid-19/>

² <https://covidtracking.com/race>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6944e1.htm>

⁴<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/racial-ethnic-disparities/index.html>

challenges, further straining public health systems.

COVID-19 has impacted many residents' ability to put food on the table financially and physically, with the elderly and other high-risk residents not being able to access grocery stores. The economic fallout has left residents, many of whom struggled financially before the pandemic, vulnerable to housing instability and food insecurity.

Based on a Digital Literacy Survey conducted in 2016, only 86% of Evanston residents had access to reliable high-speed internet at home. The three primary barriers which prevent access to the internet include affordability, literacy, and privacy. For students to learn, for job seekers to apply for opportunities, for individuals to access telehealth services, for worshipers to remotely attend religious services, for families to participate in the economy, residents need, more than ever, reliable and secure devices and convenient access to high-speed internet.

Restaurants who have actively combined outdoor dining experiences with robust carry-out and delivery



models have reported that year over year revenues are flat or modestly declined. The outdoor dining has helped.

On average, however, most businesses report revenue loss in the range of 50% year over year with outdoor dining. Early in the pandemic, restaurants reported revenue of just 10% to 20% of last year's sales (sales down 80 to 90 percent). Tax revenues year over year reflect the revenue declines. Sales and liquor taxes are down and declining compared to last year for the period ending May 31st.

There have been limited restaurant closures including Symphony's Cafe, Little Mexican Cafe, Stained Glass and Panera. Reza's opening has been delayed. Despite significant outdoor dining offerings, popular outdoor dining spots in all business districts have reported significant revenue reductions. Staff estimates the retail vacancy rate is closer to the 8% to 10% range.

Small independent retailers have reported revenue declines similar to restaurants. Some have implemented delivery and pick up models, subscription services, and online classes to supplement product sales. Bookstores report strong sales, perhaps as people are reading more during COVID-19 isolation. This is important to note as it suggests there is demand and support for unique local stores. The lesson from these book stores might be applicable to other retailers including

toys, clothing, and home furnishings. Staff will continue to connect with the retailers to determine how the City, Chamber and SSA's can help.

Evanston's hotel demand has plummeted. Evanston hotel demand is driven by Northwestern University - move in and move out weekends, parent weekends, athletics, conferences, etc. Evanston's corporate offices also generate significant hotel room nights. Weddings and other family gatherings are restricted by state health regulation. Business conferences have all been moved to virtual meetings.

Evanston's unemployment rate has essentially quadrupled from 3% to over 12% before settling to 10% in July 2020. The unemployment rate was at 5.8% as of March 2021. Evanston's workforce, on average, is highly educated with relatively high salaries. Unfortunately, the pandemic has impacted lower wage and lower educated service employees. On average, these tend to be minority workers.

Cancellation of virtually all live performances, film productions, events and festivals over the last year means many businesses in this sector may not return. This is likely to have long term



impacts on the supply chains, skills and services of our diverse small to medium businesses, as well as specialist sole proprietors, including artists and performers, who support these events.

The small to medium sector of community galleries, performance venues, sound recording studios, media services, production spaces and artist-run initiatives are the seedbeds of our culture. These are the places where artists and performers can experiment and take risks, nurture their talent and build audiences and new local content to renew our major cultural institutions.

The pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities within our city. This includes our socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, including people of color, people with disabilities, non-citizens, women, and homeless people. Children and the elderly have also been impacted significantly due to the restrictions on movement and access to the services they need.

The City has a critical role in supporting communities already unable to access essential services, support and food.

This will help reverse the long-term disproportionate impact on these groups.

An equitable society is founded on a principle that all people, no matter their income, should have access to the essentials of daily life. These include fresh and healthy food,

services such as health care and education, social support and equitable internet access. We would also expect recreational and cultural amenities to be accessible to all.

All people should be able to live in safe, sustainable housing that protects them from the elements, particularly extreme

weather events that are becoming more intense and frequent due to climate change. This is especially important if people are required to spend more time at home. Renters and those living in subsidized housing often live in homes that are not energy or water efficient, resulting in high utility bills.

In summary, the execution of this Action Plan will require a whole of community recovery effort, meaning an organized collaborative effort between all levels of government, all organizations, including businesses, non-profits, and support from all Evanstonians. The remainder of this plan discusses the guiding principles to our recovery, our action plan goals and the actions we will take to build back better post-COVID-19.

Guiding Principles for the Action Plan

- People are actively involved in shaping change needed for the recovery of their city and their future
- Recovery plan is responsive to the health directives of the government, led by stewardship and collaboration
- Decisions are evidence-based and allow a flexible response
- Funding is invested in capital improvement and other projects that spur economic and workforce development

Action Plan Goals

- Recovery results in a thriving economy
- Recovery results in a healthier community
- Recovery results in a more sustainable and resilient community
- Recovery is equitable and inclusive

Action Plan

- 1** Support businesses and organizations to innovate and adapt, and increase living wage jobs to reduce economic inequalities and provide economic opportunity for all residents
- 2** Strengthen community cohesion to build a resilient, sustainable and equitable community that supports the wellbeing of all residents and the opportunity to thrive
- 3** Safely manage public places and streets to support community life, education and business
- 4** Provide equitable digital and social service access for all residents

The Actions

Action area 1: Support businesses and organizations to innovate and adapt, and increase living wage jobs to reduce economic inequalities and provide economic opportunity for all residents

- Assist local businesses with workforce attraction efforts by helping train unemployed / underemployed Evanstonians to fill job openings
- Train local unemployed/underemployed residents to implement infrastructure improvement projects
- Continue to work with restaurants for outside dining options
- Provide financial support for creation of a food business and retail incubators to help startup businesses
- Provide tenant improvement allowances (i.e. space improvements) for existing businesses to help expand or adjust to post pandemic realities
- Ensure landlord support to bring space to vanilla box standards to help attract new businesses in vacant storefronts
- Leverage funding to existing or new office businesses to assist with expansion or relocation to Evanston based offices
- Support Northlight Theater's efforts to return to Downtown Evanston, serving as an economic engine
- Assist businesses with loans or grants who did not qualify for other government financial programs
- Advocate to federal, state and county governments for targeted support for arts and no net loss of cultural space
- Create a long lasting workforce development strategy
- Direct existing grant support to sustain cultural organizations and stimulate development opportunities for local creatives

- Use our communications channels to promote shop local and visit local to residents, workers and visitors
- Continue to explore opportunities for making space for culture in partnership with public and private sectors
- Enable diverse local cultural infrastructure and activation through the City's Open and Creative planning reform
- Continue to invest in local festivals and major events that demonstrate vibrancy and encourage local Evanstonians and others from around the state and country to visit

Action area 2: Strengthen community cohesion to build a resilient, sustainable and equitable community that supports the well being of all residents and the opportunity to thrive

- Identify representatives from the community and community-based organizations to build a collaborative network to help facilitate the recovery effort.
- Identify what the needs are for the disabled community then build a partnership with the representatives from that community
- Expand broadband services to residents to eliminate the digital divide and offers equitable communications and information services to provide:
 - Capacity for remote learning and work for all residents
 - Electronic services such as well-being check in for homebound seniors and the medically-fragile community
- Promote holistic wellbeing for all residents:
 - "Wellness," that is not just going to the doctor when you are sick. Instead, it is focused on preventative healthcare, inclusive of physical and mental health, plus dental and eye care
 - Access to education from birth to address financial inequities that continue to disparately impact Blacks, Latinx and other POC
 - Economic well-being by providing financial education and estate planning, living wage jobs, asset building and intergenerational wealth transfer
- Support the development of healthy neighborhoods by collaboration between the health sector and community development by building:
 - Continue to leverage the City's financial and land resources, and modify zoning and building regulations to develop and preserve a range of housing types and tenures in economically integrated neighborhoods that are affordable, accessible, and meet the needs of Evanston residents
 - Encourage active, healthy lifestyles by developing walkable and bikeable neighborhoods that include amenities such as parks, sidewalks, bike paths, and public schools

- Invest in infrastructure to provide welcoming sidewalks, safe connected bicycle routes and quality parks

Action area 3: Safely manage public places and streets to support community life, education, and business

- Increase community connections through expanding public spaces
- Offer lunchtime and after school activities for students to encourage physical activity and provide a brief respite for parents
- Promote pre-k to 12 programming to improve educational achievement, grow the labor force, provide women-managed families with better employment opportunities and improved educational background, childcare, address increasing educational divide, technology, year-round camps, (ex. - 1,000 kids without access to internet)
- Adjust zoning options to promote home daycare options
- Empower communities to manage their own recovery by strengthening local connections through networks, events and forums
 - For example: supporting community celebrations at the end of the pandemic
- Speak and coordinate with schools and incorporate their plan into Citywide Action Plan
- Invest in city infrastructure to provide quality facilities to support essential functions
- New infrastructure including benches, cans, lighting, and artwork - improves appearance and experience for residents and visitors
- Review city parking systems
- Promote Evanston as a destination to live, work, play and learn
- Improve outdoor dining infrastructure
- Explore opportunities for outdoor market stands and infrastructure for retail french markets, food vending, etc.

Action area 4: Provide equitable digital and social service access for all residents

- Work with other government agencies and organizations working with people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless
- Determine long-term homeless shelter capacity needs and invest in the development of permanent 24/7 facility
- Match homeless residents with available resources, including Housing Choice Vouchers from the Housing Authority of Cook County
- Develop a comprehensive plan to monitor and prevent evictions and mortgage foreclosures

- Continue community outreach and education by Metropolitan Tenants Organization/Lawyers Committee for Better Housing regarding eviction moratoria requirements and tenant/landlord rights & responsibilities
 - Offer mediation services for landlords and tenants to work out payment plans, etc., to avoid evictions
- Work with Cook County Health and local providers including AMITA Saint Francis, Erie Family Health Center, and NorthShore University Health System, to improve access to health care, particularly for uninsured, underinsured, and undocumented residents
- Develop and maintain peer support groups to provide residents with critical social-emotional connection/guidance in partnership with the Evanston Public Library and National Alliance on Mental Illness - Cook County North Suburban and relieve the strained local mental health network
- Expand access to the City's prescription drug discount program
- Restructure the allocation process for Mental Health Board and CDBG funding to focus resources on underserved populations, especially disabled and BIPOC residents
- Use CARES Act CDBG-CV funding to provide additional Safety Net services for residents impacted by COVID-19 such as pop-up food pantries
- Develop an effective communication plan to:
 - Address food insecurity including how to apply for SNAP Benefits (food stamps), locations and hours of food pantries and congregate meals, and other food resources
 - Ensure Evanston residents understand how to access County and State emergency funding for housing, utility assistance, in-home medical services, and other needs
- Increase the number of computers, expand free Wi-Fi services at city buildings and increase hotspot access for individuals seeking employment in partnership with the Evanston Public Library to address the digital divide. Invest in the city fiber network to support these activities