

The Road to Recovery: Introduction¹

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This first publication in the *Road to Recovery* series provides a brief introduction to some core concerns and considerations for Extension professionals as they adapt their outreach, education, and evaluation efforts during a pandemic and recovery. This publication also includes an overview (see Appendix) of the subsequent articles in the *Road to Recovery* series.

Introduction to COVID-19: Implications for Extension

On March 11, 2020, the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Shortly afterward, a national state of emergency was declared in the United States, prompting dozens of states to activate their own emergency statuses. The resulting closure of schools, businesses, and public event gatherings, whether mandated by lockdown orders or implemented voluntarily, has significantly impacted day-to-day life for millions of Americans (Fawcett et al., 2020).

The following are examples of how COVID-19 has affected Extension's operations nationally. Some effects may be more or less salient for certain states and counties.

- Restricted opportunities for in-person workshops/ educational events
- Challenges for Extension personnel unfamiliar with remote technologies

- Strain and pressure on overall capacity to adapt to lockdown restriction requirements and to clientele's new resource and information needs
- Difficulties reaching clientele who lack reliable internet access
- Increased pressure to share timely, relevant, and trustworthy information related to the pandemic and associated public safety guidelines
- Feelings of internal stress, anxiety, and uncertainty among Extension personnel

Necessary Adaptations

In response to the aforementioned effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following are examples of adaptations Extension institutions have either already implemented or should actively consider implementing:

- Increased emphasis on building Extension personnel's knowledge of virtual platforms and facility with their use
- Conversion of educational materials and presentations to files easily viewable on portable electronic devices
- Increased reliance on shared folders/working documents for asynchronous collaboration with colleagues and clientele
- Expanded social media engagement
- Renewed focus on trust, collaboration, recovery, and resiliency

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Key Considerations for Pandemic Scenarios: COVID-19 and Beyond

The concepts below are offered as key considerations for Extension change agents interested in successfully navigating not only the remainder of the COVID-19 pandemic, but all future pandemic scenarios. These summarized topics are addressed in greater detail in subsequent publications in the *Road to Recovery* series.

Building Trust

Now is a crucial time for Extension professionals to address the health, safety, and emotional burdens urban and rural communities are experiencing, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Higgins, 2020; van Dorn et al., 2020). However, many clients may be unsure about ways to safely seek credible information and assistance. Building trust is essential for Extension professionals to engage with clients, especially during a pandemic, and entails strategic efforts to account for clientele's physical well-being and emotional safety and needs.

Community Capacity and Resiliency

While Extension provides several critical services for community stakeholders during disaster and postdisaster periods, one of the most important ways Extension can support affected communities is by facilitating the development of capacity-building strategies to improve a community's overall resiliency (Eighmy et al., 2012; Lindsey et al., 2018). This effort involves working with stakeholders and organizations to identify existing social capital in a community—how collaborative linkages and social networks can be leveraged to mobilize action, and where they can be strengthened if they are lacking.

The Shift to Virtual Engagement and Evaluation

Cooperative Extension in the United States has long worked to adapt to the rising popularity of numerous social media and virtual tools to reach and engage with clientele (Sobrero, 2008; Sobrero & Craycraft, 2008). While there has been a broad pivot towards increased use of these tools and strategies, the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly accelerated the transition. This pressurized switch has, in many cases, occurred for change agents without previous training and experience on effective virtual engagement and evaluation. Simple evaluation techniques and tools can be integrated within virtual programming to ensure the reach of vulnerable target clientele, the promotion of trust and inclusivity, and the building of community and resiliency. These

include online surveys or polls, audience segmentation (e.g., breaking down demographics), using visual, verbal, and other cues to assess participation and inclusivity, and analyzing participatory tools and community functions.

Summary

This initial publication in the *Road to Recovery* series introduced key concerns and considerations for Extension professionals as they continue to adapt their programming, outreach, and evaluation efforts facing the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery process ahead. The remaining publications in the series will explore these issues in greater detail. For a brief overview of subsequent publications in the *Road to Recovery* series, see the Appendix.

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Appendix: The Road to Recovery Series Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic created the need for this *Road to Recovery* series of EDIS publications. Six publications are included, covering topics to assist Extension professionals and State specialists in addressing client needs and evaluating techniques for virtual engagement. Brief summaries of each publication in the series are provided below.

Road to Recovery #1: Introduction

Summarizes the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Extension professionals' operations and presents necessary adaptations and key considerations to safely improve delivery and impact.

Road to Recovery #2: Building Physical and Emotional Trust When Engaging with Extension Clientele

Provides information and recommendations to address emotional and physical trust gaps clientele may experience in the face of a pandemic by using intentional, strategic efforts when engaging in the field or via virtual platforms.

Road to Recovery #3: Facilitating Community Resilience for Effective Pandemic Response

Considers challenges posed by the pandemic and the importance of community-led initiatives and provides alternative strategies for facilitating building resiliency, capacity, and social capital involving community stakeholders and clients.

Road to Recovery #4: Evaluating Virtual Techniques to Reach Clientele and Promote Equity

Offers guidance on how to effectively assess which audiences are being reached through virtual engagement and which audiences may be “falling through the cracks;” includes information on leveraging social media and virtual

platform analytics, applying audience segmentation, and using online surveys and polls.

Road to Recovery #5: Evaluating Virtual Facilitation to Build Trust

Provides information on how educators can evaluate their efforts to facilitate trust through remote learning and virtual engagement, especially important during a pandemic; considers users' concerns about cybersecurity and common anxieties, discomfort, and competency gaps using online platforms.

Road to Recovery #6: Evaluating Virtual Strategies to Build Community Capacity and Resiliency

Offers support for agents interested in evaluating their use of virtual strategies to promote participatory engagement and community-capacity building; provides recommendations for agents to better assess whether virtual techniques improve users' perceptions of collective efficacy and community capacity during pandemic scenarios.