

# Harris County

## Recovery Plan

### Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

### 2021 Report

Note: The Recovery Plan Performance Report will provide the public and Treasury information on the projects that recipients are undertaking with program funding and how they are planning to ensure program outcomes are achieved in an effective, efficient, and equitable manner. While this template includes the minimum requirements for the Recovery Plan, each recipient is encouraged to add information to the plan that they feel is appropriate to provide information to their constituents on efforts they are taking to respond to the pandemic and promote an equitable economic recovery.

Each jurisdiction may determine the general form and content of the Recovery Plan, as long as it meets the reporting requirements, and recipients are encouraged to tailor this template to best meet their needs. Use of infographics, tables, charts, pictures, case studies, and other explanatory elements are encouraged.

# Harris County 2021 Recovery Plan

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## GENERAL OVERVIEW

### Executive Summary

Harris County Commissioners Court has identified four investment priorities supporting a robust recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: **Health, Housing, Jobs and Education, and County Operations**. Commissioners Court has also established an **equity framework** under which programs will be selected, developed, implemented, and evaluated, and a **governance process** allowing for rapid approval of immediate relief projects while a parallel research and community input phase identifies opportunities for more strategic, transformational investments.

Our equity framework targets delivery of the same outcomes and opportunities across populations, relying heavily on community input throughout the program lifecycle and revising programs as needed for maximum accessibility and fairness. Through our investments, we aim to reduce disparities in health, housing, and economic outcomes that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

We have heard from over 1,000 community members thus far, via three mechanisms:

- Local nonprofit BakerRipley conducted an *Appreciative Community Inquiry* process, interviewing 200 residents across the county about pandemic impacts, needs, support systems, and aspirations.
- Harris County staff held nearly 200 stakeholder interviews with community, non-profit, and business leaders, academics, philanthropists, and public policy experts.
- More than 600 community members responded to a public survey soliciting community input on recovery needs and investment opportunities.

Common themes emerged across all input streams: the extent to which the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing structural inequities, the need to use ARPA funds to deliver both continued relief and transformational investments, challenges related to housing instability and the inability to afford housing, ongoing struggles with small business closures and unemployment or underemployment, disproportionate economic impacts on women and especially Black and Hispanic women, concerns about safety issues and domestic violence, healthcare access as a critical need, widespread mental health impacts due to economic stress, isolation, grief and loss, together with challenges of virtual schooling and increased caregiving responsibilities, and more. Broadly, community members expressed a desire to move toward economic self-sufficiency, with easier access to the support needed to achieve their goals. With that input in mind, we have proceeded to develop immediate relief projects addressing households' basic needs, stabilizing families in their homes, preventing the pandemic from further impacting mental and physical health, as well as longer-term strategic investments enabling economic mobility and household security.

The most critical need initially identified was flexible financial assistance. During this reporting period ending July 31, 2021, Commissioners Court approved the following:

- **Harris County Recovery Assistance:** Initially approved for \$32.7 million, this program was expanded by an additional \$32.7 million due to high demand. The program provides low-income households impacted by the pandemic with a \$1,500 grant towards housing costs, utility payments, transportation, food, healthcare, childcare, or other basic needs. The key outcome goals for this program are *maintaining family financial stability, increasing household income, and reducing debt burdens*.

Since the end of the reporting period (after July 31, 2021), additional programs have been approved:

- **Small Business Grants (Jobs & Education):** Approved for \$32.1 million.
  - The Program provides small and micro businesses with grants up to \$25,000.
  - The key outcome goals for this program are *supporting the survival and growth of small and micro businesses*, ideally with spillover effects of preserving pandemic-impacted jobs.
  
- **Permanent Supportive Housing support services (Housing):** Approved for \$5.5 million, with additional State of Texas funding.
  - The Program provides navigation, case management, and support services (mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence support) for 1,200 unsheltered individuals, allowing the Emergency Housing Vouchers made available to the Houston Housing Authority and Harris County Housing Authority under ARPA to be utilized for Permanent Supportive Housing.
  - The key outcome goals for this Program are reducing the population experiencing homelessness, reducing time spent in homelessness, reducing homelessness recidivism, and increasing the number of successful housing placements. Potential spillover effects include improving economic prospects and providing support for individuals to successfully exit domestic violence, substance abuse, or poor mental health situations.
  
- **Vaccine Incentives (Health):** Approved for \$12.6 million.
  - The Program provides a cash incentive of \$100 upon receipt of the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.
  - The key outcome goals are *increasing the population of vaccinated individuals and returning COVID-19 status to green* in the face of the Delta variant, with spillover effects reducing the strain placed on local hospital systems and improving health outcomes for patients.
  
- **Court Backlog (County Operations):** Approved for \$4.7 million.
  - The funding provides additional court space, judges, jury services, and attorneys to mitigate the impact of the pandemic-related court backlog. Both defendants and victims have been negatively impacted by having cases remain unheard for long periods of time.
  - The key outcome goals are reducing exposure to the criminal justice system and improving access to a speedy hearing or trial.

Going forward, Harris County is creating a broader set of priority outcomes under each area of Health, Housing, Jobs & Education, and County Operations. While there are still a few immediate relief projects being considered, projects focused on longer-term strategic investments and their associated portfolio allocations are being developed with the achievement of these priority outcomes in mind.

## Uses of Funds

Each of the programs approved thus far supports a strong and equitable recovery by focusing assistance on the communities that have been most impacted by the pandemic. First, beyond community input, our approach is also informed by national and local data and analysis of the health and economic effects of the pandemic upon different communities. For example, many of our programs use the CDC Social Vulnerability Index (SVI), Census data, and labor market projections to inform program design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Feedback mechanisms based on this data for program outreach and engagement statistics help us ensure we are always reaching the most vulnerable populations. Second, we understand that true recovery requires not only relief, but equipping people with the tools to succeed in the future. While most of our present efforts focus on direct assistance to households and businesses, our strategic portfolio focuses on building the long-term infrastructure to address homelessness and housing stability, to build systems of mental and behavioral health support, and to train workers for the economic conditions of the future.

Programs in key expenditure categories follow. Note that only Harris County Recovery Assistance was launched in the reporting period; the remainder have been approved since July 31, 2021.

### a. Public Health (EC 1)

**Vaccine Incentives:** Providing \$100 incentives for people to receive their first dose has been shown to be especially helpful to communities facing access barriers such as concern about taking time off work. Initial results show particularly strong impact for young people (age 20-29) and Black and Hispanic community members. Higher vaccination rates may slow the spread of the Delta variant and prevent serious hospitalization and illness, especially in vulnerable communities.

### b. Negative Economic Impacts (EC 2)

**Harris County Recovery Assistance:** Direct assistance is targeted towards low-income families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Funds will enable families negatively impacted (e.g. unemployed, reduced hours, increased healthcare costs) by COVID-19 to cover emergency and basic expenses. The program includes outreach targeted at families not traditionally connected to safety net supports, as well as families for whom English is not the primary language. Monitoring application rates by neighborhood and language relative to expectations has allowed us to adjust outreach accordingly. Direct assistance can help households make ends meet while longer-term programs are rolled out.

**Small Business Assistance:** Small business assistance is targeted towards small and micro-businesses with less than \$500,000 in revenue and fewer than 30 employees, since many of these businesses had the smallest margins, were forced to close during the downturn, and had trouble accessing federal loans and grants without technical assistance. In particular, recipients are prioritized if they are in industries with high job loss (e.g. Restaurants, Arts & Entertainment), if they are minority-, women- or veteran-owned (since many of these owners have access to less informal support), if they are located in high-SVI neighborhoods, and if they did not previously receive federal or local funding. Funding can be used to cover business debt and operational expenses, helping the most vulnerable businesses on a path to growth again.

c. **Services to Disproportionately Impacted Communities (EC 3)**

While most Harris County programs are designed to support disproportionately impacted communities, the following program is particularly targeted:

**Permanent Supportive Housing Support Services (CCHP 2.0):** Not only were homeless populations hard-hit by the pandemic, with little access to health protections, many housing-unstable individuals also became homeless. Allocating emergency housing vouchers towards the homeless population holds real promise as a housing-first solution to homelessness that can set the most vulnerable unhoused people on a track to stability. These additional support services help individuals address underlying problems often linked to housing instability – domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse – providing navigation and case management to find appropriate counseling and support options, as well as providing overall social support services that can assist with finding employment and community.

d. **Premium Pay (EC 4)**

[No current projects]

e. **Water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure (EC 5)**

[No current projects]

f. **Revenue Replacement (EC 6)**

**Court Backlog:** Revenue replacement is being used to speed up key county operations that have been delayed due to the pandemic. Civil and criminal court backlogs are being addressed through expanded jury services and court staffing.

## Promoting Equitable Outcomes

### a. *Goals*

Harris County's pandemic recovery efforts are acutely conscious of how race, class, age, gender, language, geography, and more all shaped our residents' vulnerability to the pandemic and its associated economic downturn. Black and Hispanic communities have been disproportionately impacted; historical patterns of social inequity and segregation contributed to higher rates of preexisting conditions, increased exposure by working in frontline "essential" jobs, living in crowded places conducive to virus spread, and reduced access to healthcare. Undocumented immigrants are least able to access healthcare and more likely to lose a job while having no safety net, while those who do not speak English had a more difficult time accessing resources or seeking help during the recession. The pandemic has taken a toll on elderly populations, especially those isolated from support networks. Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ were more likely to have comorbidities, reported worse mental health effects, be living on lower incomes, and have encountered discrimination or barriers in access to care and employment during the pandemic.

In light of these disparities, we are conscious of the need to reach Black and Hispanic residents, low-income residents, LGBTQ+ residents, immigrants, and those for whom English is not a primary language. Moreover, we understand that for many people, marginalization and adverse effects (both historic and as a direct result of the pandemic) may be experienced along more than one dimension: women of color, for example, may face higher burdens than white women or men of color; low-income youth in the LGBTQ+ population may have encountered many more challenges than straight or higher-income counterparts. In design and outreach for many of our programs, the County has taken into account statistics such as neighborhood Social Vulnerability Index, demographic information, and the input of these communities and organizations that work closely with them in order to come up with goals and equitable outreach. Moving forward, as more programs are designed and rolled out in response to specific needs in health, housing, or jobs and education, we will incorporate knowledge of how needs change or differ for different target populations in order to ensure programs are especially accessible and helpful to those who need them most.

### b. *Awareness*

Thus far, all programs that are open across the county (Harris County Recovery Assistance, Small Business Grants, and Vaccine Incentives) funded by the SLFRF have taken several steps to ensure equal awareness across residents.

For Harris County Recovery Assistance and Small Business programs, the following tactics were used to ensure equity in awareness and application processes:

- **Outreach and navigation approach:** Both programs have engaged community-based organizations to spread information about each program, as well as to provide direct application support. Outreach has included not only social media and media coverage but in-person events, canvassing, and webinars.
- **Multilingual media and application:** Application websites for both programs were available in the major languages spoken throughout the county, English, Spanish and Vietnamese (and Chinese for direct assistance). Media outreach was also conducted across multiple languages, with extensive engagement of community-specific media outlets.

- **Multiple application methods:** In addition to filling out applications online, residents are able to apply in-person with navigating agencies located throughout the county, especially in high-need neighborhoods. Multilingual call centers offer additional support.
- **Planning periods:** Information about each program, including necessary documentation and eligibility, was released far in advance of the application windows in order to allow applicants time to prepare, especially those who may need more help. This transparency allowed awareness about the program requirements to also circulate amongst family, friends, and word of mouth.
- **Application selection and monitoring:** Applications are not first-come, first-served, but are instead selected randomly so as not to advantage those with greatest access. Applications are monitored for representation across geographies and demographics, with outreach strategies adjusted accordingly. Vaccine incentives were likewise publicized across multilingual media platforms to ensure widespread public awareness, with support from local organizations broadcasting the information to different vaccine-hesitant communities.

### ***c. Access and Distribution***

Thus far, the Harris County Recovery Assistance and Small Business Grant programs rolled out by Harris County have been designed to ensure that more vulnerable and disadvantaged populations are able to access benefits and services, and that communities hardest hit will be prioritized through eligibility criteria, application design, and applicant selection.

- As mentioned under awareness, both programs provide for **navigators and in-person events** to help households apply who may not have access to steady internet or who may simply need extra guidance in the process. These events have been and will be located across the county to ensure that geography is not a disadvantage for in-person help, with reinforcements in area where application numbers are not meeting expectations given demographics. Small business grants will also be rolled out with webinars that allow attendees to ask for help and information regardless of location.
- **Eligibility criteria** also prioritize groups that have been hardest-hit by the pandemic. For direct assistance, households are only eligible to apply if they are public benefits recipients or make less than 60% of area media income. For small business grants, applicants must have fewer than 30 employees and have revenue less than \$500,000 in 2019 and 2020, prioritizing the smallest businesses.
- **Application design and selection** are also intended to provide greater access to benefits for more vulnerable groups. For direct assistance, applicants are able to certify income through various methods, and they are not disqualified if documents are not submitted at the time of application. Instead, if someone is selected with incomplete documentation, program administrators reach out to applicants to verify eligibility together, with the understanding that some of the lowest-income families have faced a difficult level of stress and might have more difficulty putting together proof of income without a stable job. Applicants are also selected with prioritization by the SVI of their neighborhood.

For small business grants, the application is also designed to be easy-to-use, with the knowledge that lack of technical know-how kept many of the smallest businesses from applying for PPP and other federal support. Applicants are prioritized for grant receipt by whether they are minority-, women-, or veteran-owned, the pandemic impact on job loss in their industry, the



SVI of the neighborhood, the number of employees (with smaller businesses prioritized), and whether they have not previously received assistance (with unassisted businesses prioritized).

As much as possible, levels of access to benefits and eligibility criteria have been configured in order to address disparities between groups exacerbated by the pandemic.

**d. Outcomes:**

Harris County's programs actively work towards closing gaps and disaggregating progress by equity dimensions for different policy objectives, prioritizing groups that otherwise would lack necessary support, resources, or service.

Thus far, we know that communities of color are lagging in vaccination rates and have fared far worse economically, as they were more likely to be employed in industries that were impacted by shutdowns and unable to go virtual. As such, the vaccine incentives, direct assistance, and small business assistance all intend to close these health and economic gaps. While all of these programs are still in the process of being delivered, the County has designed equity-conscious targets for each program, with dashboards that have tracked program reach along equity dimensions. (For example, see the dashboard for direct assistance [here](#), with plans for a similar dashboard for small business and additional programs rolled out across the County). Our evaluation plans which will track the outcomes of each program are also designed to include statistics across different dimensions of equity.

Beyond our County-wide programs, programs serving specific populations are by nature focused on closing gaps. The permanent supportive housing support services are focused on especially vulnerable homeless populations, and support services are tailored to each person's needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, with the understanding that the path to stability will look different for each person. Court backlog funding will work towards ensuring speedy hearings and trials, especially for those currently in jail who cannot afford bail who are largely low-income people of color. Doing so works to minimize these individuals' unnecessary contact with the criminal legal system. Outcomes for each of these programs will be tracked along multiple equity dimensions.

All Harris County program proposals are first assessed and scored against an equity framework, included below. This ensures that racial and economic equity are a part of the conversation when deciding upon how funds will be spent in the first place, and includes a statement of broad equity goals, as well as strategies to reach these goals in each step of an ARPA project's life-cycle (from capacity building in departments, to project development, selection, monitoring and evaluation, and finally evaluation and accountability). Each project includes equity reflections (see Appendix A, copied below) and equity scoring (see Appendix B, copied below). (As previously described, our equity strategy so far has resulted in and shaped programs in both categories listed above: Harris County Recovery Assistance and Small Business Grants provide direct relief to communities most severely impacted by the pandemic, while Permanent Supportive Housing support services assist disproportionately impacted communities and provides for basic needs.)

# Harris County Equity Framework for Investments Funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating to all, but it has not impacted all Harris County residents equally. Instead, it has exacerbated long-standing inequities. Black and Hispanic residents, already facing disproportionately negative health outcomes, have suffered the highest coronavirus disease burden and death rates.<sup>1</sup> With lower pre-pandemic wages and less money available to cover shortfalls, Black and Hispanic families have felt the economic fallout of the pandemic acutely, facing additional loss of income and greater-than-average housing insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Women, and particularly women of color, have also experienced higher rates of unemployment, dealing with virtual schooling, reduced daycare and afterschool options, and inflexible work schedules on top of the collapse of essential industries like retail and hospitality. These are just a few of the disproportionate impacts that have affected already-struggling households.

## Equity Goals

Advancing equity means striving for the same outcomes and opportunities across different groups, not simply delivering the same treatment when it fails to yield fair, just, and equal results. With this Equity Framework, Harris County will ensure an equity lens is applied to investments made possible by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA). In determining how to deploy ARPA funds, Harris County will pursue investments that advance the following equity goals:

- Reversing negative pandemic-related trends and closing gaps in health, economic, and housing outcomes; positioning disproportionately impacted groups and neighborhoods for improved future outcomes.
- Building capacity within County government, creating a shared understanding of and commitment to equity, and developing tools and practices to support equity-centered solutions.
- Measuring racial and ethnic disparities in health, economic, social, and environmental outcomes so that pandemic recovery plays a role in the long-term remediation of systemic harms to populations of color.
- Incorporating an equity assessment in each project, with opportunities to reflect and adapt based on interim results and community input throughout the project.
- Monitoring investment across the entire program to ensure the overall portfolio is reaching populations and neighborhoods most impacted by the pandemic.

## Equity Strategies

To ensure Harris County addresses existing and exacerbated inequities, we will employ the following strategies when developing, selecting, and delivering ARPA programs.<sup>3</sup>

- **Disaggregate historical data and outcome measures by race, ethnicity, gender, and/or geography and other demographic variables** to identify inequities and ensure programs are prioritizing disproportionately impacted groups.
- **Analyze specific factors underlying inequities** such as racial and gender discrimination, disparate policy impacts, and institutional and structural barriers, adjusting program design accordingly.
- **Include community representatives** of groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic throughout program development, delivery and evaluation.

- **Target resources and strategies** to minimize incremental burdens on groups most affected by the pandemic while maximizing their access to relief.
- **Evaluate the performance of projects through defined metrics and provide opportunities for reflection**, creating space for continual improvement throughout implementation.
- **Publish transparent program results** via a publicly available website and other outlets, ensuring performance information reaches disproportionately impacted groups.

### Equity Approach

An equity-oriented approach will be embedded throughout the lifecycle of each ARPA-funded project and across the full ARPA program as follows:

1. **Capacity Building:** The Budget Management Department will identify resources to provide training and technical assistance on equity-centered program development to support ARPA Working Groups, relevant Department staff, and project administrators.
2. **Project Development:** All project proposals should incorporate responses to the Equity Reflections (Appendix A) or other materials describing implementation of the Equity Strategies listed above.
3. **Project Selection:** An Equity Assessment tool (Appendix B) will be used to inform project selection. The tool includes questions assessing each project’s application of the Equity Strategies. It must be completed by the Working Group Lead, approved by voting members of the associated Working Group, and included in the project’s submission to the Steering Committee.
4. **Project Monitoring & Evaluation:** At an interim checkpoint and at the end of each project, qualitative and quantitative responses to the Equity Reflections (Appendix A) will be refreshed to ensure consistency with the original project intent and identify opportunities for improvement.
5. **Program Evaluation & Accountability:** Program-wide financial analyses will be conducted by the Budget Management Department to determine ARPA funding impact on targeted populations and geographies where feasible. Reporting on investment relative to social vulnerability, reporting on investment by race, ethnicity, gender, and/or other specific populations where available, and/or other program-level equity analyses will be provided to Commissioners Court on a quarterly basis beginning in Q4 2021 and also made available online.

### Equity Framework Modifications

Modifications to this Equity Framework may be required based on learnings throughout its use. Minor modifications may be approved by the ARPA Steering Committee, comprised of Commissioners Court Chiefs of Staff or their designees, and transmitted to Commissioners Court. Substantive modifications must be approved by Commissioners Court. All modifications must be tracked in the Change Log below.

### Change Log

Version	Effective Date	Description of Changes
1.0	Request for approval at Commissioners Court April 21, 2021	Initial document

## **APPENDIX A: Equity Reflections**

For each project, the following questions addressing the Equity Strategies may be adapted for use in the initial project proposal, at interim checkpoints, and in a final look-back. Team members responsible for proposing and implementing a project should reflect on the project's impact on equity via overall project results and associated community engagement.

1. How does your project leverage clear outcome measures and disaggregated data from beginning to end to identify inequity and ensure programs are prioritizing disproportionately impacted groups? Who has been disproportionately impacted?
2. How have you analyzed specific factors underlying inequities? What did the analysis reveal?
3. How does your project include voices from disproportionately impacted groups? How have community members been engaged in project development and / or evaluation?
4. How does your project minimize additional burdens and maximize benefits for disproportionately impacted groups?
5. How does your project evaluate performance through defined metrics and provide opportunities for reflection? What do the evaluation and reflection reveal and what changes may be needed?
6. How are you sharing information about the project? Is it reaching people from disproportionately impacted groups?

## APPENDIX B: Equity Assessment Tool

	Does the project proposal...	Score
<b>Leverage clear outcome measures &amp; disaggregated data</b>	Include a statement of inequities to be addressed: specific outcomes, disaggregated by race, gender, geography, or other relevant variables (using appropriate proxies for these if not available)?	
	Identify specific groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic?	
	Prioritize disproportionately affected groups as primary audiences?	
<b>Analyze specific factors underlying inequity</b>	Describe how discrimination, policy impacts, institutional barriers, or other social or environmental conditions have contributed to the identified inequities?	
	Consider if other groups, not identifiable in data, may also be affected by the identified inequities based on the factors above?	
	Articulate how the program design takes into account discrimination, policy impacts, institutional barriers, or other social and environmental conditions?	
<b>Include voices of community representatives</b>	Identify potential partners from community institutions, non-profits, and other organizations representing disproportionately affected groups?	
	Incorporate meaningful moments to engage with representatives or individuals from the disproportionately affected groups?	
	Incorporate input from representatives of disproportionately affected groups who have participated in project development, taking into account their lived experiences?	
<b>Target resources and strategies to minimize burden &amp; maximize access</b>	Target resources and strategies to minimize burden on disproportionately impacted groups?	
	Target resources and strategies to maximize access for disproportionately impacted groups?	
<b>Evaluate performance through defined metrics and reflection</b>	Include a plan to measure and evaluate outcomes, specifying metrics to be tracked and how data will be disaggregated by race, gender, geography or other demographic variables?	
	Include a plan to expand access to relevant data if original data sources were insufficient?	
	Include plans to engage in Equity Reflections and adapt the project as needed based on interim results and community impact?	
<b>Publish transparent program results</b>	Discuss channels for disseminating reports and information?	
	Include means of reaching disproportionately impacted groups within the results dissemination plan?	
	<b>Total Proposal Score</b>	

### Scoring:

- 1 = Not done, or including adverse impacts contrary to the Equity Strategy
- 0 = Minimally completed
- +1 = Thoroughly completed

### Proposals are scored by the relevant Working Group.

Proposals with a negative score are rejected or sent back for significant redesign.  
 Proposals with a neutral score are further reviewed and refined by the Working Group.  
 Proposals with a positive score may be considered for submission to the Steering Committee.

## Community Engagement

Community input has and will continue to shape how Harris County spends ARPA funding. Over the past few months, we have solicited diverse feedback through three main channels: an Appreciative Community Inquiry (ACI) carried out by local non-profit BakerRipley; a stakeholder interview process with local community leaders, academics, philanthropists, public policy experts, and community-based organizations; and a public survey hosted on the county's website asking for open feedback on pandemic impacts and how funding should be spent.

The Appreciative Community Inquiry involved one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, and community outreach with over 200 individuals in English and Spanish. Participants came from across all four County precincts, different age groups, and were primarily members of communities of color who earned less than \$75,000 – representatives of households that have been most impacted by the pandemic. The results pointed out key community needs that were under-addressed – such as childcare and the need for high-quality jobs – and also highlighted barriers and predatory practices, like payday loans and transportation, which keep residents from reaching their aspirations.

Across the priority areas selected by Commissioners Court, ACI respondents highlighted key concerns which will inform our approach to SLFRF investments:

1. **Health:** Community members highlighted access to **affordable, high-quality healthcare; mental health services and support, and caregiver support** to be key areas of concern exacerbated by the pandemic. Community members reiterated the difficulty of meeting in person, one-on-one with a trusted medical professional when medical needs arose, without health insurance and with long wait times. They spoke to the sense of grief and loss people felt and the trust gap between communities needing mental healthcare and professionals who may not share or understand their experiences. Caregivers highlighted the difficulty of caring for both children in online school and family members more vulnerable to COVID-19 while also being employed in fields that had high risk of exposure.
2. **Jobs and Education:** Community members first noted the difficulties in being able to meet their **basic needs** due to unemployment, reduced hours, emergencies, and debt. Secondly, many people wanted **better job security** and tailored skill- and career-building opportunities that could (a) help them secure living-wage, meaningful careers with job ladder opportunities, and (b) be targeted towards populations beyond those reached by traditional upskilling programs, given that many people who lost a job and are seeking to return to work are older people and women.
3. **Housing:** Community members first highlighted the continued need for **rental relief**, before addressing their longer-term dreams of homeownership. Here, key barriers described were **difficulties building credit**, and interest in credit repair, as well as **lack of information and support for homeownership**, with a trust gap between many communities and traditional financial institutions and lenders.

While the ACI was informative for directing our attention to priorities, the ultimate goal of the ACI will be to create robust, participatory ecosystems that allow communities to elevate their own visions for solutions and directly contribute to building the solutions they want to see. Through the one-on-one interviews, the ACI sought to build trust and strengthen relationships directly with community members, as well as empower them to speak out about both ARPA funds and

future county-wide investments. Respondents gave guidelines for how programs could be best designed, including the need for programs to minimize burdens on recipients, to be sustainable over time so networks could be activated, to be culturally cognizant and responsive, to integrate as many interventions as possible into one program or hub, reduce barriers to entry and participation, and also to prevent and address the rejection fatigue and fear that many people feel in applying repeatedly for assistance.

In addition to the ACI, Harris County also carried out an extensive stakeholder interview process. The first round of interviews with experts and community-based organizations allowed us to get a macro-level sense of where the needs were across the county, and to collect a wide variety of imaginative solutions from people who work closely with the communities we most want to serve on a daily basis. Now, continued stakeholder input is being solicited to fine-tune projects and ensure that they directly address the root cause of problems and truly provide transformation in addition to relief.

Lastly, Harris County rolled out an open public survey that allowed anyone to share their thoughts with us online. The survey allowed people to identify most critical pandemic impacts and suggest potential investment ideas.

All of these forms of community engagement, and the County's ongoing relationship-building with our community organizations and members, have been vital inputs into planning for ARPA spending, as well as for building a more democratic, engaging infrastructure for change.

**Labor Practices**

Not required; no infrastructure projects have yet been initiated.



## Use of Evidence

Harris County's initial investments are most focused on providing immediate relief. As such, while each program comes with an evaluative component and are based off of evidence on what works, they are not structured to be rigorously measured interventions. Future investments in our strategic portfolio, however, will be aligned with our learning agenda and will include evaluation partners that can design and carry out rigorous program evaluations, building evidence for what works.

At present, the evidence-based and evaluative aspects of our projects are as follows:

- **Harris County Recovery Assistance:** The provision of direct cash assistance to households is based on a fairly large body of research literature finding that (a) due to the effects of the pandemic, many households were struggling to meet basic needs, (b) that direct cash transfer provided the speediest, most efficient, and flexible way for families to meet their needs, and (c) that such transfers have no, or at most very slight, negative behavioral or other impacts on households. The evidence from several rounds of universal federal emergency pandemic payments has also shown that direct cash for specifically low-income families not only relieves poverty, but also helps to sustain local economies, as low-income families spend money on necessary goods and services immediately.

As an immediate relief program, we do not have a rigorous evidence-gathering design in place for the program in the interest of equity and minimizing burdens to families. (For example, we wanted the application to be quick and painless, rather than create a long application with all the questions that a full research agenda would require answering of all participants). However, we did create a set of follow-up surveys designed to help us evaluate the following variables:

- Use of funds
- The top concerns of the household
- Employment situation
- Mental health
- Outlook and hope for the future

Our evaluation plan includes sending surveys to both recipients and non-recipients of the grant amount, in order to see if any differences between them arise. Because being a recipient is not perfectly randomly assigned (we employ a formula taking into account neighborhood SVI for equity), differences between groups along these variables may not be entirely attributed to receiving cash assistance. However, we can hold SVI and other variables constant to compare between similar neighborhoods and provide some insight into the impacts of direct assistance across neighborhoods.

- **Small Business Grant Program:** This grant program is based upon evidence indicating that micro and small businesses, especially in particular neighborhoods and industries, had been hit especially hard by the pandemic and struggled with access to bigger capital loans or federal relief like PPP payments absent technical assistance. Similar to direct assistance, a grant program has the benefit of being both efficient and flexible at helping businesses survive and recover. Since applicants will be selected based off prioritized variable scoring, they will not be randomly assigned to either receive or not receive grants; therefore, it is even more difficult to see whether impacts on grantees are

because of the grant program. However, information on the following variables will still be collected for comparison:

- Operational status of business
- Use of funds
- Change in revenue
- Change in number of employees (hired, furloughed, re-hired, future hires)
- Business owner's outlook on sustainability of operations
- Business owner's outlook on expected duration of pandemic
- Additional resources needed

A baseline survey will be sent at time of grant receipt, followed by a second survey in March 2022 and a third survey in August 2022. Several fixed data points, including average wages per employee, industry, household size and annual revenue are part of the initial application and can be tied to a recipient's questionnaire responses.

- **Vaccine Incentives:** Although this has less of an evidence base, the pursuit of cash incentives for vaccination was inspired by limited emerging evidence from other jurisdictions where such incentives have increased vaccination rates. Thus far, as a result of incentives, there has been a sixfold increase in daily vaccination rates. We will continue to track partial and full vaccination rates and spillover effects on health systems throughout the County.
- **Permanent Supportive Housing support services:** Our approach with the permanent supportive housing support services is based off a rich literature indicating that a housing-first approach to homelessness is both a more helpful and humane approach to homeless populations, and also more effective at reducing homelessness and more cost-efficient than other approaches. Part of an effective housing-first approach is the provision of supportive services that are tailored to each homeless individual's needs. Particularly for those who have been chronically homeless and are literally homeless without shelter, permanent supportive housing models have resulted in higher long-term stability, better health outcomes, and reduced use of crisis services. As there is no random assignment involved in this program, it is also not designed as an experimental intervention. However, the program will monitor retention rates and reasons for positive and negative exits, with a goal of maximizing retention and positive exits, and minimizing negative exits. We will also track finer details on how different support services affect individuals and whether it aids in the improvement of their situations. Program statistics may be roughly compared with other housing programs where either permanent housing or support services were not provided.

### Table of Expenses by Expenditure Category

Category		Cumulative expenditures to date (\$)	Amount spent since last Recovery Plan
2	Expenditure Category: Negative Economic Impacts		
2.3	Household Assistance: Cash Transfers	\$10,000,000	\$10,000,000

## PROJECT INVENTORY

Information provided below is for only the project launched during the reporting period.

### **Harris County Recovery Assistance**

Project 001: Flexible Financial Assistance

Funding amount: \$32,700,000 (approved in reporting period) + \$32,700,000 (approved following reporting period) = \$65,400,000 (total funding approved). Expended in reporting period: \$10,000,000

Project Expenditure Category: 2.3, Cash Transfers

*Project overview*: The program will provide \$1,500 in flexible financial assistance to 40,000 low-income households that have experienced economic hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic. To be eligible for the program, applicants must be Harris County residents and have a current household income at or below 60% of the HUD Average Median Income. Households may demonstrate income eligibility through participation in qualifying public benefits programs. The application launched on July 28th and remained open through August 11th. The first payments were distributed on August 12<sup>th</sup>; all funds will be distributed by December 30th, 2021.

The program provides \$60 million in flexible financial assistance (\$30 million approved in reporting period). Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Greater Houston is responsible for operating the program including application processing and payment, contact center operation, technology platform development, and outreach to vulnerable populations in partnership with nonprofits and other local entities.

The primary goal of the project is for an increased ability for families/ individuals to be able to pay for basic needs in Harris County. Intended outcomes for the program include a decrease in the number of households that report they are behind on their bills and an increase in the number of households that report they can pay for essential needs (e.g., food).

*Project website*: [harriscountyreliet.org/](https://harriscountyreliet.org/)

*Use of evidence*: The project was based on the evaluation of a previous direct assistance program offered by Harris County under the CARES Act (by Notre Dame's Lab for Economic Opportunities), as well as a rich literature surrounding direct cash assistance.

Ample research has shown that households have been unable to afford basic needs during the pandemic. By April 2020, [Pew Research](#) reported that only 23% of households that emergency funds that would last 3 months; about half of low-income Americans had reported a job or wage loss due to COVID-19 by that point. The [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), [the Urban Institute](#), and the [Federal Reserve](#) all indicate that families struggled with food insecurity, paying for bills and other basic expenses, and that the impacts were felt especially by those who entered the pandemic with fewer resources and/or experienced a layoff. While the impacts have been blunted by safety net programs, for many households, such assistance has not been enough.

Meanwhile, a large literature shows that unconditional cash transfers can be a quick and efficient way to aid households in crisis. There are also few labor market side effects; preliminary research on pandemic unemployment benefits showed that those who received larger benefits became unemployed at and resumed work at similar rates to those with smaller benefits. In general, work on cash transfers suggests few negative labor market effects

(although most research is done, and may even help increase adult labor supply by alleviating liquidity and risk constraints. Although [most work](#) is done in developing country contexts, cash transfers are regarded as a cost effective method of poverty reduction. More relevant to our program, [analysis](#) of CARES Act payments and other pandemic stimulus payments show that, for low-income families, cash payments had faster effects than previous stimulus programs (in 2001 and 2008), and resulted in large increases in spending on food, rent, and debt payments. Research by the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) and [Opportunity Insights](#) second this, finding that households making lower incomes, in lower-wage jobs, experiencing job loss, or sick/affected by COVID-19, were especially likely to use their stimulus payments on basic household expenses rather than paying off debt or increasing savings. [Research](#) by Opportunity Insights also pointed out that traditional macroeconomic tools used to stimulate employment had little effect during the pandemic, making social insurance and hardship alleviation more effective channels of public spending.

The full program spend (\$30 million, plus \$2.7 million in administrative and outreach costs, approved in the period, with an equivalent amount approved after the period) is allocated toward evidence-based interventions under Negative Economic Impacts (EC 2).

A brief summary of our evaluation design and approach is included here:

- For the purposes of evaluation, there are 2 groups: **grantees and non-grantees**. Both groups will receive one follow-up survey **1 week** after grants are distributed, and a second follow-up survey **3 months** after grants are distributed.
- Incentives will be provided to increase the probability of a high response rate; the incentive amount is tentatively set at \$15 per survey after discussion with community partners and other evaluative organizations. We expect this should provide us with a relatively high (30-50%) response rate on our surveys, with at least 330 grantee respondents and 330 non-grantee respondents. We plan to distribute incentives and surveys via electronic giftcards and a reputable survey platform such as Qualtrics.
- Follow-up surveys include a section that evaluate how effective the program was for grantees. They also include a section of questions that allow us to compare between grantees and non-grantees.

*A draft of grantee-specific questions follows:*

**Payment:** Did you pay a fee to cash or deposit your payment?

- a. Yes    b. No    c. I don't know / I don't remember

**Impact:** What did you and your household mostly spend your Harris County Recovery Assistance payment on? Select all that apply.

- a. Food (groceries, eating out, take out)
- b. Clothing (clothing, accessories, shoes)
- c. Household supplies and personal care products
- d. Household items (TV, electronics, furniture, appliances)
- e. Recreational goods (sports and fitness equipment, bicycles, toys, games)
- f. Rent
- g. Mortgage (scheduled or monthly)
- h. Utilities and telecommunications (natural gas, electricity, cable, internet, cellphone)
- i. Vehicle payments (scheduled or monthly)
- j. Paying down credit cards, student loans, or other debts
- k. Charitable donations or giving to family members

- l. Savings or investments
- m. Other; if other, please describe.

*A draft of comparative questions sent to both grantees and non-grantees follows:*

**Concerns:** Thinking about the next 3 months, what are your top 3 concerns?

- a. Paying for food, clothing, and/or basic household supplies
- b. Paying for utilities, vehicle payments, or other bills
- c. Paying for rent or mortgage
- d. Paying down credit card debt, student loans, or other debts
- e. The physical health and well-being of myself and/or my family members
- f. The mental health and well-being of myself and/or my family members
- g. Finding a job
- h. Finding care providers for my children or other family members
- i. Sending my children back to school and/or concerns about my child's education
- j. Other; if other, please describe

**Employment:** What best describes your current employment situation?

- a. Employed in a full-time job
- b. Employed in a part-time job
- c. Unemployed
- d. Furloughed or on a reduced work schedule due to the pandemic
- e. Other; if other, please specify

**Usual household expenses:** In the last 7 days, how difficult has it been for your household to pay for usual household expenses, including but not limited to food, rent, or mortgage, car payments, medical expenses, student loans, and so on? Select only one answer.

- a. Not at all difficult
- b. A little difficult
- c. Somewhat difficult
- d. Very difficult

**Mental health:** Over the last 14 days, how often have you felt down, depressed, anxious, or unable to control worrying about something? Select only one answer.

- a. Not at all
- b. Several days
- c. More than half the days
- d. Nearly every day

**Outlook:** Thinking about the next 3 months, how hopeful do you feel about your and your family's future?

- I feel very hopeful
- I feel somewhat hopeful
- I feel sometimes hopeful, sometimes worried
- I feel somewhat worried
- I feel very worried

All grantees and non-grantees will also receive questions about their demographics, such as owner/renter status, household composition, race and ethnicity, and gender. Information collected on their original application about language preference will be retained, as well as their addresses, which can be used to map to neighborhood and local SVI.

## **PERFORMANCE REPORT**

KPIs shown are for the project active during the reporting period.

### **Harris County Recovery Assistance**

KPIs in reporting period:

- Applications received (7/28 go live through 7/31): 131,515
- Funds distributed to administrator: \$10 million
- Amount pledged and paid (funds approved): Not started in period
- Applicants pledged and paid: Not started in period

KPIs at end of August 2021:

- Applications received: 203,998
- Funds distributed to administrator: \$10 million
- Amount pledged and paid (funds approved): \$6.6 million
- Applicants pledged and paid: 4,407