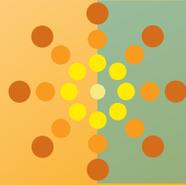


HOMELESSNESS SERIES

PART 1



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# KEEPING OPEN THE DOORS OF HOPE

How the Coronavirus Pandemic is Affecting Homeless Services in Salt Lake County

JULY 2020

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report presents findings from a recent survey administered to homeless service providers in Salt Lake County exploring the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. A total of 79 service providers out of a possible 149 in the sample completed the survey for a 55% response rate. Results indicate that some organizations' survivability is being challenged and that the issues they are experiencing range from maintaining the health safety of staff to a lack of collaboration within the local homeless network. Providers, however, are adopting a number of diverse and innovative mitigation strategies to reduce the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

This report is the first in a series on homelessness.

## INTRODUCTION

Salt Lake County had seen a total of 7,809 positive coronavirus cases as of June 19, 2020, and the state had seen its highest daily totals since its first cases a few months previous.<sup>1</sup> There is a need to understand the impact of this virus on the local homeless service system, in part because individuals experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to communicable diseases and are generally less likely to access primary health care systems when compared to other population groups.<sup>2</sup>

In 2019, Salt Lake County counted a total of 1,844 individuals who were experiencing homelessness at one point in time, with 193 being unsheltered individuals.<sup>3</sup> Salt Lake County reported that as of June 15, 2020, there have been a total of 1,319 coronavirus tests administered to individuals experiencing homelessness, with two active positive cases and 220 recovered cases.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the novelty surrounding the spread and effects of the coronavirus pandemic, this research project grew out of an imperative to understand how homeless service providers are being affected by this pandemic as well as how they are responding to its effects. A key purpose of this research is to share successful practices in the midst of the pandemic across service providers, advocates, policy makers and others so as to improve outcomes among a vulnerable population group in the community. The focus of this research agenda is threefold:

1. Understand the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on homeless service providers and the challenges experienced by homeless service providers.
2. Explore the innovations and coping strategies to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.
3. Understand existing and long-term service gaps.



### KEY FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT

- A majority of organizations have continued providing services during the pandemic, while about 19% have reduced or temporarily closed their services.
- About 45% of the homeless service providers reported that their survivability is being challenged at least somewhat.
- Homeless service providers are facing a variety of challenges, with health safety of staff being the top challenge (57% of respondents).
- On average, nonprofit organizations report a greater number of challenges than do governmental agencies.
- Organizations are adopting a diverse and innovative set of mitigation strategies, with a majority being management-focused.

This report is focused on the first of these research questions and is based on survey responses from service providers in Salt Lake County. Future research reports will focus on the remaining research questions of this project.

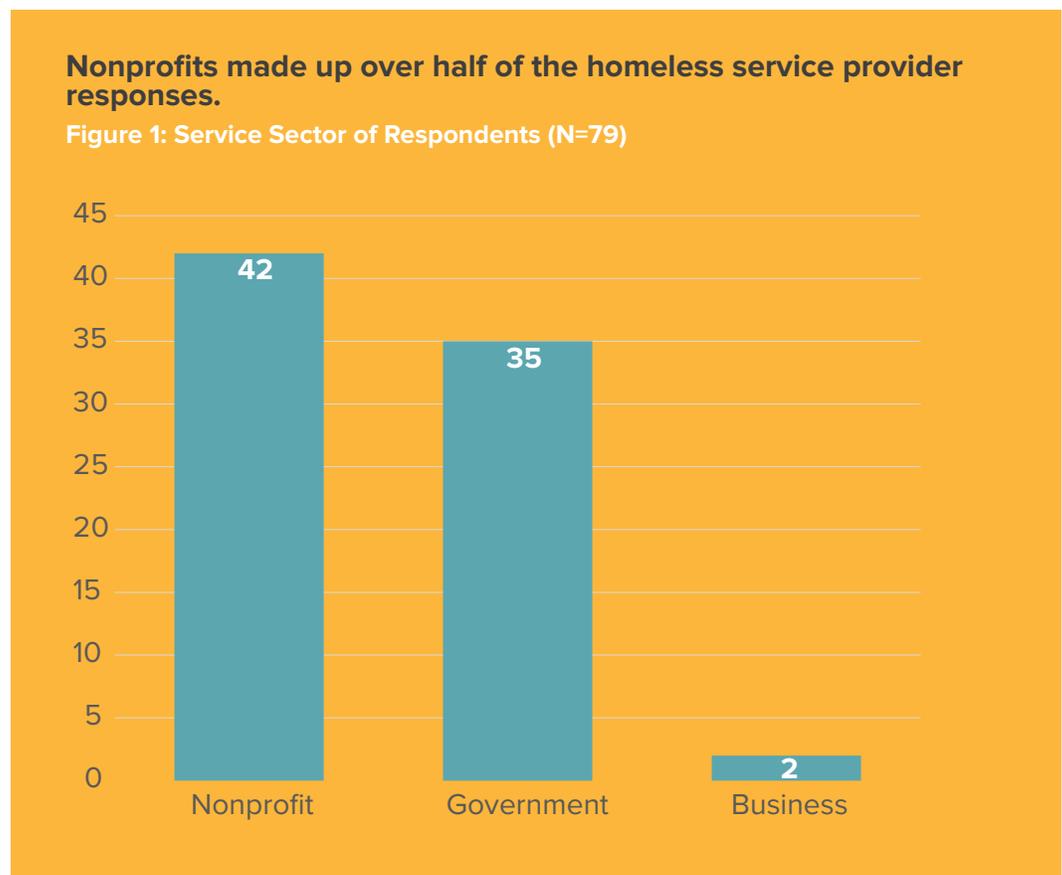
## METHODOLOGY

Original data was collected via a short survey administered to homeless service providers in Salt Lake County from May 15 to June 5, 2020. The survey was developed in close consultation with the leadership of the Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness (the Coalition) and based on a review of the latest research on the coronavirus pandemic and its reported effects on public and nonprofit organizations. The short survey consisted of a total of seven questions that prompted each respondent to report their organization's service sector, the homeless subpopulations they serve, the extent to which their organization continues to provide services, any challenges their organization is experiencing, the extent to which their organization's survivability is being challenged, and any steps that their organization is currently taking to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The survey was kept brief to help ensure a high response rate.

In order to identify the sample of service providers, the research team relied on multiple sources, including: a) conducting a search using GuideStar; b) reviewing public meeting minutes from the Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness to identify organizations present at recent meetings; and c) soliciting a list of members from the Coalition. After culling an initial list of service providers, a final sample of 143 respondents emerged. The research team received a total of 79 completed surveys, constituting an overall response rate of 55%.

As shown in Figure 1, of the 79 respondents, 49 (53%) were nonprofit organizations, 35 (44%) were governmental agencies, and two (3%) were business entities.

Respondents provide services to a number of different subpopulation groups ranging from children and youth to the elderly, both men and women, and people with specialty needs



such as those with substance abuse, mental health and chronic homeless issues. Subsequent surveys will ask organizations about the subpopulations they serve.

### EXTENT OF SERVICE PROVISION

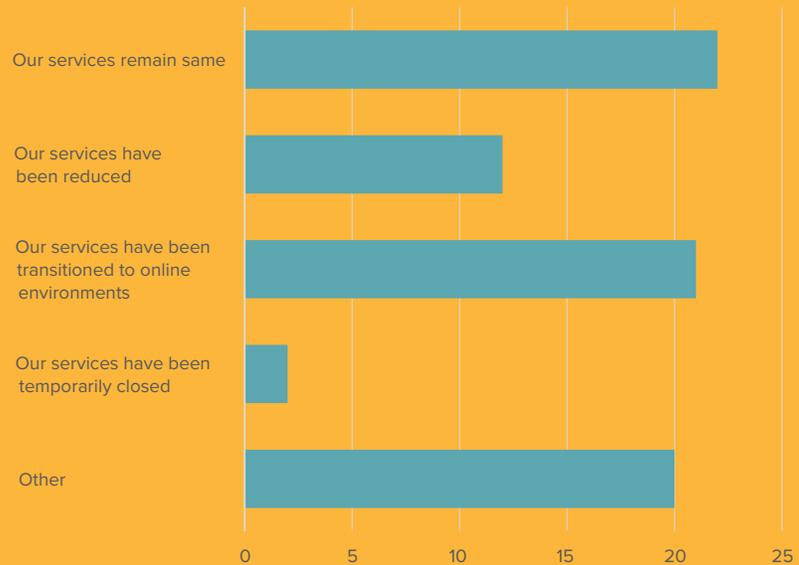
First, respondents were asked the extent to which they continue to provide services to individuals experiencing homelessness during the pandemic (see Figure 2). About 29% respondents report that their service provision has remained the same -- that the pandemic has not affected the extent to which they continue operating as normal. On the other hand, 16% of respondents report that their services have been reduced as a result of the pandemic, and 27% of respondents report that they have transitioned their services to online environments such as telehealth or via video conferencing. Only two organizations report that they have temporarily closed their services to those experiencing homelessness.

The question included an “other” category, in which respondents largely reported a blend of continuing services as normal but with the addition of online services (i.e., telehealth and video conferencing). Others report modifications to the way they deliver services – particularly food pantries and food service providers, which report providing curbside pickup, pre-wrapped foods and delivery to specific locations.

When analyzing responses by the service sector of the respondent (see Figure 3), it was notable that government organizations were more likely to keep services the same when compared to nonprofit service providers. Additionally, nonprofits more frequently report reducing services (24%) compared to government agencies (6%).

### Most providers have needed to change their services under the pandemic.

Figure 2: Extent of Service Provision During Pandemic



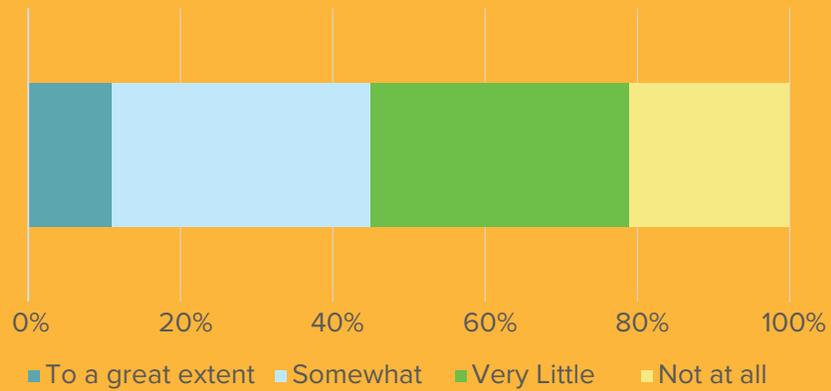
### Most nonprofit providers have reduced or changed their services.

Figure 3: Extent of Service Provision During Pandemic by Service Sector

	Nonprofit	Government	Business	Total
Our services remain same	20%	35%	100%	29%
Our services have been reduced	24%	6%	-	16%
Our services have been transitioned to online environments	29%	26%	-	27%
Our services have been temporarily closed	2%	3%	-	3%
Other	24%	29%	-	26%

**One-in-ten service providers have seen their survivability challenged “to a great extent,” while twice as many responded “not at all.”**

**Figure 4: Survivability Challenged by Pandemic**



### ARE PROVIDERS IN DANGER OF COLLAPSE?

Respondents were also asked to what extent their organizations’ survivability is being challenged by the coronavirus pandemic. Responses ranged from to a great extent to not at all. (See Figure 4.)

About 11% of respondents report that their organization’s survivability is being challenged by the pandemic to a great extent, followed by somewhat challenged (34%), and very little challenge (also 34%). Only 21% of those surveyed responded that their survivability is not being challenged at all.

We took a closer look at those organizations that reported that their survivability is being challenged by the pandemic to a great extent. Results indicated that they tend to be organizations that engage in advocacy work, provide specialty services such as refugee and domestic violence services, or serve children and their caregivers.

Results were further analyzed by the service sector of the respondent as recorded in Figure 5. Nonprofit organizations were more likely to report that their survivability was challenged to a great extent (15%) when compared to governmental agencies (7%). Nonprofit organizations were also more likely to report that their survivability was being somewhat challenged (44%) compared to government agencies (21%). Government agencies more

**Nonprofit providers are far more likely than governmental ones to see their survivability challenged by the pandemic.**

**Figure 5: Survivability by Service Sector**

	Nonprofit	Government	Business	Total
To a great extent	15%	7%	-	11%
Somewhat	44%	21%	50%	34%
Very little	27%	42%	50%	34%
Not at all	15%	30%	-	21%

commonly report that their survivability is challenged very little (42%) or not at all (30%) compared to nonprofit organizations (27% and 15%, respectively).

## CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SERVICE PROVIDERS

Respondents were asked to identify the number and variety of challenges that they were experiencing as a result of the coronavirus pandemic out of a pre-identified list of 13 challenges (see Figure 6).

The top five challenges experienced by homeless service providers are 1) the health safety of their staff (57%), 2) reduction or loss of financial resources (51%), 3) increased demand for services (43%), 4) maintaining morale and motivation among staff (40%), and 5) reduction or loss of available volunteers (36%).

The challenges least reported by services providers include: unclear instructions from government agencies (17%), spread of the coronavirus among staff (12%), and a lack of collaboration within the Salt Lake Valley Coalition to End Homelessness (4%).

For the 19% who reported “other challenges,” issues included: clients lacking the technology to engage with service providers (i.e., internet, phone, computer), lack of information translated to different languages, difficulty providing services while maintaining social distancing, challenges connecting individuals experiencing homelessness to service providers, and an overall need for more resources from the state and federal government and other partners.

These challenges were further analyzed by service sector to understand differences in issues facing organizations between those that are nonprofits and government organizations. (See Figure 7). On average, nonprofit organizations report more challenges (a

### Health/safety of staff and reduction in funding are top concerns of service providers.

Figure 6: Challenges Experienced by Service Providers

Challenge	Total	Percent*
Health/safety of staff	44	57%
Reduction or loss of financial resources	39	51%
Increased demand for services	33	43%
Maintaining morale and motivation among our staff	31	40%
Reduction or loss of available volunteers	28	36%
Telecommuting is not appropriate for our line of work	26	34%
Clients refusing to adhere to social distancing	25	33%
Lack of personal protective equipment for our staff	22	29%
Clients refusing to wear personal protective equipment	21	27%
Other challenges	14	18%
Unclear instructions from governmental agencies	13	17%
Spread of COVID-19 among staff members	9	12%
Lack of collaboration within the Coalition	3	4%

\* Not all respondents specified whether each specific challenge applied to their organization or not.

## Nonprofits and government agencies see differences in challenges.

Figure 7: Challenges Experienced by Service Providers by Service Sector

Challenge	Nonprofit	Government	Business
Health safety of staff	67%	64%	-
Reduction or loss of financial resources	69%	36%	50%
Increased demand for services	31%	72%	100%
Maintaining morale and motivation among our staff	57%	24%	50%
Reduction or loss of available volunteers	50%	24%	50%
Telecommuting is not appropriate for our line of work	40%	32%	50%
Clients refusing to adhere to social distancing	45%	24%	-
Lack of personal protective equipment for our staff	38%	24%	-
Clients refusing to wear personal protective equipment	43%	12%	-
Other challenges	14%	32%	-
Unclear instructions from government agencies	19%	16%	50%
Spread of COVID-19 among staff members	14%	12%	-
Lack of collaboration within the Coalition	7%	0%	-

*Note: Nonprofits reported a combined 208 challenges, whereas governmental agencies reported a total of 93 challenges.*

total of 208) when compared to government agencies (a total of 93). Of the top five challenges, nonprofits report greater challenges in maintaining the health and safety of staff, facing a reduction or loss of financial resources, maintaining morale among staff, and facing a reduction or loss of available volunteers. Government organizations see an increased demand for services as a top challenge.

### MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Lastly, respondents were asked what steps their organizations are taking to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their organizations' survivability. We identified 24 different mitigation strategies from the open-ended question's responses. (See Figure 8.) Strategies ranged from those focused on the management of the organization to those focused on staff and those focused on clients. In general, respondents identified more mitigation strategies that were management-related, which is consistent with the top challenges experienced also being management-related (i.e., loss of financial resources, increased demand for services).

Management-related strategies were predominantly focused on finances, with organizations taking steps such as: assessing income and expenses, securing CARES Act funding, researching new funding opportunities, securing exceptions or allowances due to the coronavirus pandemic's affect in contracts and grants, securing funding for coronavirus-related mitigation efforts, and working with funders to address billing issues. Other management-related strategies were focused on strategic planning, including: developing internal coronavirus response teams, developing transition plans to move across color-coded risk phases, and planning for future similar events. Collaboration with other organization was also noted as a key mitigation strategy such as participating in Salt Lake County coronavirus-response calls and working with existing partner to deliver programs and services.

## Most mitigation strategies are management-related.

Figure 8: Mitigation Strategies Adopted by Service Providers

Management Related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assessing income &amp; expenses</li><li>• Applying for CARES Act funding (Paycheck Protection Program)</li><li>• Participating &amp; collaborating on Coalition* calls</li><li>• Creating an internal COVID-19 response team</li><li>• Developing transition plans to move across color-coded risk phases</li><li>• Researching and pursuing new funding opportunities</li><li>• Planning for future similar events</li><li>• Accessing existing partnerships to deliver programs</li><li>• Suspending volunteer programs</li><li>• Renegotiating services with Medicaid to include telehealth</li><li>• Providing or securing exceptions or allowances due to COVID-19 in service agreements (i.e., contract extensions, flexibility in grants)</li><li>• Providing or securing funding for COVID-19 mitigation</li><li>• Working with funders to resolve billing issues &amp; timeliness of payments</li><li>• Engaging in advocacy</li></ul>
Staff centered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providing staff with equipment to work remotely</li><li>• Working remotely</li><li>• Implementing health safety protocols for staff</li><li>• Providing hazard pay to incentive staff that provide face to face services</li><li>• Investing in staff support</li></ul>
Client focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offering curbside services</li><li>• Implementing safety protocols for clients</li><li>• Making changes to programming or services</li><li>• Surveying the changing needs of clients &amp; providers</li><li>• Increasing clinical contact w/ clients to reduce effects of social isolation</li></ul>

Staff-centered mitigation strategies were focused on affording employees opportunities to work remotely and providing the necessary equipment. Investing in staff also appeared to be a mitigation strategy, such as providing hazard pay, adopting safety protocols and overall investment in staff support.

Client-focused strategies were similar in number to those of staff focused. As with staff strategies, client strategies focused on implementing safety protocols and changing the way services are delivered (i.e., curbside offerings and overall changes to programming).

## CONCLUSION

Few homeless service providers report that they are closing their doors or report that their survivability is being challenged to a great extent. A majority continue providing services but with modifications, like a transition to online environments or a reduction in services provided. However, 45% of the homeless service providers reported that their survivability is being challenged at least somewhat. And this survivability may be related to the number of serious challenges, including an increasing demand for services along with a loss or reduction of financial resources -- on top of issues related to their staff such as their health and safety as well as maintaining their morale.

Results also indicate that nonprofit organizations are reporting greater effects from the coronavirus pandemic when compared to government agencies. For instance, nonprofit organizations are more likely to report that their services have been reduced and that their survivability is challenged to a great extent or at least somewhat. Overall, nonprofits report more challenges than government respondents.

Homeless service providers are responding to these challenges through an adoption of diverse management-, staff- and client-focused mitigation strategies. Management strategies are predominantly focused on revisiting financial aspects of the organizations, while staff

and client strategies addressed their health and safety, as well as accommodations to programming and services.

These results provide an early observation of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the state's largest homeless service system of government, nonprofit and business organizations. Because of the vulnerabilities facing individuals experiencing homelessness, the continued and sustainable operations of service providers during the pandemic is ever more important. The results of this first report indicate that some organizations are experiencing significant challenges and that they are adopting innovative and diverse mitigation strategies to address the effects of the pandemic on their operations. That nonprofit organizations are disproportionately affected by the pandemic compared to public agencies should be of interest to funders, policymakers and others who have a vested interest in seeing that these organizations thrive in the local community.

Subsequent reports will provide additional details as to the provider challenges. They will also explore the innovations and coping strategies to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, and explore the existing and long-term gaps in the homeless service system.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 State of Utah (2020, June 17). *Overview of COVID-19 Surveillance*, [coronavirus.utah.gov/case-counts/](https://coronavirus.utah.gov/case-counts/).
- 2 LePage, J. P., Bradshaw, L. D., Ciper, D. J., Crawford, A. M., & Hoosyar, D. (2014). *Public Health, 128(11)*, 985-992. And Baggett, T. P., O'Connell, J. J., Singer, D. E., & Rigotti, N. A. (2010). The Unmet Health Care Needs of Homeless Adults: A National Study. *American Journal of Public Health, 100(7)*, 1326-1333.
- 3 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2020, June 17). *2019 AHAR: Part 1 – PIT Estimates of Homelessness in the U.S.*, [www.hudexchange.info/resource/5948/2019-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/](https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/5948/2019-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us/).
- 4 Salt Lake County, *Vulnerable Populations – Homelessness Weekly Report*, June 15, 2020.





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