

COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SYSTEMS
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Information sources utilized by Vermont foodservice businesses during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic



Inter-institutional
Network for
Food and
Agricultural
Sustainability

Henry R. Blair,^{a*} David S. Conner,^b Naomi Cunningham,^c
Jessica Krueger,^d and Claire Whitehouse^e
University of Vermont

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Abstract

Our research team interviewed owners or managers ($n = 10$) of commercial (restaurants, caterers, food hubs) and institutional (schools, hospitals) foodservice businesses in Vermont in the summer and fall of 2020 to gather information about their experiences and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article discusses the information sources they utilized to make decisions about operating procedures and business strategies as the pandemic unfolded. Though this is not a comparative analysis to other states, Vermont had strong networks and support systems in place before the onset of COVID-19 that were poised to respond quickly as events unfolded. In addition, these interviews highlighted the importance of

^{a*} *Corresponding author:* Henry R. Blair, University of Vermont Extension, Northwest Crops and Soils Program; 278 South Main Street, Suite 2; St. Albans, VT 05478 USA; Henry.Blair.1@uvm.edu

^b David S. Conner, Professor, Department of Community Development and Applied Economics, University of Vermont; David.Conner@uvm.edu

^c Naomi Cunningham, Master of Science candidate, Department of Community Development and Applied Economics, University of Vermont; Naomi.Cunningham@uvm.edu

^d Jessica Krueger, Bachelor of Science candidate, Department of Food Systems, University of Vermont; jkruege@uvm.edu

^e Claire Whitehouse, Master of Science candidate, Department of Food Systems, University of Vermont; Claire.Whitehouse@uvm.edu

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both formal and informal information sources, which filled different niches in the information ecosystem.

Keywords

COVID-19, Foodservice, Food Systems, Resilience, Information, Pandemic, Adaptability

Information Sources and Networks

Vermont commercial and institutional foodservice operations utilized many information sources in the spring of 2020, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. These networks and information sources were both formal and informal, including but not limited to briefings by state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, informal industry and community group meetings, and social media platforms.

Interviewees identified the following information sources and networks as essential to their planning and decision-making at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: Vermont Governor Phil Scott's press briefings; Vermont Department of Health briefings; industry calls coordinated by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and Farm-to-Plate Network (VSJF/F2P); calls organized by the Vermont Small Business Development Center (SBDC) for program alumni; the Vermont Food Hub Collaborative; information and outreach produced by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets and by University of Vermont Extension; guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); and press briefings from the White House Coronavirus Task Force.

Many of these resources were already in place and became vital support structures to assist agile business adaptations as the pandemic unfolded. Novel informal networks were established as well. Industry groups (such as restaurants, food hubs, and school foodservice) were formed to share information and business strategies. Foodservice operations also used social media platforms to engage with customers and identify effective strategies used by similar businesses in other parts of the country.

This soft infrastructure was essential to foodservice businesses throughout the pandemic, but especially during its initial onset. Interviewees identified Vermont SBDC, VSJF, and F2P as particularly valuable. Businesses also contributed to each other's survival, as interviewees reported that the continued operation of their foodservice businesses had effects up and down the supply chain, supporting farmers and meeting the evolving needs of consumers. These collaborative and community-based support networks, both state-sponsored and independent, might be useful models for other states, as referenced by Campbell (2021) and Ammons et al. (2021).

Some businesses appointed heads of health and safety to monitor information sources and create and manage operating procedures based on evolving health guidance. Businesses also created or joined safety and reopening committees to coordinate and share information about industry reopening protocols.

Relationships Were Vital to Adaptation

A complex web of relationships supported these businesses in Vermont and allowed for agility and adaptability as the crisis evolved throughout the year. Information from state and federal agencies was necessary for a host of reasons. However, information was also gathered, disseminated, and utilized within business operations and between businesses and organizations throughout the supply chain. Businesses in many cases were able to successfully communicate with farmer-suppliers, distributors, employees, customers, and the public to adjust their business practices and operations as necessary.

Many employers stressed the adaptability of their staff as crucial to the business's ability to adjust practices and operating procedures. Interviewees reported that their staffs were flexible and willing to

implement necessary changes. Owners and managers also cited their concern for employees' health and well-being. Employers made efforts to provide physical and mental support to staff during this time, including paid personal time, mental health resources, personal protective equipment, food assistance, health insurance, and flexible work schedules. Businesses adopted new technologies to communicate with staff during the pandemic shutdowns. Virtual meeting and file-sharing platforms were used to share information and coordinate between staff and managers who were no longer working face-to-face.

Relationships between businesses and consumers allowed businesses to change their food delivery strategies (curbside pick-up, local delivery, online ordering, etc.) while maintaining consumer support. Individuals had to think carefully about their food choices and sources to support the businesses in their communities. In many cases, consumers were willing to adapt to the changing foodservice landscape and go along with new operating procedures. This willingness to adapt has been pivotal to the continued viability of many foodservice businesses. Businesses had to communicate effectively with consumers about hours of operation, changes in menu offering, meal service styles, ordering logistics, and health and safety protocols to ensure continued operation and protect both customers and staff.

Relationships between foodservice businesses and their vendors ensured consistent food supply while allowing for substitutions and last-minute changes based on business needs and opportunities. Long-standing relationships allowed for open communication, support, and mutual understanding. In some cases, businesses initiated new relationships with local producers, particularly through food hubs, to fill needs that national suppliers could not meet. Fardkhales and Lincoln (2021) discuss a similar impact of food hubs in Hawai'i's COVID-19 food systems response. Small-scale producers, frequently local, were able to pivot their production, packaging, and delivery operations quickly. They were often flexible and able to adapt along with their buyers. At times, foodservice businesses were also able to minimize food waste by adapting their menus to sudden excesses of local food products.

Relationships between businesses and government organizations were vital. In many cases, businesses had direct contact with government actors. In other cases, relationships were based on familiarity or exposure to the organization's role, even if a direct contact did not exist. These relationships were based on the utility of the information and support offered, as well as trust in the agency or organization providing the information.

Shortcomings

Interviewees found that at times they lacked necessary information or that information sources contradicted each other. In some cases, this may have been avoidable. Information from state and federal sources was not always aligned, creating confusion about best practices and expectations. In other cases, information gaps were unavoidable, as the situation was new and rapidly evolving.

The most critical piece of information that businesses lacked in the early stages of the pandemic was how long to expect restrictions and changes to business operations to persist. An anticipated timeline or duration of lockdowns would have guided decisions about whether to stay open or close, retain employees or reduce staffing, purchase and/or install new equipment or infrastructure, or adopt new technologies. Because policy decisions have been largely based on health data from a complex and dynamic crisis that is still unfolding, it was and still is unknown how long restrictions will be in place, making this challenge unavoidable.


More thorough details about the permissible use of relief funds, loan forgiveness or repayment terms, and potential loan or grant tax liabilities could have allowed businesses to use funds more quickly and with greater impact. The terms of the financial assistance offered to business owners were unclear, inhibiting decisions about retaining or hiring staff and purchasing equipment or technologies. Interviewees reported that they would have made different decisions if they had had clear information

about relief funds and loans. Some businesses would have maintained or increased staffing levels in the early months of the pandemic or purchased new adaptive equipment or technologies were it not for the unknowns and uncertainties around payback terms and forgiveness opportunities.

Conclusion

Vermont's collaborative and supportive landscape allowed for flexibility, adaptability, and resilience in the face of a significant system shock. Formal and informal networks and institutions had established trust and goodwill that allowed for collaboration, adaptation, and survival.

Though the multivarious information sources could have been overwhelming at times, it is important to note that each provided different types of information and support to food businesses. The CDC and departments of health kept businesses and individuals informed about evolving scientific knowledge of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 and how it affected sanitation procedures and protective guidelines. State and federal agencies implemented operating restrictions, regulations, and mandates, as well as relief programs. Business support services, such as SBDC and VSJF, provided guidance on relief applications and business strategies. Industry committees and support groups shared information about operating procedures for staff and consumer health, adoption of technologies, and experiences with various relief programs.

These conduits provided a great deal of information and, despite some redundancy, each provided specialized support with a unique perspective. It remains unclear to what extent this redundancy was useful or was too fragmented and overwhelming for business decision-makers. Fardkhales and Lincoln (2021) describe the value of redundancy in diverse systems when responding to a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Glaros et al. (2021) further explain how supply networks, as opposed to chains, work toward community resilience. This network perspective can be applied to the various sources of information utilized by businesses during immediate and prolonged crises. Pre-existing networks, such as VSJF and SBDC, and trust in those networks by foodservice businesses, allowed for the rapid dissemination of valuable information that enabled operations to continue to move food from farms to individual consumers in Vermont. 

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