

Summary of Coronavirus Pandemic Safety Net Issues: Conversations with Government, Business, Nonprofit, and Thought Leaders

Background

OBC hosted a series of online meetings in the spring of 2020, inviting business leaders, policy partners, stakeholders, and thought leaders to identify the trends, challenges, and opportunities for recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The sessions asked: How can Oregon come out of the pandemic crisis stronger, more resilient, more prosperous, and more equitable? This summary captures themes from the conversation series focused on the social safety net.

Conversation Takeaways

- In the balance of the pandemic and its aftermath, there will likely be a host of fundamental, and, in some cases, permanent, changes in the lives of Oregonians.
- The economic recovery is a long game, and it should be supported by a human-centered safety net system that provides Oregonians agency to attain economic mobility.
- The recovery effort should emphasize resilience and focus on addressing inequities accelerated and exposed by the crisis.
- There are immediate actions that need to be taken to ensure Oregonians are supported through the re-opening and recovery phases of the coronavirus crisis.

Themes and Their Implications

Theme 1: There needs to be a fundamental overhaul of our safety net system. The new system should empower Oregonians, build agency, and foster economic mobility.

- **Support for the safety net ecosystem.** The system should value culturally specific and responsive organizations as trusted connectors to families and children. The system should be thoughtful about the role of government as part of this ecosystem.
- **Flexibility in state, federal, and local funding.** Much of our safety net is fragmented and there is inflexibility in how federal, state, and local funding can be spent. A reimagined safety net should include flexible and blended funding streams that can be responsive to the unique needs of communities and Oregonians.
- **Cash vs. programs.** Different forms of cash transfers and cash assets should be considered as part of any system that is supporting economic mobility. For example, we could explore converting food stamps into cash.

Theme 2: Sharing power and decision making are critical for shared prosperity.

- **Civic engagement.** Civic engagement and civic health should be part of a support system that empowers Oregonians. This includes empowering groups that have not had a place at the table to participate in civic life.
- **Resources for participation.** Civic engagement and shared power should include resource allocations to support participation, training, and other supports that enable Oregonians to be full participants in civic life.

Theme 3: Inequities persist, and equity should be at the center of a reimagined safety net system.

- **Avoid a leaky bucket.** Prevent funneling money into an inefficient system that does not reach the groups of people that need the resources the most.
- **Equity.** “We are all in the same storm but not in the same boat.” Racial inequities persist and the coronavirus pandemic is exacerbating this issue.

- **Data systems.** Good data systems should inform strategy and be disaggregated so that resources can be allocated to communities that need them the most. Data should be integrated to reflect the interconnectedness of safety net programs.

Theme 4: There are specific areas of the safety net that need immediate attention.

- **Childcare access and affordability.** There was a shortage of affordable quality childcare before the pandemic. That shortage is now worse because many childcare centers were forced to close. As Oregonians go back to work, it is imperative that this issue be addressed.
- **Housing.** Addressing housing access and affordability was an issue prior to the crisis and should remain at the forefront of any policy agenda.
- **Health care.** Coordinated Care Organizations could serve as a model for future system redesign both in how they are financed and in their accountability. Community engagement needs to be elevated as part of this model.
- **EITC uptake.** Oregon has one of the lowest EITC uptake rates in the country. Addressing this issue could provide immediate cash assistance to low-income Oregonians while benefitting the Oregon economy.

Reflections

- This crisis creates an opportunity to change the narrative around poverty in Oregon.
- There is a need for a north star shared by all so leaders can get behind the idea of a reimagined safety net system.
- Fundamental changes have already been made to the system that were previously unimaginable (e.g. online sign up for food stamps). We need to preserve these important changes and understand the barriers to making those changes in the first place.
- Oregon should not go back to back to the siloed approach of delivering safety net services. This means that programs and policies should reflect a new seamless delivery system that supports of the ecosystem of providers, government, and private sector actors.
- Equity should be at the center of every recovery effort moving forward.