

County of Berks
Recovery Plan

**State and Local Fiscal Recovery
Funds**

2022 Report

2022 Recovery Plan

Table of Contents

General Overview.....	2
Executive Summary.....	2
Uses of Funds	2
Promoting Equitable Outcomes	2
Community Engagement	3
Labor Practices	5
Use of Evidence	5
Performance Report	5
Project Inventory.....	5
Grants Coordinator Position	5

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Executive Summary

The County of Berks has received its total allocation of \$81,806,170.00 in early June of 2022. The County is focused on leveraging our available resources and collaborating with community partners to ensure that these funds will create a positive, lasting impact in our community for all residents. The County will have until December 31, 2024, to obligate these funds and until December 31, 2026, to expend the funds.

In addition to the County's allocation:

Berks County municipalities have received a total of \$96.7 Million

Berks County School Districts have received a total of \$160.3 Million

During our Information Gathering Stage of this process, the County Commissioners established committees dedicated to specific focus areas to help address the needs of our residents and strengthen our local economy. Each Commissioner served as the Chair of a committee that helped to identify objectives, long-term benefits, possible collaborations, and deserving initiatives to aide in recovery. The County has since moved out of the Information Gathering Stage and into the next stage of the County's ARP process: Deploying Dollars into the Community.

Uses of Funds

The County is committed to the effective and purposeful deployment of these resources into our community. The Administrative Committee chaired by our Chief Administrative Officer, Ronald R. Seaman, has been responsible for reviewing and assigning time and resources to address unforeseen situations that might arise in the future or otherwise not covered by other Committees which has successfully assisted the County in strategically planning for the future in the event another wave of the pandemic occurs.

The County Operations - Assessment and Needs Committee ran by Senior Leadership has been assessing and documenting the negative financial impact on the County budget and operations as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency. Weekly operations meetings have been held to ensure transparency with the public on the County's negative economic impact from COVID-19 and its recovery strategies.

As result of the County Operations – Assessment and Needs Committee's due diligence, it was discovered that the best course of action for these funds was to utilize the Revenue Loss/ Revenue Replacement (EC 6) eligible use category to stabilize the County's operating budget through the end of 2024 and deficits to governmental services with the intent to lessen any negative and/or additional burdens on County residents. These efforts are focused on how to make the most of this historical federal funding opportunity created to ignite economic recovery.

Promoting equitable outcomes

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, it became increasingly clear that having reliable and affordable Internet service is a crucial utility service for everyday life. Unfortunately, there are still many residents within Berks County that do not have the ability to access quality Internet service. With that in mind, the County has embarked on a thorough feasibility study into broadband access throughout the county that will help to focus our efforts at filling those gaps

and advocating for further funding. One of the initial steps in the study is to identify the current needs of the community, so the County is conducting a broadband survey for residents to fill out and complete speed tests of their existing connections. The survey is available in English and Spanish and is being communicated through local media outlets, networks from community organizations and a social media promotion campaign. The County has already received roughly 3,000 responses to the survey and hopes to extend that further to garner the best representation of the community.

Through its Redevelopment Authority, the County also established the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) which is funded by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. ERAP has provided payments for rent, rent arrears, utility, and utility arrears for eligible applicants. Applicants must have experienced financial hardship directly or indirectly by COVID or during the COVID pandemic. Priority is given to people at or below 50% of the area median income and to one or more members of the applicant household that have been unemployed for a least 90 days. To date, the County is serving or have served 2,679 families.

Based on the demographics of our community, the County is also working to prioritize making services and information available to residents in both English and Spanish. One of the biggest steps to achieving this objective will be through an upcoming rehaul of the County's website later this year. Previously, the County relied heavily on Goggle's automated translation service, but we've come to learn that a direct translation is more appropriate and adequate to truly communicate with our residents. We've already taken several steps toward this overall goal by making sure that the information related to large County projects is available in both languages, including the previously discussed broadband survey and ERAP program. While we still have a long way to go, the County is committed to filling this gap and making sure all our residents can take advantage of the various services and programs offered through County government.

The County also strongly believes that understanding and promoting equity and equality starts with County leadership and those employed in County government. In February 2022, the County held a mandatory Diversity Training presented by Adrean Turner from the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) for County employees as part of the 2022 Professional Development Series - Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This session heightened awareness and enhanced skills, to effectively prepare individuals to understand Diversity, Equity and Inclusion impacts, initiatives, and engagement strategies. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training helps employees at all levels and in all departments to better work with colleagues of differing identities and backgrounds. This training aimed to build awareness and skills which support employees and help to cultivate a safe, compassionate, and equitable office culture where everyone feels valued. Attendees gained a greater self-awareness and increased learning of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion by understanding and obtaining more clarity around power and privilege. This session is a part of a multi-series on Professional Development and inclusion in the County's workplace and culture.

Community Engagement

The County's initial community engagement recovery efforts began with the distribution of CARES Act funding. the Berks County Board of Commissioners wanted to find the best way to allocate these important funds to maximize every dollar. In order to get a snapshot of the true need, the Commissioners conducted an online Community Needs Assessment during the

summer of 2020. More than 150 community partners responded, allowing the Commissioners to gauge how best to provide the necessary funds for relief, response, and support efforts.

These efforts have been divided into seven primary focus areas below:

CARES Grant Program: Grants offered to organizations within public health services, municipalities and authorities, nonprofits and educational institutions and services.

Small Business New Start Grant Program: Grants offered to small businesses and promoted through the county's Rebuild Berks campaign.

Food Insecurity: Funds provided to local food banks.

Contact Tracing: Funds provided to support a county contact tracing program.

Public Outreach: Funds for three campaigns designed to educate the public about COVID-19 and promote local businesses, organizations, and tourism.

Business Support: Funds provided to support larger business organizations supporting the community

County COVID Expenses: Funds to cover County costs related to COVID-19, including PPE and staff needs

The County has continued these community recovery outreach efforts by establishing a Community Support Committee chaired by Commissioner Kevin S. Barnhardt which reviewed workforce issues, food insecurity, homelessness, affordable housing, mental health, health inequities and identify any unmet social service support needs. The County also launched the Berks County Recovery Survey for residents to actively participate and provide feedback as to which area of focus the County should direct these funds. More than 290 residents responded.

The Berks Cares Vaccine Center and Mobile Testing Site was created with the support of Co-County Wellness Services for COVID-9 contact tracing to assist with County community health efforts for mitigation and vaccination to help improve and expand public health efforts.

The County of Berks has also created an opportunity for municipalities, businesses and nonprofits that serve the County to apply for project grants. These grants are intended for one-time financial support for projects that will leverage available resources and collaborate with community partners to ensure the maximum level of positive and lasting impact for residents.

The County Commissioners approved utilizing \$18 million for these grants in 2022 and another \$12 million for grants in 2023. The deadline to submit applications for 2022 was March 31, 2022. A Grant Review Committee was established during the review and determination phase made up of community stakeholders to assess which projects should be submitted to the County's Board of Commissioners for final approval.

For the 2022 grants, the County specifically focused on projects that would create sustainable, long-term positive outcomes within key community sectors, including housing, education, small businesses, food insecurity, agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure projects related to improving water and sewer, access to broadband internet service, transportation, and other types of infrastructure.

The application process has now entered the awarding phase. On June 30, 2022, the County Commissioners authorized the approval of up to \$18,080,000 in County-funded grants to support projects that will have a positive and lasting impact in the community. The grants are expected to be awarded to 49 selected applicants, subject to the terms and conditions contained in a grant contract to be reviewed and approved by the County Solicitor's office.

The grants will support projects within 25 municipalities throughout Berks County. The selected projects include initiatives to create outdoor public space and trail connectivity, capital projects that address homelessness and food insecurity, and support for water and sewer infrastructure, health care facilities and educational centers.

Labor Practices

The County established a Business Response Committee chaired by Commissioner Michael Rivera. This committee reviewed programs that supported businesses to determine if there were still unmet needs. This included small businesses, Main Streets, Tourism, Hospitality, workforce development and manufacturing.

The Special Projects and Infrastructure Committee chaired by Commissioner Leinbach was established review and assess Transportation, Broadband, Water and Sewer, and Special Projects – which may include, but not be limited to Housing, and Arts and Culture.

The County has launched the IMAGINEBerks planning process which over an 8-months span will seek to develop a 5-Year Action Plan that encourages sustainable land development, suggests improvements to local regulatory and tax policy and strategies, and achieves competitive market positioning to sustain and grow existing businesses and attract new businesses. The implementation of the IMAGINE Berks economic development plan also falls in alignment with about \$5.6 million of the grant program funding awarded to projects in a cross-collaborative effort to maximize the strength of each dollar deployed into Berks County.

Use of Evidence

The County has set up a dashboard that will allow the community to track how funds are distributed. As the County Leadership team makes decisions and allocates funds, the dashboard will be updated to reflect those expenditures.

Performance Report

The County has one direct expense which is the Grants Coordinator position under the Administrative Expense category. This position receives 45-day, 60-day, 90-day, a one year then yearly subsequent reviews to manage performance and ensure goals are met.

PROJECT INVENTORY

Project

Project 11314: Grants Coordinator Position

Funding amount: Yearly Salary \$47,175.10 plus Training Expenses

Project Expenditure Category: 7-Administrative - 7.1-Administrative Expenses

Project Overview

The Grants Coordinator position was created to assist the County to fulfill its purpose to oversee a cross-community collaborative approach for impactful investment in Berks County that addresses the needs of our residents and the vulnerabilities of our economy and the outcome of effectively utilizing ARP funds; leveraging available resources and collaborating with community partners to ensure the maximum level of positive and lasting impact for our residents. This position is a part of the County's Economic Development Department and reports to the Chief Administrative Officer and the Economic Development Director.

Use of Evidence

- The Grants Coordinator manages all uses of the ARP funding, reporting requirements, and acts as liaison between County departments to ensure all distribution of funds are properly communicated and correct information is gathered for reporting purposes.

Performance Report

Payroll for Grants Coordinator:

From start date 08/04/2021 to 12/31/2021:

Salary - \$18,702.03

Training- \$893

Total: \$19,595.03.

01/1/2022-03/31/2022:

Salary - \$22,221.91.

Actual Fringe - \$2,584.94

Training - \$1,675.36

Total: \$26,482.21

04/1/2022-6/30/2022:

Salary - \$10,553.20

Training - \$174.00

Total: 10,727.20

Total Cumulative Expenditures to Date: \$56,804.44

This will be an ongoing expense therefore the "Status of Completion" will remain at "Completed less than 50%" until all reporting requirements are completed and funds are disbursed.