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The Colorado Resiliency Office is highlighting the work of local governments, organizations, and businesses who are adapting to the changing COVID-19 crisis.

Gunnison County ICELab

Darcie Perkins is the assistant director of the **Innovation Creativity Entrepreneurship Lab (ICEL)** in Gunnison County, a coworking space and innovation hub supported by Western Colorado University, the West Central Small Business Development Center, and the City and County of Gunnison. The ICEL is a 501c6 – a non-governmental agency without non-profit status – and works at the direction of the county commissioners.

Normally, Darcie’s job focuses on diversifying the economy but during the COVID-19 pandemic she has been dedicated to helping county businesses survive. As of April 23, Gunnison County had been under incident management control for 45 days, which means that more than 800 county businesses have been shut down or have massively reduced their operations for more than a month.

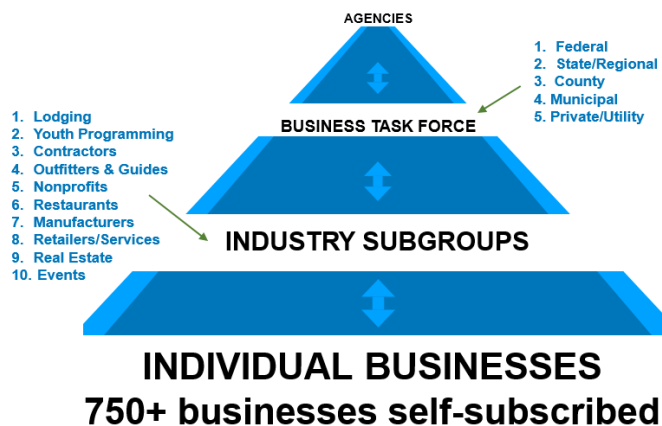


Image Courtesy of Darcie Perkins

Gunnison’s tourism-based economy is reliant on visitors and has a density of businesses that rely on greater demand than

the local populations can provide. Darcie has found that communication has been the best tool for solving problems and managing local business owners' confusion and anxiety over the pandemic's impact on their livelihoods and employees. Her focus on communication has helped the county pioneer task forces and networks that have, in several instances, spared businesses further financial blows and will likely make their return to normal working hours easier. Following are several key lessons that have emerged from her interview:

Deliver Clear and Timely Communication

First, Darcie committed to delivering **clear, accurate and honest information in a timely manner**. Concealing or white-washing dire economic predictions will not help businesses, she told us.

"If they know the bad news, they can manage it," she said, encouraging local officials to err on the side of too much information, not less. "Don't be afraid of the backlash -- be afraid of your community not having the info it needs."

In the spirit of honesty and timeliness, Gunnison County under Darcie's guidance launched a **business communication network** that hosts regular Zoom meetings with more than 800 local businesses. Businesses are divided into industry subgroups, which meet once a week. The county has also created a weekly task force meeting, which fields the questions and concerns of the business groups and includes local elected officials and state agency representatives. All of the weekly calls have been recorded and archived on a [county website](#) for access by the public.

Darcie attributes Gunnison County's high numbers of loan recipients to this communication network. On the weekly Zoom calls, two local business leaders with knowledge of federal small business loans were able to share tips with other businesses on the loan process. By late April, 150 businesses had received \$13 million in loans; 1,250 people at risk of losing jobs are staying on payroll, in a county with just 17,000 people.

One example of the efficacy of the business communication network was when local contractors, who were deemed essential businesses, were not able to get state plumbing and electrical inspections. This feedback was given to the task force, the members of which passed it along to State officials. The State confirmed that inspectors were allowed to work and, within three days, contractors were back to work.

Deliver on Promises

Second, Darcie strives to **always deliver what she and her colleagues promised to the community**. If she can't deliver, Darcie realized it was important to communicate why and set new expectations. "If you just leave them hanging and you don't explain and they feel like they are waiting, then anxiety and anger skyrockets," Darcie said. "That's why our weekly calls are so helpful." Regular check-ins with information updates helped the county to manage community expectations even as the pandemic situation rapidly evolved and changed. This is about more than managing business anxiety, Darcie says -- Gunnison's greater economy is at stake if businesses fail to work together or feel supported by local government.

Learn To Adapt - Quickly

Third, Darcie believes that **getting rid of hierarchies that don't allow for rapid change** will help businesses come back and ensure that communities can be creative in their economic recovery. "If businesses have to wait and go through a (bureaucratic) structure, they will be left behind," Darcie said. "Change has to happen fast." Crested Butte city council, for instance, has agreed to explore a previously controversial idea to open Elk Avenue, the city's main street, to pedestrians to allow all restaurants to have outdoor spaces. In a matter of weeks the city has come closer to implementing this idea than it had after years of discussion and work.