



**GULF COAST  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION**

# **REGIONAL SCAN 2021**

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**THE GULF COAST  
BEYOND COVID**

**TOGETHER  
WITH OUR  
DONORS, WE  
TRANSFORM  
OUR REGION  
THROUGH BOLD  
AND PROACTIVE  
PHILANTHROPY**



**GULF COAST COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**

## THE GULF COAST BEYOND COVID

In our 2019 regional scan, Gulf Coast Community Foundation explored future risks and disruptors facing our region and identified priorities to help make it more resilient. Little did we know that 2020 would bring unprecedented upheaval and uncertainty with the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Now in 2021, the Gulf Coast region is in the process of recovering from over a year of turmoil, hardship, uncertainty, and change. The pandemic has jeopardized the livelihoods of thousands of workers, disproportionately impacted communities of color, afflicted the mental health of children and adults, disrupted our nonprofit organizations and civic institutions, and accelerated social and technological changes in how we live, work, learn, and communicate.

Gulf Coast Community Foundation responded quickly to the impacts of COVID-19 in our region. We partnered with Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation in March 2020 to launch the COVID-19 Response Initiative, a joint philanthropic effort to ensure the well-being of our region. Together with Gulf Coast donors, we have invested over \$7 million in grants to ease strains on organizations serving those hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis and help our communities recover.

As we look toward the future, the Gulf Coast in a post-COVID world may look different from in years past. There remain significant community needs and long-term systemic issues to address together. The impacts of the pandemic on our communities, our families, and our children are far-reaching, and ripple effects will be felt for a long time.

Through regional leadership, collaboration, and philanthropy, we can work together to ease the burden of financial insecurity on households, to reduce the strain on our mental and physical health, to look after the well-being of our youth, to reopen doors and provide services for those in need, to repair the social connections within our communities, and to strengthen our civic institutions and philanthropic networks.

# REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

**Gulf Coast Community Foundation** sets an ambitious agenda for its regional philanthropic work by identifying critical trends and priorities, and then developing transformative initiatives to address them. We refer to this priority-setting process as our “regional scan.” Gulf Coast commissions a regional scan every two years, researching and analyzing data for a view of long-term and emerging trends, and then enhancing that picture with perspectives from community leaders. This helps us prioritize issues and mobilize the resources and community partners to address them.

For over a decade, our regional scans have provided a road map to direct our community investments through responsive grantmaking and proactive regional initiatives. We directly engage community leaders from civic, business, and government organizations to listen and learn. This process helps articulate Gulf Coast’s priorities and guides our funding decisions.

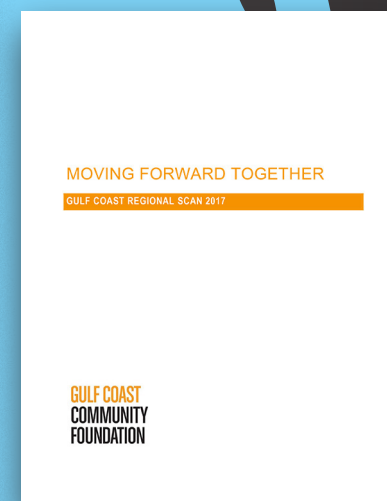
In 2021, we reached out to community leaders across the region to ask what are the region’s most pressing challenges in the year ahead and what opportunities should be acted on over the next several years as we transition to a post-COVID world. We heard common concerns and worries for the future, but we also heard hope and optimism.

This document summarizes our priorities for the year ahead. Priorities are identified by both how frequently they were raised as a critical issue and how likely and significant their impacts might be in the near future. We also recognize that there remain many foundational and crosscutting issues where progress continues to be important.

Our priorities are your priorities. Gulf Coast is committed to action across the range of issues facing our communities, and we are ready to lead, partner, and invest in innovative ideas and solutions. We invite you to join us in transforming our region.



*Regional Scan 2019*



*Regional Scan 2017*



## OUR MENTAL WELLBEING

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2020 challenged us all. A year of uncertainty and unrest strained the mental health of many adults and many more youth. For those who were already living on the edge, or in poor health, or a primary caregiver, that strain was much worse. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that nearly 40 percent of Americans suffered from anxiety, depression, or thoughts of suicide. Sudden hardships and life changing events triggered a mental health crisis in our region. Mental wellbeing has significant implications and is linked to challenges with work opportunities, family and household stability, and addiction and abuse.

Increased visibility and a growing awareness of the role of mental health challenges as a barrier to opportunity are drawing attention to this critical priority. For those who can afford it, quality care is available. However, for underserved and under-resourced populations, barriers to care include cost, access, transportation, and stigma. Regional partnership and investment is needed to identify and close gaps in mental health support systems and to backfill lagging public funding for treatment programs and services.



## OUR FUTURE GENERATIONS

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We are only beginning to understand the impacts of the pandemic on youth. Remote learning, digital divides, and social isolation are among the more immediate and apparent challenges. The long-term implications on student achievement, development and nutrition, mental well-being, and future economic opportunity are real, but they are largely invisible. For many students, remote learning has widened achievement gaps and worsened outcomes, particularly for vulnerable low-income and minority youth. For other children, loneliness and technology precipitated significant mental health challenges. Teen suicide rates in Sarasota County continue to trend above the state average, even without considering 2020 data.

Increased financial pressures and service demands on nonprofits providing foster care, community programming, and counseling services will leave fewer children with critical support services. College-age students still face limited job prospects, affordable housing, and community quality of life within the region, and they may continue to look for opportunity elsewhere. Expanding partnerships, delivering services effectively and efficiently, and identifying new areas for service and provider collaboration are needed to help the next generation of the Gulf Coast stay and succeed.





## OUR COMMUNITIES

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Real estate markets in Sarasota County communities continued their astronomical rise as the pandemic created an all-time low inventory of affordable housing. Already unaffordable for many working families, housing options on the Gulf Coast for many of our caregivers, educators, and first responders – and now grocery pickers, home-delivery drivers, and other on-demand service providers – are simply out of reach.

Housing and transportation account for 60% of household income in many communities across our region. Essential workers such as firefighters, nurses, and teachers may pay up to 65% of monthly income in rent alone. Housing is directly connected to transportation costs, challenges retaining essential workers, and limited opportunities for younger and diverse residents.

Addressing the housing imbalance requires regional leadership, innovative market solutions, and education and communications initiatives to reframe the problem and dispel myths surrounding obtainable and essential worker housing.



## OUR OPPORTUNITIES

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The economic story of the pandemic is a tale of two very different outcomes. For most high-wage, high-skill professional workers, transitioning to remote work and maintaining job security were surmountable challenges. But for low-wage, lower-skill workers, the pandemic was life-changing. Many workers lost jobs in service, retail, and tourism industries. Many others faced income instability, digital divides, and uncertainty.

For vulnerable residents, the unexpected loss of work led to increased housing insecurity, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, and day-to-day challenges meeting basic needs.

How well our region provides opportunities for businesses and living wages for workers is a critical measure of success.

Gulf Coast is committed to working with public and private partners to diversify the regional economy, train and equip a skilled workforce, and leverage regional assets to build a more competitive region.



## OUR NATURAL ASSETS

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How we enjoy our region's natural areas changed over the past year, as residents sought new opportunities to social distance and recreate outside. Demand for trails, parks, open spaces, and cycling paths increased and brought new attention to the natural assets of the Gulf Coast. Our bays, beaches, rivers, parks, and conservation and recreation areas are irreplaceable assets.

The ecosystems of the Gulf Coast have a natural and an economic value — and a cost when they are out of balance. Red tides cause more than \$20 million in tourism-related business losses in Florida each year, and the mitigation costs to harden infrastructure against rising sea levels could cost more than \$3 billion in Sarasota and Manatee counties by 2040. Extreme weather and high-impact storm events are likely to worsen in the coming decades as the impacts of a changing climate are increasingly apparent. Beach erosion and tidal flooding are already visible threats, and much of the region's housing stock, destinations, and critical infrastructure are at risk from extreme weather events that are increasing in intensity and frequency.

Leadership on this priority is needed to raise the visibility of environmental issues, collaborate on solutions, and become a leader in adaptation and mitigation.

# CONTINUING PRIORITIES

The preceding five key priorities will be the focus of Gulf Coast's philanthropic efforts in the coming years. However, this regional scan also illuminated cross-cutting and foundational challenges that our region must collaborate on together too, including:

**COMMUNITY CIVILITY** As technology continues to drive social interactions, political discourse, information, and misinformation, it is more important than ever to connect youth to volunteer and community initiatives, to engage the next generation of political leaders, and to introduce civility into our classrooms and communities.

**EDUCATION** While our region's education systems perform better for children than many other districts across the state, they do not always work for every student. Continued attention is needed to address achievement gaps, introduce new learning initiatives, and engage students from all communities. Digital learning divides only increased during the pandemic, as technology adoption and reliance works for many but not all students.

**RACIAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE** The past year has shown us that racial equity is important for every community across the country and is essential in addressing long-term, systemic injustices. The Gulf Coast's philanthropic and nonprofit communities can help ensure diversity and equity in services provided and within service providers.

**NONPROFIT COMMUNITY** Continuing to strengthen the region's philanthropic, civic, and nonprofit organizations will continue to be a priority. The pandemic tested the financial sustainability of many organizations and introduced new challenges in online fundraising and service provision. Encouraging innovation in service delivery, leveraging technology to connect people and providers, and enabling greater cooperation and coordination will continue to be critical.

**CRIMINAL JUSTICE** Reform and innovation in criminal justice systems remains ever important to rethink how we address mental health, chronic homelessness, substance abuse, at-risk youth, and other social challenges in our courts. Sarasota County's law enforcement and judicial systems continue to be a progressive model, but creative pilot programs and new initiatives can be tested.

**SENIOR CARE** Many elderly residents face issues of social isolation, vulnerability to natural disasters, retirement and financial insecurity, transportation barriers, and basic mental health and healthcare needs. The pandemic significantly impacted at-risk elderly and increased issues associated with isolation and loneliness. Partnerships and investment in programs that connect services across networks and connect volunteers and donors to senior-care initiatives can help the region prepare.

## TRANSFORMING OUR REGION

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COVID has changed lives up and down the Gulf Coast and accelerated many trends in technology, society, and communities that were previously visible.

The lasting impacts of those trends may now also be just visible. We are likely to see continued demand for mental health and human services, for social justice and racial equity, for addressing root causes of poverty, for equipping workers with the skills to succeed, and for diversifying the region's industries to provide living wages for working families.

Gulf Coast is committed to working with our donors and our partners in the public, civic, and private sectors to enact meaningful change and provide opportunities for all residents.

Visit us online at  
[GulfCoastCF.org](https://GulfCoastCF.org)

