

Introduction

by Dora Anne Mills, Amanda Rector, Linda Silka, and Barbara Harrity

In early 2021, when we began work on a special issue of *Maine Policy Review* to focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, few of us expected to still be in the throes of the pandemic nearly 12 months later. We thought this issue would be retrospective: a place to gather pieces that evaluated the impacts of, examined the responses to, and considered opportunities arising from the pandemic. A collection of the lessons learned that future researchers and policymakers could reference. We didn't realize there would be so much more yet to come.

Looking back to a year ago, vaccines were just starting to become available. Case counts in schools were low. Home testing kits were beginning to roll out. We were just starting to hear about different variants of the virus. The CDC announced that fully vaccinated individuals could gather indoors without masks. The federal government had responded with an expansive fiscal stimulus package. We were eagerly looking ahead to a summer that looked more like what we remembered from before the pandemic.

Since then, we saw the Delta variant, and then the Omicron variant, take off. Vaccines became available for children of more ages. Vaccination and masking mandates became highly politicized, and an overall pandemic fatigue set in. Certainly we weren't where we thought we would be in the summer of 2021. Businesses struggled to hire workers even as demand for things like restaurant dining rebounded; many workers had retired, and others were dealing with health concerns or other pandemic-related challenges like childcare. Supply

chains became snarled and inflation started climbing towards rates not seen in 40 years.

The future of the pandemic is uncertain. As we learn to live with COVID, we also realize that a new variant can disrupt things again. Despite these uncertainties and the ongoing pandemic challenges of exacerbated workforce shortages and overall increased demands for healthcare services, organizations and people are adjusting, are turning challenges into opportunities, and are finding creative solutions.

As we looked at the submissions we received for this special *MPR* issue, we realized that they fell into three broad categories: pieces that examine measurable impacts of the pandemic, pieces that look at responses to the pandemic, and pieces that explore opportunities arising from the pandemic.

This issue starts with the Margaret Chase Smith essay, written by Guest Editor and State Economist Amanda Rector, who reflects on her experience of trying to find data to help state policymakers navigate this unprecedented event. Andrew Crawley and Angela Hallowell were two of the economists scrambling to provide data in the early days of the pandemic, and their article compares their initial forecasts for output, employment, and tax revenue to actual values for 2020. The next article, by Mark McInerney and Erin Fenton, examines the pandemic's impact on the labor market in Maine, first by putting it in the context of past recessions, then by assessing telework suitability, and finally by exploring the differential job losses that occurred during the pandemic. Philip

Trostel, looking at labor market trends both nationally and in Maine, finds that, in addition to the unprecedented spike in unemployment, there was an unprecedented decrease in labor force participation, an increase in absence from work, and a decline in average weekly hours of work among those employed. Turning to Maine's food system, Jonathan Malacarne and colleagues describe the response of the Maine food system to the onset of the crisis as a way to better understand how the food system responded to an acute crisis and how to create a more resilient food system. The final two pieces that describe the impacts of the pandemic focus on Maine's tourism industry. Todd Gabe examines the effects of COVID-19 on tourism in Bar Harbor, Maine, and Tracy Michaud and colleagues use data from the social media site Flickr to explore the impact of the pandemic on travel patterns and visitor spending in Maine.

The collection of articles that look at responses to the pandemic starts with the article by Vanessa Levesque and colleagues, which explores how 50 Maine municipalities communicated their responses to COVID-19 in the earliest stages of the pandemic. The commentary by Joseph McDonnell examines the missteps in managing the pandemic, at both the national and state levels, with a focus on six stages of crisis management. Several of the submissions in this category had a focus on education: Niles Parker and Kate Dickerson describe efforts by the Maine Discovery Museum and Maine Science Festival to improve science education and outreach efforts; Sarah Krichels Goan and colleagues look at the lessons Maine's Aspirations Incubator have learned during

the COVID-19 pandemic; Paige Wentworth and Lois-Ann Kuntz describe a winter gear drive for low-income elementary school children held in Washington County in late 2020; and Katie Rybakova and Jeremy Pare offer a look at the way the pandemic has helped them innovate in their classrooms and build upon hands-on, virtual experiences that prepare college students for the real world. Closing out this section, Frank O'Hara, using Daniel Dafoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, compares the experiences of the Great London Plague to the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The final section comprises articles that focus on opportunities arising from the pandemic. David Vail wonders if the pandemic may jumpstart an economic renaissance in Maine's rim counties. Rob Brown argues that Maine should support employee ownership transitions as a key to an equitable economic recovery. Thomas Remington discusses ways that Maine can take advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to restructure the institutional environment to reduce inequality and foster workforce development. Laura Fairman argues that state policymakers should reconsider their postpandemic economic development strategy in light of remote work trends. Stefano Tijerino describes the possible changes to international trade and Maine's economy in the postpandemic world. From his perspective, "the way life should be" is about to be revised and redefined. And in the final piece of the issue, Lisa Miller and Deborah Deatrick describe the efforts of Maine public health advocates to use the experiences of the pandemic to strengthen Maine's public health agencies.

Our hope is that this issue, while maybe not the retrospective we initially thought it would be, captures a snapshot of the impacts, responses, and opportunities in the early stages of the pandemic—the

first year or so. The lessons learned are valuable and capturing them here is perhaps even more important given how much has happened since. We are more likely to remember what happened last when looking back at an event, yet there is much to be gained from remembering what happened first. It is important to remember, as we reflect on COVID-19, that this is certainly not the last pandemic. We need, therefore, to be considering the future and what we can learn from this pandemic that will help us prepare for the next one. The articles in this issue include many insights that can help us plan for, and prepare for, the future. These articles speak to learning and preparation and will continue to be helpful as we look to the future.



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