Title of the Story: COVID-19 Response

Destination Name: Explore Brevard, Transylvania County, NC

Country: United States

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Nomination Category: Immediate responses in dealing with the COVID-19

☐ Culture & Communities
☐ Environment & Climate
☐ Nature & Ecotourism
☐ Islands & Seaside
☒ Immediate responses in dealing with the COVID-19
☐ Post COVID-19 recovery
☐ One of the 17 SDGs* (if yes, which one) GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being

*The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated—that is, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. What are the Sustainable Development Goals? https://www.unpd.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

For further information on Tourism for SDGs: http://tourism4sdgs.org/

Find detailed instructions for submitting good practices here
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Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

**Issues faced**

Tourism is a key economic driver for Transylvania County. The arrival of the COVID-19 crisis challenged the local tourism leadership in never-before-seen ways and required almost instantaneous decision-making and policy development.

In early March, 2020, as regional COVID-19 infections were confirmed, Transylvania County Tourism (TCT) and other local leadership groups quickly identified the following as their most crucial responsibilities:

1) Prevent the spread of the virus in Transylvania County
2) Minimize economic damage
3) Support local tourism dependent businesses
4) Educate key stakeholders

With a population of less than 38,000, Transylvania County has fewer human and financial resources than most counties to respond to a crisis of this magnitude. As a result, TCT recognized that collaboration was the key to making the most of its resources and developing an effective response without duplicating effort.

**Methods, steps and tools applied**

TCT immediately forged a partnership with multiple organizations, including Transylvania County government, the City of Brevard, Brevard/Transylvania County Chamber of Commerce, Heart of Brevard, Transylvania Economic Alliance, Mission Health, Transylvania Times, the Transylvania County Library, Blue Ridge Community College Small Business Center and others.

Social distancing guidelines were put in place and shared through a broad spectrum of communications platforms, including social media, e-newsletters and websites. Specific communication to potential visitors on best health practices was a key tactic.

Early on during the crisis, national forests, state forests, and state parks in Transylvania remained open. But during the second weekend of March, moderate springtime weather, coupled with large populations seeking a safe alternative to remaining indoors, flocked to Transylvania County’s public lands. There were widespread reports of visitors not practicing
social distancing, creating threatening opportunities for COVID-19 to spread, endangering critical staff at Pisgah National Forest, DuPont State Recreational Forest, and Gorges State Park, and taxing local resources, prompting the closure of these popular destinations. Gates to parking areas were closed, visitor centers were locked, and forest and park rangers patrolled popular attractions to inform would-be visitors of the closures.

TCT swiftly dropped all tourism-related advertising and promotion of the area, and crafted a stay at home message urging potential visitors to visit Transylvania County “virtually” through a wide variety of tools listed on the ExploreBrevard website. The organization also provided valuable input to Pisgah, DuPont and Gorges’ local leadership to help them make the case for closing or limiting access to public lands, which ultimately took place. Additionally, local outdoor recreation camper manufacturer, Sylvan Sport, pivoted to making protective gear for health care workers and plexiglass shields for customer service organizations.

On March 27, North Carolina governor Roy Cooper issued a month-long stay at home order for all residents, effectively shutting down most retail, accommodations and restaurants in Transylvania County.

In short order, TCT and its partners:

**CONDUCTED** two business owner surveys to determine their greatest needs.

**HOSTED** multiple virtual town hall meetings on a variety of topics critical to business owners and hosted by experts in the field of finance, law, and health.

**DEVELOPED** the Transylvania Tomorrow Emergency Relief Fund, which provided up to $3,000 per grant to qualified applicants to help pay bills.

**CREATED** the Transylvania Emergency Bridge Loan Program (TEBLP) to provide a flexible source of short-term capital to help local businesses meet pressing COVID-19 financial obligations.

**HOSTED** a series of small business “huddle ups,” allowing business owners in specific categories (restaurants, accommodations, retail, etc.) to brainstorm and share best practices with each other in anticipation of reopening.

**SERVED** as a vital clearinghouse for resources and information available at the local, state and national levels. Through e-newsletters, websites, and social platforms, TCT and its partners provided a vital flow of timely, accurate information to multiple audiences (local business owners and residents, prospective visitors, etc.)

**DISTRIBUTED** a powerful video to the community produced by local musicians and
videographers entitled “Tomorrow.”

As stay at home orders were relaxed in late May and public lands and local businesses began to reopen under state and federal guidelines requiring masks, hand washing, and social distancing, TCT recognized that rural counties might be affected differently and later than their larger neighbors and extended its moratorium on advertising and promotion. For the health and safety of the county’s tourism industry workers, visitors, and public lands, TCT developed a new message: “Explore Responsibly.” This campaign was exemplified in two posters (one outdoor focused, one community focused) that provided valuable guidance on how to stay safe and healthy. Our parks and forests were reopened but their visitor centers remained closed to limit exposure of the volunteers who man them and social distancing is still encouraged.

Though the guidelines for dealing with the infection have changed regularly since COVID-19’s arrival, our responses to the dangers have been consistent since the beginning: wear a mask, wash your hands, and maintain social distance. Initial reaction of our citizens was mixed, with First Amendment advocates being hesitant to conform but the Three-W’s of Wear, Wash, Wait have now been broadly accepted. Through the application of several grants and educational outreach, most businesses require a properly wear a mask and provide masks for those who don’t have one. Hand sanitizer is provided at the front door, and reduced occupancy is enforced to provide socially distanced shopping and dining. Businesses whose employees test positive for COVID-19 are quarantined and employees manifesting symptoms are not allowed to work.

Key success factors

As in Transylvania County Tourism’s other Good Practices Story (Waterfall Safety) collaboration was one of the key components to the success of the COVID-19 program. The unselfish pooling of resources and the generous spirit of collaboration between government and non-government entities allowed Transylvania County to work quickly and effectively to limit the spread of COVID-19 and to set the stage for a quicker recovery. As a result, Transylvania County has the fifth lowest infection rate per 100,000 of all 100 counties in North Carolina. A very successful outcome of collaboration between TCT, local restaurants, and the City of Brevard has been the expansion of outdoor dining. Several areas of publicly managed property have been designated “Public Dining Areas” to accommodate a large increase in carry out meals and other outdoor dining areas have been allocated to specific restaurants to compensate for reduced seating capacity caused by COVID-19 restrictions. These “al fresco” dining areas, some of which allow the consumption of alcohol, have proven to be very popular and will remain after the demise of the current pandemic.

Lessons learned
The learning curve for dealing with COVID-19 was steep and continues to climb as new conditions and insights arise almost daily. As a result, TCT and its many partners learned the importance of communication and responsiveness. As conditions changed on the ground, TCT was able to provide timely and relevant information almost instantaneously to visitors, local residents, and business owners alike. The late arrival of COVID-19 to the County and our ability to respond to a rapidly changing landscape allowed TCT to get ahead, and stay ahead, of the outbreak and anticipate the needs of the community and its many tourism partners. The procedures developed in Transylvania County to cope with this pandemic mirror, on the safe side, procedures in place at other localities throughout the region, state, and nation. We have taken the safest route to guarding public health, reopening businesses, and seeing to the needs of our citizens and tourist populations.

Results, achievements and recognitions

As stated, COVID-19 was late arriving in Transylvania County, a basically rural county. The first reported case was March 15 with reported new cases remaining low until spiking during the week of June 21, shortly after businesses were allowed to partially reopen. The delay in arrival granted TCT, Transylvania County Public Health, and other city and county representatives to prepare for its predictable impact on our population and businesses.

As of August 26, 2020:

There have been 237 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with one death early on in Transylvania County. According to Center for Disease Control and Prevention statistics, this is the 5th lowest number of cases per 100,000 residents of all 100 of North Carolina’s counties.

The Transylvania Tomorrow Small Business Emergency Relief Fund, an initiative created by our Chamber of Commerce and business partners, raised and distributed $166,500 to 93 businesses throughout Transylvania County in grants of up to $3,000. We anticipate this program will be revived in the Fall.

Our response to COVID-19 was impressive enough that our Director of Public Health, Elaine Russell, was invited to make two presentations on local best practices for rural communities at a meeting of the National Association of City and County Health Officials.

We continue to cope as a community, knowing that what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger and look forward to a healthy and prosperous future.

Additional references
Bridge Loan Program Newspaper Coverage

Explore Responsibly Poster - Outdoors
https://explorebrevard.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Explore-Responsibly-Outdoors.png

Explore Responsibly Poster - Community
https://explorebrevard.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Explore-Responsibly-Community.png

Explore Brevard COVID-19 Travel Updates
https://explorebrevard.com/travel-information/

Explore Brevard – “Pause” Visitors Video Message
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0shHwfZEqtg&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3HZFBaTo3JZKa2tOiRIR-nR15MwlQTZqTh5SP4vXxz1n71XWGx9PP75bY

Explore Brevard – Community Video “Tomorrow”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2b8EkeQn1c&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0VUhyZQJbo6ggTa gdSw3Bcyvf1K_DiPLW1nSBOrFTNvxwxiyTcQYyWlnk

Facebook Feed (see posts from mid-March forward) Facebook: search Explore Brevard or:
https://www.facebook.com/explorebrevard/?__tn__=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARB_JXbF85H-OKEph74n03_m8GY7drMLUdTZnKdZx1M601xKh3VeqEmuDYD-BYuDnRgEkgtIYZvrmJ8

Transylvania Tomorrow Relief Fund Update and Testimonials
https://www.dropbox.com/s/acw47aysv23plcp/Transylvania%20Tomorrow%20Update%20and%20Testimonials%20%28as%20of%20June%2026%29.pdf?dl=0

Sylvan Sport Transitions To Making PPE for Health Care Workers (Story)

Transylvania County Public Health
https://www.facebook.com/TransylvaniaPublicHealth/photos/pb.1506830082964040.-2207520000./2556264524687252/?type=3&theater

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention