Impact of Small Business Pandemic Relief Grant Programs

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and related impacts on business activity, Fairfax County moved quickly to support businesses through two grant programs: The Relief Initiative to Support Employers (RISE) program utilizing federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding and the PIVOT Economic Recovery grant program utilizing American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding. Through the Department of Economic Initiatives, these programs distributed nearly $70 million to businesses in 2020 and 2021.

Results from a 2025 study by the George Mason University (GMU) Center for Regional Analysis confirm that five years post-pandemic, the RISE and PIVOT grant programs met their respective program goals: to help businesses mitigate the impact of the pandemic and remain in business.

Beyond providing temporary economic relief, study findings indicate the RISE and PIVOT programs contributed to stabilized business activity in Fairfax County, increased firm survivability rates, and directly supported economic activity and job retention.

George Mason University Evaluates Impact of RISE and PIVOT

The GMU Center for Regional Analysis examined the impact of the RISE and PIVOT programs through 1) a survey of grant recipients; 2) an analysis of impact on business survival rates, and; 3) an economic contributions analysis. This document presents an overview of the findings and shares insights from survey respondents.

1. BUSINESS SURVEY RESULTS

A survey of PIVOT and RISE recipients asked a variety of questions, including if and how the grants helped, the health of their business today, and when the business stopped operating (if applicable). The GMU-administered survey was released in July 2025 and continued through August 2025.

In total, there were 721 survey respondents. Respondents were mostly small businesses with a median number of 4 employees. The survey results were overwhelmingly positive.

RISE (2020)
Grants for small businesses with fewer than 50 employees used for wages, employees' health insurance, rent, and other fixed operating costs.

PIVOT (2021)
Targeted grants for the most impacted businesses in food and services, hospitality, retail and arts sectors.

5,482 businesses directly assisted

Grant funds made a difference in businesses' ability to continue operations

- 94% of respondents are still in business
- 98% of operating businesses are still located in Fairfax County
- 72% of those operating report their businesses are in excellent or good health
- 96% of respondents still in operation reported that funds helped their business survive. The most frequently cited uses for grant funds were to meet payroll and pay rent, along with obtaining protective gear and shifting business operations online.

Businesses had an overwhelmingly positive view of County grant programs.

- 63% of the open-ended comments included statements of appreciation, thankfulness or gratitude for the programs.

"I cannot thank you enough for the monetary support. Being a brand-new business when Covid hit, I was thinking I would have to declare bankruptcy and close. But I didn't!"

"I am most thankful for having receive this grant as it truly made a difference and saved my business that I am enjoying today."

"I am extremely grateful. This was life-changing at the time."

2. RISE AND PIVOT PROGRAMS IMPACT ON BUSINESS SURVIVAL

To assess the survival rates of participating businesses, GMU compared the number of grant recipients still operating against the expected survival rates based on U.S. Census Bureau data for establishments by firm size in Fairfax County.

GMU's analysis found that survival rates among RISE and PIVOT grantees exceeded what would typically be expected given normal business exit rates. The results suggest that these grant programs increased participating business survival rates by nearly 6%. This is strongly supported by the survey results, in which nearly all survey respondents indicated that the programs helped them remain in business.

It is important to note that the calculated survival rate is likely conservative due to data limitations. The programs primarily targeted and served sectors with characteristically higher exit rates than the county average. However, because sector-specific data was unavailable, the analysis applied the overall (lower) exit rate. This means the actual impact of the programs may be understated.

3. BUSINESS ACTIVITY AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

The RISE and PIVOT programs provided direct cash assistance to businesses that substituted for operating revenue. GMU conducted an assessment of the economic contributions related to the business activities supported by the grants. The related business spending of the grant dollars increased total economic activity in Fairfax County by $95.5 million, boosting gross regional product by nearly $64 million and supporting 572 jobs that paid close to $50 million in salaries, wages and benefits.

The support provided to businesses, primarily very small enterprises, during the COVID-19 pandemic directly sustained economic activity, preserved jobs, and extended firm longevity. Beyond these immediate impacts, the programs demonstrated Fairfax County's commitment to supporting businesses during times of crisis. This reinforces the county's reputation as an attractive location for investment, generating economic benefits that will extend well beyond the lifespan of specific programs.

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For more information or a copy of the study, contact: economicinitiatiatives@fairfaxcounty.gov