

Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force: from COVID to Community

Recommendations Moving Forward

Tracey Wade, MCIP, RPP

February 22, 2021

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the wide range of stakeholders and community members who contributed to the review of the TCTF and helped to identify new directions:

Carolle de Ste. Croix and David McKellar - Co-Chairs, Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force
Shannon Robinson - Communication Coordinator, TCTF
Jessica Hughes and Shayne Mann - Co-Chairs, Food Security Action Group (and its members)
Michael Fox and Gwen Zwicker - Co-Chairs, Business and Economic Impact Action Group
Pat Estabrooks and Margaret Tusz-King - Co-Chairs, Mental Health Action Group (and its members)
Cindy Crossman - Chair, Physical Health Action Group (and its members)
Hannah Ehler, Nadine Robinson, Bergen Fraser - Co-Chairs, Youth & Student Action Group (and its members)
Megan Mitton - MLA for Tantramar-Memramcook
Mayor Judy Scott - Village of Port Elgin
Acting Mayor Ron Aiken - Town of Sackville
Jamie Burke - Town of Sackville
Christoph Becker - Port Elgin Regional School
Susan Lafford - Tantramar Regional High School
Anthony Maddelena - Main Street Revitalization Committee
Sydney Thorburn - Mount Allison Student Union
Susan Fisher - Sackville Rotary Club
Laura Reinsborough - FoodForAll NB
Kate Doyle - Horizon Health
Mathieu Landry - Southeast Regional Resiliency Committee
John Higham - Sackville
Sharon Allen - Murray Corner
Judy Hickman Morison - Dorchester
Katie Tower - PEDVAC
Andrew Wilson - Sackville 20/20
Debbie McInnis - United Way of Greater Moncton and SE New Brunswick
Pam Van Egmond - Nursing Homes Without Walls (Port Elgin and region pilot)
Lauren Fawcett - Westmorland-Albert Action Co-operative
Wendy Keats - Co-operative Enterprise Council (NB)
Lise Babineau - RCMP

Finally, as a resident of the Tantramar region, I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the many many volunteers who have spent countless hours helping our community - especially those most vulnerable - through this global pandemic.

It is with both pride in community and ongoing hope for the future that this report is submitted.

Tracey Wade, MCIP, RPP
Sackville, NB

Summary of Recommendations

The purpose of this project is to gather information from the partners, leaders, and stakeholders to determine if and where there is a need and a desire for the Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force (TCTF) and Action Groups to continue their important work after March 2021. Following key-informant interviews, focus group discussions and an on-line discussion of key people from the region, these recommendations are submitted for consideration:

Recommendation 1: TCTF become known as the Tantramar COMMUNITY Task Force.

Recommendation 2: TCTF 2.0 continue regular updates and conversations with community stakeholders to ensure that ongoing needs and issues are being addressed.

Recommendation 3: Current members and stakeholders of the TCTF work to identify new community champions to lead the TCTF forward in its now-established role in the Tantramar region.

Recommendation 4: TCTF 2.0 establish a Memorandum of Understanding with key partners through which it can seek funding, take advantage of existing liability insurance for project-related activities, and access assistance for coordination functions.

Recommendation 5: A concerted effort by Action Group members should be made to recruit new volunteers to assist with advancing the work of the Groups.

Recommendation 6: Apply for the two community grants (max \$5000 each) to support the transition from TCTF to TCTF 2.0 including communications support and organizational development.

Recommendation 7: Begin discussions with other community non-profits about job-sharing a student intern through MTA's Experiential Learning and Career Development Office.

Recommendation 8: Continue to collaborate with WA Action on TCTF 2.0 initiatives to ensure that TCTF is notified as soon as funding pots are made available.

Recommendation 9: Monitor the Investment Readiness Programme website to be aware of when funding opportunities may open up again.

Recommendation 10: The TCTF 2.0 undertake an organizational strategic planning session to establish a new vision and mission. From there, Action Group priorities can be identified and championed by volunteer committees.

Recommendation 11: TCTF 2.0 continue to operate informally in the short-term and work towards developing a more formal governance structure through this transition period. Strong leadership is a pre-requisite of moving towards incorporation, if that is the chosen route.

Recommendation 12: TCTF prepare a presentation for the Health Reform consultations for March 4, 2021. Further TCTF, with help from various local champions can continue to present its experience and showcase what can happen on other provincial stages as appropriate.

Introduction and Purpose

The Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force (TCTF) was established by the region's mayors, the MLA, and the Chief of Fort Folly First Nation in mid-March 2020 in urgent response to a wide range of Tantramar community needs brought to light because of the coronavirus pandemic. With key partners identified in Mount Allison University and the Sackville Rotary Club, the mission was to bring volunteers together and identify groups and individuals who needed support through the pandemic. Through the dedication of more than 200 volunteers who gave countless hours of their time, many segments of the Tantramar community came together to address the most pressing pandemic-related issues. Five Action Groups were established: food security, physical health, mental health, economic and business impact, and youth & students. The first six months were dedicated to assessing the issues and providing "boots on the ground" support for the vulnerable populations and broader community of Tantramar. Now in the second half of the task force's year, the TCTF remains in a stewardship role ensuring that crucial supports persist at least until funding from the United Way of Greater Moncton and Southeast NB runs out in March 2021.

The purpose of this project is to gather information from the partners, leaders, and stakeholders to determine if and where there is a need and a desire for the TCTF and Action Groups to continue their important work after March 2021.

Methodology:

In order to gauge the impact of the TCTF and its Action Groups moving forward after March 2021, a three-pronged approach to gathering information and feedback entailed key informant interviews, Action Group Zoom meetings, and TCTF meeting participation. For key informant interviews and Action Group Zoom meetings, five standard questions were asked each time:

1. What, in your opinion, has been the major accomplishment of the TCTF/Action Group since March 2020?
2. What (if any) initiatives can be set aside or retired now that the initial urgency has passed?
3. What (and who) has been missed in the process so far?
4. What still needs to be done?
5. What do you think is the best way to accomplish these actions?

The information from these meetings was compiled and shared back with Action Groups and stakeholders for review and reflection. Other stakeholders and partners were contacted about various models and funding opportunities in early February. Following that, a group of key contributors and stakeholders was then invited to an on-line workshop on February 13, 2021, to discuss re-focusing the Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force and plotting a strategy forward. This report is a culmination of those and other discussions and includes some recommendations for moving forward.

Preliminary Feedback

Following 18 key-informant interviews and five Zoom meetings with the Action Groups, a Preliminary Report was prepared and dated December 11, 2020. Those rich discussions have been boiled down to the following key takeaways:

TCTF has real value:

- TCTF brought Tantrammar community groups together to collaborate in unprecedented ways that was at once professional as well as very personal and community-oriented – in a word, it was “magic”.
- Communication among the Tantrammar community groups has been extremely useful in identifying and providing at least temporary solutions to both pandemic and hidden issues.
- This was an action-based or “boot’s-on-the-ground” initiative.
- It operated outside formal structures so there was no red-tape or bureaucracy – TCTF identified what needed to be done and then volunteers found a way to do it.
- TCTF did not replicate what was being done – but found ways to fill gaps between existing service providers.
- Action Group work has highlighted gaps that exist in social systems especially for the most vulnerable populations (seniors, youth, working poor, etc.)
- Volunteer service has been outstanding.
- TCTF was accountable to the stakeholders (not to funders or “program priorities”)

The current situation is that:

- The initial urgency has passed – less of a sense of crisis (even some light at the end of the tunnel)
- Leadership is changing – new co-chairs are needed.
- Special funding for COVID-19 response ends March 31, 2021. This source will not likely be available in the future.
- Volunteer burn-out is being experienced on most committees because of the heavy lifting over the last year.

But, it is well-recognized that there is still work to be done:

- The pandemic will not be “over” March 31, 2021.
- Vaccine roll-out and testing communications/education continues to be an essential piece.
- Mental health implications will be long-term and are frankly unknown at this point.
- While some food access holes have been filled, food security issues have not been solved and are long-term concerns.
- What about those gaps that were identified and filled by TCTF partnerships? They still exist and need more than band-aid solutions.
- System changes are needed - social justice, poverty, access to technology, etc.
- There is a significant desire to continue established relationships (e.g., university, youth, seniors).

The Re-Focus: from COVID to COMMUNITY

The original Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force (let's call it version 1.0) was an emergency local response to a global pandemic. Community members and organizations came together in a time of great stress and urgency and made a difference in the lives of Tantramar's most vulnerable populations.

The TCTF now finds itself at a cross-road. It could try to continue purely as a COVID-19 response until the pandemic is over and then disband OR, it can harness the "magic" to transform and renew itself to be the vehicle by which Tantramar becomes a compassionate, healthy, sustainable, rural community. This new organization could be known as the Tantramar COMMUNITY Task Force (TCTF version 2.0). This proposed transformation was widely supported by participants of the February 13th discussion.

Recommendation 1: TCTF become known as the Tantramar COMMUNITY Task Force.

Essential Elements Moving Forward

There are four essential aspects to maintaining and growing the new TCTF 2.0: accountability, leadership, support, and ongoing communications.

Accountability

One of the truly unique characteristics of the TCTF is that it was, and continues to be, directly accountable to the communities in Tantramar. From the outset, transparency and open communication with community stakeholders were critical in ensuring that those who needed help received it. It is a testament to the close-knit nature of our rural communities – such as Murray Corner, Bayfield, Jolicure, Pointe-du-Bute, Westcock, and Dorchester Cape to name a few – where local community members recognized where the needs were and tapped into the TCTF and its collaborative network for help in addressing those needs. Monthly meetings with a range of stakeholders took place under the TCTF mandate. Invitees included representatives from our three municipalities (Sackville, Dorchester, and Port Elgin), the surrounding rural communities, as well as other community stakeholders such as Sackville Rotary Club, PEDVAC, RCMP, Nursing Homes Without Walls, CMHA Radio, Mount Allison Student Union, United Way of Greater Moncton and SE NB, among many others. This accountability mechanism remains a critical element moving forward for the TCTF 2.0.

Recommendation 2: TCTF 2.0 continue regular updates and conversations with community stakeholders to ensure that ongoing needs and issues are being addressed.

Leadership

Leadership is important in any successful organization, but it is essential in building this new vision for the TCTF 2.0. Current leadership has been exceptional; however, there is deep recognition that an organization cannot be about the leader, but must be about the organization's mission. Moving forward, the TCTF 2.0 needs to find new leader(s) to push the agenda forward. It is critical for any future design of the TCTF 2.0.

Recommendation 3: Current members and stakeholders of the TCTF work to identify new community champions to lead the TCTF 2.0 forward in its now-established role in the Tantramar region.

Human Resources Support

Support for the TCTF has come in many forms – human resource capacity and funding are key. The TCTF 2.0 can continue to operate with ongoing support in the form of volunteer participation, leadership among the Action Groups and continued moral support from the stakeholders. There are several partners that have indicated more formalized support is possible (with limitations) including the Regional Resiliency Committee (RRC), Sackville 20/20, Westmorland-Albert Action Co-op (WA Action), and the Co-operative Enterprise Council (NB). Nevertheless, continued volunteer participation is critical for the “on-the-ground” work of the TCTF. Since it has been indicated that volunteer burnout is occurring in most Action Groups, recruitment of new volunteers and recognition of the existing volunteer pool is also essential.

Recommendation 4: TCTF 2.0 establish a Memorandum of Understanding with key partners through which it can seek funding, take advantage of existing liability insurance for project-related activities, and access assistance for coordination functions.

Recommendation 5: That a concerted effort by Action Group members be made to recruit new volunteers to assist with advancing the work of the Groups.

Financial Support

Financial support, even in limited amounts, will significantly help facilitate the work of both the TCTF and the Action Groups. The communications coordinator position may not be needed as a full-time position. However, the time and effort it takes to coordinate Zoom meeting invitations, track responses and assemble meeting notes is an important role when volunteers are already expected to lift a heavy burden. The time that is required to maintain social media and other communications can also be significant. These concerns have been shared widely by TCTF volunteers in this renewal process. A number of funding support possibilities have been identified:

- Community Innovation Grant - hosted by Horizon Health, this grant is an opportunity for Horizon to support our communities as they work to find innovative solutions to help New Brunswickers be healthy based on the Social Determinants of Health.
- Community Investment Fund - hosted by the Regional Development Corporations with a base amount allotted to each MLA riding each fiscal year. The objective of the program is to support projects, through non-repayable contributions, that: enhance a community's identity; provide economic and social benefits; enhance existing community assets; or enhance or develop initiatives that strengthen a community. Grants are available up to \$5000 or possibly higher amounts with matching funds.
- Experiential Learning and Career Development Office – a program that matches Mount Allison University students with intern opportunities (either full or part-time) with partial funding available to support interns at non-profit organizations. In discussions with this organization, it is clear that to take advantage of this option, a partnership with another non-profit would be advisable.
- Sackville Rotary Club – this service club could be a community partner from both participation and funding perspective.
- WA Action - while funding is not currently available for community-based projects such as TCTF or its Action Groups, the provincial Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation (ESIC) does provide support.
- Investment Readiness Programme – under Federal social innovation strategy, this funding option is currently closed while priorities are being realigned. It has been suggested that the realignment also meant an increase in the funding pot with a focus on building capacity in communities, which would be a perfect fit for the TCTF.

Recommendation 6: Apply for the two community grants (max \$5000 each) to support the transition from the original TCTF to TCTF 2.0 including communications support and organizational development.

Recommendation 7: Begin discussions with other community non-profits about job-sharing a student intern through MTA's Experiential Learning and Career Development Office.

Recommendation 8: Continue to collaborate with WA Action on TCTF 2.0 initiatives to ensure that TCTF is notified as soon as funding pots are made available.

Recommendation 9: Monitor the Investment Readiness Programme website to be aware of when funding opportunities may open up again.

Communications

Overwhelmingly, communications were identified as the key role to ensure that the collaborative nature of the TCTF could function. There was general consensus that without someone in the communications/coordinator role (even part-time), that the long-term success of TCTF could be in jeopardy.

Priorities Areas Moving Forward

Existing Action Groups

Given the pivot in focus from pandemic response to community resilience, it will be necessary for the TCTF 2.0 to consider the key priorities moving forward. Under the Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force, the Action Groups were: Physical Health, Mental Health, Food Security, Youth & Students, and Business & Economic Impact.

It is clear that the Business & Economic Impact Action group can be appropriately addressed within the Regional Resiliency Committee, as well as through work being undertaken by the Town of Sackville with the business community. Food security continues to be a concern, but with the reestablishment of WA Action, there is a very logical connection to use that existing network as a critical piece in improving food security and addressing poverty in Tantramar through that organization.

In terms of Physical Health, the key focus of that committee was originally around pandemic response – the use of masks in public, handling breakouts in town (that never came to fruition thankfully), safely welcoming Mount Allison students back to town in September, helping students who stayed through Christmas break, and now vaccine awareness and testing. It can be safely assumed that this purely pandemic response role will eventually be unnecessary once the pandemic is over. This Action Group also took on a “physical activity” perspective to help the community find ways to combat some of the serious side effects of isolation and physical gatherings. It is generally agreed that this physical activity piece is better hosted by the existing Tantramar Outdoor Club (TOC), however continued communication and collaboration between TOC and TCTF 2.0 is appropriate.

The Mental Health Action Group felt the informal nature of the TCTF allowed them to work “outside the system” as together they were not bound by funding limitations, or program definitions. The Action Group became an important source of collaboration and support among the partners. As well, it is acknowledged that long-term mental health concerns (existing and new) will remain a priority in Tantramar.

Finally, the Youth & Students Action Group has initiated several projects that touch on many other Action Group priorities (specifically mental health and food security). Future partnering with an already-existing youth organization is being considered with a recognition that students from the broader Tantramar region be kept involved.

Priorities Under TCTF 2.0

Rural health advocacy and environmental health were identified as examples of other areas where TCTF 2.0 could focus. Poverty, food security, mental health, youth & students, and seniors were also considered priorities. It was suggested that establishing Action Groups based on topic area itself creates false silos and limits true collaboration which is the ultimate goal. Indeed, looking at the TCTF 2.0 using a health and sustainability lens, there are many themes that run through all of the

previously conceived Action Groups as well as the new ideas. For example, if the TCTF 2.0 is looking at the overall health of the community, then “physical health” will continue to be a priority, but not necessarily as its own “Action Group.” Another comment was that these big topics are hard to effect change in the community, if there aren’t targeted committees to break the issues down into actionable pieces. Indeed, the original TCTF model was created so that the TCTF (as the overall body) ensured regular communication and collaboration between Action Groups as things evolved. With the transition away from COVID-19 toward community, it would be prudent to undertake a strategic planning session to determine the vision and mission for the TCTF 2.0 from which Action Group priorities can be determined.

Recommendation 10: The TCTF 2.0 undertake an organizational strategic planning session to establish a new vision and mission. From there, Action Group priorities can be identified and championed by volunteer committees.

Governance Models

Figure 1 represents the current operational model of the TCTF. At the centre of all the work the TCTF does are the community stakeholders (orange circle) - the individuals and families of Tantramar. The blue circle is the work of the TCTF with 5 current Action Groups directly serving the community and linking with each other in a collaborative manner. Outside this circle, but helping out are community partners such as Sackville Rotary Club, Mount Allison University, and the Town of Sackville, partners who have stepped up to facilitate the work of the Task Force. And in the outer realms are the systems and forces that impact our communities – in both positive and negative ways.

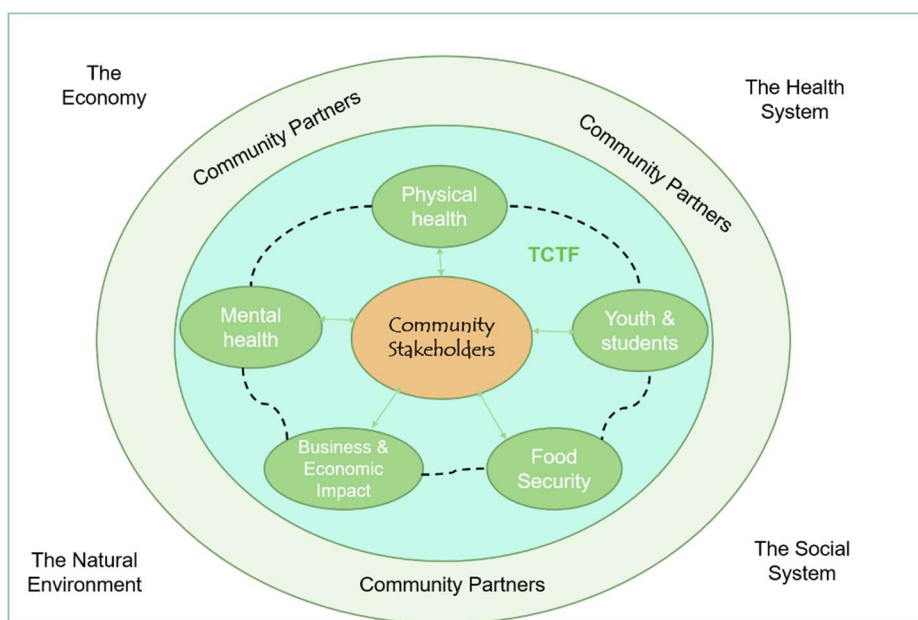


Figure 1: The original TCTF organizational model

While the organizational model need not change, various informal and formal governance models have been considered. No decisions have been made at the point of writing this report. There are pros and cons to both formal and informal structures as illustrated in the table below. As well there may be a hybrid option to consider moving forward by piggy-backing on an existing organization while maintaining some independence.

Type of Structure	Pros	Cons
Informal	• No red tape or bureaucracy • Can continue to play outside the “lines” • It is the current system that seems to work for TCTF and Action Groups	• Volunteers are exposed to liability • Cannot directly apply for funding • Fewer funding options
Formal (incorporated)	• Recognized body • Increased legitimacy • Formalized decision-making • Liability coverage available	• Articles of incorporation outline all aspects of organization, leaving less room for creativity. • Annual \$\$ expenditures require core funding (registration, financial reporting, etc.)
Hybrid (partnering with existing NFP)	• Piggy back on liability coverage • Retains less formal atmosphere • MOUs between groups can formalize aspects of organization.	• Still dependent upon others for survival

Local organizations such as Sackville 20/20, PEDVAC, and EOS Eco-Energy are formally incorporated entities. EOS Eco-Energy is a good example of a Tantramar region non-profit (its focus is on climate change and sustainable communities). Significantly, EOS by-laws require representation of Tantramar municipalities on the Board, as well as other key partners in the community.

Alternatively, the Chignecto Climate Change Collaborative (CCCC) is an informal organization that may be an interesting model to consider for the TCTF 2.0. The Collaborative was created from a regional concern related to climate change and sea level rise impacts around the Chignecto Isthmus. EOS Eco-Energy acts as the Collaborative’s secretariat, applying for annual funding, hosting meetings, and organizing activities. The Collaborative is an informal group of local and provincial government representatives, scientists, planners, geographers, Emergency Measures and other experts from both sides of the provincial border who voluntarily come together to plan and host educational events for the greater Tantramar community. Similarly, the TCTF 2.0 could bring together key players and experts on both sides of the border to push the work of the task force forward, advocate for system changes, and ensure the magic continues. While funding for such a cross-border initiative might be challenging, it is an informal model that works well.

Recommendation 11: TCTF 2.0 continue to operate informally in the short-term and work towards developing a more formal governance structure through this transition period. Strong leadership is a pre-requisite of moving towards incorporation, if that is the chosen route.

Next Steps and Other Thoughts

In addition to questions of leadership, funding and organizational structure, there continues to be ongoing health and COVID-19-related issues that need to be addressed. Further, it is felt by various stakeholders that the lessons learned and successes experienced by the original TCTF and its “magic” must be shared more broadly, so that other communities both within and outside of New Brunswick can learn from the work that has been done.

One of the key opportunities for sharing the work is by taking part in the Government of New Brunswick’s Health Care Reform consultations and, eventually, its Municipal Governance Reform consultations. The first consultation for Health Care Reform is scheduled to take place in Sackville on March 4, 2021. TCTF needs to share its story to emphasize the value of rural communities and resources helping rural people.

Recommendation 12: TCTF prepare a presentation for the Health Reform consultations for March 4, 2021. Further TCTF, with help from various local champions can continue to present its experience and showcase what can happen on other provincial stages as appropriate.

Conclusions

The Tantramar COVID-19 Task Force is an inspiring story of community collaboration and compassion in a time of unparalleled crisis. It grew from a unique understanding of “community” and a true appreciation of how rural communities have developed and continue to evolve in the 2020s. Would the TCTF have worked in a larger urban centre? Would it have been a success in a region without a small and connected University community? We’ll never know. The important thing is that it DID work in Tantramar and the hope is that the new Tantramar COMMUNITY Task Force continues the conversation beyond the current pandemic crisis in supporting vulnerable populations and collaborating as one voice to make positive and productive system change.