

# PENNSYLVANIA county news

# COVID-19

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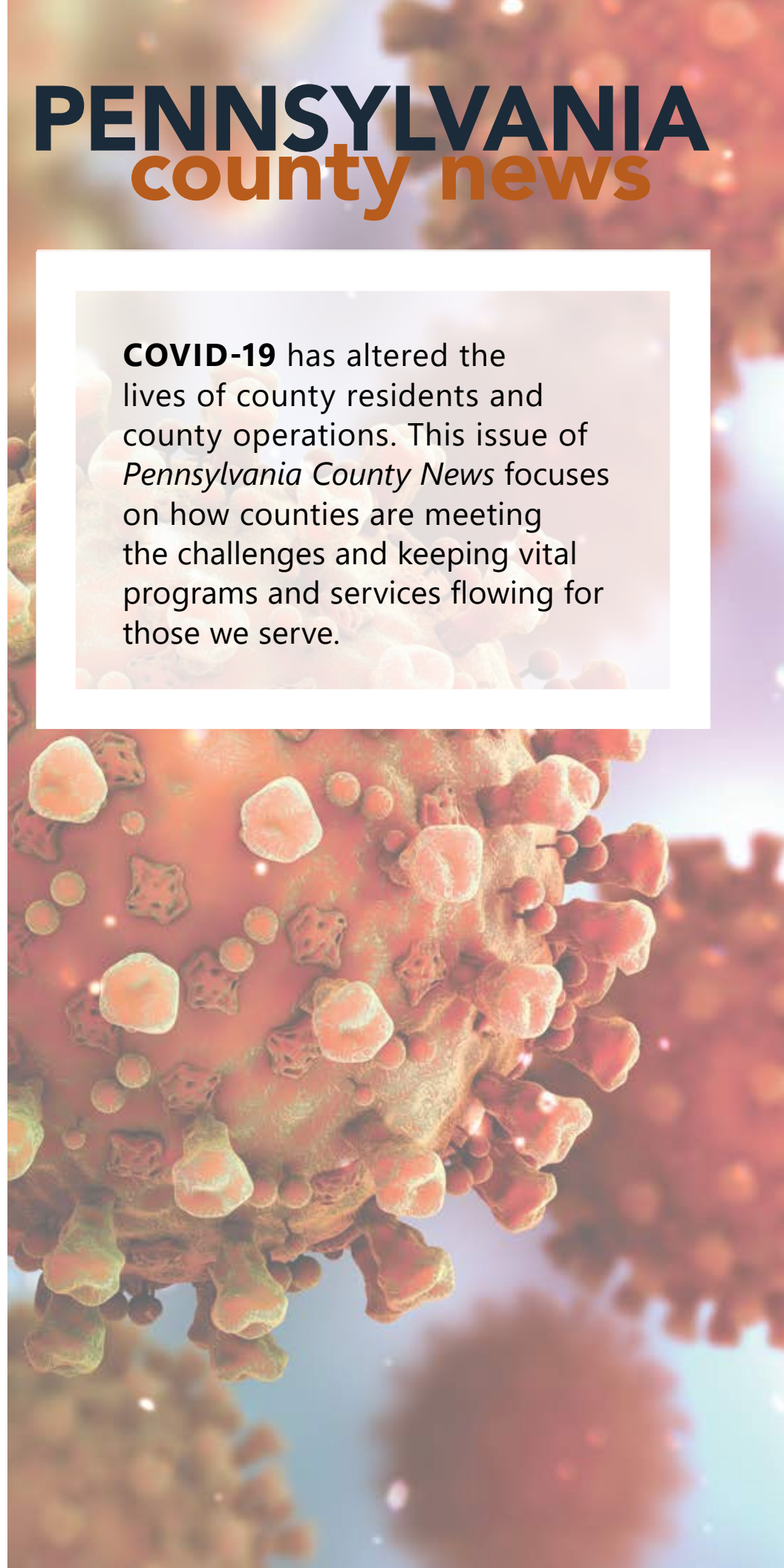
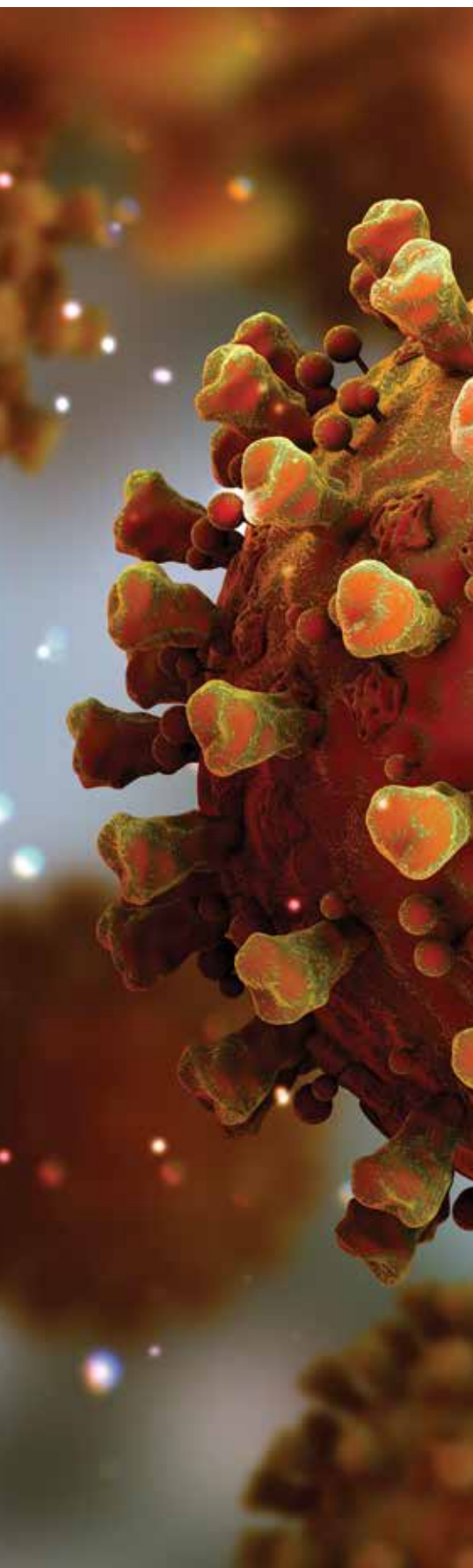
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summer  
**2020**

# **PENNSYLVANIA** county news

**COVID-19** has altered the lives of county residents and county operations. This issue of *Pennsylvania County News* focuses on how counties are meeting the challenges and keeping vital programs and services flowing for those we serve.



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**JEFF SNYDER**

President, County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania  
Clinton County Commissioner

# Providing County Services During a Pandemic

I hope all of you and yours are healthy and safe.

In the president's commentary in the winter 2020 edition of the *Pennsylvania County News*, I noted that I was looking forward to the many opportunities and changes that we would see in 2020. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever consider the fact that we as county commissioners would be dealing with a pandemic.

As you are well aware, due to the unique nature of COVID-19, counties have had to address a wide array of challenges that have emerged daily, sometimes hourly. We have had to adapt to new ways of delivering county services, while being very cognizant of the safety of our employees and residents through this crisis.

In Clinton County we implemented procedures to mitigate the public health threats; furloughed non-essential employees; scheduled staggered shifts; introduced social distancing; and used technology to the best of our ability.

Early on, we were frustrated by the one-way street of communication from counties to Harrisburg and continue to ask the governor and legislators to include us at the table to be involved in the critical discussions involving county services.

By the time you read this article we will be dealing with aftershocks from the initial phase of the pandemic and guarding against another wave of COVID-19 infections while we await strides from medical science. We recognize that, moving forward, things may never be the same.

We remain concerned about the ability of many of our residents to afford rent and food, small businesses, pandemic-driven child abuse, the acceleration of mental health impacts, veterans and so much more.

In this issue of our magazine you will read about various facets of our pandemic experiences. Many of these articles were written well before you received this issue, but they will become part of our historical context of governing through a crisis like no other in our lifetimes.

As we hope for a restoration of balance for our residents and our county operations, we must remember that we are the leaders. Let's rebuild the future of our counties together. ▼

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The Pennsylvania Counties Health Insurance Purchasing Cooperative (PCHIPC) was launched in October 2005 with three counties. Today there are 22 counties that represent 9,094 county employees.

Membership is open to any Pennsylvania county as well as any county agency created under the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act. It is governed by a Board of Directors made up of a representative from each of the member counties. Each member has a vote in governing PCHIPC.

The program has been successful due to total transparency of claim data and surplus returns that have generated cost savings to member counties.



# The Mental Health Aftermath of

# COVID-19

**A blight is on the fruitful  
plants of the earth,  
a blight is on the cattle  
in the fields,  
a blight is on our women that  
no children are born to them,  
a god that carries fire,  
a deadly pestilence, is on the town,  
strikes us and spares not,  
and the house of Cadmus  
is emptied of its people while  
Black Death grows rich in  
groaning and in lamentation.**

(Oedipus Rex by Sophocles)

**In Ancient Greece – blight.  
Today – a global pandemic.**

**Dr. Pamela Rollings-Mazza**

Vice President Behavioral Health Services  
Co-Corporate Medical Director  
PrimeCare Medical, Inc.

On December 31, 2019 Chinese Health Officials informed the World Health Organization about a cluster of 41 cases with a mysterious pneumonia. On January 7, 2020, the virus was identified as a new type of coronavirus. On January 11, the first death linked to coronavirus was recorded in China. This was the start of an unparalleled pandemic which would impact the entire global community and will continue to influence life for an indeterminate length of time.

The coronavirus was confirmed to have reached the United States in January 2020. The first known deaths happened in February. By the end of March, cases had occurred in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and all inhabited U.S. territories except American Samoa. As of May 27, 2020, the U.S. had the most active cases and deaths in the world.

March 6 saw the first recorded cases in Pennsylvania, with the first death announced on March 18. On April 1, a statewide stay at home order was issued. And as of mid-June, more than 76,000 cases and 6,000 deaths had been reported in Pennsylvania.

## **ALTERED REALITY**

As this article is being written it's been more than four months since the CDC announced the first confirmed case in the U.S. Since that confirmation our lives have been bombarded daily with instructions to wash our hands, wear masks and stay at home. We have heard about social distancing and the new normal. Travel restrictions have forced us into living in what they now refer to as a bubble – following social distancing guidelines even within the community of our own family and friends. The support we normally received from our extended family and friends was compromised.

As Americans, we have come to take for granted certain freedoms. In a brief span of time those basic freedoms had been eroded and for many our daily lives became unrecognizable. The new reality includes working from home, or worse, unemployment, home-schooling, and lack of contact with family members and friends.

There are the constant concerns about contracting the virus, concerns for family members and their exposure. This fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in both adults and children.

While the evolution of information about the coronavirus has focused on the physical side of coronavirus and the varied symptoms, what started as a health pandemic will have a long-lasting impact on the way we live, work and engage with others. COVID-19 brought altered daily routines, has caused financial pressures and forced us into social isolation. Public events have been canceled and business have closed. These changes to daily life require a shift in focus.

**Retrospective reviews of patients with active, positive COVID-19 disease describe mental health symptoms ranging from confusion, depressed mood, anxiety, impaired memory and insomnia.**

Our health professionals need to direct energy and resources to the psychological impact. While fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, for COVID-19, the day in day out impact of repeated and changing messages will halt the resolution or addressing of the fear and worry. This pandemic has become pervasive.

## **STAGGERING IMPACT**

As the pandemic is playing out like a Greek tragedy, mental health professionals are forced to address the next wave of COVID-19. The emerging mental health crises will have a staggering impact worldwide. It will be lengthy and costly. The mental health cost will be significant in the acute phase and the long-term burden is unfathomable.

Retrospective reviews of patients with active, positive COVID-19 disease describe mental health symptoms ranging from confusion, depressed mood, anxiety, impaired memory and insomnia.

**There are the constant concerns about contracting the virus, concerns for family members and their exposure. This fear and anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions in both adults and children.**

There are case reports of acutely ill patients with severe COVID-19 delirium, agitation after withdrawal from sedation and altered consciousness. After recovery, patients have been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, fatigue and insomnia, and there is a concern for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder over the long term.

In those who do not get COVID-19, the social and economic situation has led to a psychological fallout. The rates of related diagnoses are on the rise. While suicide experts are reluctant to give death projections, recent reports described more than 75,000 additional deaths expected with COVID-19 from drug and alcohol misuse and suicide. The consequences of quarantine and the economic downturn are in themselves risks factors for suicide and self-harm behavior, substance abuse, gambling and domestic violence.

People at higher risk are those that have a preexisting mental illness history, such as depression and anxiety. Also at risk are people from lower income households. Added to this is also the stigma related to age, race, ethnicity, disability or perceived likelihood of spreading COVID-19. It would

**In those who do not get COVID-19, the social and economic situation has led to a psychological fallout.**

be remiss to forget our front line workers and concerns related to caregiver fatigue and the day to day worries of being on the forefront of this global crises.

## TREATMENT NEEDED

Yet, even in suffering there is hope. The immediate priorities are for surveillance of populations at risk, including children and young people affected by school closures; older adults with comorbidities who are experiencing loneliness and isolation and attempting to address end of life care; people with preexisting mental health issues that are experiencing exacerbation of symptoms and disruption of services; front line workers who are experiencing exhaustion and

fears of self-contamination and contamination of loved ones; and people who are facing financial insecurity and homelessness.

Focus needs to address high risk facilities, as well. Nursing homes have been headliners as places of spread for the virus, this has posed a challenge because of the at-risk population. Detention settings also are extremely susceptible to the rapid and disastrous spread of the infectious disease. The measures and protocols put in place for these facilities has led to quarantine, extreme isolation within facilities and reduced contact with the outside world.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. As a society we most

prioritize mental health treatment and address the barriers created by the pandemic. It is essential to recognize the COVID-19 mental health aftermath and develop protocols to increase access to mental health treatment. The first step in dealing with the negative secondary outcomes of COVID-19 is to highlight the concern so that we put into place necessary interventions for society as a whole and most importantly populations at risk. 🍷

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Pennsylvania counties' number one legislative priority for 2020 is increased funding for mental health services. Learn more at [www.pacounties.org](http://www.pacounties.org).

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# PANDEMIC COMMUNICATIONS

## Counties Meet the Challenge



**Ken Kroski**

Director of Media and Public Relations  
County Commissioners Association of  
Pennsylvania

The Brady Bunch was ahead of its time. Who knew that those faces in boxes on a screen would play such a pivotal role in our communications 50 years later? 50 years – ouch!

But that image and many alternative forms of communication became commonplace as counties met the challenges that COVID-19 placed upon staff, services and our way of life. Various tools and methods were used to provide information, conduct business, engage audiences, and keep counties moving forward.

## **FAST, ACCURATE, EFFECTIVE**

As the pandemic hit, counties acted quickly. The effects of the pandemic on the speed of communications with residents and the media were explained by Rebecca Brain, Chester County public information officer, "To say that communications ramped up is an understatement. Chester County has responded to and communicated with the public, state and federal elected officials, all municipalities, many stakeholder groups, and with department heads and county staff from the moment we went to essential services only on March 13. The communication is often daily, even two, three, four times a day. Responses to some social media posts and emails to the commissioners are expected almost immediately. Same with the traditional media. They are working on a continual news feed of COVID-19 info, so are asking us to support and fill their need for continual news 24/7."

"Recognizing that the media is one of our best conduits to the public, we have remained engaged with our media partners to find out what their needs and challenges are and have tried to work with them proactively to meet those."

**Amie Downs**

Director of Communications  
Allegheny County

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Allegheny County quickly provided detailed daily statistics updates including cases, hospitalizations and deaths, age ranges, genders, and other notes related to number of cases in health care workers or long-term care facilities. The updates were pushed out daily through a free subscription service that reaches nearly 10,000 residents each day and was translated daily to Spanish and ASL.

According to Amie Downs, Allegheny County director of communications, "Graphics that show the same information visually are posted on the Health Department's social media pages (Facebook and Twitter) and are shared on the county's pages as well. That same information is sent out via email to COVID-specific subscribers, media lists, press release lists and contacts for municipalities, school districts, businesses and organizations, utilities, and higher education in our community. Those graphics and the accompanying text are translated into Arabic, Chinese, Nepali, Spanish and Swahili and are posted on the county's website."

And those communications involved many county operations. Early on in the outbreak Northampton closed its nursing home and prison to volunteers and visitors. Becky Bartlett, Northampton County deputy director of administration/public information officer, stated, "We provided phones and tablets so the nursing home residents and the prison inmates could still communicate with their loved ones. We closed our Government Center to the public on March 19,

but we kept the offices open. The public could contact us via phone and email, but it made providing services such as marriage licenses impossible until we found a way to do that virtually. We also extended the 2% discount period and the deadline to pay county real estate taxes.”

## MANEUVERING TECHNOLOGY

When the pandemic hit, it hit hard and fast, challenging counties to maneuver technology that had never or rarely been used. Bartlett reported that in early March, Northampton issued instructions to stop all in-person meetings. “We hosted a COVID-19 response meeting on March 12 with representatives from EMS, Human Services, the Department of Corrections, regional health departments, schools and hospitals. Moving to digital platforms resulted in some bumps. Some people don’t have access to Skype. Our IT department was worried about the security of platforms like Zoom. The media interviewed elected officials via FaceTime and other apps and, quite often, the audio broadcast was distorted.”

Northampton began to accept E-Notary documents for some real estate transactions but does not plan to use E-Notary after the crisis is over. Departments used Skype, Zoom or Free Conference Call for meetings.

Chester County used Zoom, Webex and many large-scale telephone conference call sessions. Even as they moved into the yellow phase, the county continued a lot of remote work practices, and expects to continue to use those formats.

According to Downs in Allegheny, “We expect that we will continue to use all of the platforms that we are currently using and are excited to see the public engage on these same channels and that those numbers continue to grow because they are consistent and reliable sources of information.”



*In Allegheny County, the Salvation Army was one of many organizations that made donations of meals or other items to health care workers at the Kane Community Living Center in Glen Hazel. Here, the county’s Heather Dietz, labor relations assistant, and Susan Long, recreation supervisor, are distributing meals for employees.*

## BOARD MEETINGS

When it came to managing Board meetings, Franklin County automated the question/answer system, as explained by Julia Lehman, Franklin County communications coordinator, “In order to maintain communication between the commissioners and the public, our Communications and Information Technology Services departments worked together to create an online public comment form. Comments may be submitted up until one hour prior to a Board meeting to then be acknowledged by the chairman during public comment time. This has become a highly utilized method for the public to share their thoughts, opinions, and feelings regarding the impact of COVID-19 on our county. The online public comment form is currently being piloted with plans to evaluate its use and benefits once in-person Board meetings resume.”

Franklin County quickly modified their routine meeting schedule to once weekly, transitioning to in-person with social distancing measures, then to completely virtual. Lehman continued, “The remote meetings are held using Google Meet, an application already available to Franklin County through G Suite,

which offers the public the ability to join by phone. Though functional, effective, and able to maintain the Board's standards for transparency and engagement, the meeting format is not always ideal. It took participants a few weeks to figure out their optimal devices for proper connections, how to minimize interference feedback, and perhaps most importantly, where the meeting's mute/unmute button is located!"

## CONNECTING WITH THE MEDIA

As the demand for information from the media intensified, counties shifted gears to respond quickly and accurately. Amie Downs in Allegheny noted, "Each Wednesday, the county executive and Health Department director hold a 4 p.m. COVID-19 update which is aired on Teams to allow media to ask questions and also streamed live on the Health Department and county's Facebook page. An ASL interpreter is also part of those briefings which have also included guests including medical researchers, or experts in specific fields, to provide more context on certain concerns or issues."

Downs continued, "While we are not accommodating one-on-one interview requests due to the demand, and our desire to treat all media outlets equally, we do make every attempt to answer questions from the media quickly. Additional COVID-19 related communications are also provided daily on the county's webpages for the jail, Kane Community Living Centers and elections. We have also made staff available from those offices to answer media queries and have hosted a few press briefings when appropriate. Recognizing that the media is one of our best conduits to the public, we have remained engaged with our media partners to find out what their needs and challenges are and have tried to work with them proactively to meet those."

Rebecca Brain elaborated on Chester County's media experiences and long-lasting benefits, "The media has been incredibly appreciative, and we have come to agreements on the information that we can or cannot provide. My network of journalist contacts has expanded greatly and will help with future communication post-COVID-19. However, there have been a number of people representing special interest groups that claim to be journalists but have very specific agendas."

"This crisis has caused us to become more intentional about keeping the lines of communication open."

**Julia Lehman**  
Communications Coordinator  
Franklin County



*Chester County commissioners meet with media representatives.*

Chester even created a series of social media videos from the county commissioners, contracted with an audiovisual organization to provide quality B-roll footage for the news networks (as well as for the commissioners' social media videos), and once social distancing became very important (and being home-based) the county created press and community briefings via Zoom that were livestreamed on their website and via Facebook.

## SOCIAL MEDIA, WEBSITES, TOWN HALLS

Among those things accelerating quickly during the pandemic was the use of social media. Northampton's Bartlett stated, "Our social media audiences on Facebook and Twitter increased exponentially as we used those platforms to get state and local information about COVID-19 to the public."

Brain noted that Chester County's following increased tremendously with 11,300+ followers now following

the county's main government Facebook page alone, up by around 3,000 since the start of the pandemic. Twitter grew and Brain noted, "Our website traffic has also increased, due to the fact that we have comprehensive Health Department webpages that have become the 'go to' information source for all Chester County residents. The department has taken center stage on the mitigation, communication and response to COVID-19, and the work put into creating the web presence before the pandemic even hit the U.S. has really paid off. We have a tremendous dashboard with data relating to cases and deaths for Chester County. We have tool kits for all stakeholder groups – businesses, employers, non-profits, faith-based communities, schools, congregate care facilities, healthcare professionals, etc. We also have extensive Q&As on quarantining and isolation recommendations, cleaning & hygiene recommendations, mental health strategies and resources and testing information."

Chester County also responded within less than a week of the shut down to the SOS from the business community – providing telephone town hall sessions as the federal and commonwealth stimulus packages and supports were unveiled. Chester continued those town halls for up to four different sessions, helping small businesses and non-profits especially in navigating the application processes. According to Brain, "We often had 1200+ people on those town hall sessions. We also provided advice on unemployment and job opportunities even during COVID-19. Similar town halls then developed for human services overall, and specific aspects of human services."

The messaging was even more critical than usual the past few months. Allegheny's Downs noted, "In order to ensure that we are communicating well, the Health Department has contracted with additional staff whose responsibilities include keeping up with external guidance, acting as a direct conduit with the health director, and ensuring that the language used is easy for all residents to understand."

## PERSEVERING

The reaction to efforts internally evoked gratefulness and appreciation in Chester County. Externally, the public was mainly appreciative at the beginning of the pandemic and through the first month or so. Brain

noted, "As time moves on, reactions are more divided – some still appreciative, but many using posts as a negative sounding board for dissatisfaction, anger and anti-government."

Counties continue to persevere. Franklin County's Lehman stated, "The unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted our communication strengths and weaknesses. It gave us an opportunity to both formalize our current communications processes as well as problem-solve some of the challenges brought on by an abrupt shift in operations. This crisis has caused us to become more intentional about keeping the lines of communication open."

Here's hoping that the lessons learned and efforts of county staffs continue to assist our residents as the effects of COVID-19 continue to impact our lives. 🍷

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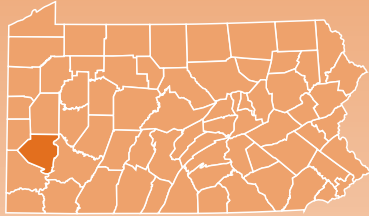
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## COUNTY HIGHLIGHT: ALLEGHENY

### Aaron Aupperlee

Communications Consultant  
Allegheny County Health  
Department

Allegheny County's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has required an extraordinary effort that asked county employees to take on new roles, forced departments to find innovative solutions to new challenges and brought together teams across county operations in new ways.

# Allegheny County

# Collaborating to Succeed

**D**r. Debra Bogen wasn't supposed to take the helm of the Allegheny County Health Department for another two months.

But on March 12, about a week after she had been formally introduced as the county's next Health Department director, Bogen was asked to start her job a bit early to help with the response to the growing coronavirus crisis. She had been busy that day cleaning out her office at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, where she served as the vice chair for education in the pediatric department but rushed to downtown Pittsburgh.

She made her way through the still unfamiliar halls of the Allegheny County Courthouse and walked into a conference room in County Executive Rich Fitzgerald's office. It was packed with representatives from every county office and department. Bogen knew three—if that many—people in the room. "And there was a seat open right next to Rich at the head of the table for me," Bogen said, recalling the meeting.

It would be two days until the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Allegheny County but weeks until Bogen found time to slip back into her office at Children's Hospital and finish cleaning.

By the time she officially started as the Health Department's director on May 4, nearly 20,000 people in the county had been tested for COVID-19, 1,445 had tested positive and 121 had died from the disease. On that date, Allegheny County's Emergency Operations Center was into its ninth week of operation and the county's Election Division was running extra shifts to process an unprecedented demand for mail-in ballots and prepare for June 2 Primary Election.

Allegheny County's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has required an extraordinary effort that asked county employees to take on new roles,

forced departments to find innovative solutions to new challenges and brought together teams across county operations in new ways.

"We've seen people step up and work together in a cooperative manner across all levels of government," Fitzgerald said. "We see people reaching out. We get calls every day from people just asking how they can help."

## A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT

Fitzgerald issued an emergency declaration shortly after the meeting in his conference room on March 12. On March 15, the county asked all non-essential businesses to close voluntarily. The state ordered this a short time later.

The county tweaked and changed its operations in the days that followed, suspending its fire academy and poll worker training, restricting visitors to its senior living facilities, the Kane Community Living Centers; and keeping its parks open but closing nature centers, ball fields, tennis courts and other amenities.

Toward the end of May, the number of new cases of COVID-19 in Allegheny County began to flatten as the county moved from the red to the yellow phase of Gov. Tom Wolf's "Process to Reopen Pennsylvania." The number of tests administered in the county climbed to 30,000 while the total number of positive cases approached 2,000. Some days passed with no new deaths while others brought the heartbreaking news of another one.

Preparations among the county's Department of Emergency Services



*In Allegheny County, more than 100 people, including county employees and temporary staff, worked together on Election Day to manually remove and flatten ballots to be scanned on election day. The crew began their work at 7 a.m. and completed counting the 209,000+ ballots around 2:30 a.m. on June 3.*

started months before the first cases were reported in the county. In early January, the department began working with emergency medical services on new procedures and policies expected with COVID-19, said county Emergency Services Chief Matt Brown.

The county's Emergency Operations Center was activated March 6, and on March 9, it shifted from the physical EOC—that Brown, his department and emergency responders around the county had become familiar with—to a virtual EOC. Instead of face-to-face meetings, situation reports and debriefs, the county's EOC, which swelled to nearly 60 people, worked virtually.

The EOC included representatives from Allegheny County, Pittsburgh and other municipalities large and small, the region's 211 health and human services support system, the Pittsburgh Poison Center, school districts and the National Weather Service.

The EOC was operational from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. seven days a week with meetings scheduled three times a day. The 8-to-4 operating hours were intentional, Brown said. During other disasters like the 2010 Snowmageddon and large-scale events like the G-20 Summit in 2009, the EOC ran 24/7. Brown realized this crisis would be different. "This was a marathon and not a sprint," Brown said. "It would be a slow burn event, so we purposely activated our emergency operations center with that in view."

During the first two months of the pandemic in Allegheny County, emergency managers across the county had to respond to tornadoes, flooding, thunderstorms, power outages, record cold temperatures, fires and watermain breaks, Brown said. "You name it," Brown said. "Those still needed to be managed, and we continued to do that."

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Typically, emergency services would take the lead during a crisis, coordinating responses across different agencies and departments and managing aid and requests from state and federal authorities. Because COVID-19 was a public health crisis, the county Health Department took the lead.

And it prompted different types of emergencies. Brown remembered one Friday afternoon when the governor announced that every essential employee working must wear a mask. Suddenly, everyone working in the county's 9-1-1 call center, at the jail and the juvenile detention center, in the Medical Examiner's Office, at the Kane centers and elsewhere throughout the county needed masks. "That triggered a panic," Brown said.

Within an hour, the team drafted a new directive about mask wearing at the 9-1-1 call center that was adapted and shared elsewhere, and within another hour, 50,000 masks were sent to employees who needed them. "That was a major hurdle, but at the same time, a major success," Brown said. "What's very unique in Allegheny County is that we've always had and maintained a good cooperative relationship. That's afforded us an opportunity to stand and up and support the Allegheny County Health Department in this disaster very rapidly and very effectively."

## ELECTIONS

Meanwhile, the county's Election Division has responded to unprecedented demand as it prepared to stage the June 2 Primary Election. The county encouraged voters to cast their ballots through the mail and even sent mail-in ballot applications to every registered, eligible voter in the county. Nearly 281,000 mail-in ballot and absentee ballot applications were received by the division.

At the same time, the Election Division was processing voter registrations, consolidating polling places and developing new procedures to keep people safe on Election Day. The division had to work with municipalities to ensure that the new, consolidated polling locations would be accessible and safe, and notify voters of their new polling places.

"There were so many moving parts with so many challenges that we've never seen before," said David Voye, manager of the Elections Division. "Everything was being done at the same time; everything was shifting at the same time."

The division's ballot processing operation required extra shifts and the hiring of temporary employees. By mid-May, it was a 24/7 effort.

The bulk of the mail started arriving at the end of April and in the beginning of May. It didn't slow down as the primary approached.

About 87,000 ballots had been returned by Memorial Day weekend. But after working around the clock through the holiday, the staff returned that Tuesday, a week to go before the primary, to find 100 pallets of mail waiting for them, possibly another 30,000 to 40,000 ballots to process.

During a similar primary election happening any other year, the county would receive about 15,000 absentee ballots with the vast majority of voting happening at the 1,323 polls spread across 800 to 830 locations throughout the county. Turnout would hover around 22%.

For this primary, mail in and absentee ballots could easily top 100,000, and the county expects smaller crowds at the 416 election districts consolidated into 147 physical locations across the county. Overall turnout could exceed 30%.

"Our goal is to make democracy as convenient and accessible and as safe as possible," Fitzgerald said of the efforts surrounding the primary. "Our Elections Division has done a great job getting the word out."

Our goal is to make democracy as convenient and accessible and as safe as possible.

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## NO ONE SAID NO TO ANYTHING

The cooperation and teamwork across the county helped Bogen find her footing. Brown brought her up to speed on emergency services. Bogen consulted with the county's jail Warden Orlando Harper and Dennis Biondo, the executive director of the Kane centers. The county's Department of Human Services (DHS) lent staff and expertise.

Fitzgerald checked in with her every day for her first few weeks on the job. "People knew I was new on the job, and people really helped educate me," Bogen said. "I did a lot of asking, 'How does this work?'"

The nonstop ringing of phones at the Health Department signaled one of the first needs in the COVID-19 response. The department's phone system did not have the capacity to handle all the incoming calls from people with concerns about the coronavirus. Overwhelmed, the phone system would shut down.

The Health Department worked with the county's Department of Information Technology to upgrade the phone system and establish a COVID-19 hotline. It brought together partners in DHS, the United Way, the Pittsburgh Poison Centers and other agen-

cies and organizations to provide answers to people's COVID-19-related questions. "Within a week, it was up and running," Bogen said. "It was fast."

The Health Department worked with the county's communications staff and the Department of Information Technology to create a website from scratch dedicated to COVID-19. The website contains a dashboard updated daily with the latest statistics, information for residents and FAQ and rumor control pages.

The staff helped Bogen get acquainted with her new co-workers. Ron Sugar, the senior deputy director of the Health Department and the former interim director before Bogen took the job, led a 9 a.m. meeting Monday through Friday where deputy directors shared their latest efforts in the COVID-19 response.

The team on the call discussed the latest case counts, shared updates on the number of people tested at the department's specimen collection site—which was stood up in a matter of days—and worked to find solutions to questions about food safety, pools or air quality. When Sugar left the department in mid-May, Bogen felt ready to lead the meetings herself.

As the number of cases in Allegheny County rose, the Health Department realized it needed more people to help with case investigations and contact tracing, vital tools in slowing the spread.

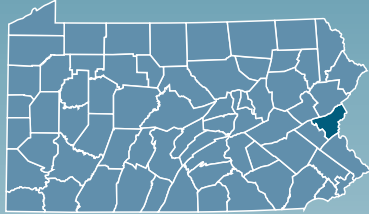
Medical students from the University of Pittsburgh volunteered for some of the case investigation work. They called people who had tested positive for COVID-19 and asked questions about their symptoms, whether they were hospitalized and with whom they had recent close contact. Contact tracers then called those close contacts, notified them that they may have been exposed and asked them to self-quarantine.

For the contact tracing, the Health Department looked to its own staff. It pulled people from other divisions of the department and trained them on contact tracing. Deputies identified people who were comfortable talking on the phone and put them on the front lines of slowing the spread. "No one said no to anything. No matter what we've asked of people, they've done it," Bogen said.

That has been true of the response across county departments. Everyone, whether a first responder, a corrections officer at the jail, a nurse at a Kane center or an accountant working from home, was affected by the pandemic and had a role to play in the response.

It's one of the ways this is unlike any disaster Allegheny County has faced before, Brown said. "This is a time when everyone is a first responder," Brown said. "Everyone is in emergency management. It's on all of our shoulders." 🍷

Everyone, whether a first responder, a corrections officer at the jail, a nurse at a Kane center or an accountant working from home, was affected by the pandemic and had a role to play in the response.



COUNTY HIGHLIGHT:  
Northampton

**Becky Bartlett**  
Deputy Director of  
Administration/Public  
Information Officer  
Northampton County



# NAVIGATING Uncharted Waters

**N**avigating through uncharted waters is challenging for any governmental organization because governments aren't supposed to wind up in uncharted waters in the first place. Governments have plans for almost everything: fires, floods, power outages, budget impasses, etc.

In recent years, Northampton County's EMS department has handled outbreaks of H1N1, SARS, and Ebola and handled them well but, while our emergency plans provided us with a framework, the ever-shifting waves around a novel coronavirus made responding difficult. COVID-19 presented us with a pandemic on a scale not seen in 102 years.

## PREPARING FOR THE STORM

In February, we could see the storm approaching and began coordinating with our municipalities, hospitals, schools, and public officials. Plans for outbreak prevention and exposure control were reviewed and employees were advised to avoid sick people, stay home if they showed any symptoms and wash their hands frequently.

Knowing that the waters were going to get choppy, we closed Northampton County's nursing home and prison to all volunteers and visitors on March 10th. This action, while necessary, wasn't popular. Both institutions enjoy the services of a very dedicated volunteer force. Residents weren't happy to hear they could no longer visit with family members and friends. Computer tablets and cellphones were purchased so residents could still communicate with their loved ones.

The riptides began to swirl on March 12th with the report of the first case in Northampton County. Four days later, County Executive Lamont McClure issued an Emergency Declaration of Disaster. Declarations of Emergency aren't unheard of, but neither are they common and, since they give governments the power to bypass the procurement process, they can raise suspicions among the public. In the past twenty years, Northampton County has only enacted Emergency powers twice—once for a flood and once for a State of Pennsylvania budget impasse.

Our output of press releases and posts on social media increased dramatically in an effort to be as transparent as possible. On March 19th, we began to batten down the hatches, closing the government center to the public with no definitive end date. During Superstorm Sandy in 2012 the courthouse stayed open as long as the power was on, but COVID-19 presented a new set of risks. As our fellow counties closed their offices—traffic to ours substantially increased. People who needed passports and marriage licenses began driving across state and county lines to access our services. We had to shut our doors to reduce the risk of transmission.

## ADAPTING AND CREATING

As the uncharted waters began getting choppy we found our compass wasn't of much use. Counties have a wide-range of responsibilities and COVID-19 impacted every single one of them. First and foremost was the protection of our employees. The buildings might be closed to the public, but the business of the county continued. The Solicitor's Office kept busy trying to determine what was legal under the constitution and what was now permissible under the governor's stay-at-home order. There is no way for a social worker to social distance while working with a family in crisis so how could we keep our staff and our clients safe?

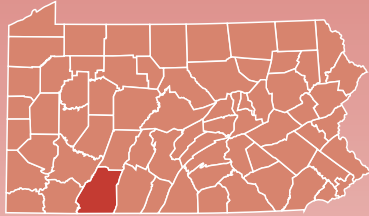
The Custodial Department's duties expanded rapidly as they were instructed to disinfect as many surfaces as they could as often as possible. Our nursing home, prison and Coroner's Office needed gloves, masks and gowns. EMS had to scramble to find supplies to protect county employees as well as the county's municipal fire and police departments. Our most controversial decision was when we closed the parks for a month.

Then there was the world outside of the county. Some businesses had to close, others remained opened, but under strict guidelines

from the state. Our Department of Community and Economic Development held two virtual town halls for what small businesses could do to stay afloat during the crisis and how they might be able to open when the governor sounded the all clear. Working with Lehigh Valley Food Policy Council, we organized distributions of meal boxes. Eager to move Northampton to 'Yellow' and 'Green' status as quickly as possible, the administration used \$150,000 from a CARES Act to open a drive-thru testing center at Easton Hospital.

As with most counties, we had successes (low rates of infection at the prison) and disappointments (high rates of infection at the nursing home). We adapted by becoming more creative. After Governor Wolf closed the senior centers in March, DHS staff organized drive-thru events for clients, distributing coffee and donuts and boredom busting bags. In addition to manning the polls, the Election's Office had to quickly figure out how to process more than 41,000 applications for mail-in ballots and develop a strategy for opening 82,000 envelopes on Election Day.

While navigating these uncharted waters has not been easy, it has been enlightening. If nothing else, we have created a map to guide future administrations. ▼



COUNTY HIGHLIGHT:

## Somerset

**Rachel Looker**  
Staff Writer

National Association of Counties

# A Rural Sewing Circle Succeeds

**S**ometimes it takes a tragedy to bring people together.

"We literally are running the world's biggest sewing circle that you've ever seen in your life," Somerset County, Pa. Commissioner Pamela Tokar-Ickes half-joked.

Commissioners in Somerset County headed a project to recruit county sewers to make face masks for those in need during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Tokar-Ickes said the county's EMA director and emergency response agencies told commissioners that they did not have enough face masks. Somerset County Commissioner Gerald Walker explained the county never had a huge supply of masks for many places such as nursing homes, which usually don't require masks during daily operations.

The county also had a limited, outdated supply of N95 masks, according to Commissioner Colleen Dawson, who added that each EMS service received no more than 90 masks. "If you put one mask on the patient and one mask on each of the responders, that equals 30 trips," she said. "That's not many."

In the rural county in southwestern Pennsylvania, Dawson said the commissioners knew it would be challenging to obtain more masks.





"The federal and state governments, whenever they have additional masks, they go to the counties that have the higher numbers [of cases]."

Commissioners Dawson and Tokar-Ickes found a sewer on Facebook and decided to connect with her and make this a county project. They ordered three palettes of 100% cotton material, thread and elastic to distribute to residents interested in sewing.

"The county has been instrumental in launching this project and mobilizing the community as we move into this public health crisis," Tokar-Ickes said. With the first order of material, the group hoped to produce 21,000 masks for the community. The masks will not be used in medical settings, instead distributed to nursing homes, emergency responders, county agencies and other non-profit organizations such as mobile food banks.

"It became apparent to us early on that we could not depend on the federal government or the state government to get us the materials we need here in rural southwestern Pennsylvania," Dawson said.

The county recruited 400 individuals incorporating church groups, sewing clubs and other organizations into the project. Dawson said they are splitting the materials into bags to distribute to those who want to sew. The commissioners have struggled finding more elastic but are receiving donations from many individuals and community vendors.

"There was no doubt in my mind if we put the word out that we needed help that our community would respond," Tokar-Ickes said, adding that in these unprecedented times, county officials need to turn to their communities. "County government has to work in close partnership with its community through this crisis and any other." 🍷

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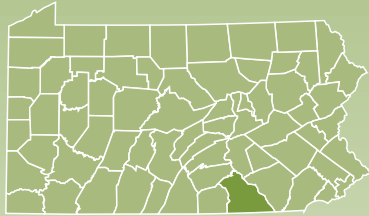
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COUNTY HIGHLIGHT:

# York

**Mark Walters**

Public Information Officer  
York County

Whether it was information for businesses, critical care needs at a nursing home or handling an election, York County managed its response to the pandemic using collaboration as its compass.



## Reaching Out to Come Together

**T**he ability of county government to pivot quickly in an emergency response is crucial to effectively managing crises. Mobilizing county employees, community stakeholders and local business leaders is essential.

While events like storms or mass casualties are easily visible, a public health crisis like that of the COVID-19 pandemic requires a different kind of handling to address a citizenry that may be skeptical of information or fearful of its impact.

### IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND TOUGH DECISIONS

York County met the pandemic with a disaster emergency declaration in March that coincided with the state's declaration and, through efforts of the county's Office of Emergency Management and solicitor, was better suited for COVID-19 versus a weather-related disaster. The declaration empowered the county's Office of Emergency Management to continue its mission of monitoring the needs of agencies and entities around the county.

Emergency Management coordinates the county's response in emergencies no matter their size or scope. Even before the declaration was formalized, this county department had stood up its Emergency Operations Center, modeled after the National Incident Management System's Incident Command System, or Incident Command System (ICS), outlined by FEMA as the bible of emergency response.

Through the ICS, the county had a nucleus of information on schools, nursing homes, health care facilities and the needs pertinent to personal protective equipment, PPE.

York County Commissioners Julie Wheeler, Doug Hoke and Ron Smith have oversight of the ICS, and they used it to get timely information related to county operations. There were tough decisions to be made as the commissioners balanced the county's operations with its need to protect its financial stability.

One difficult decision that was made was to furlough more than 200 employees. This allowed the county to reduce operating expenses. By early June, the county had brought back nearly 100 furloughed employees.

## REACHING THE PUBLIC

As COVID-19 changed, so did the county's plans. Buildings were closed to the public, creating a safer and more controlled work environment. This information was disseminated through social media, traditional news outlets and the county's website.

Communication among the commissioners, row officers, the county's Court Administration and judges as well as messaging to the county's nearly 2,200 employees through "all employee" emails facilitated necessary information-sharing internally. It allowed county services to continue. The county's Administrator and Human Resources department provided commissioners with the information to empower department directors and supervisors to implement work-from-home capabilities where applicable and manage offices that would still need to function but without being open to public visitation. This effort includ-

ed expanding the bandwidth for internet services and licenses for remote access to county servers and temporarily expanding Webex licenses for collaboration with outside agencies and businesses. It was critical to remain accessible to the public as well as reporters during this time.

The commissioners' public meetings were shown on York County's local government access channel, White Rose Community TV, as well as on the county's Facebook page through a live feed. The county's public relations department fielded any public comments and questions on Facebook and shared them on the video feed, allowing for open and transparent government to continue amid the uncertainties and inconveniences. To allow for additional access to submitting public comments, a conference line connecting callers to the commissioners meeting room was established.

The commissioners have been able to reach its diverse population, including Spanish-speaking communities and the Black Ministers Association of York County, thanks to outreach efforts that lay the foundation of these relationships before disasters strike. This outreach is strengthened by regular calls with the county's two largest health care providers—UPMC and WellSpan Health.

## PREPAREDYORK.COM

A tremendous resource outside county government's departments was the York County Economic Alliance, known locally as YCEA. This adaptive and responsive entity

quickly set up *preparedyork.com*, a website geared toward preparedness and response for local governments and the business community.

York County has always had a strong relationship with our economic alliance, similar to a chamber of commerce, and this relationship was a lynchpin for us to keep the public apprised of important information such as virtual job fairs for essential businesses.

The YCEA had its business solutions and innovation director attend almost all of the commissioners' public meetings, where she would be given time to promote all the resources provided by YCEA and where to find them. The county was also fortunate to tap into her bilingual capabilities and use them to offer information in Spanish.

This person made videos with our president commissioner to inform people of what was going on and how to access these services. The videos ranged from county and YCEA operations to small business assistance and even elections information as the county prepared for and held the primary on June 2.

## IN GOOD HEALTH, IN GOOD HANDS

York County does not have a health department, but York City does, and the county/city relationship was another major component of the collaboration that drove York County's pandemic response. It also helps that the York City Health Bureau's physician is the county's public health strategist who has



*York County Prison Warden Clair Doll, second from right, delivers boxes of masks to WellSpan Health.*

been tapped for efforts like the heroin epidemic.

This health strategist served as the county's chief medical officer for incident command, guiding the county's decision making as it pertained to health impacts.

The county's public health strategist and president commissioner leveraged the strengths WellSpan Health and UPMC. Having these two competitors at the table and working together was an asset for York County, and it took the efforts of the York City Bureau of Health along with the political muscle of the city and county.

## GOVERNMENT HELPING GOVERNMENT

It is crucial for county government to have support from the county's municipalities. York County has

36 boroughs, 35 townships and one third class city. It is just as important to have support from lawmakers in Harrisburg. The commissioners communicated the county's evolution within the pandemic as it transpired with these governments. At the very least, local and state officials need to know what the county is doing. In our case, these relationships are largely beneficial as we wrangle with issues pertinent to government functionality in a pandemic.

There were some challenges in managing an election because of the nature of transmission of COVID-19. The primary was not without its challenges amid the pandemic, but thanks to the collaboration of county departments lending the manpower to process mail and open mail-in/absentee ballots, the county managed to get

every mailed ballot open the night of the primary.

Connections with state and local government supported the county's ability to be flexible. This included state legislators' involvement with voting reform and the city's assistance with something as simple as parking changes.

Another element of the governance structure that kept the county informed was the governor's regular press conferences, which we watched to stay current on the developments from the state Department of Health and Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. Without this seemingly obvious practice of tuning in to daily briefings, the county would have had a lot less information to consider throughout its response.

The York County Planning Commission, which is not a county department but a county-adjacent entity that works closely with York County government, proved to be another asset as the county responded to the dire needs of a community in a public health crisis.

The Planning Commission facilitated the county Human Services agencies and outside partners that secured housing services for people who did not have a place to safely quarantine if diagnosed with the coronavirus or were exposed to someone who had tested positive. This put homeless people or people who live in congregate facilities into hotels. Without the Planning Commission's resources, this would have been a fragmented effort that would not have been able to help as many people.

## COLLABORATION AS A COMPASS

Whether it was information for businesses, critical care needs at a nursing home or handling an election, York County managed its response to the pandemic using collaboration as its compass.

The ability to have multiple departments within county government on the same page as well the external support from YCEA and the county's two major health care providers proved to be invaluable.

As York County began the recovery process, our partnership with YCEA thrived yet again. We formed a task force—YoCo STRONG Recovery Task Force—commissioned to

leverage feedback from all sectors of the community.

A panel of 14 committees were tasked with basically figuring out what in their sectors worked well and what could be improved not just for the next emergency response but moving away from COVID-19. The two biggest factors were the recommendations for the county to form its own health bureau and facilitate making broadband internet more affordable and available for areas that are underserved or not at all served by the infrastructure required to bring reliable internet to residents and businesses.

The recommendations were made public through a webinar and post-

ed online. They will serve as a draft of guidance moving forward. The document is the work of efforts across the community in areas like housing, health care, education, emergency response and vulnerable populations.

Without the collaboration of the agencies and groups named above and many others, we cannot begin to imagine the havoc COVID-19 could have wreaked on York County and its residents and businesses. Fortunately, because so many people stood up to help, we weathered the storm and learned valuable lessons for possible future use. 🍷

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# Budget Advocacy in Uncertain Economic Times

**Ashley Lenker White**

Director of Government Relations  
County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania

**S**o far 2020 seems to have a surprise around every corner. In Harrisburg, it's incredibly rare that a budget is finalized early, let alone passed by the end of May. The unprecedented nature of the coronavirus pandemic not only called for remote legislative session and emergency remote voting rules for state legislators for the first time ever, but it also resulted in a number of negotiations to allow local governments to continue to conduct business during the sudden shutdown. For several weeks, legislators, counties and CCAP staff examined plans and proposals to address the litany of circumstances we faced, including legislative measures regarding emergency preparations, mitigation and response that were not planned in advance.

## FULL SPEED AHEAD

COVID-19 uprooted most spring-time plans, including advocacy

plans for county legislative priorities. Suddenly we went from planning to educate House and Senate Mental Health Caucus members on the need for additional mental health community base funding to navigating a wild ride of negotiations regarding postponing the primary election, seeking emergency relief funding and confirming authority to conduct emergency remote meetings so that counties could resume critical business via Zoom, Skype, Team and the like and still be in compliance with legal requirements.

Like just about everything else, in-person meetings to discuss next steps on policy issues halted briefly and then Harrisburg moved full speed ahead into the virtual world with which we are all now quite familiar. As such, advocacy, conversations and relationships have changed dramatically. Not only has the subject matter been necessarily overshadowed by public health and emergency response

measures, it has had a trickle-down effect on the importance of other once-critical issues and its form has largely taken to writing.

All of the online tools upon which the telework world now relies have become some of the most powerful advocacy tools as well: video meetings, phone calls, emails, social media and online news media to name a few. And with electronic information overload, using a variety of these tools creatively becomes necessary to get the message across.

## CAREFUL STEWARDS

So while we have secured a temporary five-month budget for the commonwealth which contains mostly level funding for programs of interest to counties, we anticipate that an uphill battle remains for achieving county priorities and negotiating the remaining seven-month budget during a time that is almost certain to reflect economic downturn.

With initial revenue for the state and economic predictions contain-



ing dim projections, counties will need to be both careful stewards of the funding they have received for the first portion of the year, and avid advocates for a minimum of level funding for the remaining seven-month budget, likely to be negotiated in the fall.

Already legislative leaders have indicated that budget line increases are going to be near impossible, even for counties' top priority of mental health funding as we witness the already increased need related to the effects and stress of the pandemic. Legislators have, in some instances, recognized the deep mental health impacts of the stay-at-home order, job loss and illness; however, raising taxes and finding additional revenue to fund increases for any line item will be a tough sell in the current economic downturn and uncertain environment.

Despite this, strong advocacy must continue. Counties must continue to build strong relationships with their legislators and communicate frequently about the impacts

COVID-19 has had on local communities, county budgets and policy needs. CCAP will forge a head on these efforts, but the best message is always the one that comes from those on the ground, seeing and working with Pennsylvania communities firsthand.

## INVESTMENT AND COOPERATION

Your input as a locally elected official is needed now more than ever. Effective messages include examples of how our county priorities and your local county budget has been impacted by the unexpected crises we've seen so far this year. Share your powerful stories, bring your undeniable data showing the good work your county has achieved and also the vital need for increased resources.

Using the virtual skills you've honed over the last several months, ensure your legislators hear your perspective clearly and often. All are in a time of economic stress and uncertainty, but it is the state's responsibility to be a good

partner in providing the necessary resources for local governments to carry out many of their necessary, or in some cases mandated, functions. We must remind leaders at every level that investment and cooperation are in the best interest of all of our constituents throughout the commonwealth.

As we emerge from the initial grip of COVID-19 you may even have the opportunity for a face-to-face meeting with legislators at their district offices. Pack your mask and take advantage of this long-awaited opportunity to have an in-person conversation to discuss county needs to create health and economic stability and support for county government partners. And prepare for working together throughout the fall and winter months to ensure that this budget and other resulting policies align with county priorities. As always, CCAP staff will continue to voice this message in Harrisburg, whether in the Capitol or remotely, so that together we can overcome current hardships and achieve the best outcomes during this trying year. 🍂

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# GRASSROOTS IN A DIGITAL AGE



## Engaging Legislators and Building Relationships

**Melissa Anese**  
Government Relations Associate  
County Commissioners Association  
of Pennsylvania

**A**s elected officials, commissioners and legislators share one common goal—to aid in the development of policy that positively impacts the lives of their constituents. This shared interest is consistent and does not change, even when put up against a global health pandemic, social justice movement or economic recession. At the end of the day, the goals are the same and people look to government to make those tough decisions.

That said, there are a lot of voices out there driving policy. How can you be sure to have your voice heard? The voices of those in your county and communities? While it may seem like a big task in the day-to-day job, grassroots advocacy really is habitual. It's about building relationships, making connections and establishing rapport.

Often advocacy is thought of in terms of visiting the Capitol in Harrisburg and having that face-to-face meeting with your local legislator. In reality, the conversations that matter are the ones that are had more regularly and more as a coworking effort than a grand gesture. In the hyper-technologically focused time we find ourselves, particularly with the need to continue to communicate at a distance, grassroots advocacy can be a phone call, text, email, weekly webcam meeting, even a messenger pigeon on a fixed route!

Staying engaged with legislators and the administration has never been easier, but as we all shift to digital communications, it is critical to ensure your voice is heard. There are several tips and tricks to grassroots advocacy in a digital age that can be helpful, whether you're a novice or a pro: introduce yourself, be considerate and consistent, and make the local connection.

### **MAKE THE LOCAL CONNECTION**

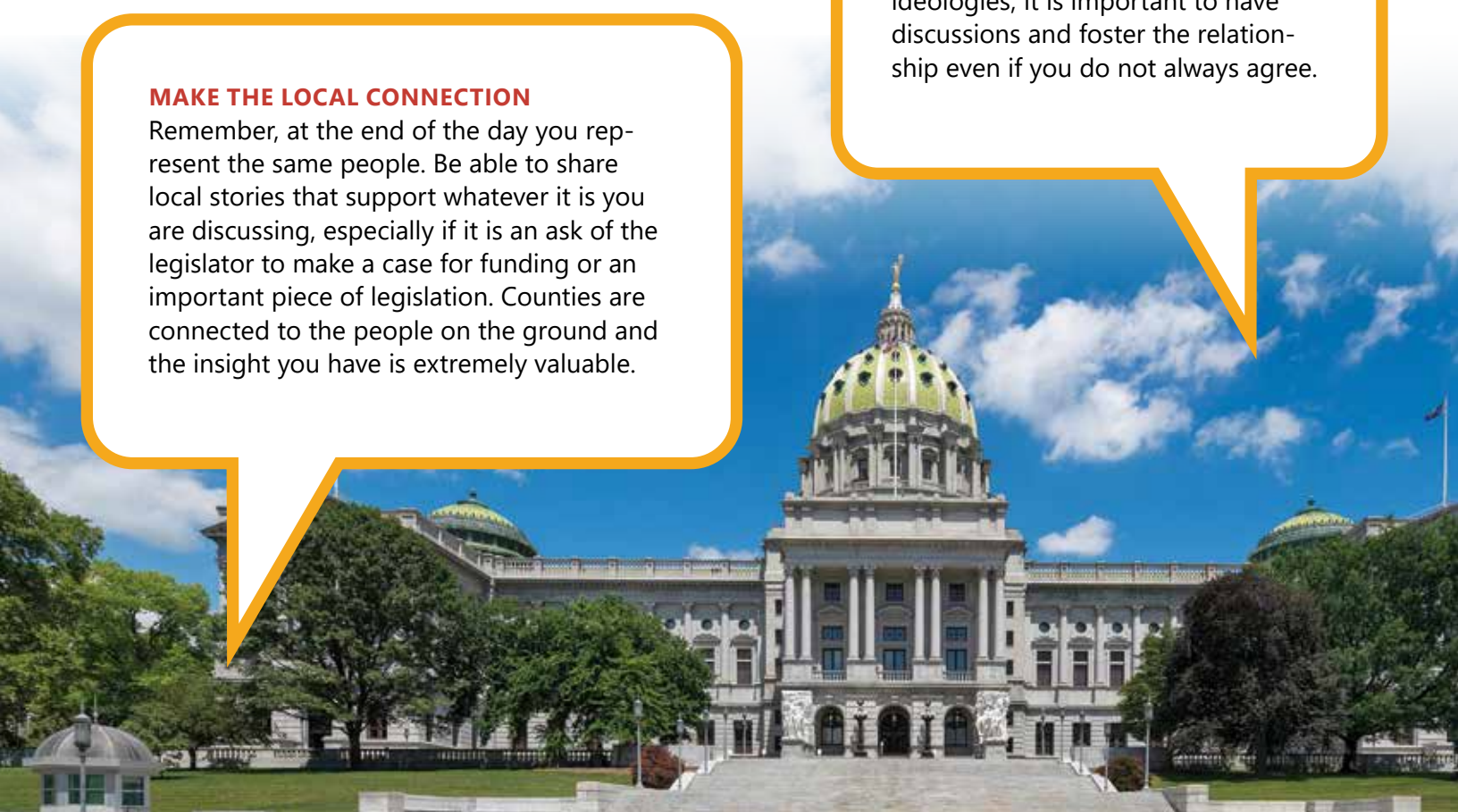
Remember, at the end of the day you represent the same people. Be able to share local stories that support whatever it is you are discussing, especially if it is an ask of the legislator to make a case for funding or an important piece of legislation. Counties are connected to the people on the ground and the insight you have is extremely valuable.

### **INTRODUCE YOURSELF**

Say hello! You may or may not know your local legislators very well for a multitude of reasons. The first step in establishing that relationship is to reach out, explain who you are and what you do. This can be with a phone call to their district office, an email, or at a public event. Make sure to give them your contact information and offer to be a resource. Even if you know your legislator well, it might be time to just say hi and check in if you haven't in a while.

### **BE CONSIDERATE AND CONSISTENT**

You are building a relationship that is a two-way street. It is important to maintain regular contact, not only to reach out when you need something, and vice versa. Regardless of political ideologies, it is important to have discussions and foster the relationship even if you do not always agree.



## THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

CCAP offers a number of tools to help counties make a difference with grassroots activity and other advocacy on priorities, the state budget and many other bills under consideration by the General Assembly that impact county government. At [www.pacounties.org](http://www.pacounties.org), the Government Relations webpage and Legislative Action Center offer resources such as fact sheets, talking points, sample letters and background information.

### Grassroots Toolkit

This toolkit holds a host of good tips and tricks, from strategies for effective communication to human services advocacy advice. It also features a crash course in the Pennsylvania legislative process.

### Legislative Information

The Legislative Action Center serves as a reference page to link you out to the General Assembly website. You can find contact information for Pennsylvania House and Senate members as well as other commonwealth employees.

### Guidelines for Organizing Legislative Visits

This quick one-pager helps to guide the process of setting up meetings in the county. These could be a sit-down meeting in an office or a guided tour of a county facility. Organizing meetings is more than just logistics, but also careful consideration and preparation of the goal of the meeting.

### Articles on Special Topics

Often articles related to tips, tricks and best practices are featured in the CCAP magazine, Pennsylvania County News. For quick access, some also can be found on the Legislative Action Center. Some topics include legislative engagement, messaging and speaking skills, connecting with media, and how to explain what counties do.

### Legislative Bulletin

The bi-weekly Legislative Bulletin keeps counties up to date on the latest news from the Capitol, including information on recent bill movements, hearings and events. While the bulletin is good reading material to stay in the know, it also is a way to keep members informed of issues going on in Harrisburg. The topics in the bulletin can make for great conversational pivot points with legislators.

### Resources and Reports

Ever wonder where you can find repository information on older or ongoing legislative issues? Perhaps you are looking for guidance on a new Act. This newer edition to the CCAP Government Relations website serves as a landing page for issues ranging from transportation and the hotel tax to election reforms, human services information and the EMS Task Force.

### Priorities

Each year the CCAP membership selects several issues that rise to the top of the legislative agenda for that year. The Priorities webpage hosts resources including fact sheets, talking points, sample social media posts and even a specialized planning guide that can be used for grassroots activities with legislators.

### Budget

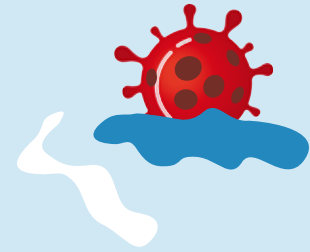
The state budget process can be a lot to handle and understand. The CCAP Budget page is an excellent hub of information on the Pennsylvania State budget. You even can register for budget news updates, review spreadsheets or read an analysis of the items critical to counties.

As always, the CCAP Government Relations team is available to help out too. Please don't hesitate to reach out to any of the team members directly via the contact information on the Government Relations webpage or through email at [pacountiesGR@pacounties.org](mailto:pacountiesGR@pacounties.org). Now, get ready, get set and go out and start the discussion! ▼



# What Does COVID-19 Teach Us About Risk Management?





## Some would claim that “no one expects the unexpected.”

However, that is precisely what risk management is about—having a structure in place to deal with risks, even those that we cannot even imagine will show up. Our new hazard is COVID-19, and we cannot change that. Risk management can minimize or reduce our risk by practices and procedures that we have used to deal with more predictable and “ordinary” risks.

### A BASE ON WHICH TO BUILD

To navigate the coronavirus, rely on the core components of good risk management:

- Planning in Advance
- Point People
- Developing Relationships

I’m sure by now you realize any advance planning work done by your risk manager, other county officials or employees was worthwhile, even if no one anticipated a global pandemic. If you had a business continuity plan in place, or other risk management plans, they provided a base on which to build.

You’ve drawn together a group of people to manage this crisis. These point people make the plan come alive and translate it into decisive action. You’ve been meeting regularly, dealing with an issue that involves every part of county

operations: HR, buildings and grounds, public health, finances, insurance and so much more.

By now you also know who the key point people outside the county are—those that can get you the information you need to make decisions. This may be local health officials, legislators, state executive and agency staff, your local insurance producers, the county’s insurers and CCAP staff. And how you share information with other counties is important too—if you are searching for an answer, chances are good another county is too, and may have found it. While you may have spent a good bit of time developing these relationships prior to COVID-19, the need for these strong ties will continue until the pandemic is over, and maybe even longer.

Here’s an important lesson from COVID-19: Whether or not you had a formal risk management

team in place before COVID-19, you do now. Don’t disband it once this crisis is over. You have already learned so much about risk management, build on that. Keep the team, or a core part of it, in place. You will be even more ready for whatever happens next.

### WHAT’S NEXT?

Here are some things you may already be addressing, or that should be on your planning list:

#### Employee Health

The county’s employees and officials are your most important asset, and the pandemic only highlights what you cannot do without them. If they are not healthy, the county’s ability to do its job is severely limited. There should be no doubt that wellness programs and a strong focus on employee healthcare must be a major priority in any county risk management plan.

## Reopening

Whether you are fully reopened now, or just getting there, keep track of what checklists you developed and the policies you put in place to transition. How did you communicate with your employees? Was telework successful? Did your telework policy serve you well?

## Update your Business Continuity Plan

By now you have a pretty good idea of whether it worked or not, and what you may have missed. Document that while it is still fresh in your mind.

## What Works Virtually?

You probably discovered you accomplish more virtually than you ever expected. Did video and phone conference calls help? If so, are they safer than some in-person interactions? Are there ways to continue to use them and other benefits—like reducing travel time?

## High Risk Operations

We know these county operations bring unique risks: prisons, human services, courts, nursing homes. COVID-19 placed even more stress on these functions. What can be done to be better prepared for whatever the next critical situation brings?

## Educating Employees on Effective Mitigation and Prevention Measures

Your first line of defense is employees who take mitigation and prevention seriously. They will look to the county leadership to see how that is to be done. They need role models, and they need county management to be consistent about what the rules are and what

is expected of every employee and official. And while it is a small item, we've already seen claims from employees being affected by fumes from bleach and other cleaners—be careful with the cleaning supplies!

## Travel Precautions

When is travel safer, and more importantly, when is it also necessary? Make sure you have a clear definition for your employees and are consistent in its application.

## Cybersecurity

Those who would attack your operations will not hesitate to use coronavirus related emails and warnings to attack. Remind your employees to watch for those phishing emails and other realistic cyber links.

## COVERAGE REVIEW

Counties should review their insurance coverage with their local insurance producers. Many liability policies will contain exclusions for pandemics, and going forward those that currently do not, will no doubt contain them next year. The same will be true for property insurance, and nursing home liability coverage.

Here's a review of what seem to be the trends with claims related to COVID-19.

## Unemployment Compensation

Many counties had to furlough employees, and costs for their UC benefits will fall to the counties at some point. It will help that the federal government is providing funding for some of the additional unemployment claims.

## Workers' Compensation

It will be difficult to ascertain if an employee who contracts COVID-19 was infected at work, as there are so many other ways to become infected. Currently most workers' compensation insurers are denying COVID-19 related claims unless it can be proven where the employee contracted the virus.

## Health Insurance Claims

It is expected COVID-19 will cause an increase in claims, however the full impact is uncertain at this point.

## Liability Claims

Thus far it does not appear there is an increase in liability claims against entities as a result of COVID-19.

## Nursing Home Professional Liability Claims

Nursing Homes are already seeing notices of lawsuits being filed related to COVID-19 deaths. This could be a significantly expensive matter for the facilities. In addition, some nursing home liability policies may include a virus or pandemic exclusion.

Perhaps the best that can be said about the COVID-19 pandemic is that we have learned so much. Counties have stepped up and focused on providing services, protecting the public and making major changes to their workplaces and how work is conducted. We've all realized how our actions can impact others. As we work to return to normal, we also realize that normal is never going to be the same. 🍷



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# Learning Together, Even When Apart



## Karen A. Sweigard

Director of Meetings and Education  
County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania

In early March, as CCAP staff was finalizing the details for the CCAP Spring Conference at the Hilton Harrisburg in Dauphin County, the world changed. COVID-19 became reality. Over the course of four days, the CCAP Board debated and ultimately made the difficult, but correct, decision to cancel the Spring Conference, nine days before it was to start.

This was the first casualty in a string of cancellations: by the end of April, CCAP and its affiliates had canceled or postponed 30 events which were to have been held at

various facilities around the commonwealth. Dozens more slated for the CCAP office were also canceled or rescheduled, while we all waited for guidance on when and how we could return to regular work schedules and meeting locations.

As the “shelter in place” lifestyle became our mindset, we witnessed a shift in how we solved problems and made decisions: education, business meetings, and information sharing shifted to video and virtual conferencing platforms that three months ago many of us didn’t know existed.

After months of wondering when we can get back to in-person meetings, the “look” of meetings in Pennsylvania is not clearly defined. From a positive viewpoint, the slow process of getting back to business as usual, or some variation of “usual,” has begun, even amidst differing opinions and continued questions.

Here are a few frequently asked questions about activities and decisions from the past few months. CCAP staff will continue to seek and react to accurate information as we all resume our personal and professional schedules in the safest ways possible.

**Q:** The CCAP Board of Directors typically meet on the first day of the Spring Conference, but the Spring Conference was canceled. How did the Board complete their scheduled business?

**A:** Yes, the Board missed their March 22 meeting date, as did the CCAP standing committees scheduled to meet that afternoon. Many of the committees are conducting their meetings over phone or video conference calls. And almost one month later than originally scheduled, the CCAP Board held their first virtual meeting via Zoom in mid-April. CCAP leadership successfully discussed and debated their way through their agenda. It was new and it was unique, but it worked!

Similarly, the CCAP Board had to make another difficult decision regarding their scheduled June 5, 2020 Board meeting. The ripple effect from the pandemic left little untouched, and the original Primary Election date of April 28 was postponed to June 2. Obviously with counties running the elections it made it difficult to expect Board members to be away from their counties that week, so CCAP President Jeff Snyder and CCAP Board Chair Craig Lehman made an early decision to postpone the June 5 Board meeting to June 30. As of this writing, it may be another virtual meeting or a hybrid of in-person and virtual attendance. Regardless of the format, the CCAP Board of Directors will continue to maintain operations on behalf of CCAP members, engaging in good governance of the association despite the challenges.

**Q:** This year's PA GIS Conference and the CCAP County Administration Conference were additional casualties. How disappointing was it to have to cancel those conferences?

**A:** Each cancellation was disappointing, but canceling the Spring Conference, PA GIS Conference, and then the County Administration Conference was difficult for sure, as each had terrific agendas and speakers in place, ready to go. And we had a "first" with the CAC: we had scheduled our first keynote speaker, Beth Ziesenis. It was a perfect fit for the CAC, especially in our new daily technology-driven environment. Her keynote address was entitled, "Powered Productivity: Super Tech Tools to Get Stuff Done," and she was also presenting a follow-up breakout session, "Tech Tools to Create Cool Content for Your County's Marketing and Social Media Efforts." We were disappointed to miss out on meeting her and learning about her useful technology tips, but we have great news: "Beth Z" is already confirmed to present both of these sessions at the 2021 CAC in State College!

**Q:** The CCAP insurance programs had a winning spring semester full of great educational workshops. Our county had planned to send several staff to different offerings. Do you know if these workshops will be rescheduled?

**A:** Thank you for participating in our insurance training programs, and we certainly share your disappointment. We are always im-

mensely proud of the diversity and high level of the topics and speakers included in each semester, and the 2020 spring semester was no exception. Fortunately, yes, you will see these workshops repeated in the 2020 fall semester and beyond, depending on how the entire schedule pans out. Please watch for our new brochure promoting the fall workshops, and we look forward to seeing you in the CCAP classroom soon!

**Q:** CCAP uses customer-oriented properties across the state, but many hotels and educational facilities have been forced to shut down temporarily during the pandemic. Does CCAP plan to take their meetings and conferences back to these locations once their doors start to open?

**A:** Sadly, many of our great hotel partners have been decimated by the loss of business and the cancellations of meetings overall. Those that have been fortunate enough to remain open are doing so at sometimes 10 – 20% capacity. For us, there were about a dozen hotels and educational centers that suffered financially from our cancellations, yet they were willing to work with us to share the fiduciary burdens. We worked with each one individually to rebook future business where we could, plus we are committed to bringing business to them again and again, when the opportunities arise, to repay them for being true partners even amid their own financial crises.


**Q: Speaking of hotels, how are they preparing to reopen their doors and safely welcome back guests and meetings again?**

**A:** The meeting and hospitality industry globally has been discussing shutdown and reopening guidelines and protocols since mass cancellations and postponements hit Asian and European countries months ago. And since the shutdowns have lasted longer than anyone originally predicted, they have had more time to update and share their processes. Whether a major hotel chain or an independent property, each facility department will have their own guidelines. From housekeeping to banquets to front desk to convention services to sales, they will

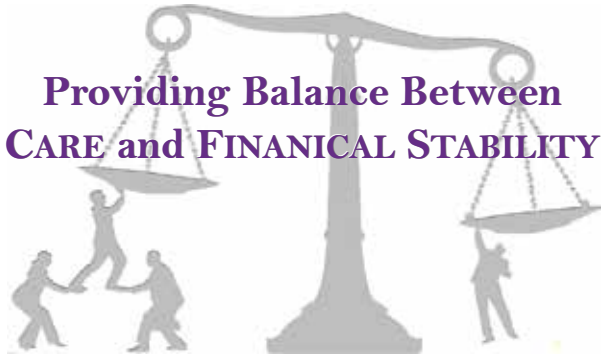
require everyone's cooperation to follow protocols intended to make hotels safe and ready for clients to walk through their doors.

In a proactive and positive move, CCAP developed an education series of weekly webinars to help county officials with information and resources to keep counties functioning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These webinars discussed topics such as staff anxiety and fear, teleworking options, operational safety, federal funding streams, risk management and legal issues. We hope you were able to participate in this weekly series, but if not, we encourage you to view the recordings via a link on our website, [www.pacounties.org](http://www.pacounties.org).

One thing is certain, no matter how many times we hear it, we have learned we truly are all in this together. And together we will get through it and come out stronger together on the other side. CCAP staff will continue to monitor conditions and protocols around the state, through peer groups, meeting industry associations, and our individual hotel partners. Any major decisions have been and will continue to be made with our attendees' and staff's safety in mind. We thank everyone for your incredible support and understanding as we work through the difficult challenges facing every one of us. Stay well and stay safe. 🍷



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Rackspace provides PTG with deep security knowledge, leading technology and advanced threat intelligence tailored to its business needs. Rackspace uses advanced analytics to detect unknown (zero-day) threats through behavioral patterns and anomaly detection, across the world's leading clouds.

*"PTG's strong partnership with Rackspace is vital to the high level of services that PTG provides to its clients. Rackspace's commitment to data security and business continuity has helped differentiate the PTG solution from its competitors."*

John R. Reidy :: Co-Founder & President, Pension Technology Group

## Benefits and Features

- **Dramatically reduce the risk of data loss by minimizing the breach window:** An active security approach is designed to minimize a threat's most precious resource — time in your environment.
- **Meet security goals while lowering total cost of ownership (TCO):** The advanced security protection of Rackspace Managed Security can significantly lower TCO over internally developed security operations centers and comparable managed security service offerings.
- **Host-based protection:** Experience real-time visibility into adversary activity on every endpoint as Rackspace analyzes billions of endpoint events, spotting and correlating anomalies to alert you when an attack is underway.
- **Net-based protection:** Intrusion detection increases network security by monitoring traffic and inspecting and scanning packets for suspicious data.
- **Security analytics:** Advanced technologies are augmented by behavioral analytics which enable the CSOC to aggregate, correlate, analyze and respond to security threats in the environment.



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# "Cyber Security Done Right"

Rackspace helps Pension Technology Group architect, deploy and manage its virtualization environment



As a leader in the web-based pension administration software marketplace, Pension Technology Group (PTG) needed to partner with a leader in server virtualization. By choosing to work with Rackspace, the internal IT team at PTG can now focus on delivering applications and running their business without the need to deal with the underpinnings of virtualization and its infrastructure.

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Rackspace was the perfect fit to provide the benefits of virtualization without staffing up or retraining existing resources. As a VMware Cloud Verified Partner and with over a decade of expertise deploying VMware® solutions, Rackspace provides management services built on industry-leading best practices and service level agreements.

*"PTG's strong partnership with Rackspace is vital to the high level of services that PTG provides to its clients. Rackspace's commitment to data security and business continuity has helped differentiate the PTG solution from its competitors."*

John R. Reidy :: Co-Founder & President, Pension Technology Group



For further information, please contact Stephan Georgacopoulos at 617-977-8408 X15 | [Stephan@ptgma.com](mailto:Stephan@ptgma.com)

## Benefits and Features

- **Anytime, anywhere access to vital statistics:** PTG manages their virtual environment from the MyRackspace® portal, and use the provided statistics to see their available CPU, disk and memory capacity.
- **Systems that grow with you:** Rackspace can handle PTG's most performance-hungry workloads. With flexible virtual CPU and RAM options and the ability to break applications up into component parts and place them in a hybrid architecture, Rackspace allows PTG to scale out into the Rackspace public cloud when demand suddenly peaks.
- **Built-in resiliency:** Rackspace lets PTG take snapshots before making changes to VMs so they can safely commit changes or roll back updates if needed. They also have a broad range of resiliency options to help protect their environments in the event of disaster or unexpected downtime.
- **Secure, predictable, trusted:** Dedicated hardware resources translate into consistent performance with no tenancy-related performance compromises and no "noisy-neighbor" effect. PTG also gets the enhanced security of a single-tenant environment with physically isolated network, compute and storage layers.





# Seizing Leadership Opportunities

in the Midst of

# CHAOS



**Chuck Mazzitti**  
Executive Director  
Mazzitti and Sullivan EAP



**When people suffer loss or are exposed to trauma, we often hear talk about “getting back to normal.” The truth is you can never completely go back to the way things were.**

You have to adjust to life as it now is, and that loss or exposure to trauma now becomes part of your life experience. It informs your thoughts and shapes how you react to things.

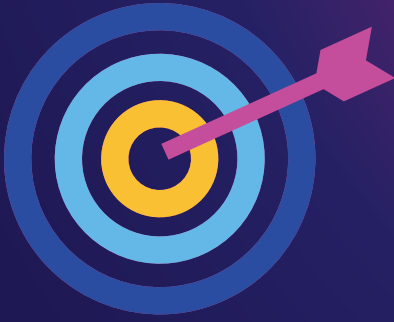
Businesses are no different. They respond to threats and challenges by either adapting to changes or doubling down on what they believe to be their “tried and true” way of operating. The results of embracing the second response are usually not good.

Throughout history, we have seen events occur that are

truly game changers. While they may look insignificant at first, their impact on business as usual can be disruptive and devastating. Examples of this are: the introduction of the digital camera to rival Kodak’s industry dominance; Netflix mail order movies competing with Blockbuster’s store-based operation; and Amazon selling

books online (and then everything else) to the demise of brick and mortar stores. At every turn, the existing businesses doubled down, only to be swept up in a tidal wave of change. We call these events strategic inflection points.





**The current pandemic driven challenges can be viewed as an opportunity in the midst of a crisis. We are being forced to do things differently. How do we provide services in the age of COVID-19?**

If we are able to see these events as they develop before our eyes, we can analyze them, look to develop strategies to take advantage of these changes, and then implement them. Businesses, like people, rarely see these events as opportunities. They usually see them as threats or annoyances.

The current pandemic driven challenges can be viewed as an opportunity in the midst of a crisis. We are being forced to do things differently. How do we provide services in the age of COVID-19?

My conversations with county commissioners and county executives have demonstrated how effects are playing out across the commonwealth. Revenue has been reduced. Many counties have delayed or suspended indefinitely capital projects that were scheduled for this year. Most counties find themselves laying off, or furloughing, employees. The challenges of providing services to our constituents during a pandemic raises many questions about how we can accomplish this while protecting our employees. And, is the county resilient enough to take advantage of new opportunities?

## **COUNTY IMPACTS AND RESPONSES**

What has been the impact on county government? The impact may be similar in many respects—the increased demands, the lack of previous experience with this type of crisis, and the unbelievable emotional and financial stressors created for leaders and employees. Here are some of the discussions I have had with county leaders who were willing to share their insights and experience.

Some county executives I have talked to see opportunities they did not realize existed. Many counties have reduced staff because of the current pandemic, some county leaders are realizing they can provide the same level of service with fewer staff.

Others have realized that offsite work can be as accountable and effective as in office work. Moving into the future, will work from home be something we can embrace to reduce operating costs and provide more flexibility to our staff and clients? I believe so. A few investments in technology today could alter the face of our operations in the future.

And, while there is a learning curve when integrating new technologies, the comfort level with using new communications applications is growing for commissioners and the public. Many believe they will continue to add some of these options to their service delivery, even after the current crisis has ended.

Bill Gaylord, chief clerk of Wyoming County, noted that services such as Children and Youth are currently delivered by telephone only, until the county feels they can safely resume performing these services in person. He also noted that for those services requiring in person service, COVID protocols are in place, including masks, temperature checks and foot traffic restrictions to reduce the number of constituents in the county buildings at any one time. They are preparing for when employees return to work, establishing protocols for operations going forward.

In Dauphin County, the experience is a little different. Commissioner George Hartwick reports that Children and Youth Services is still doing home visits. The Department of Aging and the

Meals on Wheels programs also continue to provide community services. When I asked him how the county was able to do this he responded, "The county provides full PPE for all of the Children and Youth and also Aging employees that need it for their work. We learned a lesson during the H1N1 incident and have stockpiled the necessary equipment in case something like that happened again." That foresight appears to be paying off.

In Tioga County, there was a broad-based response to this crisis. Commissioner Erick Coolidge told me how the county pulled together a task force to make sure the most vulnerable citizens received the help they needed. "We brought everyone together—the boroughs, townships, Chamber of Commerce, business leaders and volunteer organizations. It was a true community effort, and everyone stepped up to the plate. It was wonderful to be a part of." He did note that he wished there was a little more cooperation between state and county government officials when it came to crisis planning and response. "That part has been somewhat frustrating," he said.

Berks County Commissioner Christian Leinbach states that they have adopted Microsoft Teams for conference calls and group meetings. However, they are also using the technology for public meetings as well, giving the public a way to participate even if they cannot attend in person.

Berks has been hit especially hard by the pandemic. While the

county is #8 in size in Pennsylvania, they rank 4th in both number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and confirmed COVID-19 deaths. The Berks Heim Nursing home has had 63 positive COVID cases with 33 deaths directly attributed to the virus. Ten staff members have also tested positive. Berks County has responded by developing a campaign to support local businesses and engage the community. Called "Do Your Part Berks," they created resource materials for businesses to use when considering reopening so that best practices can be in place. These materials are bundled and sent out electronically to any business who wants them.

Posters were developed and distributed to both businesses and individual homes so that the community could show its support. There is also an ongoing media campaign to get the information out through all of the media outlets in the area. The program is universally promoted, understood and embraced. A website was developed—[www.doyourpartberks.com](http://www.doyourpartberks.com). The County has sent information about this campaign to other counties to use.

## RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION

Many judges are working remotely on civil cases and have delayed criminal proceedings until later in the year. The Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts is establishing the operating guidelines for the courts. More than one county reported that their judges enjoy using this option. As employees and the

public gets more comfortable with video conferencing and "Zoom" type meetings, what percentage of face-to-face contact (and travel) might be replaced with this new service option in different areas of county operations? I can remember going from phone calls to faxes to emails; now we may see a primary operating change from email to video chats. My guess is there will be a place for all of these operational platforms in the future "workplace."

Their usage will depend on situational considerations and effectiveness. Integrating technology does not have to be an all or nothing proposition. We need to ask ourselves—In what situations is new technology best suited to improve service delivery to our constituents? What services can we provide remotely? While some services must be delivered in person, we may be able to provide others virtually. How much could we save on rent, office space, supplies, etc. if we adopted a hybrid approach? The answer may be a pleasant surprise.

I believe our ability to be resilient and to innovate will be what carries us forward into the next chapter of business in the United States. Those companies and employers who can adapt to the changing realities of our times will survive and then prosper. Those that are structurally built to only do things in a specific, concrete way may not survive.

County government may be somewhat insulated from these changes, but not completely. Assessing current operations



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and planning to integrate new technologies will help us lead the way in providing services to our constituents. While technological changes have an initial cost, there can be significant savings in time, personnel and supplies needed when they are fully implemented. Ignore the current strategic inflection points at your own peril. Try to realize the potential that exists. This will not be easy to do, especially when you are bailing water as hard and fast as you can just to stay afloat.

Collaborating with other county officials is an extremely valuable resource. Sharing ideas with colleagues facing the same challenges can help with different insights and solutions to help you and your team plan and move ahead. There is great value in tapping the experience and wisdom of your peers, especially when there is no previous playbook or roadmap to follow.

However, sometimes the best ideas come from outside of your own industry. I have found that many times the best practices come from areas you would least expect. I remember going to some professional association meetings during the Great Recession and listening to everyone complain about how bad things were. Maybe that made them all feel better, knowing that misery loves company. It made me decide to stop going to these meetings. I wanted new ideas. Therefore, I looked elsewhere. I recommend you do the same.

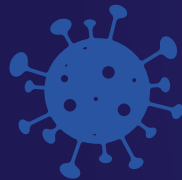
## WHAT YOUR EMPLOYEES NEED

I don't have to tell you that these are unsettling times for all of us. Many service delivery systems have been turned on their heads. Our lifestyles are now drastically altered by social distancing, and mental health problems are manifesting in predictable ways: uncertainty breeds anxiety and fear of what may happen, as well as what may not happen. The twin assaults on our health and our financial independence are having noticeable effects. Many of us are not sleeping well; we are eating our way through this, and we are consuming record amounts of alcohol. Self-medication is a new national pastime. Violence and suicide are increasing. We are seeing this effect in the services we must deliver to our most vulnerable constituents.

In a discussion with Corinna Jackson of the Dauphin County Victim/Witness Program, she noted that there has been a rise

in the frequency and severity of protection from abuse cases since the pandemic began. The increase, she says, is likely due to the compounding of pandemic-related stressors (lack of income, increased drug/alcohol abuse, lack of childcare, etc.) in tense situations where domestic violence is already occurring. In addition, the prolonged time in quarantine plays into the tactics of abusers, who frequently isolate their victims and cut off access to supportive services, family, and friends.

These new realities also add to the stress our employees must deal with while working with county residents. It is more important than ever that we need to take care of ourselves and each other. Where do we begin? One successful strategy involves working from the inside out, starting with taking care of our needs, and then reaching out to those closest to us. Beyond friends and family, those of us in management have another responsibility—our employees. So, what do they need that we can give them?



**It is more important than ever that we need to take care of ourselves and each other. Where do we begin? One successful strategy involves working from the inside out, starting with taking care of our needs, and then reaching out to those closest to us.**



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Let's start by looking at where employees are right now. In a recent survey by Ginger, a mental health coaching service, employees reported the following:

**88% of employees** reported experiencing moderate to extreme stress over the past 4-6 weeks.

**60%** have been brought to tears.

**69% of employees** claimed this was the most stressful time of their entire professional career, including major events like the September 11 terror attacks (13%), the 2008 Great Recession (14%) and others. Every demographic, including adults over the age of 55, rated COVID-19 as the most stressful time.

**91% of employees** working from home reported experiencing moderate to extreme stress.

**43% of employees** have become physically ill as a result of work-related stress.

**93% agree** that companies that have strong emotional and mental health support for employees will be more likely to survive the impact of COVID-19.

Given these unprecedented results, we need to care for our employees as never before. With the increased demands for our time, and no previous experience to fall back on, it can be very easy to get caught up in the tasks before us and not devote as much attention to the needs of our staff.

There are several important things we can do for our employees to help them stabilize during such unprecedented upheaval. And they will not cost you anything.

### 1.) A vision for the future.

You may not have a clear picture of how things will go but having a plan for moving forward can be reassuring. Your planning may yield several possible scenarios. Anticipating these outcomes will allow you to build models that have the best chance of success. Communicating those plans to your staff will give them one of the things they most need right now—hope. We can deal with what we know. We can plan and build if we have an identifiable goal.

What if things don't go according to plan? Flexibility and resilience are the keys to survival, in business and personally. Rigidity will lead to failure. The ability to shift gears during the game can mean the difference between success and watching it all slip away. Engage your employees in this process. Ask their opinions about how to respond to changing conditions, and in developing new ways of doing things.

### 2.) Clear and constant communication.

This is more important now than ever. What employees don't know as fact, they make up with fantasy, and it is usually negative. You want your team focusing on progress and delivering services, not devolving into a fear-filled rumor mill. There is another reason that communication is so important now. Many of us have had to adapt to working from home or working in a drastically different workplace compared to how it existed just a few months ago. With processes changing, and new systems for delivering services falling into place, constant, clear communication is the only way to ensure that these changes are correctly

implemented and generating the results expected. Now that more of our communication is remote instead of face to face, checking for clarity and quality is a primary task. We must lay out the collaborative goals, our new (or existing) priorities, and expectations for how and why we do what we do. Having a short feedback loop means we can coach our way to success.

### 3.) Knowing you care about them.

If you played sports in school, or were part of any organized activity—band, theater, dance, service clubs, etc.—you know the difference between a leader or coach who cares about you, and one who only cares about the outcome. Leaders who get the best and most consistent results from their staff are those viewed by their employees as genuinely caring. Showing that you care about your employees' lives when things are good can be easier; however, doing the same things—such as celebrating life's milestones and accomplishments, or supporting staff during difficult times is crucial. I will give you everything I have to accomplish our team goals if I think you care about and believe in me. If I think you don't care, I am probably just biding my time and collecting a check.

Make sure that your employees have what they need—the resources to do their jobs correctly and safely (including protective equipment and supplies), the training to do it right, the confidence that there is a plan for the future, and the knowledge that you will do everything in your power to keep the ship upright and moving forward.

#### 4.) Accountability and integrity.

If we want employees who are willing to take responsibility for themselves, their work and their families, they need us to be their examples. Do we pitch in and roll up our sleeves? Are we expecting more of our staff than we are willing to do? Do we share the credit for each victory along the way, especially now? Do we have the best intentions behind our actions? Am I always looking out for the greater good and not just my personal success? If we cannot act with integrity and accountability, we have given up the right to expect our employees to do so. Trust me, they can tell if we are genuine, or just trying to appear to be. False integrity and accountability are worse than having none in our employees' eyes. In the family, we call this transgenerational patterning. At work we call it behavioral modeling.

#### 5.) Ensure that there are adequate behavioral healthcare resources for employees.

Most counties have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Make sure that information about these crucial services are routinely prominently and distributed in ways that reach all staff and their families. With the incredible

increase in stress, and stress related issues from this pandemic, behavioral health services have never been more important. Our nursing homes are dealing with life and death issues every day, but for the first time the employees' health is also at risk. The same is true for our prison staff, the dedicated caseworkers of our Children and Youth agencies, and our victim/witness advocate.

Not only are our employees dealing with increased stress, the trauma they experience as a result of the exaggerated inhumanity of their work can be devastating. We need to check in with our employees regularly and point them toward the resources they need as soon as we notice they may have a need. Your EAP should also be able to respond to requests for group services, and we have handled numerous county (as well as private employer) requests to help staff cope with what they are experiencing. Make sure that your management team has a constant eye on the needs of their employees. Being sensitive to your employees' needs and fears during this time will pay huge dividends down the road. We are laying the foundation for the future.

### A NEW PRIORITY—SELF CARE

Now that we have examined many different aspects of caring for county business and your employees, it is time to examine one more area of major concern as we navigate these uncharted waters. Although it may sound cliché, it is also very true: you cannot take care of others, properly and for any length of time, unless you first take care of yourself. If you are operating at 50% physically, mentally or emotionally, you cannot give your best to the county, your employees, or your family. One of the problems many of us face is our inability to recognize what this new stress is doing to us. It is continuous. There is no day off.

If we allow it, we are constantly bombarded with news and opinions about this pandemic. Meetings and phone calls with representatives from federal and state government can be frustrating and seem like little help for your particular situation. As everyone looks to you for leadership, the constant stream of requests for guidance and information can be overwhelming. The effects of this stress are cumulative, like radiation. Slowly building up



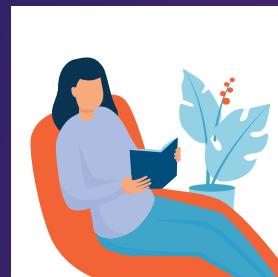
ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS



TALK WITH YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS



MAINTAIN YOUR ROUTINE WHERE POSSIBLE



FOCUS ON POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

and affecting us in ways that we do not recognize right away. Because none of us has been in a situation like this before, we have little experience to rely on. This uncertainty about what is happening and what might happen creates even more stress. Not "being in control" exacerbates it further.

This pandemic is happening *to* us. It is not something we created or prepared for. None of us has been here before. Self-doubt creeps in as we try to make the right decisions for our families, our employees, and ourselves. Are we making the right decisions? What is the best way to deal with all this? Whom can I turn to for answers? It can be very hard to tell when you are vilified by some constituents and supported by others. The political divide created by this situation is greater now than before the pandemic started. We have examined all of the questions. Now we need to answer them as they apply to our own well-being. Before we get overcome with stress and anxiety.

Perhaps the best way to start this process is to take stock of where we are. Let's start with an overall personal checkup:

How do you feel physically? Is your blood pressure where it needs to be?

Your heart rate? Are you taking any prescribed medications as directed?

Are you getting enough sleep? Is it continuous or do you find yourself waking up several times because of the stressors you experience all day?

Are you eating the right things at the right times? There is a lot of talk about the "quarantine fifteen" out there. People are stress eating their way through this crisis. Some of us are eating less, but not as many.

Has your alcohol consumption increased since the pandemic started? Is it possible you are self-medicating with alcohol or drugs?

How are your interactions with others? Do you maintain an even keel, or has it become apparent that you have a shorter temper? Do you find yourself being increasingly irritable? Are you easily aggravated?

What about your ability to focus on things? Can you concentrate on working through issues, or do you find yourself feeling overwhelmed when issues start to pile up? Do you find yourself constantly worrying about "what if"?

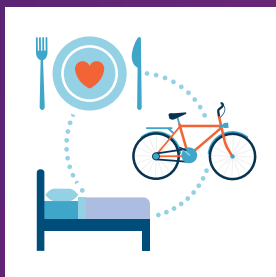
Are you still able to laugh at things that you find funny? Can you laugh

at yourself when you do something silly or harmlessly stupid? On the other hand, is everything a compounding tragedy?

I ask you to look at yourself with the same "clear eyes" you need when looking at the county operations. Honesty is very important here. If you cannot get it from yourself, ask someone you trust to tell you the truth. Deluding yourself into thinking things are just fine will not help you make a corrective action plan if one is needed.

Once you have done a self-assessment, focus on making positive changes in the areas you have identified that need the most attention. We all know that exercise reduces stress. You don't have to walk a marathon but do something physical that gets you moving. Whatever form this takes for you, get off your computer and off the couch. Find something you enjoy doing that has a physical component to it. It can help mitigate the effects of the stress.

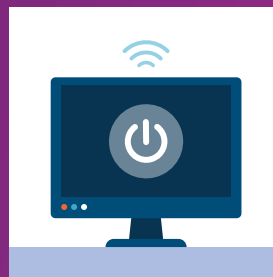
And, be careful with alcohol and drugs. They can become an emotional crutch during times like these. There is a tendency to use alcohol and other mood-altering drugs to cope with stress. Vigilance is important.



KEEP A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE: PROPER DIET, EXERCISE, SLEEP



DON'T USE ALCOHOL, SMOKE OR DRUGS



DISCONNECT FROM MEDIA AND LIMIT PANIC



SEEK ACCURATE INFORMATION

## LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD

Together, we can get through this crisis. However, we cannot stagger through it alone.

One recommendation that might work well as part of your self-care plan is to find someone who can be a sounding board for you. This can be a spouse, partner friend or colleague. It is good to talk through the stressors we feel. To discuss how the uncertainty of what we are facing is affecting us.

Physical, mental, emotional and financial insecurity has replaced our innate need for safety and stability. You need to talk about this and look at it. Your sounding board does not have to be able to solve all of your concerns and challenges. They just need to listen. They also need to care. And—you need their permission to be that sounding board.

One final note on this. You may have very strong feelings about what is happening to you and/or the county. You DO NOT have permission to take those feelings out by simply dumping all of your frustration, anger and fear on your sounding board. They are a support for you, not a scapegoat for what is wrong. This happens too often with people we care about. They do not deserve it. Stop it and apologize if it happens.

Get a mentor—a business colleague you can trust to share your hopes, dreams, fears and ideas. Collaborating with someone can give you new ideas and give validity to some you may already have. Preferably someone who has been around the block and

can bring experience and insight to the table. Someone who is not afraid to tell you when you are straying off base. Someone who has enough humility to share his or her mistakes and failures.

Both the sounding board and the mentor have another specific function: to help you deal with the isolation that is inherent in managing this crisis. It is lonely at the top. You have the public, the clients and your staff all looking to you for leadership. You need to be an anchor and a port in the storm. Because the pandemic decreases our opportunities for personal, human interaction, the negative effects of this isolation compound our stress further. You need to address this reality. Just as you are the one your staff is looking to for support and leadership, you need to do the same with your support team.

Spend time each day planning. Plan the things you will do to take care of yourself. Plan the things you will do to take care of loved ones and others you care about. Plan the work you need to do done for the county today. Planning gives us a sense of regaining control when everything seems out of control. We then find ourselves moving toward being able to navigate and manage rather than just react. Yes, there will be curveballs. However, having a plan in place makes it easier to get back on track once the curveballs are dealt with.

Remember that you do not have to do everything yourself. Utilize the talents around you at work and at home. Those people have skill sets that you do not, and

their experience and insights can be invaluable in sharing the load and planning the future. Involving others in the planning and execution allows them to start regaining control and helps them cope with this crisis also. Do not ignore these resources. They can help you and help themselves in the process. Everyone benefits from this approach.

Find things that lighten your mood. One of the ways we gauge a client's progress is by their ability to laugh at things, including themselves when they do something silly or stupid. Being able to laugh at our mistakes and missteps shows humility and acknowledges our humanity. How do we do this? Maybe relive some old stories about adventures from the past that you found funny. Take time to recapture them with those who were part of those adventures or share them with friends and family who have not heard these stories. Doing this can lighten our mood and remind us that things were not always as tense and stressful as they are now. This helps us reframe the present into a larger context. It can also connect us with others we may not have talked to in a while.

Finally, remind yourself that this is temporary. It can be impossible to see beyond the current crisis we are in, but at some point, it will end. Things will return to a new normal. Probably not the same as it was. In some ways, it may actually be better. We will probably lose some of the people and things that we loved and cherished.

The future may look different, but there will be a future. If that

thought scares you, try to think about it this way: The past year looks very different from one 30, 40 or 50 years ago when you compare them side by side. So much has changed over the years. New technologies have evolved. New products and services have been developed. Many of the businesses from the past 40 years are now gone. Some of the current changes happening in our lives were going to happen anyway. This pandemic simply accelerated the timetable.

So, we get to decide who we will be and what we will be going forward. Do we crawl in a hole? Put our head in the sand and shake our


angry fist at the world? Or will we become the leaders these times demand for all of us to succeed?

We are resilient. We are accountable. We are survivors. We are builders, innovators and creators. If we take care of ourselves, we will have the strength and energy to take care of everyone and everything else. But we must do things in the right order. Remember, the stars look brightest when the night is darkest.

I wish you success as we all work through this. Our ability to not only survive but also eventually thrive will depend upon what we do now, the lessons we learn, and the

groundwork we lay for the future. If we do this correctly, we can emerge from this even stronger than we were before, better positioned to meet the challenges that will inevitably come in the future.

I would like to leave you with a final thought from Commissioner Erick Coolidge. He summed it up quite well, I believe. "We can't do anything about what happens in the 'outside' world. We don't have control over that. We can only take care of our county. And we have a responsibility to do everything we can for those we serve here." 🍷



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# COVID-19

Forces States and Counties  
to Assess Correctional Solutions



**John Hogan**

Pennsylvania Area Manager  
GEO Reentry

**A**cross the nation, COVID-19 has radically disrupted government services in all areas, including education, transportation, public safety, criminal justice, housing and human services and more. Leaders from each of these service areas have had to quickly assess how to deliver critical public services while observing social distance practices in the attempt to bend the curve of the disease, lessen pressure on public health systems and save lives.

In the area of criminal justice, there have been two major undertakings: stemming the spread of COVID-19 within correctional settings like jails and prisons, and reducing face-to-face interactions within parole, probation, pretrial and reentry services settings. These are major challenges, as the need to maintain public safety has only increased in this disruptive time.

Nationwide, as here in Pennsylvania, the threat of COVID-19 has motivated corrections facilities to consider releasing certain non-violent inmates early as a method of spreading out remaining inmates, many of whom have underlying health issues, in facilities not designed for social distancing.

In April, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) sought to force Pennsylvania jails and prisons to release inmates early. The state Supreme Court rejected this lawsuit but did provide guidance for president judges to review capabilities to address the spread of COVID-19. Many counties have taken swift measures, such as Allegheny County jail releasing more than 600 inmates in March to reduce the inmate population by 25%. Lancaster, Luzerne, Northumberland, Montour, Dauphin, York and other counties have furloughed or released non-violent offenders to lighten facility populations. York also released inmates participating in a work-release program early, and other changes have been made, including restricting visitations, monitoring staff health, and quarantining new inmates for 14 days.

Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf ordered temporary reprieves for non-violent state inmates in April, affecting up to 1,800 incarcerated people. Inmate releases like this at the state level, likely to be continued by counties throughout the commonwealth, are a reaction to the urgent need to protect facility staff, some of the unsung heroes today, and inmates.

## SEEKING IMMEDIATE SOLUTIONS

As Pennsylvania's 67 counties consider their options, two solutions have come forward to provide a level of supervision for inmates released early: electronic monitoring and reentry services for individuals on probation or parole.

For decades, electronic monitoring has been a proven tool for correctional agencies as a complement to probation, parole or pretrial release services. Electronic monitoring comes in many forms, ranging from GPS tracking, which is often reserved for high-risk individuals; radio-frequency monitoring to assure absence or presence at home; and sophisticated alcohol monitoring systems that track sobriety. In some situations, these technologies are combined to match offender risk and needs.

Today, electronic supervision options have gone mobile, like software apps that can be installed on individual's phones to provide court reminders, video conferencing, biometric check-ins with or without supervising officers, and lists of helpful local resources. One such app, BI SmartLINK, was recently deployed to the mobile phones of thousands of parolees

provided early release in Illinois, as a fast, low-cost, easy way to support engagement and supervision efforts for these individuals.

## EARLY JAIL RELEASES

Reentry services, which have expanded across the state of Pennsylvania over the last 15 years, have also been under a spotlight to support probation and parole agencies tasked with managing larger caseloads during this crisis. Reentry services have been an important component in reducing inmate counts, helping counties avoid costly jail expansions and reducing recidivism through research-based programming that focuses on changing criminal behavior.

In the U.S., the number of people who returned to state prison three years after being released went down by nearly 25% over seven years, according to data on prisoners released in 2005 and 2012 from The Pew Charitable Trusts and Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. And this national trend aligns with Pennsylvania's declining incarceration rate over the last two decades: the state's crime rate has dropped 45% and the inmate population at state prisons is down by almost 4,400 from its peak in 2012, according to the Department of Corrections.

Effective reentry programs use evidence-based practice. According to the National Institute of Corrections, "evidence-based practice is the objective, balanced and responsible use of current research and the best available data to guide policy and practice decisions."

In Pennsylvania, effective reentry programs employ certain principles of evidence-based practice. For example, GEO Reentry programs follow a set of eight principles: assess risk; enhance motivation; target interventions; skill train with directed practice; increase positive reinforcement; engage support in natural communities; monitor and adjust practices and processes; and, perhaps most importantly, measure results.

Successful examples of evidence-based reentry programs are plentiful in Pennsylvania. The Lycoming Reentry Service Center, which provides a structured combination of cognitive-behavioral treatment, training and case management, successfully graduated several hundred probationers in its first five years, almost all of whom were fully employed upon graduation. Since it opened in 2014, the reentry program was a contributor in helping Lycoming County avoid a \$50 million jail expansion; cut down on costly in-

mate transfers to nearby counties; and helped the county avoid more than 50,000 days of jail diversion days at \$65-\$70/day.

"When the reentry center first opened, we (commissioners) made a commitment to the public to ensure it met expectations. The fact that it has shown signs of early success is a tribute to the staff's dedication, the participants' efforts and the program itself," Lycoming County Commissioner Tony Mussare said.

"I knew that special types of programs like this would be successful," said President Judge Nancy L. Butts at a recent participant graduation. "Our numbers are awesome. I am so grateful that five years later we can say thank you to the commissioners. Lycoming County is making a difference."

## A CRITICAL LIFELINE

Reentry programs have always offered a critical lifeline to individuals who are returning to society following incarceration or diversion from jail. During unusual times, like now, experts agree these programs are more necessary than ever—even if modified to fit the current situation.

According to Correctional Counseling Inc., the firm that created Moral Reconciliation Therapy, a highly respected cognitive behavioral therapy program in use nationwide, reentry programs can remain effective during a period of social distancing, even with modifications. CCI recommends that if possible, reentry programs can facilitate groups through a video conferencing platform so that the

**"When the reentry center first opened, we (commissioners) made a commitment to the public to ensure it met expectations. The fact that it has shown signs of early success is a tribute to the staff's dedication, the participants' efforts and the program itself," Lycoming County Commissioner Tony Mussare said.**

participant may show the completed exercises to the facilitator and potentially contribute during a group conference with peers.

One demonstrably successful example of this can be seen in Luzerne County, which has had robust reentry services and electronic monitoring programs in place for years. To adapt to today's disruptions, the Luzerne Reentry Service Center implemented several modified treatment, training and monitoring programs to keep its services active and its probationers engaged in the reentry process. When the center suspended treatment activities on-site, staff members initiated a new protocol of calling out to all scheduled participants, checking

in regularly and referring them to needed resources.

In addition, program participants are asked to complete the steps in their treatment workbooks over the phone and through web-based platforms and instructed to make themselves available by phone for their individual cognitive therapy sessions. In April, Luzerne Reentry Service Center staff engaged scheduled participants 96% of the time. Staff are still doing new participant assessments, as they would inside the reentry program, but now by teleconference. This gives them a baseline for creating a treatment plan for each person designed to address criminal risks and needs.

Luzerne County also has modified its pretrial services program during the pandemic. It maintains telephone contact with pretrial defendants, manages case plans with them, and begins treatment for certain individuals. In doing so, an average of 65 individuals are monitored at home as they await trial.

As we have heard repeatedly since the pandemic exploded, these are uncharted and unprecedented times. For governmental entities charged with overseeing public safety, it will be critical to adapt, innovate and look to outside solutions to supplement existing public resources. 📌

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# DMVA Connects with Pennsylvania's Veterans

## During COVID-19

### Joseph Butera

Deputy Communications Director  
Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

**T**he world was turned upside down with the emergence of COVID-19 earlier this year, but that didn't stop the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) from fulfilling its commitment to serve the state's nearly 800,000 veterans.

With the fourth largest veteran population in the nation DMVA receives thousands of requests each year for assistance from veterans who have served our nation spanning generations all the way back to WWII. Veterans rely on DMVA for information and assistance with their state benefits, and to provide direction on how to obtain federal and local benefits.

### ON THE JOB

COVID-19 might have shut down a great deal of Pennsylvania's workforce early on, but the DMVA's Office of Veteran's Affairs remained open for business as part of an

essential organization. Every phone call was answered, pensions were paid, and all veterans' queries were responded to expeditiously. Staff in the office was sure to comply with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, while others were social distancing by working remotely.

"Veterans are a very precious part of Pennsylvania's population, having served our country by fighting for our freedom and keeping us safe," said Maj. Gen. (ret.) Eric Weller, deputy adjutant general for Veterans Affairs. "Now we are fighting a different kind of war and veterans need our help during these times of uncertainty. The Office of Veterans Affairs has taken great pride in taking care of veterans in their time of need."

With much of the state shutdown and everyone, including veterans, having more time on their hands, the volume of calls and e-mails about pensions, health care claims

and appeals, financial and educational assistance, and military records intensified in the early days of COVID-19. The DMVA reassured veterans that they would continue to receive their benefits by launching a regularly updated website page dedicated to information about programs and services during COVID-19. The DMVA also made press statements and participated in press conference calls to help spread the word.

While the DMVA was able to minimize the negative impact COVID-19 had on Pennsylvania veterans, Weller said that this experience has created a new normal that will help serve veterans even better going forward. "Serving veterans has to be a collaborative effort on the local, state and federal levels," said Weller. "Planning, networking and relationship building are the keys to success, and that is exactly what we were able to leverage during the early on-set of COVID-19."

## PARTNERSHIPS

The DMVA partners with the county directors of veterans affairs to help assist veterans. The partnership includes a shared management database system that allows accredited veteran service officers to help veterans submit electronic benefit claims. The database was purchased by the DMVA and pushed out to the counties for their use since most veterans first seek assistance on the county level.

The system allows for importing key documents and other data veterans need to file claims. Veterans can sign the claims via a digital signature. This system, said Weller, has come in handy now that so many business transactions are taking place in a virtual environment. "We put this system in place to alleviate stress on veterans who can't always be onsite to deliver hardcopy documents," said Weller. "Our foresight to move to a virtual environment as an option has paid off two-fold now that we are still dealing with COVID-19 and conducting less one-on-one in-person business meetings."

Weller said that not every county has transitioned to using the system, but he encourages county commissioners and county directors to consider doing so.

The DMVA has also partnered with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide virtual options to the claims appeals process. Prior to COVID-19, appeals were made in-person and many veterans had to travel great distances to attend the hearing. Once COVID-19 surfaced, the VA worked on a solution supported by DMVA to comply with social distancing

recommendations and to make the appeals process less burdensome on the veterans.

## OFFERING OPTIONS

Veterans now have two options. One option allows veterans to have their appeal heard by phone with a Decision Review Officer, rather than having to appear before a veterans law judge. Veterans agreeing to this option understand that there will be no official transcript, but don't have the stress or loss of time brought about by travel. The second option veterans can choose is a recorded skype meeting that can be done on any electronic device, including a smartphone. A veterans service officer still represents the veteran before the veterans law judge.

Another area where DMVA really began encouraging veterans to embrace technology with the onset of COVID-19 is with telemedicine. The VA has greatly broadened their telemedicine capabilities, allowing veterans, especially those in rural areas not close to a VA hospital or clinic, to forego the travel for appointments that can be easily handled via an electronic device. County directors can assist veterans who are interested in arranging for a telemedicine medical appointment with the VA.

"The DMVA is always looking for ways to improve the lives of veterans," said Weller. "By providing veterans with electronic options, especially during these new uncertain times, our American heroes are able to more easily seek the services they have earned. This reduces their travel time and out-of-pocket costs."

## ENHANCING LIFE

As Pennsylvania's biggest veterans advocate, DMVA administers a number of programs and services on the state level to enhance their quality of life. One of those programs is the Veterans Temporary Assistance Program (VTA) which provides temporary financial assistance to veterans and their beneficiaries who reside in Pennsylvania for the necessities of life (food, dairy, shelter, fuel and clothing). Eligibility includes a veteran who: served in the Armed Forces of the United States; was discharged under honorable conditions after a period of active duty, other than active duty for training, as evidenced by a DD Form 214 or other official documentation; or died in service or was killed in action; or suffered a service-connected disability as certified by the United States Veterans' Administration.

Prior to COVID-19, an eligible veteran and their beneficiary could qualify for an amount not to exceed \$1,600 in a 12-month period. Understanding that the pandemic brought about unforeseen financial crisis for many Pennsylvanians, the DMVA waived the one-year stipulation between applications for anyone who received a grant prior to the COVID emergency declaration, to help as many veterans in need as possible.

"We took a hard look at our financial assistance programs and quickly determined that we had to waive the one-year period between VTA grant applications," said Weller. "The pandemic hit fast and created a lot of unforeseen hardship. Veterans needed to know that help was and still is available."

## VETERANS' TRUST FUND

Another grant program that DMVA administers is the Veterans' Trust Fund (VTF). While the VTA serves individual veterans and their families, the VTF provides assistance to organizations and county directors of veterans affairs who help veterans in need.

The VTF grant funding is available for new, innovative or expanded programs or services operated by the county directors of veterans affairs or the Pennsylvania Association of County Directors of Veterans Affairs. Funding is also available to veteran service organizations with 501(c)(19) status and non-profit organizations with a mission of serving Pennsylvania veterans granted 501(c)(3) status under the Internal Revenue Code.

"The VTF grants provide funding that organizations and county directors can use to have a direct positive impact on the lives of veterans," said Weller. "The times we live in now call for a whole new way of doing business. These grants are not exclusive to COVID-related issues, but could help provide funding for IT solutions, changes to infrastructure and tele-work accommodations that make it easier to interface with veterans in a safe and convenient manner."

For information about all of DMVA's grant programs, including the application process, veterans can go to the agency's web site at [www.dmv.pa.gov](http://www.dmv.pa.gov).

## PA VETCONNECT

Weller said that DMVA's ability to respond quickly to COVID-19 and seamlessly serve Pennsylvania's veterans is largely attributed to a new initiative that the agency has embarked on called PA VetConnect, which will officially roll out in the fall of 2020. Building up to the rollout, DMVA has been putting the infrastructure in place, establishing community partnerships and networking throughout the state.

"These partnerships are essential to DMVA because we recognize that veteran advocates on the local level are in an advantageous position to develop programs and services tailored to the specific needs of veterans throughout their communities," said Weller. "As the DMVA continues to identify and cultivate new partnerships we are able to simultaneously broaden our referral capabilities and connect veterans to not just the best local resources, but to the best possible resources available across the commonwealth."

Thanks to this vast compilation of organizations, veterans will no longer be limited to the resources (or lack of resources) in their immediate area. By identifying thousands of organizations throughout the state, veterans can be connected to where they will be best served, and that includes across county lines.

Representing DMVA throughout Pennsylvania are five Regional Program Outreach Coordinators (RPOCs) who are in the field meeting with county directors, organizations supporting veterans,

VA facilities and any other entity that can assist veterans in need. Whether it was by phone contact or electronic meetings, the RPOCs have been able to continue networking despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. This dedicated effort has kept DMVA on target for a full rollout of PA VetConnect in the coming months.

That rollout will include launching an Information and Referral (I&R) database that provides those who serve veterans with the names, contact information and an overview of thousands of organizations throughout Pennsylvania that have the resources to assist veterans' specific needs.

With a county system already staffed by county directors of veterans affairs and a vast network of organizations advocating for veterans, this I&R database will have the flexibility to connect veterans, service members and their dependents to the programs and services they need regardless of the township, county or region where they reside.

"We are excited about PA VetConnect and a new way of connecting veterans in need to the best possible service available to them, regardless of whether that is a mile away, or two counties away," said Weller. "What's important is that thanks to the foresight and hard work by all those who helped to bring PA VetConnect to fruition, Pennsylvania veterans are receiving the best possible care, which they all deserve because of their service and sacrifice to our country." 🍷

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# As the State Struggled to Help Nursing Homes, Counties Stepped in to Fill the Gaps

Allison Steele

The Philadelphia Inquirer

**A**s coronavirus cases appeared in nursing homes across the region, the Bucks County Health Department recommended that the staff in the county's facilities use masks—a guideline issued before the state's advisory. The county also provided tests to nursing homes, distributed protective supplies, and assigned staffers to monitor homes with outbreaks.

When the coronavirus swept through Montgomery County's nursing homes, county leaders asked the state Department of Health for help—but when the state could promise only phone follow-ups, the local Health Department deployed teams to visit hot spots in person.

## TAKING CHARGE

Pennsylvania's nursing homes are licensed and inspected by the state, but as COVID-19 took hold, county governments got involved. They learned that nursing homes had taken a backseat to hospitals when it came to getting personal protective equipment, that staff at some facilities were not trained in containment protocols, and that many facilities, while accustomed to dealing with seasonal flu, were unprepared to weather the extended outbreak of a pandemic.

"The state, early on, was intent on helping. But their idea of helping was often sending a memo, without any human follow-up," said David Damsker, director of the Bucks County Health Department.

"I don't blame anyone for not having the resources, but maybe they shouldn't be regulating these places if they don't have enough people to do it."

Department of Health spokesperson Nate Wardle said the state is assisting its close to 2,000 nursing and other long-term-care facilities by working with local health-care coalitions, the medical reserve corps, and other state agencies. He said staff have conducted site visits to investigate safety concerns, and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention started sending teams to some homes.

"We know that disease outbreaks in congregate care settings are particularly challenging," he said in an email. "In many cases, by the



time we are made aware of an outbreak, a wide number of exposures may have already occurred.”

Local governments in the Philadelphia region have been particularly responsive to the needs of nursing homes, said Zachary Shamberg, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association, which represents more than 400 long-term-care facilities.

“Absent support from Harrisburg, we think it’s fantastic that county health departments are stepping up,” he said. “If we could replicate what we’re seeing in the southeast part of the state everywhere, we would.”

A state announcement that nursing homes with COVID-19 cases should begin testing all residents

and staff has led some facilities to again ask for guidance. The move would help contain the spread by identifying asymptomatic patients, but carrying it out would require more supplies and staff than many nursing homes have.

### **MORE ATTENTION**

Deaths in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities account for more than two-thirds of coronavirus-related fatalities in the state, with the highest number of deaths occurring at homes in Philadelphia, Montgomery, Bucks and Delaware Counties.

Even as nursing homes banned visitors, screened staff, and began serving meals in residents’ rooms, the virus crept in, due in part to staff members who showed no

symptoms and spread it unknowingly. “It was clear in Pennsylvania that our focus was 100% on hospitals, and that made sense,” Shamberg said. “But the minute the surge didn’t happen, the state should have directed all additional care and attention to these homes.”

The state had a plan to deploy quick-strike teams that would train nursing home staff on infection prevention. But county leaders said the state Health Department has heavily relied on phone consultations done by ECRI, a health-care research institute hired last month. As COVID-19 took root in nursing homes, staff members grew desperate for masks, gowns, and test kits, said Ruth Cole, director of clinical services for the Montgomery



County Health Department, and EMS crews were dispatched to the same homes multiple times a day. She believed some homes needed more than phone calls.

Montgomery County Commissioners Chair Val Arkoosh, a physician, said nursing homes weren't even on her radar at the start of the outbreak. "We were working under the assumption that their needs would be met through the Department of Health," she said. "Once they said, 'We're not in a position to provide in-person visits,' we said, 'OK, we're going to have to figure this out ourselves.'"

The county sent six two-person strike teams to dozens of facilities to help with disease control protocols and PPE requests. The county must ask permission before visiting, but Arkoosh said once it's made clear that the teams are there to help, they are greeted with relief.

Counties without health departments have struggled to get information and supplies. Delaware County, which has been assisted by Chester County's Health Department since March, has the region's highest rate of infection. One Broomall nursing home has lost more than 40 residents to COVID-19, and staffing shortages prompted the National Guard to deploy medics.

"It has been very difficult to navigate assisting our nursing homes," said Delaware County Councilwoman Christine Reuther. "We do not have great visibility into what's going on in these homes, and we need to be careful not to be the regulators, because we don't have that authority."

## LEADING THE WAY

In Philadelphia, the city Public Health Department has regularly taken the lead in nursing home outbreaks. It has a team of workers trained in infectious disease that reached out to homes in February about how to handle sick patients and screen employees for symptoms.

Even with those preparations, COVID-19 spread rapidly through Philadelphia's nursing homes. Steve Alles, director of the health department's disease control division, said many homes aren't equipped to train employees in containment strategies, such as how to fit-test masks or disinfect PPE without contaminating themselves. "The work of infection control in a nursing home takes a highly skilled person who has worked in infectious disease control, and nursing

homes don't usually have robust infection control teams," he said. "They don't have the resources."

Wardle acknowledged the state's financial challenges, noting that Pennsylvania ranks among the lowest in the nation in terms of public health funding. "Training on PPE is something that we have been working on during this crisis, but it is correct to say many nursing home staff members likely had not been trained on how to properly wear PPE prior to COVID-19," he said.

Wardle said the Health Department has sent guidelines to nursing homes about how to roll out universal testing. The state has testing swabs from the federal government to use, and the Health Department and National Guard are working on finding labs to process them.

For many facilities, the idea of testing all employees is panic inducing, since it could further strain staff levels. Damsker, of Bucks County, said his department will help nursing homes develop a plan.

Overall, he said, the situation in Bucks has improved. Nursing home staff who became ill have recovered and returned to work. In the event of future outbreaks, he believes homes will be able to group the sick together, and separate infected staff from those who haven't had the virus.

"Once we reopen, we may have another flareup," he said. "But we'll be better able to extinguish it." ▀

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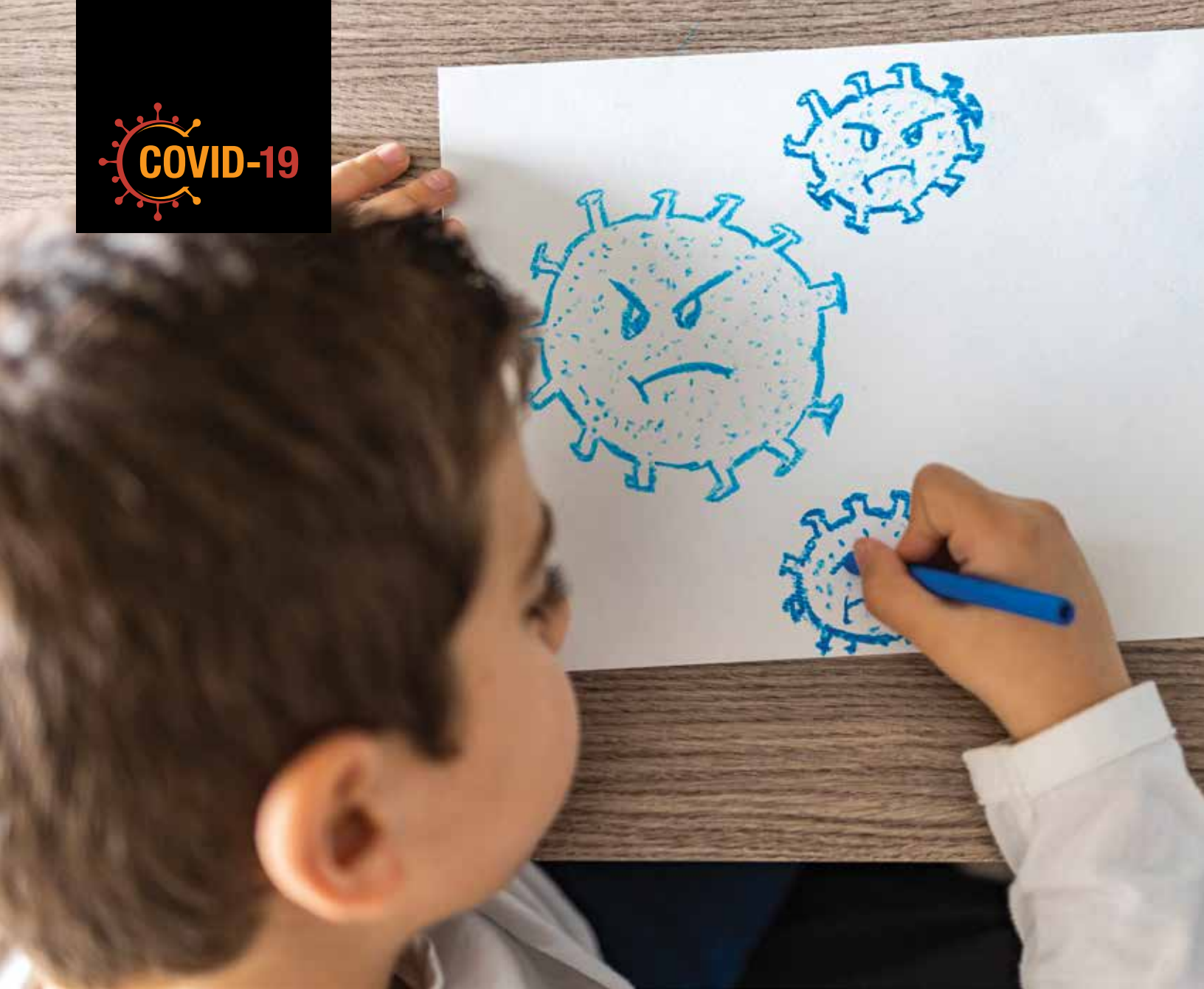




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# Impacts of the Pandemic on **Child Welfare**

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**C**hild welfare is one of the most important functions provided by county government. The critical task of protecting the commonwealth's children never really stops. County child welfare agencies must be available to respond day or night, every single day of the year. The duty to ensure children's safety does not stop due to inclement weather, budget impasses, labor disputes, or pandemics. The latter, however, has posed some unique challenges for staff working in child welfare, including state, county, and private providers. The focus of this article will be the challenges, solutions, and innovative practices that impact the counties, providers, and state.

## THE TRAJECTORY OF A CRISIS

While COVID-19 was impacting various parts of the world before March 6, 2020, that was the date when Pennsylvania first had two presumptive positive cases, in Wayne County and Delaware County. On that date, Governor Wolf issued a disaster declaration for the state. It spread quickly and on March 13, he ordered the closure of school for two weeks. On March 16, the Governor declared a state of emergency and encouraged all non-essential businesses to close. On March 18, the first COVID-19 related death occurred in Pennsylvania.

On March 19, the Governor ordered a statewide shutdown of all non-life sustaining businesses in the state, with enforcement to begin on March 21. March 28 saw the issuance of stay at home orders for some counties, followed by a statewide stay at home order by the Governor on April 1. At that point, there were 5,805 known infections, with 74 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in PA.

On April 3, all PA residents were asked to wear facemasks in public. Schools were closed for the remainder of the school year on April 9. At that point, there were 18,228 infections and 338 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in the commonwealth. By April 15, there were 26,490 infections, with 647 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in the state. By April 22, there were 34,528 infections, with 1,564 deaths attributed to COVID-19 in the state, although the large jump in deaths was attributed to a reconciliation of previously uncounted deaths. Jumping to May 14, the known infections had risen to 59,636 with 3,943 death attributed to the virus.

The speed with which the virus spread and the limitations imposed by social distancing and stay at home orders created a unique set of challenges for child welfare. Since the cornerstone of child welfare practice is building relationships with families, how to do this in a time where contact is potentially dangerous became the point

of much discussion. Some of these challenges required innovative ideas to address and some simply needed additional or improved resources.

## BALANCING RISK AND SAFETY

The question of how to assess the safety of children without putting both the caseworker and family at risk of the virus became a topic of much debate across the commonwealth. Not surprisingly, the right way to do things differed dramatically based on where you stood within the system.

For parent advocates and counsel, the ability to spend face to face time with children outweighed the potential risks of spreading the virus. Foster parents and placement facilities were certain that keeping their families, staff, and the other children in the home or facility was the most important piece of the puzzle. As is so often the case, county agencies were stuck in the middle trying to balance multiple competing interests and deciding what is best for both the kids in care and the families being served. In many cases, the county court preempted the decision, at least as it pertained to visitation, by ordering that visits were to take place by videoconferencing.

It must be remembered that many of the families served by child welfare are those with the fewest

resources. Difficulties in health insurance, transportation, isolation, and lack of supports greatly impact many of these families. Passing COVID-19 to a family, while unintentional, could have devastating effects. Additionally, counties had to ensure that their staff did everything possible to ensure their own safety and the continuity of services within the county. One county had a caseworker contract the virus, leading to a quarantine of 20 additional staff who had been in contact with the infected caseworker. That caseworker spent three weeks on a ventilator, before recovering sufficiently to be sent home for further recovery. Another county suffered an exposure, leading to nine additional staff being quarantined, including the director of the agency. There was an ongoing concern throughout the pandemic that smaller agencies could potentially lose their entire staff due to an infection, leading to an inability to provide even the most urgent of child welfare services.

## STAFFING AND CHILDREN

As a response to the risk of counties having insufficient staff to provide services, DHS began collecting data on staffing compliments for the counties. Their goal was to direct any county with insufficient staff to another county that may have furloughed staff or staff not working at full capacity to assist. While this could potentially work if there are sufficiently low numbers of staff impacted by the virus, it also begs the question of what would happen if large numbers were unable to perform their duties. This will hopefully be

a call to action for both the state and counties to look into meaningful back-up plans for how critical services could be provided in the event something was to occur that was more widespread with a greater impact.

On the other side of the safety concerns surrounding a potential COVID exposure to staff, providers, or families, there was the safety of the children at risk for child abuse to weigh. It is obvious that telephone calls and videoconferences are not optimal for assessing a child's living conditions for safety. Due to this, county agencies still went into the home to assess child abuse reports and to see the children first-hand. However, while ChildLine was still available to receive child abuse referrals, and counties were still available to conduct investigations, the number of reports statewide reduced by roughly 50% throughout the crisis. The reason for the reduction in reports was that kids were not coming into contact with mandated reporters (teachers, coaches, clubs) due to the stay at home orders.

While it is common for reports to drop off over the summer when kids are not having as much contact with mandated reporters, it is not generally the case that there is more abuse taking place over the summer that is not being reported. To be sure, there will be some reports that are not called in because of the lack of contact with mandated reporters, but there is often less parental stress over the summer. The demands of getting kids up for school, completing homework, and dealing with other school-related

stressors are gone over the summer. For many, this results in lower stress, generally for age range of kids that can fend for themselves to a greater extent when it comes to preparing meals and personal care.

## ISOLATION AND STRESS

Unlike summer break, the COVID-19 stay at home orders resulted in greater isolation and stress. Many families have felt the pain of lost incomes, reduced opportunities for socialization and support from friends and family, and uncertainty, which for many is the worst stressor of all. With stress and child abuse being inextricably linked, it has certainly been concerning that there is such a large reduction in the number of referrals coming in for investigation.

To combat this, many counties have been proactive in reaching out to families known to them to see if there are services that could be provided to help with the stressors. With various federal and state programs available to assist families, it was often the case that some stressors could be alleviated simply by pointing them in the right direction to locate needed assistance. A mental health warm line was created by DHS to assist those who may be struggling with mental health concerns. Some counties went to locations where kids could pick up meals from the school to personally see if anything was needed. Most counties updated websites to make resources available to the public. Anything that could be done to reduce the sense of isolation and stress was beneficial in trying to reduce child abuse.

## FACETIME, ZOOM-BOMBING, SKYPING AND OTHER MYTHICAL CREATURES

For many of us, let's say "wily veterans" and not "old folks," the sudden and necessary use of remote meeting technology has been a blessing and a curse. While the younger among us grew up with this technology and feel relatively comfortable using it, many in the over-50 crowd still hate automated call centers and online banking. The idea of having all meetings via remote technology was a daunting thought and the etiquette surrounding these technologies still leaves much to be desired. Anyone want to listen to me scold my kids? Too bad you get to anyway!

That being said, the COVID-19 crisis forced many to become, if not adept, at least passable in using these time-saving technologies. For child welfare, meetings are a necessary, if frustrating, part of completing the mission of protecting our youth. Many of the initial challenges with the virus surrounded how to use technology to keep court processes functioning so parents and children have their rights protected. Also, the use of technology to maintain visitation between children and parents and CYS staff and the families they are working with became critical to reducing the spread of the virus.

While there are a number of technologies that allow virtual visitation or court, it is seldom as easy as simply writing a policy on how it will be utilized. Whether it be Zoom, Skype, Facetime, or something else, the fact remained that



the technology needs to exist on both ends of the connection. For many of our families, a functioning computer, reliable internet, or access to a smartphone are simply not a given. So, while it is possible for parents to have a video visit with children in placement, they often do not have the technology in order to facilitate it.

This led to counties trying to resolve the technology issues for clients so they could participate in visitation. This ranged from a referral for free or low-cost internet services to purchasing cell phones for families. Unfortunately, with how the technology grants work within the Needs Based Budget, there is little flexibility for situations such as this where there are sudden, unplanned costs.

## UTILIZING TECHNOLOGY

In some cases, the counties themselves did not have adequate technology and needed to purchase equipment to facilitate both mobile work and visitation. Some counties were still using desktop computers. When decisions were made to move towards telework, additional equipment had to be obtained in order to do so. This experience re-

inforces the importance of utilizing technology that is effective both in the office and in the field. Additionally, many emergency management plans had contingencies for working remotely if necessary, but the technology needed to do so was not always kept up to the needed level.

For many child welfare agencies, this was an initial foray into telework for caseworkers. Like anything else, the results were mixed. Some caseworkers did not like the telework and missed the camaraderie of the office. Others became outstandingly productive without the usual interruptions. It is likely that these experiences, not just for child welfare, will result in some shifts in how we work.

Hopefully, as we move forward and look at lessons learned, there will be a comprehensive assessment of the technology being purchased for staff so that transitioning between telework and office can be seamless. Additionally, there should be an increased reimbursement rate through the Needs Based Budget to allow counties to adequately purchase and update needed equipment for both staff and the families with which they work.



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## INNOVATIVE PRACTICES FROM THE COUNTIES

One of the greatest strengths of county government is the ability to identify a problem, determine a solution, and quickly implement needed changes. Unlike state and federal administrative entities with vast hierarchies that must review, measure, and pontificate upon every decision, counties are generally quite agile and responsive to the immediate needs of their constituency. The coronavirus was certainly no exception.

However, by means of example, at the time of this writing, it has been eight weeks since waiver requests were sent to DHS, yet there is still no answer. Counties and their courts have, on the other hand, identified changes needed, how those should be implemented, and completed those changes within a matter of days, if not hours. The difference of turning a battleship versus a speedboat.

While this will not be a comprehensive exposition of innovative county practices, I wanted to highlight some to give a feel for what counties have done throughout the COVID epidemic.

## COMMUNICATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Several counties focused on outreach and communication to the community. Many heard about Allegheny County's daily briefings, which were very informative and appreciated by members of the community. Without being overly technical, these briefings were a great opportunity to get some general statistics and hear what

the county is doing to address issues. While Allegheny County had a well-structured and comprehensive process, they were certainly not alone in their efforts. Many other counties made concerted efforts to reach out via social media, local news outlets, their webpages, and radio to update the community on where to find help with food shortages, mental health concerns, parenting support, housing problems, and other stresses impacting people's day to day lives in this epidemic.

Counties also worked closely with community partners to develop programs to help alleviate some of the challenges that came with stay at home orders, particularly for those parents with young children. There were activities developed for kids, such as online story time. Parent support groups moved online to provide additional support for isolated parents. Telemedicine really came to the forefront of efforts. In many cases, services could be delivered effectively through telemedicine that were previously only provided as a face to face service.

Agencies sought innovative ways to reach out to families that may be in need of services. Among those practices were sending caseworkers to lunch pick up sites at schools to check on the kids and checking in on kids who were not completing online schoolwork. At least one county created backpacks for families they were serving that had children's activities, stuffed animals, and hygiene products. Some counties used the reduction in incoming referrals to be able to maintain a greater level on contact with their families. In

many counties the previous weekly contacts ramped up to three to five contacts a week with families. This helped with building a better rapport and alleviated some of the isolation being experienced by families.

## OLDER YOUTH

One of the more lasting and difficult to solve challenges surrounds the issue of older youth in care. Youth aged 18-21 can choose to remain in or return to care, but there are certain conditions that must be met in order to do so. These include maintaining employment or attending school, among others. These requirements are set out in statute and are, therefore, not able to be waived by DHS. With schools closed and most businesses closed, there were questions as to what to do with these older youth. Many advocacy groups for young adults wanted those older than 21 to be able to remain in care while the disaster declaration was in effect, but there would certainly be no state financial support for doing so.

In this matter, counties were extremely flexible in working with youth. Efforts were made to make sure that youth could be considered as meeting a requirement to be permitted to remain in care. At least one county, and perhaps more, allowed youth beyond the age of 21 to remain in care. For those youth aging out of the child welfare system during the epidemic, the challenges with housing, employment, and education could be insurmountable. It was critical that the courts and counties develop rock solid transition

plans for these youth or allow them to remain until an effective transition could be accomplished.

## OTHER COUNTY IMPACTS

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many changes to county child welfare. During this time period, referrals to ChildLine, the statewide child abuse call center, were down more than 50%. As a result of the reduced referrals and many counties utilizing technology to provide visitation between parents and their children in placement, many counties implemented furloughs of portions of the CYS workforce. While it will certainly not apply to all furloughed workers, there will undoubtedly be some who seek other employment, either due to necessity or uncertainty in their employment future. This loss of employees will only further tax a system that has always struggled with hiring and retaining an adequate workforce.

A more insidious impact, and one which remains to be seen whether it comes to fruition, is that there may be an overall reduction in interest in working in county employment. Traditionally, child welfare and other human services have never been known for their exceptional salaries; however, county government work has generally been stable through economic downturns and world events. Unlike private industry, which shuts down production based upon markets and demand, there is always work in human services. This has changed somewhat with the COVID-19 crisis, but

only time will tell whether there is reduced interest in public sector positions due to perceived instability of employment.

Another impact on the child welfare field has been the overall lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). With shortages of PPE occurring everywhere and the need for medical personnel to be adequately protected, most child welfare agencies were not provided with PPE. Despite this, there was still the expectation that those workers would go into the field, visit people's homes, interview them and their children, and do whatever was needed to conduct investigations. What occurred was a hodgepodge of home-made masks, hand-me-down equipment from other entities, or simply going without any protection. Even when PPE was available, there was little training on the appropriate use of it.

One of the major impacts of this pandemic has been the dramatic increase in telework and the supporting technologies. Even those of us who were most steadfast in our opposition to videoconferencing were compelled to become fluent with the technology, and, for the most part, it worked. Sure, there will still some who insisted on eating potato chips with their microphone unmuted, but, by and large, the meetings were functional and things got done.

## LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

As with all crises it is critical to look at what worked with responses, what could have been done better, and what should be done moving

forward. To be sure, all counties are in a different position when it comes to staffing, technology, and access to services. That being said, I would suggest that counties and the state consider some of the following as they move forward.

### 1) The technology needs of emergency preparedness plans should be assessed regularly.

With the staggering pace of technological development and constantly changing threats of people seeking to exploit vulnerabilities in data systems, it is critical to update your technology assets as needed. If your emergency plan involves telework, this needs to be practical without purchasing additional equipment. While the COVID-19 epidemic did not impair obtaining new computers or equipment, other states have needed to relocate child welfare due to wildfires, hurricanes, and flooding, which created challenges when needed equipment was not already on hand.

### 2) Consider what options you may have if a large percentage of your workforce becomes unavailable or incapacitated.

With the need to quarantine anyone who had contact with an infected individual, if was entirely possible for large percentages of child welfare staff at an agency to be taken out of the workforce at one time. Counties should give some thought to what could be done in that event and plan to ensure that such an outcome is unlikely. Many did this through telework or staggered shifts, but it would be beneficial to consider what option may be available.

### 3) Build and enhance partnerships with community providers.

Counties already work extensively to partner with community providers, but this crisis makes it clear that solid partnerships allow counties to be more agile when it comes to developing new programs and services for families. As child welfare cases become more complex, stronger partnerships will become ever more important to address those needs.

4) For state partners, it is hoped that consideration will be given regarding the timeliness of guidance and responses to waivers and other requests. As the governing body that licenses providers and county human service entities,

it is critical that DHS provide timely responses to requests to waive regulations during crisis' and to work with counties on how changes that become necessary due to a crisis will be interpreted by the administrative agencies providing oversight. Oversight must be more than citing for what was wrong after the fact. There must be responsive answers and technical assistance.

The coronavirus has strained multiple systems and created innumerable challenges to address them. It has been heartening to see how rapidly the county child welfare agencies changed practices to be able to address the new reali-

ty we are facing. As always, I am impressed with the creativity and innovation of the programs that counties develop and their vision for serving the families we work with. We should all be thankful for the dedicated and professional child welfare professionals across the state and for their efforts to keep kids safe during these challenging times. While it is impossible to know what the future of the system looks like, I am certain that the committed individuals will continue their good work. ▾



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All facts and figures are as of December 31, 2019.



# PRIVATE PROVIDERS



Supporting Health, Well-being and Safety of Youth During a Time of Crisis

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Program Director, WorkBridge  
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**Youth and families in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania have been hit especially hard by the impact of COVID-19.** Daily schedules and routines of educational institutions, spring rituals, arts programming, community activities, and athletics all have come to standstill. Availability of food and other necessary resources has changed, and new ways of living are developing. The issues of poverty, equity, and need, which were already prevalent in our society, are displayed in even starker relief during this time of crisis. Within our communities, the youth who receive court mandated or medically necessary services are especially vulnerable.

The primary defense in the battle to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is to follow the governor's mandate to stay home. While social distancing is necessary to save lives, it also exacerbates issues of mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, and elder abuse—particularly in people who were marginalized before the crisis. The trauma caused by these issues affects every aspect of society.

Everyone is grappling with how to adapt to the "new normal." Pennsylvania's Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice systems are no exception. Both systems, in conjunction with the private service providers, have continuously been tasked with keeping our children and communities safe. During the crisis, collaborative efforts between these agencies has ensured the continuing accessibility of necessary services for our vulnerable populations. Providers improved the delivery of critical services to better meet the needs and risks of the population. Conference calls, reports, memos, and bulletins with guidance focusing on safety inundated the field, resulting in multiple policy changes, effecting operations daily.

## DRAMATIC CHANGES

Both Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice experienced dramatic changes in referral practices as the pandemic came into full effect. The direct causes of these vacillations are speculative, possibly associated with school closures, refocusing of law enforcement, increased access to family/or social supports due to layoffs/work from home, or other still unknown

factors. Regardless, provider programming for immediate responses to public and child safety needed to adapt as operations moved toward the new normal.

With limited resources to ensure the safety of the direct service workers who are required to maintain contact with families, providers have demonstrated the flexibility and creativity needed to ensure that families and youth remain safe during the COVID-19 crisis.

Private providers have collaborated to order overseas equipment to meet personal protection protocols. They have also turned to digital technology, using apps for virtual contacts, meetings, and opportunities to build and maintain social connections. Most importantly, a balance between the needs for social distancing and meaningful interventions with youth and families had to be created and must be maintained. This is especially challenging due to the insecurity of future funding and the residual effects of operational changes (staff recruitment, retention, new expenses associated with virtual connectivity, layoffs), which continuously threaten the viability of service access beyond COVID-19. Even with this uncertainty, many private providers are finding ways to deliver services in unpredictable times.

## UNIQUELY IMPACTED

Children in the foster care system have been uniquely impacted. Youth who are already experiencing uncertainty cannot access school, biological family, and community supports necessary to bring a sense of normalcy. Prior to COVID-19,

immediate support would be offered face-to-face, but virtual visits have had to take the place of all such contact. Foster parents face the dual strains of following social distancing orders while fulfilling the role of "resource parent" to an already traumatized child.

The IMPACT Project Executive Director Courtney Wagaman reported that as a community-based placement, the agency collaborates with local entities and schools to support the youth. IMPACT has continued to thrive during what is a very stressful time for families because of the cooperative efforts of the agency teams, composed of staff, families, and youth. Virtual contact in foster homes has become the primary means of communication for clinicians and case managers. Wagaman states: "We have seen, first and foremost, our resource families rise to the difficult task of maintaining the safety of the youth in their home, providing structure for homeschooling, access to necessary technology, and, most importantly, stability for a vulnerable population. All families rose to the challenge."

## BUILDING SKILLS AND RESILIENCY

The Community Service Foundation (CSF) has been successful with service planning during these difficult times. Restorative practices are at the core of all services they deliver, as they proactively build relationships and community. Through provider partnerships and county collaborations, they have continued to build valuable skills and resiliency with youth,

despite the pandemic. CSF's community-based services immediately transitioned to an online and telehealth model. Youth in foster care were connected to their online school learning management system to continue their academic progress, counseling services were adapted to be provided through telephone/video interactions, and an after-hours on-call service was added to support families.

As a trauma-responsive provider, CSF implemented "listening circles," a process designed to foster psychological safety, connection, voice, and sense of community. This implementation has aided especially vulnerable youth and families as they continue to cope with the added stress and ambiguity of COVID-19. CSF's Executive Director, Paul Karaman, states: "It is important to not only provide our current

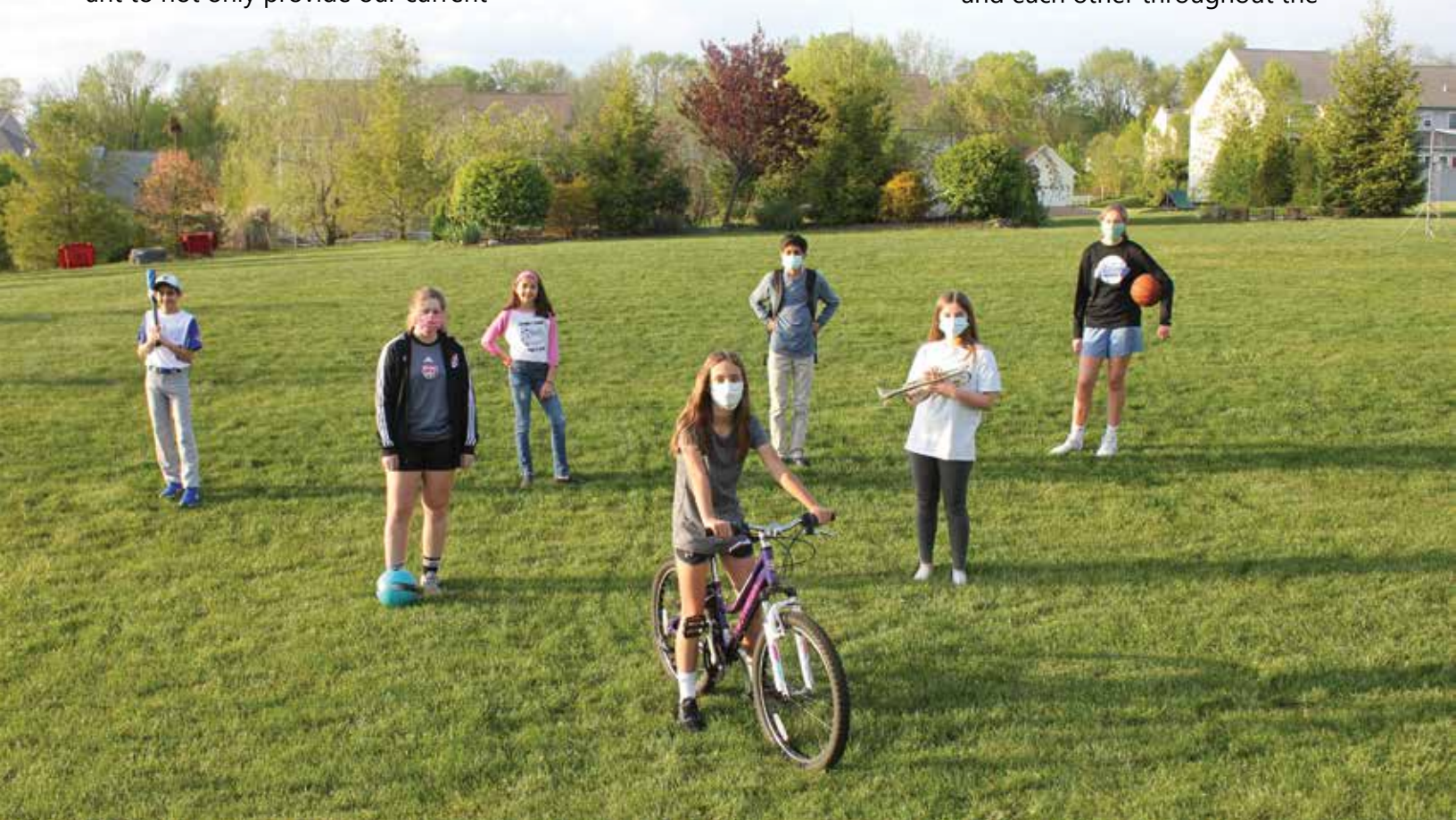
services but to also find additional ways to meet the needs of our youth and families. The addition of listening circles really created an outlet for parents to discuss their situations in a caring setting."

JusticeWorks YouthCare also provides an array of community-based services for youth and families. The JusticeWorks staff understand that the needs of disenfranchised youth require a delicately balanced approach as they apply accountability without retriggering past trauma. Clients benefit from research-informed interventions and learn the necessary 21st century skills and competencies for successful transition from youth to adulthood.

During the current COVID-19 crisis, their independent living staff have worked diligently, transitioning to online classes and virtual interac-

tions through various applications. They could not have done this without the help of the program youth. The fantastic part of this transition is that youth have been equal partners through the set-up, scheduling, and coordination with staff and each other. The virtual classes have included cooking demonstrations, Japanese, virtual book clubs, vehicle maintenance, and American Sign Language. Staff are facilitating writing contests and holding virtual spirit weeks, in which youth show program and team spirit in line with the day's themes.

JusticeWorks' Program Director Lisa Snyder states, "What makes our programs successful is our incredibly dedicated staff and our intentional efforts to build connections. Youth rely on our staff and each other throughout the



programs. They genuinely feel like part of a family that includes the community at large. Youth gain a tremendous amount of support to be successful. They begin to view themselves as an integral part of a broader community.”

## ADJUSTING AND ADAPTING

At Abraxas, the WorkBridge is a community-based employment and restitution program for juvenile justice youth, relying heavily on the food service industry and nonprofit community service sites for youth to complete employment goals and meet conditions of probation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 98% of community service sites are closed, and the food service industry has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Visits to hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation facilities have all been canceled.

WorkBridge has had to make several adjustments to assist youth with meeting their goals and completing probation conditions while the youth remain at home with their families. WorkBridge shifted their efforts to create a virtual penal program, designed to service several agencies, including nursing homes and hospitals. The youth have been receptive to the change, eager to participate in a meaningful community service activity and help others impacted by COVID-19. Not only has this been a great opportunity for the youth, but some families have opted to make this an event where all members of the youth’s family write letters or draw pictures to be sent to facilities.

Residential programs have also made significant adaptations. The Bradley Center operates a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Faculty (PRTF) and Bradley Schools, serving children and youth from a variety of counties and referral sources throughout Pennsylvania. Children are admitted to the facility due to a behavioral health issue in which treatment has been determined to be medically necessary. These children are often involved in multiple social serving systems.

Staff and youth have found creative ways to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19, including therapeutic leaves, activities, and face-to-face visitation that complies with social distancing guidelines. Technological enhancements have been made and new equipment purchased in order to continue contact with caregivers. This has allowed for seamless telehealth services to continue with children and families. Allegheny County’s Departments of Health and Human Services have been collaborative partners, providing guidance and resources on a regular basis.

Lisa Fox, CEO, shares: “For Bradley, COVID-19 has presented many challenges, but also numerous opportunities in the ways we deliver care to the children and families we serve. Our team has been amazing in recreating a new “normal” that will continue into whatever lies before us.” Mr. Fred Rogers said it best: “Often when you think you’re at the end of something, you’re at the beginning of something else.”

Alignment is vital for wellbeing of families/youth. The Pennsylvania Partnership for Juvenile Services

(PPJS) is the only statewide association directly affiliated with the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania representing system-involved youth and their families. In this position, PPJS is informed by the voices of providers and aligned with the mission of CCAP in advocating for practices that meet the needs of juveniles, improve outcomes for youth and families, and support decision-making at the local level.

The COVID-19 crisis will continue to impact how services are delivered to vulnerable populations. Private providers must adjust meet community needs in response to rapidly changing regulatory orders and guidelines.

Continuously building upon the existing partnership between counties and private providers is critically important for overall system improvement. Private providers have transitioned well and will continue to ensure positive outcomes for youth, family, and communities because of their ongoing commitment to their missions. Not only have the private providers across the commonwealth risen to the challenges presented by COVID-19, each is prepared to meet the ongoing goals of keeping families and communities safe. 🍷



# Pandemic Pivot

Penn State Extension Goes Virtual to Assist Businesses, Citizens and Communities in the Wake of COVID-19

**Chuck Gill**  
Public Relations Specialist  
Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences

**L**ong before “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” became part of the popular lexicon, “Atlas” was a buzzword that circulated widely throughout Penn State Extension.

The internal moniker for an ambitious project to remake and modernize the organization, Atlas was aimed at combining extension’s century-old strength—translating science-based

knowledge to provide practical solutions that meet local client and community needs—with the latest instructional technologies and distance-education practices.

To supplement traditional in-person seminars, field days, and growers meetings, the project integrated online courses and workshops, web-based event registration, a customer relationship management platform, and delivery of

digital educational and marketing information. As Atlas reached implementation, it had become a model for the transformation of extension education at land-grant universities nationwide.

As a result of this initiative, begun more than seven years ago, Penn State Extension was well-positioned to adapt to the educational environment and social distancing practices brought on by the COVID-19 global health crisis, according to Brent Hales, the organization's statewide director, who also is an associate dean in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Having the technologies and delivery methods in place gave us a leg up in providing critical educational programming at a time when we had to close extension offices across the state and avoid face-to-face interaction," Hales said. "As a result, we quickly have been able to expand our existing portfolio of digital and virtual products and programs to address the needs of the audiences and communities we serve."

## A FOCUS ON DIGITAL

Early in the pandemic, Hales noted, a collection of coronavirus-related resources in a variety of formats was developed and posted online at <https://extension.psu.edu/coronavirus>. The workhorse of this digital portfolio is web-based seminars, commonly called webinars. This format enables anyone with an internet connection to log in to an event, see and hear speakers, view presentations, and interact with experts from Penn State

Extension and other, collaborating organizations.

"Upon the implementation of COVID-19 regulations and directives, our faculty extension specialists and county-based educators rapidly began converting materials that originally might have been intended for in-person workshops to the webinar format," Hales said. "Plus, we were able to develop many new webinars addressing critical issues related to the pandemic to help farms, businesses, and families cope with various disruptions to 'business as usual.'"

Many webinars are free to register for and view, and most are recorded for future viewing. Topics are as diverse as Penn State Extension's program units, which include animal systems, such as dairy, livestock, and poultry; agronomy and natural resources, including field crops, water quality, and forests and wildlife; horticulture, which encompasses fruits, vegetables, ornamentals, and home gardening; 4-H youth development; food, families, and health; food quality and safety; and energy, business, and community vitality.

The analytics suggest that these webinars and other virtual offerings have been a hit with farm and food businesses and citizens, in Pennsylvania and beyond. In April 2020, the first full month after stay-at-home orders were issued, traffic on the extension website totaled nearly 1.2 million users and more than 4.6 million-page views, up over April 2019 by 70% and 205%, respectively. In addition, registrations in April reached almost 79,000 for extension online courses and more than 12,000 for webinars.

## SUPPORTING ESSENTIAL BUSINESSES

Under state regulations governing what activities could take place during the pandemic, agricultural, food, and related businesses were allowed to continue operating after being deemed "essential" and "life supporting." As organizations dedicated to supporting these functions, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Penn State Extension also were designated as essential.

Although Penn State Extension county offices across the state closed to the public in March, educators working remotely from their homes quickly sprang into action. Using internet videoconferencing software, such as Zoom, to connect with colleagues on their program teams, they developed webinars, online courses, videos, articles, and other educational materials to help clientele navigate COVID-19 issues.

"We heard from food, farm, agriculture, and natural-resource-based businesses, community organizations, and local governments struggling to stay afloat, remain viable, and adapt to the new pandemic normal," said James Ladlee, who oversees energy, business, and community vitality programs.

"Educators in the field were hearing from stakeholders about the challenges ag businesses were facing. Am I eligible for the Paycheck Protection Program? Is it worth it? Are the loans forgivable? How do we organize our business so our customers and employees remain safe? What are best practices for farm markets under COVID-19?"

What about curbside pickup or delivery? How does pandemic unemployment assistance work?"

Ladlee noted that, in addition to providing personal assistance through email and phone calls, educators in his unit offered nearly 40 new webinars and more than 100 new publications, articles, and news items in a roughly six-week window, starting in mid-March.

"Educational efforts were focused on federal stimulus opportunities for farm, food, and natural-resource-based businesses; e-commerce, delivery, and curb-side pick-up; farm-market operations and local foods; and community crisis engagement and local government leadership," he said. "By mid-May, our online courses had reached more than 10,000, and webinar registrations had topped 5,000."

## NAVIGATING THE CARES ACT

Among those benefiting from these offerings was Mike Ohler, who with his wife, Sandy, grows corn and soybeans on 1,100 owned and rented acres on Sandy Valley Farms, a cash grain operation in Polk, in western Venango County. Although they have dodged most major, coronavirus-related disruptions to their operations, Ohler has grave concerns about potential impacts going forward.

"We have had to be more deliberate in dealing with our suppliers and the necessary COVID procedures," he said. "My retired parents live nearby, and the virus also has caused us some adjustments to keep them safe. My 17-year-old daughter has had to learn from



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home on our slow internet connection. My adult son was put on leave from his job during the lockdown and has been an extreme blessing to us in helping with the farm work."

Ohler said he has been impressed during the crisis that almost all people with whom he has interacted, including Penn State Extension educators, have shown real concern for everyone's welfare while trying to safely maintain service.

"I am encouraged by the proactive outreach by Penn State Extension to inform and educate the agriculture community on government programs enacted to respond to the crisis," he said. "Our ag community was already economically challenged before the disruption. To have access to program information even as the regulations were being developed helped us respond in an informed and timely fashion."

Ohler participated in a webinar co-presented by Dan Brockett and Carla Snyder, extension educators with the Energy, Business, and Community Vitality Unit, outlining how to access the Paycheck Protection Program, which was created by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Securities Act.

"I completed a PPP application but did not qualify," he said. "However, Dan Brockett called to let me and others know about an immediate opening for Economic Injury Disaster Loans for agriculture businesses that were previously ineligible. I applied for EIDL and was approved and funded. I was very impressed with Dan's ability to keep up with such a fluid situation."

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first issue for which Brockett and Penn State Extension were valuable resources for Ohler. "Whether working with an individual or relating to large groups, Dan's ability to communicate current issues, such as oil and gas development, pipeline rights-of-way, solar leases, and, of course, the COVID crisis and government programs, always leaves me well informed with up-to-date information," he said.

## STRENGTHENING THE FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

Like all extension program teams at the onset of the pandemic, the Food Safety and Quality Unit also mobilized to interpret COVID-related government guidelines and

programs and to relay advice to clientele. This effort emphasized best practices and recommendations on food manufacturing and handling for food processors, retailers, and consumers.

“Our group is one of the leaders among providers of training and support to the food processing industry,” said Catherine Cutter, a professor of food science who directs food safety and quality extension programs. “We conduct dozens of trainings each year for hundreds of food professionals, and we also are recognized for providing ongoing technical support to companies throughout the region. This positions us well to respond to the needs of the food industry when a crisis such as this erupts.”

Among the Food Safety and Quality Unit’s contributions, according to Sharon McDonald, team leader for retail/consumer food safety programs, were articles and fact sheets for the retail food industry covering safe food handling, employee health and safety, cleaning and disinfecting, and reopening guidelines. The team also provided posters and tip sheets for farmers-market vendors and customers, as well as consumer pieces addressing grocery shopping, home cleaning and sanitizing, and chemical safety in the home.

“Another outcome of the pandemic is that we’re seeing increased interest among consumers in growing and preserving their own food,” McDonald said. “In response, we have developed a series of webinars on all aspects of home food preservation, as we feel this will be of great interest—and needed,

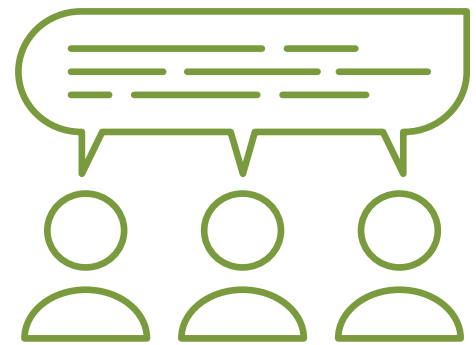
especially in light of uncertainty around holding face-to-face programs in the near future.”

A related webinar series, titled “Living On a Few Acres,” has provided thousands of participants with information about how to grow and harvest their own food. With contributions from several extension program teams, the series features advice on producing vegetables, fruits, and meat to ensure a healthy food supply for families, both during and after the current crisis.

Perhaps one of the most valuable resources that extension has offered is the opportunity for industry representatives to gather, virtually, to discuss issues related to the pandemic, said Martin Bucknavage, senior food safety extension associate.

“Through online forums, we have enabled numerous attendees to discuss food processing during the COVID-19 outbreak,” Bucknavage said. “Through these forums, companies have been able to share information about the issues facing the industry and ways they were working to fix them.

“These events also are an opportunity to address questions on non-pandemic-related topics,” he added. “Just because we have COVID-19 issues to solve does not mean other issues go away. We are always here to consult and provide technical assistance and scientific documentation to help companies with ongoing concerns related to food safety and quality—items such as microbial standards and shelf-life.”



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## FARMERS MARKET FORUMS

Extension webinars and online forums have been especially helpful to farmers market managers, many of whom were struggling to implement procedures and practices that would keep vendors and customers safe, while continuing to support local food systems roiled by supply chain disruptions.

“We run a winter market, and we had to cancel our last one on March 21 because we felt we couldn’t run the market safely in light of COVID-19,” said Abi Gildea, manager of the Bloomfield Saturday Market run by the Bloomfield Development Corporation in Pittsburgh. “After that, I hit the ground running trying to learn as much as possible



Extension teams provide expertise and recommendations for dealing with various facets of the coronavirus crisis—from providing guidance to dairy producers on how to dispose of excess milk after the loss of markets, to offering webinars for homebound gardeners on establishing virus “Victory Gardens” to grow their own food and relieve stress.

about how we were going to be able to open for the summer.”

Initially, Gildea said, her group implemented steps suggested by the national Farmers Market Coalition. “From there, Penn State Extension started its weekly, online Farmers Market Manager Forums. Those were so helpful to me just to hear how other markets were operating, questions I never thought to ask, and so on. It provided a general outlet for market managers to see how we could make this happen.

“I quickly realized we were going to need detailed guidelines for our market,” she said. “I created specific rules for our vendors, staff, and volunteers. I researched other markets across the country and what their guidelines were, and those helped shape ours. We eventually ended up sharing those on the Penn State Extension webinars.”

Carol Zellers, board member and self-proclaimed “chief cook and bottle washer” for the Lansdale Farmers Market in Montgomery County, said the market manager forums—organized by Brian Moyer, extension education program associate in business and community vitality—also were key to her market’s spring 2020 opening, which was delayed three weeks while new protocols were established.

“The forums have been invaluable for us,” she said. “We absolutely

have reaped the benefit of opening later and being able to incorporate the best ideas from other markets into our own process. The meetings have also fostered relationships with other managers. Because of that, when the forums end, I know that I can consult with these managers on a much more personal level because we have shared this remarkable transition during these challenging times. I can’t imagine what our market would look like without having had the benefit of the forums.”

## EXPERTISE ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Similar scenarios have played out across a spectrum of industry and consumer sectors, with extension teams providing expertise and recommendations for dealing with various facets of the coronavirus crisis—from providing guidance to dairy producers on how to dispose of excess milk after the loss of markets, to offering webinars for homebound gardeners on establishing virus “Victory Gardens” to grow their own food and relieve stress. These efforts have covered a wide range of critical topics:

- Short-term supply chain issues
- Long-term disruptions due to plant closures
- How retail businesses can reopen and operate in the “new normal”

- Euthanizing and disposal of animals
- Business diversification
- Implementing e-commerce solutions
- Expanding access to broadband internet service
- Personal wellness

This, in addition to developing online resources for ongoing programs that address non-pandemic-related issues, such as spotted lanternfly management, water quality and animal health.

Extension leaders anticipate that in-person workshops, growers meetings, field days, and other such events will return when health authorities believe it is safe to resume face-to-face interaction. But enhancements to Penn State Extension’s digital-education offerings only will grow in the future.

“To stay current as an educational organization, we need to continue to evolve to reach new generations of learners, while recognizing that some of the audiences we serve may have limited access to technology, such as broadband internet service,” Hales, the extension director, said. “Our number one goal is to provide people with the science-based information they want—how and when they want it—so they can use that knowledge to improve their lives, their businesses, and their communities.” 🍷



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