

An Extraordinary Four Months: How the COVID Pandemic and a Social Crisis Have Changed My Work and Perspectives Forever

ERICK UNTAL, MPA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overlapping COVID-19 pandemic and social crisis resulting from the untimely death of George Floyd has changed my personal and professional lives in ways that I could not have imagined just a few short months ago. In this reflection paper, I discuss how my team and I were able to navigate these social disruptions and continue our work during this tumultuous time. Notable responses by the Policy and Planning Team have included:

releasing critical communications early in the crises; leading and supporting task force and emergency operations work in key areas; and establishing a data visualization process to tell the story of how the pandemic has affected our community socio-economically. The work we have succeeded in producing during this difficult time is the silver lining that gives me hope that, as a community, we can overcome these crises.

Erick O. Untal, MPA, Legislative Analyst,
Employment and Human Services Department,
Contra Costa County

An Extraordinary Four Months: How the COVID Pandemic and a Social Crisis Have Changed My Work and Perspectives Forever

ERICK UNTAL, MPA

The Point of No Return

It was a typical day in March. I was getting ready for the beginning of the California Legislative Session, my third since joining the Policy and Planning (P&P) Division of Contra Costa's Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) in 2018. I felt confident in our team's approach for the session, given our nearly two years spent learning the ropes. There were rumblings of a novel coronavirus, which at the time was sweeping across China and parts of Europe. I wasn't too worried, though. *It couldn't be that bad*, I told myself. This is America. If any country can fight this off, it's us!

Then the public health directives started coming throughout the Bay Area—first, an order to limit large gatherings, then, shortly thereafter, an order to shelter-in-place as coronavirus cases began spreading rapidly in New York. By this point, my confidence in our ability as a nation to protect our people from this deadly disease had evaporated. Little did I know at the time that this would be the beginning of an unprecedented four months that would completely upend everything we thought we knew: social conventions, public health, the political landscape, economics, and everything in between. Indeed, the upheaval continues to this day.

Shelter-in-Place – Now What?

In many ways, maintaining tangible connection to the outside world has a profound impact on human well-being. Therefore, when offices closed, retail shops and restaurants shuttered their doors, and kids

started staying home from school, among other palpable signs of routines gone deeply amiss, I truly felt the reality sink in. It felt like a crisis was unfolding. There was gravity to the situation, and I knew that it would have major impacts on my professional and personal life.

On the morning of March 16, I turned on my laptop from the living room couch to connect with my team. While I had worked from home before, this time felt different. Our team scanned the landscape. From an operations standpoint, the county health order mandated that all office spaces close and wherever possible, for all employees to work from home. The order also mandated, however, that essential services continue.

These steps posed a dual challenge to EHSD. The department had to continue providing essential services, working remotely, while closing our lobbies to the public. On top of all of this, staff sensed the looming prospect of a rush for EHSD services. The department serves the county's most vulnerable residents, a population that was about to increase, due not only to the public health crisis, but also to the economic fallout resulting from across-the-board stagnation of the economy. Not only were our vulnerable populations' numbers about to drastically expand, everyone's level of needs was going to skyrocket. In this context, EHSD would be providing a multitude of essential services: Medi-Cal for the uninsured, CalFresh for hungry families and seniors, CalWORKs/Welfare to Work and Workforce Development programs for those who have lost

their jobs, rehousing services for families who may lose their homes, and protective services to children and older adults at a time when abuse would be less visible due to shelter-in-place directives.

Leveraging Communications Infrastructure

Within the first week of shelter-in-place, I was tasked to work with the EHSD Bureau Directors, Public Relations, and the rest of the P&P team to put together a comprehensive list of EHSD services available to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. I compiled a draft list of these resources through our EHSD website using Microsoft Publisher. The draft, detailing how service delivery would change during the pandemic, was quickly vetted through the bureaus. Once the initial draft was approved, I worked with our communications manager to finalize the design and to disseminate the document through EHSD's established distribution list, which consists of community partners, elected officials' staff, and community advocacy groups.

The *EHSD Services During the COVID Crisis* reference guide was released in late March as a key resource in the pandemic for vulnerable individuals and families. The guide comprised a comprehensive list of available resources, brief descriptions of each resource's services and basic eligibility requirements, and details on how clients could access these benefits during the pandemic. Shortly after the guide's release, we translated the materials into Spanish, Korean, Simplified Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Farsi, and other threshold languages in Contra Costa County. Other communications we put out quickly, within one month of the shutdown, were a one-page flyer titled *Access to Medi-Cal* and a flyer clarifying that COVID-19-related services would not be considered in any public charge determinations.

I truly appreciated the well-developed relationships between my team, Community Relations, and the various EHSD bureaus. These key relationships enabled our organization to be nimble and to effectively disseminate messaging to key partners.

Stronger Relationships with Health Services and the Community

Another issue that emerged early in the COVID-19 crisis was the need to support the county's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in partnership with Health Services. The P&P team stepped up quickly to provide staffing support to the EOC on behalf of EHSD. As the crisis continued, other areas of need emerged. Seniors' food needs became an area of concern as vulnerable seniors lost access to meals in group settings and became more isolated from their support groups and families. Over time, other emergent needs included the need to support families and individuals trying to navigate the complicated services landscape, the childcare needs of our own county essential workers, and the need to address the disproportionate difficulties faced by historically marginalized communities.

To mitigate these challenges, P&P led and supported a number of key task forces and rapid responses activities related to the pandemic. Specifically, I provided administrative support to the Senior Nutrition Task Force and offered data visualization and presentation support to the Social Services Rapid Response Team. I appreciated having the opportunity to work with partners at Health Services, at the County EOC, and in the community on these key issues.

The Tragic Death of George Floyd: A Story of Inequities and Justice

The killing of George Floyd in late May fanned the flames in an already dire situation. As a member of P&P for two years, I have worked in countless policy areas that were connected by the common thread of racial injustice and the disparities created by years of systemic oppression. These racial and economic disparities were all too evident as we witnessed the suffering of COVID-19's earliest victims: poor communities comprising disproportionately Black, brown, and immigrant communities.

As these scenes unfolded, I recalled our numerous class sessions at BASSC centering racial equity

and social justice, including *Racial Equity in Government Settings*, facilitated by Dwayne Marsh, and Jill Berrick's *Advocacy for Social Change*. These classes emphasized how long-standing policies have created unjust and racist structures that deprive people of equal access to the liberties that should be available to all. The combination of a pandemic and a social crisis felt like a "perfect storm." After a brief moment of anguish, I found the strength to move forward and think of ways to act, given where I am professionally.

As the dual crises unfolded, the P&P team was tasked to tell the story of how the pandemic has impacted Contra Costa County residents. The result of this was the EHSD COVID-19 Dashboard. Lacking sophisticated data tools, our team decided to procure and utilize Tableau, an industry-leading data visualization software program. Having limited background with this tool, I spent two months immersed in learning how to use it. After hours spent watching YouTube videos and countless words of encouragement from my team, I achieved a level of competency to contribute to the release of EHSD's first COVID-19 Dashboard in early June.

In response to emerging conversations around equity and inclusion in Contra Costa County, the P&P team continues to increase the sophistication of our COVID-19 Dashboard. Aside from tracking race and equity data, we also hope to add data trend insights aimed at sparking further social justice conversations. For example, the latest dashboard will show the stark economic disparities among African Americans and Latin/Hispanic people applying for CalFresh, CalWORKs, and Medi-Cal, compared to the rest of Contra Costa's population.

Using the COVID-19 Dashboard to address access and equity is just the beginning, and I am thankful for the opportunity that working in P&P has given me to create meaningful change that I hope might eliminate the types of injustice that have claimed the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others.

Conclusion

The past four months have changed me in ways that I never could have imagined. These crises have shaken me awake and renewed my awareness of the stark realities faced by our community's most vulnerable populations. At the same time, I feel a great sense of urgency, purpose, and energy. I would like to thank my co-workers and my BASSC cohort for their support and solidarity; my P&P Team for giving me the opportunity to use my skills productively; and BASSC for providing the perspectives and tools to implement meaningful change in our society.

These continue to be tumultuous and unprecedented times in the United States and in the nation's history. The challenges and hardships are sure to continue as we navigate these uncharted waters. Amidst all of these challenges, I feel a sense of hope that, with so many of us fighting together for justice, we will ultimately prevail.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my colleagues at the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department for their support during this past year. I also want to thank instructors and staff at UC Berkeley Extension for hosting this BASSC program.