

At Sea in Uncharted Waters: Navigating Social Service Work During a Global Pandemic

JOSIE MONTES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What the world once knew as normal has been turned upside down. Our lives now require social distancing, shelter-in-place orders, and protective face masks in public. Santa Cruz County has not been spared and has been experiencing a surge in infection rates. Most residents continue to do their best with keeping themselves and family members safe, but there are the exceptions who attempt to continue life as it was prior to the pandemic. Many

people are getting ready to navigate continued remote schooling for the start of the academic year while balancing working from home. Although the future remains uncertain, through remote work, program policy, and disaster service work, the Santa Cruz Human Services Department (HSD) is diligently helping all residents of the community remain safe and healthy while navigating life during a pandemic.

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Introduction

The world is currently experiencing a global pandemic, and the virus knows no boundaries. We live in a world of implicit biases and systemic inequities. However, the coronavirus does not care if you are rich, homeless, famous, or a young child. Anyone and everyone is at risk for infection. Since COVID-19 hit, the world has been experiencing not only widespread illness but also accompanying political, economic, and racial uproar. Most days, it is difficult to watch the news: coverage focuses on increasing COVID-19 infections, skyrocketing unemployment rates, anti-racist protests against incidents of excessive force by police against people of color. Managing my own emotions regarding what is going on in the world is difficult for me. I struggle to imagine how our vulnerable clients are surviving through these overlapping crises. In my life, I have many privileges. I can shelter-in-place safely. I have an employer that allows me to work from home while homeschooling my children, and I have income, health insurance, and food on the table. Even for me, however, the nature of my work has shifted due to COVID-19, and I often wonder if there will ever be a day where we return to what we once knew as normal.

Transition to Remote Work

Historically, the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (HSD) has not provided staff the opportunity to work from home, especially outside of management. Due to the pandemic and the need to keep employees safe, HSD had to rapidly secure

computers and equipment for clerical staff, line staff, supervisors, analysts, and managers. HSD employees across job classifications are now able to connect remotely with the county network and phone systems and to access all required documents and programs to perform essential job functions. Rotational schedules are in place to provide sufficient coverage in the office to sustain HSD service provision to the community, while maintaining social distancing between staff. I believe this sound infrastructure will continue to improve, carrying HSD toward a future that allows for permanent remote work options.

Extensive research has been done on the concept of working from home, and it appears that the public service sector, particularly the government, may be one of the last groups to embrace this method of work. The most apparent reason for this trend is that most of HSD's work is to provide direct services to our community, and the public's perception is therefore that its doors must be open with staff in the building. Transitioning clients to access services online has been an ongoing process for both HSD employees and for the clients served. HSD has begun using technology to limit the need for clients to visit offices in-person by launching options for online applications, telephonic signatures, telephonic affidavits, smartphone document uploading, and telephone interviews. The pandemic has forced HSD deeply into the realm of remote work. Although more research is needed to understand the technological barriers for some of our most vulnerable clients seeking safety net services, there is reason

to believe that remote work is turning out to be beneficial for both employees and clients.

According to BASSC Director Sarah Carnochan, Ph.D., the benefits of remote work include: retention of employees, less absenteeism, increased employee performance, increased employee well-being, increased job stratification, and increased organizational commitment. On the other hand, potential concerns one should be aware of while working primarily from home are: performance monitoring challenges, isolation, decreased work relationships, and limited advancement opportunities.

With creative use of technology, some of the concerns identified by Dr. Carnochan can be alleviated. Although remote work is not the same as in-person activities, video conferencing can address potential isolation and strengthen work relationships. For example, my team has implemented an optional virtual break room via Microsoft Teams, which serves as space to “see” each other and talk about topics aside from work. My team also has an ongoing chat thread in Microsoft Teams named “Good Vibes” to share and celebrate our participants’ successes. We use this thread to collaborate, ask for suggestions on cases, and share resources. These are two examples of how a social services team can continue to build community and foster employee engagement while working remotely.

At the start of the pandemic, I felt fortunate to be allowed to work from home. Not only was this option crucial to ensure the health and safety of myself and my family, but it was also essential for me to provide distance learning support and care to my young children whose school had been closed. It has been challenging to wear multiple hats simultaneously while working from home; I am an employee, mom, wife, teacher, cook, and housekeeper, all within the same physical space. I am used to all these roles, but usually, the overlapping of work and home life is more limited. My new reality holds our family of four juggling internet bandwidth and desk space in order to meet our work and school responsibilities. All public schools in

Santa Cruz County will be taught via online remote learning for the remainder of the 2020–21 academic year, and employees who are parents will continue balancing remote work and rotations in the office with supporting their students’ learning. For this dynamic to be successful, grace and flexibility must be top priorities for all parties involved.

CalWORKs Employment Services’ Flexibilities and Advancements

Extending the same flexibility and grace to the county’s CalWORKs Employment Services (CWES) participants has become equally as important during the pandemic. Thankfully, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has issued guidance aligning with the Governor of California’s Executive Order to mandate CWES program flexibility during the crisis. As the current Employment Services Analyst for Santa Cruz’ CWES team, my primary role is to analyze and relay information from CDSS to my county and to help develop local guidance. One key change from the state was making “good cause” status for mandated CWES participation available to all CWES participants due to the varying shelter-in-place orders throughout the State of California. “Good cause” status is granted in order to defer or excuse an individual from participation in the CWES program if circumstances temporarily prevent or impair the individual’s ability to participate in CWES activities or to maintain regular employment. Under CDSS’ adapted rules, the current pandemic qualifies as a valid reason for allowing good cause status for a CWES participant. Also, sanctioned participants, who had elected not to participate in CWES services, can now claim good cause due to a variety of reasons such as homeschooling responsibilities, loss of childcare, or shelter-in-place orders. Adding a sanctioned participant back into the monthly cash grant program provides much-needed income into client family budgets. These good cause flexibilities are vital to allowing participants to stay at home, to stay safe, and to care for and homeschool their children without the added stress of meeting CWES participation requirements.

In addition to state policy changes, our local CWES team continues to develop programs to support CWES families during the pandemic and into the future. With the new focus on remote work and distance learning, our team determined that it will be essential for each family to have a computer in their household in order to work towards self-sufficiency. Our team created a Computer Purchasing Program to assist CWES participants in reaching their educational, training, and employment goals by issuing ancillary funds for the purchase of a computer. Due to the economic impacts of the pandemic, individuals in the CWES program have experienced increased hardships due to loss of income, including potential loss of housing. Currently, there is an eviction moratorium in Santa Cruz County preventing landlords from evicting tenants, but it is set to expire soon. In preparation for the expiration, the Santa Cruz CWES team has developed a Pandemic Eviction Prevention and Rental Support Program to assist CWES families with limited rental support to stay housed during the pandemic and beyond.

A new CWES online orientation has also been implemented to allow for remote service accessibility and delivery. Before the pandemic, CWES orientation consisted of a compliance-focused, regulation-heavy, and painfully long 40+ slide PowerPoint that took over 90 minutes to deliver in-person. To revise the training, I led a redesign workgroup remotely through Microsoft Teams that focused on modernizing and reimaging the orientation to be empowering, supportive, and friendly. Our goal, especially during the pandemic, was not to add stress to a participant who is new to the program or to overwhelm a participant with program regulations and requirements. We have broken up the massive PowerPoint into smaller 8–10 slide modules that can be delivered at more targeted points when the information is needed, because we found that it is easier for clients to retain smaller quantities of information. We have also found that the smaller-sized modules can be emailed or mailed to participants and then reviewed over the phone by the family's assigned Employment and Training Specialist. Participants

have appreciated our first modules, and we have shared them with multiple social services agencies throughout the country as an example of a positive, focused orientation.

Disaster Service Work During COVID-19

HSD's call to action and rapid response toward serving homeless individuals during the pandemic have been commendable. The county quickly opened around-the-clock shelters in county-owned space, and HSD partnered with community-based organizations such as the Salvation Army to open shelters inside of privately-owned spaces. There are currently four quarantine hotel sites operating where any homeless individual who is at high risk, experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, or has tested positive can quarantine safely. All such sites require 24-hour staffing to manage the daily operation of the shelters and to provide services to the community. HSD employees, including myself, therefore conducted interviews in-person and over the phone to hire temporary Disaster Service Workers to address staffing needs for the new shelters. It was a breath of fresh air to interview so many local applicants who were willing to potentially risk their health in order to provide a service to their community.

Finally, HSD is now providing local support to community-based shelters that have increased their operating hours in order to deliver safe spaces for homeless individuals during the pandemic. Most of these organizations normally provide either day-use services (e.g., showers, meals, storage facilities) or serve as nighttime-only shelters, rather than 24/7 services. The sudden influx in shelter needs comes with a high cost of operation, which is where HSD has stepped in to help. I am a part of the HSD Shelter Resource team, and our primary responsibility is to procure supplies for shelters. The requests from shelters have included personal hygiene supplies, such as tents, sleeping bags, clothing, disinfectants, personal protective equipment, food, and technology, including better internet and computers. Computers and internet access are essential for remote case management, substance abuse, and counseling

appointments. It has been an honor to be part of the HSD support team ensuring that vulnerable members of our community have shelter and supplies to survive this pandemic. I feel lucky to be on such a caring team!

Conclusion

The importance of equity is most definitely heightened during a pandemic, such as COVID-19, and is equally vital to remote work, program policy, and disaster service work. HSD is committed to allowing all levels of staff from clerical to management to have equal opportunity to work from home in order to stay safe while remaining employed. By creating new policies and resources for CWES families that allow for growth and security, HSD is helping to limit the possibility of further crisis due to economic losses stemming from COVID-19. Deploying county workers, opening shelters, and supplying resources throughout the Santa Cruz County guarantees that vulnerable homeless members of our community can shelter or isolate safely with their basic needs met, regardless of race, gender, location, or economic status. A pandemic starkly highlights existing inequities. However, I am proud to say that HSD approached COVID-19 with a lens of equality, and I am sure Santa Cruz County HSD employees and the community it serves are better off today and in the future because of this whole-hearted commitment.

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References

Carnochan, Sarah, Ph.D.; BASSC Program Director. (July 23, 2020) *Remote Work: Synthesis of the Research*.