

# COVID-19 Response in Marin County: Community Liaison Assignment

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Serving as a liaison for Marin County during the COVID-19 pandemic taught me many lessons about leadership during a crisis, the impacts of county and state programs on communities of color, and the governmental role in supporting vulnerable communities as Marin County strives to increase inclusion and reduce racial disparities in health, food, and income access for communities of color. The Canal neighborhood, a Latinx community in Marin

County, needs extra support to fight these long-existing disparities, which have intensified during the pandemic. Government officials need to work more collaboratively with community-based organizations (CBOs) to resolve these inequities by creating a permanent community liaison role, listening to community needs, being flexible, evaluating policies from a racial justice perspective, and committing to offering services differently.

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## Introduction

Imagine five hundred people wearing masks, standing six feet apart, in a line that wraps around multiple blocks while waiting two hours for a bag of groceries. That is the reality I witnessed day after day for four months while performing a COVID-19 response assignment for Marin County Health and Human Services. My assignment was as a community liaison focusing on food distribution in the Canal, which is a low-income, densely-populated, primarily Latinx community in East San Rafael. I was catapulted into the community in ways I have never been before, experiencing new challenges and helping community partners when they needed it the most.

The pandemic forced all staff to establish new norms around social distancing, face coverings, and sheltering-in-place while enduring daunting financial, social, and health-related impacts. Simultaneously, ongoing police brutality against people of color and the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 ignited widespread demands for social justice and the dismantling of systems and policies that perpetuate racial inequities. This convergence of issues only heightened the needs of already vulnerable populations such as residents in the Canal. Low to zero income, food insecurity, health disparities, and racial injustice have impacted vulnerable communities in new ways, putting increased pressure on the government to do more to help. During times of widespread community crisis, the government's role in bolstering community stability becomes even more critical.

## The Marin County Context

Marin County is known as an affluent, majority white community. However, there are many hidden pockets of low-income residents and communities of color. The Canal is one of these invisible communities whose residents make up the primary essential services workforce, such as housekeepers, landscapers, childcare providers, and food service workers. There exists an enormous division between the affluent and marginalized communities in Marin County, where income and access to healthcare are disproportionately lower and food insecurity rates are disproportionately higher for Black and brown communities.

These disparities have been recently showing Marin County as the #1 county in the state with regard to notable racial disparities (Race Counts: Advancing Opportunities for All Californians, 2017). Marin County has articulated renewed commitment to fostering equity and inclusion for all residents and has centered these goals in the county's 5 Year Business Plan (2015–2020) and Racial Equity Plan (2017). As a result of this incorporation, Marin County regularly assesses community indicators and analyzes social determinant data to track community patterns and to guide strategic planning efforts.

When the pandemic began, Marin County Health and Human Services quickly responded by appointing five community liaisons to and convening a collaborative food distribution task force composed of county, city, and community partners to address food insecurity.

## COVID-19 Assignment

As the community liaison for the Canal, my role was to stay abreast of the status and needs of the community, provide access to information and resources, and coordinate outreach strategies for food distribution. I began my assignment the traditional way by calling and sending emails to community partners to assess needs. This methodology was not effective, nor did it provide the details I needed, so I physically went out into the community to see what was happening on the ground. I visited local markets, hang-out spots of day laborers, and food distribution operations run by Community Based Organizations (CBOs).

The advantage to being on the ground is the ability to assess community needs in real-time. Being on-site at food distribution events, I witnessed the overwhelming number of people waiting for food, heard their questions, and saw the CBOs struggling with their growing scale of operations. I jumped in wherever there was a need. This strategy began to build trust as we worked alongside one another, facing daily challenges together to serve the community. I began observing and learning the existing operations hands-on. I attended multiple food distributions weekly. This process helped me understand and gauge what was needed to implement new safety protocols as the pandemic persisted.

The CBOs' primary needs arose in the areas of staffing, supplies, health guidance and messaging. Specifically, organizations wanted guidance on operating under pandemic conditions, and establishing new safety protocols. They needed supplies, such as gloves, masks, vests, paper bags, and traffic cones. CBOs needed the county to provide educational material for the community for the continuously evolving messages around social distancing, sheltering in place, face coverings, COVID-19 testing, and available resources. While I spent many hours, it took much more effort to navigate the complicated bureaucratic channels to obtain supplies, resources and information.

One of the major requests was to provide county disaster service workers (DSWs) to each organization in order to guarantee consistency, adherence to new safety protocols, and continuous operation at distribution sites. Prior to the pandemic, many volunteers who worked at the food distributions belonged to high-risk groups (older adults or with health conditions). After the shelter-in-place, they were unable to continue volunteering. But at the same time, all the food distribution sites more than doubled their pre-pandemic serving capacity due to the incredible community need. I soon became the on-site supervisor for ten to twenty-four DSWs per site while working with multiple CBOs at their weekly food distributions. I reported back to the collaborative food distribution taskforce to strategize and pool resources.

In addition to managing a variety of people including county staff, city staff, community partner employees, volunteers, business owners, and the community, my other other duties included: mapping out traffic flows and socially-distanced pedestrian lines; organizing food donation drop-offs; coordinating out-going food deliveries to high-risk residents at home; and coordinating the dissemination of COVID-19 outreach materials, testing information, hand sanitizer, and masks on behalf of the Public Health Department. Every day presented multiple needs and challenges I have never faced before. For example, I had to quickly decide on food pallet layouts, assess food quantities, adjust vehicle and pedestrian traffic flow, and operate with a shortage of supplies and DSW staffing. Skills I learned from the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development Training Program session with Kenn Adams, *Leadership Development Through the Art of Improvisation*, were extremely helpful as I leaned into the unknown and became comfortable with being uncomfortable. The skills I learned in our improvisation class gave me the ability to make quick decisions and lead calmly. DSWs and volunteers were experiencing uncertainty, fear,

and mental and physical exhaustion while working in extreme crises. Many frontline food distribution workers are people of color, experiencing trauma themselves and coping with families impacted harshly by the pandemic. These workers experienced hurt and anger due to racist comments directed at them by privileged community members who had to wait with “others” in long lines. A collective sadness grew as the pandemic worsened, national protests developed, and racial tensions increased.

### COVID-19 Policies, Programs, and Systems

During a BASSC presentation by Dwayne Marsh, class participants learned to evaluate policies, programs, and systems that perpetuate racial inequities during the session *Advancing Racial Equity: The Role of Government*. The importance of looking at systems and policies with a racial justice lens was discussed. My community liaison assignment provided the perfect opportunity to put a racial justice lens into practice for the policies, programs, and systems that were developed in response to COVID-19.

During this assignment I witnessed how even well-intended policies, programs, and systems do not work for everyone. In response to the pandemic, the following examples posed barriers to the Canal Latinx community:

- **Rental assistance and undocumented financial assistance programs:** Systems became overwhelmed quickly due to the volume of applications. There was a lack of bilingual workers who could guide residents in the application process. The Latinx community was unable to file applications or experienced long delays in payment issuances. The system did not respond quickly to meet the dire need of the community.
- **County and state food delivery programs for vulnerable seniors:** Eligibility guidelines for both programs did not account for cultural differences and multigenerational households which resulted in disqualifying many Latinx seniors.
- **COVID-19 state testing sites:** Latinx community faced challenges registering for testing due

to technology (e.g., no internet access, no email addresses, hard to navigate website) and language barriers (English-only website).

This experience allowed me to observe issues faced by both the community and county in navigating a crisis. I had the advantage of understanding the community’s needs and witnessing how county and state policies, programs, and systems impacted the Latinx community. I found myself in the middle, advocating for community needs to the county while explaining government limitations and offering alternative solutions to CBO staff.

In response to COVID-19 state testing issues raised by the community, Marin County worked with CBOs to come up with alternatives to address the testing site barriers. The county placed DSWs at the state testing site to enroll people and eliminate the registration barrier. The county also created pop-up testing sites in the community at trusted CBO locations to increase access.

To address racial inequities, it is vital that government officials listen for understanding and be dedicated to offering services differently to be more inclusive. The county needs to be flexible when addressing community needs within its bureaucratic structure and established processes that too often perpetuate systemic racism and poor outcomes for Black and brown communities.

### Recommendations

The Marin County COVID-19 response was effective in creating community liaisons to bridge the gap between county and community by facilitating communication, increasing access to information, and producing a pipeline to support and resources. My community liaison assignment eventually ended; however, the Canal community needs continue to rise as the pandemic progresses. Going forward, Marin County can continue to fight racial inequities and support the Canal community by:

- **Building on the community liaison model by establishing a permanent position that builds a strong, trusting relationship with CBOs in**

the community to keep the county apprised of community issues. The liaison can help strategize and navigate the complex government systems to advocate for community needs. A dedicated liaison would effectively coordinate efforts, prevent duplication of work from “reinventing the wheel” by new personnel, and enhance communication.

- **Use the current demands for social justice as an opportunity to learn more about systemic structures that reinforce racial inequities.** Continue the *Safe Space – Brave Space* race conversations as learning opportunities and embed these sessions into the mandatory county training curriculum.
- **Keep racial equity at the forefront when making policy decisions.** Actively utilize the Racial Equity Tool as outlined in Marin County’s Racial Equity Action Plan when making decisions to evaluate impacts on communities of color.

If county staff continues to embrace listening for understanding of how systems and policies are not working for communities of color, progress can be made in addressing racial inequities. Aligned with Marin County values, staff needs to be committed to implement changes that will truly deviate from the way things have been done previously and actively evaluate new and existing policies to increase racial equity.

## Conclusion

I have learned so many valuable lessons from my COVID-19 assignment experience and my participation in BASSC. My community liaison assignment reinforced for me the importance of being flexible and brave by embracing the unknown and leaning into being uncomfortable. Kenn Adams talked about the importance of being spontaneous as a leader during our BASSC session *Leadership Development Through the Art of Improvisation*. He referenced five attributes of great leaders: self-awareness,

bravery, kindness, innovation, and inspiration. I am so grateful for experiencing this session as it became vital during my COVID-19 assignment.

While on the ground, I was faced with daily challenges that required quick, innovative decisions in a fast-paced, high-stress environment. I learned the importance of exuding calmness and control amidst chaos and internal apprehension to inspire others to keep going. I learned that when leading in a crisis you are “on” all the time, so I intentionally evaluated how I was feeling, especially on days when I felt overwhelmed and exhausted. This self-awareness enabled me to put things into perspective and work on not exhibiting my internal struggles outwardly. I made time to slow down, be kind, and connect with people. This choice was very important due to the amount of stress that people were experiencing, caused by both the pandemic and collective sadness as a result of George Floyd’s death and growing racial tensions. As I found myself fully engaged in racial inequity conversations on a daily basis, I often thought about the BASSC panel discussion on *Women in Leadership* when Lori Cox said that leaders could not be effective as leaders without discussing race. Through this assignment, I experienced the benefit of working with multiple people from a variety of CBOs, county and city departments, and other agencies. This cross-collaboration increased resource capacity, linked networks of support, and enhanced every team’s ability to strategize and problem-solve. It was truly an amazing experience to represent Marin County as a community liaison.

While my community liaison assignment has ended, by no means has the need disappeared. The CBOs are still on the ground serving the community and they need support. As access to testing increases, the Canal community faces disproportionately high COVID-19 positive cases in relation to the rest of Marin County, exacerbating health disparities. Now, more than ever, the Canal community needs government support as it battles the COVID-19 pandemic, financial crisis, and rising food insecurity on top of pre-existing racial inequities.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank Cindy Ward from the San Francisco County Human Services Agency for opening her doors to me and for the time she spent introducing me to the Homeless Benefits Linkages program for my intended spring project prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At Marin County Health and Human Services, a special thanks to Jessica Regala Paran, Social Services Division Director for Public Assistance, for her encouragement and support throughout my BASSC experience. Thank you to Kari Beuerman, Assistant Director of Health and Human Services for Social Services, for the BASSC opportunity and for offering me the COVID-19 Community Liaison assignment. Thanks to Paula Glodowski, my BASSC Liaison, for checking-in and words of encouragement. Thanks to Andrea DuBrow and the BASSC team for being flexible as a result of the emergencies our cohort encountered. I want to express sincere appreciation to my BASSC cohort for their honesty, vulnerability

and support throughout our experience together. Most importantly, my deepest gratitude and thanks to Canal Alliance, Marin Community Clinics, and the Multicultural Center of Marin for allowing me into their operations and for the inspiring work they do serving the Canal community.

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