

# How COVID-19 Impacted My Professional and Personal Life

AISHA TEAL

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper describes the impact of COVID-19 on both the personal and professional life of the author. It addresses a range of work life issues including policies, their impact on aspects of service delivery, and the work environment, especially a new focus on what we counties can do to deliver remote services effectively in the current work environment. This

paper also covers aspects of my personal life during the pandemic and includes my children's education, our shared work environment, and our health and safety. Lessons learned include the importance of regularly taking advantage of technological advancements, new communication tools, work flexibility, and the importance of self-care.

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## Introduction

As a Program Specialist for the CalWORKs Welfare to Work and Cal-Learn Programs for the Solano County Health & Social Services (HSS) Department's Employment & Eligibility Services (E&ES) Division, various aspects of my work and personal life have changed immensely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The most impacted aspects of work life are policies, service delivery, and work environment, especially with a new focus on what we can do to deliver remote services effectively. The impacts to my personal life include my children's education, our shared work environment, and our health and safety. Lessons learned in light of the pandemic include the importance of regularly taking advantage of technological advancement, communication, flexibility, and self-care.

## Service Delivery and Policy Changes

COVID-19 abruptly changed the way we interact with staff, clients, community partners and contractors, and county and state partners. In the Welfare to Work and Cal-Learn programs, we have relationships and contracts with several community partners that provide supportive services for our clients. Activities such as job searching, subsidized employment support and placements, community service support and placements, and mental health service delivery have all been adjusted to continue providing these key supports to our most vulnerable community members whom we regularly serve. Some partners were able to adjust quickly, while others needed time to create and implement innovative service delivery methods. For example, our mental health

partners in the Solano County Behavioral Health Division were quickly able to adjust and continue providing counseling sessions via telehealth appointments. This quick adjustment and flexibility were imperative for our clients to prevent a disruption in services and ensured that they continued to receive the support they needed for both existing issues and new challenges COVID-19 caused, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. On the other end of the spectrum, our partners at the Workforce Development Board (WDB) who provide job support for our clients in-person had to temporarily discontinue services to develop strategies and prepare to deliver services remotely, which had never been done before. Some of the challenges that had to be addressed were technology, equipment, curriculum, communication, and verification methods to ensure that clients would benefit from the services in the same manner as when they participated in person.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has played an important role in helping counties administer social services programs during this time of uncertainty and immense adjustment. The goal of various CDSS policy changes has been to benefit our clients, and all such policy alterations have supported the mitigation of fiscal impacts to a population that is already at a disadvantage due to race, income, and class. Policy changes set forth by CDSS for our programs have promoted the continuance of services and encouraged county social service agencies to:

- Provide supportive services, despite a client's ability to participate in program activities;

- Extend the number of months a family can receive cash aid assistance;
- Excuse clients' inability to fully meet program requirements; and
- Prevent financial penalties by suspending non-compliance and sanction processes.

With guidance from CDSS regarding program administration during COVID-19 came several challenges. Communication was ever-changing due to the nature of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation. Counties would receive direction and Program Specialists would have to quickly apply it and communicate it with staff. If the policy change did not align with system functionality, workload impact would ensue. In addition, several changes to one policy were fluid, and staff had to be agile in response. Other policy changes were internal and made with equity in mind. For example, supportive services were expanded to include payment assistance with electronic devices to aid those of our clients who continued to work and go to school but changed to a remote platform and needed assistance obtaining such devices. We found this concern to be prevalent for a subset of our overall population.

Considering how different aspects of our program will look in the near future has brought many questions and some solutions. For example, the manner in which we engage and orient clients in the Welfare to Work program and our methods for doing that using technology will be important considerations as we work to provide quality services while keeping a personal connection with clients. One strategy we are employing to address questions of engagement and technology is that the department now offers remote job search services. Participants are provided with equipment and online resources for completing required tasks such as assessment testing, which helps the client and worker determine the best plan towards self-sufficiency.

### **Work Environment**

With shelter-in-place requirements and school closures causing an abrupt disruption to the way

children experience education came a transition to distance learning and working from home. This shift brought an added responsibility for parents to ensure their children continued to receive some level of education and to help their kids adjust to and navigate this new way of learning. The county's administration utilized its existing countywide telework policy to grant emergency telework agreements allowing employees to work from home. This policy was rolled out to only a certain group of employees initially—those with school-aged children—though it was eventually expanded to additional groups within the county's workforce. Allowing employees to work from home allowed employees to be with their children who were home due to school/childcare facility closures and reduced the number of employees in the office, helping prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Due to the lack of an existing teleworking policy specific to the Solano County Health and Social Services workforce and the urgent need to make teleworking an option, many challenges arose. There was a shortage of available equipment for employees, including laptops or devices that were readily available for efficient use. This shortage of equipment led to employees using their personal equipment to complete assigned tasks and responsibilities. Productivity was a concern as well. How would employees effectively work from home while trying to home-school their children and/or care for high-risk household members? Expectations were provided, and tasks and duties were recorded along specific guidelines to measure productivity. Other aspects of working from home that had to be clarified and addressed were issues of ergonomics, in-office coverage, and defining which positions should be considered essential workers. Communication was imperative during this time as well. The Employee and Eligibility Services (E&ES) Deputy Director responded by: holding weekly all-staff meetings via Microsoft Teams to provide updates on teleworking and allow staff to ask questions; providing several weekly meetings with the E&ES Management team, who then reported back to staff with updates; and

sending emails whenever there was more information to share.

## Personal Challenges

As the mother of three children ages seven, eight, and sixteen, and someone who is working through childhood trauma, COVID-19 impacted my life in many unexpected ways. With school closures and teleworking, not only do I face the stresses of balancing workload productivity and distance learning, I am triggered by and react to things in a heightened way, when I was previously able to react to certain situations with a calm demeanor and to complete most tasks without thinking twice.

When my children started distance learning, they surprised me in so many ways. Because they had utilized Chromebooks and other modes of technology in class regularly, their technical issues were minimal. I thought I would have to help them log in and set up accounts, so when I found they could do most things related to technology on their own, I was relieved. Their attitudes and demeanors were stable, and they put forth the energy needed to complete their tasks. While I was sometimes falling apart, my children were doing what they needed to do: assignments, attending Google Meets with their teachers and classmates, other activities. My high schooler rarely bothered me and every time I checked in with him to gauge his needs and progress, he assured me that he was fine, and that assertion was confirmed when I checked his grades or talked to school staff. At first, I found it difficult to manage everything that was going on because this way of working was foreign to me. But about a month or so into the pandemic, we got somewhat of a routine going, and everything became a little easier for all of us.

However, there are still challenges today. Scheduling is one of them. It has been difficult to ensure each child is on track with their schedules, which differ due to their grade differences. I make sure that my daughter attends her Google Meets at 9 AM and 1 PM and my son attends his at 10 AM. I make sure they stay on task, help them with schoolwork,

and submit their assignments in a timely manner. I also make sure they have something to keep them busy when I have meetings or tasks to complete for work. Fortunately, my eldest son is self-sufficient and determined to graduate, so I do not have to worry about him much in terms of him knowing what to do or getting his work done. However, there are still times when he needs me to help him with school assignments, and navigating how to get help from his teachers and other school staff has been a challenge. I am now acting as a low-level teacher's aide, the lunch lady, and a referee, in addition to being a full time Program Specialist and mom.

In addition to ensuring I meet the requirements of my newfound roles, I have been working through my own personal issues. The effects of childhood trauma still impact me in adulthood, and I have been actively working towards healing with therapy. When you add the effects of COVID-19, things that seemed simple and easy to handle are now extraordinarily amplified and hard to manage.

## Lessons Learned

Agility, flexibility, and resilience are tools that we have all had to activate during this unprecedented time. Our division leaders have done a great job with communication, transparency, and empathy, not only for our clients but for staff as well. Some of the lessons I have learned from this experience are as follows:

- Government agencies should make it a normal practice to keep up with technological advancement and implementation. Had teleworking been an option before, there would not have been such a rough transition with so many unknowns about how it would work. Some staff would have opted in for teleworking if there was available equipment provided by the county. Policy should be inclusive with a streamlined process that does not create barriers that will discourage staff from requesting a telework schedule.
- Staff must be flexible, creating and maintaining open communication with management

and Program Specialists. Policy changes will occur frequently and will impact program implementation.

- Leadership should take the initiative to explain to staff the “why” behind changes. Mostly, swift changes happen due to decisions that are made based on available knowledge at the time.
- When new information is made available that indicates strategies implemented were not appropriate, staff must be flexible to make necessary adjustments.
- All county staff must look at policy through an equity lens. When management decided to implement the county’s teleworking policy, they decided to make teleworking available to parents with kids at home first, due to school closures. Using an equity lens to explain this prioritization for workers with children compared

to other workers may have helped smooth the implementation of this practice.

- All of us must prioritize self-care. Go to therapy, take Zoom calls with friends, go into the office periodically to have lunch with colleagues (while abiding by social distancing rules), exercise, and spend quality time with family. Do whatever is necessary to protect your mental, physical, and emotional health because if you are not well, those around you will feel the impacts.

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