

Employment and Human Services Department
2020 Report on Challenges Met and Those Ahead



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Report to Family and Human Services Committee

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As EHSD endeavors to meet the key challenges it presently faces, the overarching influence was the arrival of COVID-19 in March 2020. In some cases, the pandemic has introduced entirely new factors into our environment; in others, it has exacerbated existing dynamics. In this document, we outline the major challenges impacting the Department and those we serve.

INCREASED DEMAND FOR SOCIAL SERVICES – IMPACTS OF COVID-19

COVID-19 and the March 16, 2020 Shelter-in-Place order exacerbated the need for EHSD and our community partners to respond to job loss, food insecurity, and limited childcare. Businesses deemed to be non-essential were required to close at physical locations, leading to an immediate surge in job losses. The number of layoffs and business closures happening all over the County markedly increased, with many businesses reporting closing permanently.

EHSD has energetically pursued an understanding of these impacts on Contra Costa County and the resulting effects on the demand for social services, providing data and illustrations in [*Contra Costa County Social Service Impact & Response to the COVID-19 Crisis*](#). The following are featured highlights:

The unemployment rate in Contra Costa jumped from 3.1 percent in February 2020 to 14.5 percent in April 2020, a period of just two months. While the rate has come down from the April peak to 9.3 percent in September, it is important to note that the September 2020 figure is much closer to the County's peak unemployment rate during the Great Recession (11.3 percent in January 2010) than it is to the average unemployment rate of the past several years. For example, prior to March 2020, the unemployment rate in Contra Costa County had been under 5 percent since September 2015 and under 4 percent since September 2017.

The number of New Weekly Unemployment Insurance Claims skyrocketed from 840 the week before Shelter-in-Place, to 4,252 the following week, and 28,108 during the week of March 28, 2020. New Weekly Unemployment Insurance Benefit (UIB) Claims were declining during the month of May but have ticked back up slightly since early June, with an average of more than 10,000 per week in September. It is anticipated that the economic fallout from COVID-19 will continue for some time.

Declining incomes has led to a rise in food insecurity. Applications for CalFresh food assistance surged, from 4,535 applications in March to 7,308 in April and 5,647 in May. The result has been a sustained increase in CalFresh enrollment, with more than 77,000 individuals enrolled in the program in August 2020. This compares to approximately 62,000 in March – a 24 percent increase in five months. Emergency CalFresh allotments to eligible households have also provided increased support with California's approval to raise regular monthly CalFresh allotments to the maximum allowable benefits based on CalFresh household size has resulted in the addition of approximately \$4 million per month to more than 23,000 Contra Costa households since March.

While increased Medi-Cal enrollment lagged a bit behind CalFresh (possibly due to unemployed individuals maintaining other health coverage for a period), there has been a significant enrollment increase lately: 261,000 individuals were enrolled in September, compared to approximately 232,000 at the beginning of 2020 (about a 12 percent increase).

Crucially, the number of individuals covered by “Expanded Medi-Cal,” a feature of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), has reached an all-time high of more than 78,000 individuals. If the ACA is overturned by the Supreme Court, the county will be faced with the prospect of these members of our community finding themselves without access to insurance – and possibly without access to health care.

As schools and child care centers shut down for Shelter-in-Place, parents who would have normally relied on schools to provide daytime care and instruction for their children were left without this options. This put an extra strain on essential workers who now had to find child care for their school-aged children and find help for daily studies. The child care providers of the EHSD-led Emergency Child Care Program filled this gap, serving 565 children of essential workers and issuing 405 emergency child care vouchers to essential worker families. The Contra Costa County Child Care Task Force produced a report titled, [COVID-19 Emergency Child Care Response](#) which detailed the program's efforts and outlined the impacts the pandemic has had on child care in Contra Costa. Providers struggle to meet challenges and new requirements in an industry where profit margins are already slim. New costs of cleaning supplies make it almost unaffordable to maintain centers facing revenue loss from fewer children served.

Mandated reporters who view children in educational environments have been the main source of child abuse reporting. With children out of school, mandated reporters, such as teachers and counsellors, have been unable to observe children in person and report abuse. For vulnerable adults, average weekly calls fell during the first two weeks of Shelter-in-Place, compared to the weekly average over the prior 6 weeks (February 3 – March 15, 2020). After reaching a low point during the weeks of March 30 – April 12, weekly calls have slightly rebounded. Community partner organizations serving families affected by interpersonal violence echoed the drop in assistance requests, as Shelter-in-Place orders kept callers in close proximity to their abusers and limited their ability to make private calls.

While we are working to improve our ability to measure and report racial and ethnic data, we do know that people of color have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, from both a health and an economic perspective. Among the people who applied for EHSD benefit programs between March 1 and July 28, 2020 (and for whom race/ethnicity was reported): 21 percent of applicants were Black or African American as compared to 9 percent of Contra Costa's population; 30 percent of applicants were Hispanic or Latino compared to 24 percent of the County's population.

EHSD is working to address the disproportionate economic challenges of COVID in a number of ways. Even before the pandemic, in collaboration with trusted community partners, the Department established itself as a source of education and information regarding Public Charge and other issues affecting our immigrant community. Members of EHSD staff are now engaged in COVID-specific resource building task forces, including the Equitable Economic Recovery Task Force. However, it is clear that major infusions of financial assistance will be required to provide the necessary support for vulnerable members of the community who will continue to be impacted by COVID for some time.

RESPONDING & REBUILDING

EHSD has experienced – and has acted upon – the impact of the COVID-19 fallout in a number of ways, with ongoing challenges expected into the year ahead: for the Department, its customers and community partners.

Immediate Response

A snapshot of some of the responses EHSD implemented in addressing the acute demand for social services include the following:

- #BounceBackContraCosta was launched in direct response to the COVID-19 emergency to support job-seekers and employers alike. In addition, EHSD joined with County and community partners in an Equitable Economic Recovery Task Force that has been tackling employment challenges.
- EHSD implemented a Social Service Rapid Response Team by mobilizing its “4-Our-Families” Navigators and equipping them with a streamlined intake process to assess the immediate needs of vulnerable community members quickly. The SSRRT is an immediate resource working in partnership with health services contact tracing unit and numerous community partners. Targeted needs include: housing, food, finances, legal support, children’s needs, medical, immigration assistance, transportation and more. More than 20 percent of the individuals and families served by the program have identified themselves as undocumented immigrant members of our community – a group that has fewer options for assistance than others
- Social service emergency programs ramped up to assist with distribution of vital resources and providing for a wide variety of needs. EHSD’s Volunteer & Emergency Services (VES), in partnership with San Francisco Chronicle’s Season of Sharing (SOS) Program, shifted its emergency relief funding focus to families and individuals who faced sudden shortfalls due to COVID-19. EHSD and Contra Costa Health Services joined forces with several CBO partners to create the Food and Nutrition Task Force in response to increased food insecurity caused by COVID-19. The Task Force developed a food delivery project, which continues to provide food boxes to individuals and families in all regions of the County, with hundreds of households benefiting from the service. The Great Plates program, administered by EHSD is currently serving 195 older adults and has provided 46,675 meals as of July.

THE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK ON THE WORKFORCE AND CUSTOMERS/CONSUMERS

The sudden occurrence of the Covid virus resulted in the precipitous order for our workforce to Shelter-in-Place, and to continue working remotely to the extent possible. While EHSD has had an effective and popular Telecommuting Policy, the Department was not prepared to support hundreds of workers wishing to work from home. Our State-mandated programs and systems are designed around neighborhood district offices, with congregate work spaces and shared tools and hardware. The unpredictability of the length of the pandemic and projected need for continued support of remote work slowed our efforts to redesign our service delivery system to function in a new environment. This has been true of many County departments which led to extraordinary demands on our Public Works and IT departments.

Our experience with remote work during this pandemic has been mixed. The most successful are “thought” workers conducting analytical tasks, writing procedures and manual sections, training curricula, etc. The least successful are “output” workers, those with productivity and task requirements, and prescribed deadlines. These represent the preponderance of our remote workers and, therefore, we have observed that in most bureaus overall productivity is lower. We are seeing the signs of greater distancing and disengagement from the Department, a loss of connection to our mission and values. We are seeing the difficulties of remote work using our State-mandated systems and the limitations of remote technology. In many homes our remote staff are in competition with other family members for limited Wi-Fi and Internet access. We have deep concerns about the risks that remote work poses to customer/consumer privacy and confidentiality. On the positive side, we see some staff performing well in a remote setting, one that is well-defined and organized, with work conducted according to a set schedule. For some, remote work is allowing more flexibility in work schedules, enabling those staff with school-age children greater latitude in meeting work expectations. The recapture of lost time spent in commuting has been reported as a significant positive.

The customer/consumer experience has likewise been mixed. EHSD had implemented service delivery efficiencies prior to the onset of the pandemic. Fewer in-person interviews were required, allowing applications and interviews to be handled using technology. We had already planned a shift to a distributed call center, no longer a place-based center, using a Telework model of staff working full-time from their homes. This was in the pilot phase when Covid remote work was necessitated, and continues to show success.

The sudden loss of income and jobs brought thousands of applicants to our programs, overwhelming our capacity to meet the demand. The need for more staff coupled with the limitations of remote work as mentioned above created long waits for assistance. Customers are frustrated by the long waits and slow response times, but have shown a high level of acceptance and appreciation for the use of on-line access for applications, emailing, and interviews. A customer in Antioch may be served sooner by a worker in Richmond, rather than waiting until a worker is available at their local office.

Significant progress has been achieved since March to fill vacancies and reduce wait times, but backlogs do remain as staffing continues to be inadequate to meet customer and State-mandated requirements. Ongoing caseloads have grown to historic heights and recipients are remaining on aid for longer periods due to the high unemployment rate and delays in receiving unemployment and other stimulus benefits. We expect the high caseloads to continue as the economic recovery drags out over the next two or more years.

The Pathways Initiative

EHSD will be embarking on an initiative to absorb these lessons from our “as-is” environment and define the pathway to our future post-pandemic world. The employer – employee relationship has shifted and the nature of our work must be reimagined and redefined. At this time, Federal and State-mandated systems, compliance requirements, and performance measures have not changed. Numerous Covid-related waivers and process mitigations will be expiring in the coming months further impacting staffing and productivity. Successful remote work for “output” workers must be defined, and mechanisms for maintaining linkages between remote workers and the Department need to be created. Communications strategies, the changing nature of management and supervision, methods to promote personal and mental wellbeing, and ideas for encouraging

networking and socialization will all be elements of our Pathways Initiative.

Envisioning our future path will be a strategic interactive process, beginning with listening sessions with our staff, our customers/consumers, our bargaining units, and our community partners. Anticipated guidance from our State oversight agencies and policy directives from our Board of Supervisors will be monitored and included. At the same time, we will be continuing to follow economic indicators and gauging the economic recovery in our County as we know that our caseloads will remain at higher than normal levels for up to another two years. This will inform our long-range outlook on budget and staffing needs. We will also be outlining and incorporating planned statewide changes impacting our service delivery and staffing models, such as the replacement of the CalWIN public assistance system with the CalSAWS system and the Child Welfare CWS/CMS system with the CARES system. State legislation already passed will bring changes to some of our programs which must also be incorporated into our Pathways planning.

Our goal is to build a better, more robust human services system, solidly rooted in a strong and resilient workforce with exceptional supports for our customers/consumers and local partners.

BECOMING A DATA DRIVEN ORGANIZATION

The demand for data analytics is dramatically increasing. Consumers want fast, accurate, and comprehensive data at State and local levels and the requirements from State agencies for sophisticated analysis has increased exponentially in the last year.

EHSD lags far behind other counties and other agencies within the County when it comes to data analytics. Current systems and databases, including legacy systems mandated by the State, are not integrated to be able to view data across systems, and EHSD has no single integrated place to pull together a whole-agency view. EHSD has very limited staff resources dedicated to data analysis. In order to face the new demand for data, and allow data to drive decisions affecting customers, EHSD must invest in building a new data culture, including new integrated systems, agency-wide training, and a well-resourced data analytics team.

EHSD recognized this challenge, and continues to prioritize the department-wide goal of becoming a data driven organization focused on performance and results-based outcomes and accountability. Our Data Council has led the development of a menu of data dashboards and reports to make data more timely and accessible. These reports are posted on our website. New resources are being introduced, including data tools such as Tableau and Exemplar. Additionally, Contra Costa County will be one of four counties included in the first wave of CalSAWS implementation, which will unify California counties in a single benefits-reporting system.

ADDRESSING RACIAL EQUITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND IMMIGRANT INCLUSION

Recently, the Department stepped up its inquiry into the equitable delivery of its services. However, racial and ethnic data is collected inconsistently making it difficult to disaggregate data to identify disproportionate impacts or compare across programs. For example, race and ethnicity tend not to be required categories for customers to provide.

Data issues notwithstanding, communities we serve experience fears, obstacles and inequities in accessing social services. For example, immigrants make up over a quarter of Contra Costa

County's population according to a 2017 New American Economy and Zellerbach Family Foundation report, and this number is believed to be underestimated. Political rhetoric has produced a chilling effect and fear in immigrant communities that may be causing them to not seek aid for which they are eligible, and cutting them off from resources they formerly had access to. Families are afraid to answer U.S. Census questions, and emergency support has not adequately reached language minority and indigenous language communities due to communication barriers. As COVID-19 moved many services online, lower income and technology challenged residents also have additional difficulty accessing services.

Internally, EHSD is highly invested in ensuring the Department is a place where diversity, equity, and inclusion are fully realized and practiced. In recent months, EHSD formed an Equity & Inclusion effort led by a core team of staff with representatives from across the Department. Goals include listening to the input of staff and researching best practices for developing employee education and learning for equity and inclusion, building connection and community that supports education and learning, utilizing data to inform and drive actions, and developing a racial equity action plan that is responsive to input and aligns with the County's efforts on equity and inclusion.