



DHS News

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COVID-19 and Administration: A Q&A with Kathy Heinz, Michael Malone and Tirzha Moore

Kathy Heinz (KH) is manager of the Contracts Unit, Michael Malone (MM) is a budget analyst and Tirzha Moore (TM) is accounts payable supervisor in the Central Processing Unit.

What was the most challenging issue your team faced when responding to COVID-19?

KH: The Contracts Unit is usually particularly busy during the April through July period processing both annual contract renewals and fiscal yearend amendments. COVID-19 added to the workload tremendously. We were called upon to execute numerous new contracts and amendments, with new and existing entities. These included quarantining locations; hazard pay for provider staff who render face-to-face service; converting what were fee-for-service contracts to program-funded so providers could get paid to keep their facilities operational; addressing the need for sanitation and supplies, including meals; and extra funding to providers who have resource parents (foster and kinship) to help ease the needs of children who were not in school and needing more assistance in the home.

Not only were these needs added to the workload while we were adjusting to working remotely, but they needed to be turned around quickly. The members of the unit met the demand, swiftly and efficiently processing those extra contracts and amendments while continuing to keep up with their everyday work.

MM: The most challenging issue was figuring out how much additional funding to ask for from the state due to COVID. When asked to fill out the state funding surveys in March and April, we really didn't know what to expect in the coming months.

TM: I can truly say that fiscal was already preparing for the remote process. We tested our laptops to make sure there would be no issues prior to finding out that we would be working remotely from home, which I think was great planning by the management team and made the transition adaptable. The most challenging part that I can say on my behalf is getting a workspace set up in my home so that I could continue the effort of getting the payments processed without any delays.

What lessons did your team learn from its COVID-19 response?

KH: 1. The unit is stronger than they realized, meeting increasing demands effectively and prioritizing when necessary. 2. They are better as a team rather than facing the demands alone. Each member of the unit has a unique strength which they use to assist each other. 3. They don't need paper as much as they thought they did. 4. It reinforced that their work impacts not just providers, but the citizens of the County who need the supports offered by providers. 5. Our technology needs to be more flexible and much more reliable. 6. I hope they have also learned the work will be there tomorrow. I shouldn't beat myself up or lose sleep over not getting everything done in a day.

MM: I learned that our IT team is great and I am grateful that they were able to help a lot of people work from home so quickly.

TM: That we can take on a challenge and still get the work done. That it takes lots of communication to make things work. Planning ahead helped tremendously. I would say that putting a plan in place is what was learned from this experience, the action is the response.

How will the lessons you learned help your team to better serve Allegheny County residents in the future?

KH: 1. We need to work more closely with IT so we can quickly solve any problems. 2. We need to open more active communication with Program and Fiscal on planning for activities and understanding the priorities. 3. We must continue to work closely as a team and rely upon each other to brainstorm process improvements that will result in better more efficient processes. 4. We need to examine what we've "always done," especially if those things are not necessarily a mandate but rather our lack of pushing to evolve over the years.

If we address these primary issues, we may be able to better serve the community by better prioritizing the workload and moving contracts/amendments faster and getting cash to providers faster.

MM: I've had to work more closely with the Area Agency on Aging program office the last few months, which has helped me build a better relationship with them.

TM: We were equipped with headsets to be able to answer the phone calls that are still coming in which didn't disconnect us from serving the Allegheny County residents. As far as the future, we are living it! Technology gave us the ability to stay connected and we will continue to serve in this capacity.

What aspect of your team's response makes you most proud?

KH: I have always been proud of their ability to work together as a team and to back each other up – even their ability to back me up when the need arises. They cover each other's loads for vacations, etc.; they lean on each other for answers and expertise; and they continue that even in these unusual times. Moreover, many of them have put in extra time and effort during this period even though they have never been asked to do so. They've met the demand and I am sure will continue to do so.

MM: Even though a lot of employees were asked to work from home on short notice, everyone seemed to be cooperative and helpful.

TM: In my position, I'm responsible for processing the payroll for foster care, Senior Companion, Choose Home, and Caregiver Support Program, and I can say that not one payroll lacked being paid while working remotely from home for the last four months. I'm most proud that I can still help in this process along with processing CYF requests for families, processing monthly invoices and all that we do in Central Processing Unit (CPU) including the employee travel vouchers which are processed by my supervisor. We have not missed a beat! I am very humbled by the experience to be able to do my job to the best of my ability from home and grateful that my supervisor believes in me that I can get the work done. CPU may be small but we are mighty!