



# DHS News

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## **COVID-19 and OCR: A Q&A with Heather Fisher, Alexa Seretti and Helen Wachter**

Heather Fisher (HF), Director's Action Line (DAL) manager; Alexa Seretti (AS), content strategy manager; and Helen Wachter (HW), director of KEYS Service Corps - AmeriCorps took a few moments to discuss their teams' responses to the pandemic.

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

HF: Most contacts made to/from the DAL are by telephone. A key piece of our customer service to DHS consumers is the fact that calls are answered by a live voice during business hours. When we are all in the same room and have access to each other's phone lines, this is easy to do.

Our approach to servicing individuals who reach out to DAL is very much a team approach. We are constantly communicating with each other to share resources, background information, or ideas about the most effective way to process a complaint or request. We also answer each other's calls during lunches and other periods of being unavailable. When a majority of the staff are working remotely and there is only one staff person on site, this is much more difficult.

AS: We found that attempting to use existing DHS digital properties to share information with specific audiences was challenging. We quickly realized that websites built using older technology or sites that were already heavy with information weren't an option for us in a situation where we were adding and modifying information all day, every day. In OCR, we are fortunate to have an in-house team who can create and build new websites when needed.

HW: The biggest challenge we faced was adapting to a virtual service environment and adjusting as needed in an uncertain and constantly changing situation. When closures began, we had approximately 120 AmeriCorps members and 40 sites. We had to not only adapt to the situation ourselves, but we also had to help our partners adapt as well. Some sites had to close their doors and no longer needed the service of members, while other sites were suddenly in great need. Developing virtual service while also figuring out how to move forward safely with the upcoming program year without knowing how

restrictions would change proved challenging as well. We also had to overcome learning how to build a sense of team among members when not in person.

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

HF: The importance of consistent communication, especially when offsite. We learned to effectively communicate with each other through e-mail threads to keep each other updated on complaint/request assignments and staff availability. We learned how beneficial Microsoft Teams is for check-ins, discussions about difficult cases, and for meeting with collateral supports from various DHS program offices and provider agencies. We also learned how to use various methods to obtain information about available resources, particularly during COVID.

AS: We've learned we can work efficiently from anywhere. Our team has created five or six sites in the eight months we've not physically shared space. Communication platforms we use in real-time like Microsoft Teams or Slack enable us to correspond more often than we may have if we were in the office.

We've also learned that the needs of the people who visit our websites or engage with us on social media should drive our communications strategies. We want to push out so much information that's COVID-19 related, but we still need to stop and consider our audiences. We don't just put all information everywhere merely because we can. We think about who needs to get the information and how and where they consume it.

HW: The biggest lesson we learned was how to be flexible and prepared for change. In planning our upcoming summer term of service, we developed three plans due to the uncertainty of the changing environment. We learned to manage different responsibilities as needed and help our members to balance their service responsibilities with new responsibilities at home, such as homeschooling and changing family needs. We converted our training from seven days in-person to four days of virtual training. We learned how to communicate and provide service remotely through the use of online platforms such as Zoom and Teams. We found that you can still build a team virtually by adding weekly check ins with staff and members and adding breakout rooms for members to build a sense of team together. We learned to be more flexible in service and training, using technology and creating engaging interactive trainings. We created opportunities for members to talk to each other virtually through weekly meetings and the availability of Teams chat rooms.

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

HF: The availability of Microsoft Teams to pull together a check-in or meeting quickly and easily is something that will continue to be very beneficial for DAL. Sometimes a discussion with program office or provider staff about a complaint or request is

necessary to fully understand all of the dynamics of the situation and how to determine next steps in following up with a consumer. Although a phone call is quick and easy, many times the discussion includes more than just two people. Microsoft Teams gives us the ability to speak to as many people as needed without the inconvenience of traveling to another office which impacts people's availability.

We have also become aware of more resources and programs available in the community to refer residents to.

AS: We know that we are capable of brainstorming solutions and implementing them quickly. As the pandemic and our response to it continues to evolve, we can adapt our communications strategies. We are also committed to looking at our digital properties and modifying them based on user behavior.

HW: We have and will be partnering with additional sites to address new community needs. During the summer, our members served with the Pennsylvania Department of Health as contract tracers. Currently, our members are serving with community hubs to assist youth in completing their school's curriculum virtually. Our members are also serving with Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to provide services and care to older adults experiencing isolation. Sometimes we underestimate what we are capable of. We've learned that people can adapt when sudden changes occur. Going through the same collective struggle has made people more compassionate towards others, and more understanding of what they may be going through. It's not *if* COVID has affected you, it's *how*.

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

HF: I'd bet a majority of people in the United States, and the world for that matter, have never experienced anything even remotely close to the anxiety, stress, confusion and fear that the COVID-19 pandemic has created. Many people had to take their routines and procedures for their job and basically throw them out the window to learn a whole new way of completing the same tasks and responsibilities. The DAL team had to create new ways to answer the questions and concerns of the community efficiently and effectively. The DAL team thrives on teamwork and communication with each other in so many aspects of our day-to-day business practices, and the DAL staff have been very successful in transferring that teamwork and communication from being all in the same room to all working remotely except for the DAL manager and supervisor. So, while the transition to working remotely was the most challenging issue we faced, the success of the team being able to do this also make me the proudest.

AS: Our ingenuity in a highly stressful and ever-changing situation.

HW: Our members and staff stepped up and rose to the occasion when the pandemic struck. We have worked hard to manage our own duties while helping others manage

theirs and being supportive of each other. Everyone is dealing with the same trauma and our members, staff, and sites are helping each other to overcome it. Our members have been open and willing to discuss their challenges and face them, and help each other as they may be facing the same challenges. Our staff has taken on new responsibilities as needed, and have worked hard to provide good communication with members and sites. We have also been helping other AmeriCorps programs and in doing so have increased the level of support among other service programs.