



Adapting to the Challenge of the Pandemic and Building Community

By Kate Marr, Executive Director¹
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The pandemic brought challenges for our organization but also showed us how adaptable and resilient we are and how we can, in union, adjust to the given



conditions and continue our mission and work for the communities we serve. It also helped us to realize a new level of collegiality and camaraderie, despite our physical remoteness from each other.

Immediately after the stay-at-home orders were

issued and without missing a beat, we jumped to implement the best ways to serve our clients from the virtual office space. Fortunately, prior to the pandemic, we had already planned the use of Microsoft Teams and Zoom to support our staff, which is spread across two counties — in four offices and a courthouse self-help center. The coming of the pandemic accelerated the execution of the plans. The IT crew were the heroes of the effort, ensuring technology and the necessary training was quickly in place for our staff.

Adapting to the Changes

Once the technological infrastructure was settled, the staff began to adapt. They did so with a remarkable understanding and trust that we would create the most effective ways and methods to serve our clients, under the circumstances.

The intake and assessment team, on the frontline, successfully transitioned to working from home, fielding the incoming calls to the hotline as if they were on site in the office. All appointments with clients were scheduled for telephone and so we began and have been operating, in compliance with the recommended best practices and yet fully able to meet the needs of our clients.

In short order, we adapted further when staff began to engage in webinars, offering guidance to the community about the eviction moratorium and housing law. All these efforts have continued and expanded in the virtual environment. For example, the workshops and clinics normally held at the Orange County courthouse are now conducted online.

Creating an Online Work Community

Besides creating a well-connected and efficient virtual office space for the staff, we also recognized that there were other aspects of working together that needed to be addressed. We made a conscious effort to come up with ways to create an online work community that would evoke the spirit of hanging out in the break room and at our traditional lunch potlucks around birthdays and holidays, activities we knew our staff would miss.

Again, some of the infrastructure we needed to do this was already in place. We had just completed a strategic planning process and out of that came a committee formed to actively support staff morale and provide activities and opportunities for intraoffice engagement. In response to the pandemic, the committee came up with ideas about how to maintain a sense of social connectedness.

Supporting Employee Morale

Engagement was cultivated through using our program's internal social media channel Yammer. Ideas included Spirit Week during which each day staff could participate and share photos related to the theme of the day and comment on each other's posts. We sponsored a haiku writing contest about working from home (read the winning haiku at the end of this piece) and also participated in shared projects through Yammer, like assembling jigsaw puzzles. I started a Spotify playlist

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named *Quarantunes* to which staff could add their favorites, providing a venue for a shared music experience while working at home.

In January 2020, prior to transitioning to remote work, we started a staff book club. It has become yet another way staff engages together, meeting at lunch to discuss the reading selection. To date, the readers have finished seven books and are on to the eighth.

To keep with tradition, we hosted a virtual summer staff social to replace our staff picnic in the park, a Halloween party (a favorite activity of staff) and at the end of year, a virtual December holiday party. At the Halloween party we included an online mystery game with groups of staff working together to solve a “mystery at the art museum.” For the December holiday party, we created our version of Family Feud, which turned out to be another hit, and asked staff to work on a collaborative art project. We also solicited favorite recipes from staff to create a cookbook. The cookbook was printed and sent to each staff member as a holiday gift.

Staff members who bonded while resident and working in each of our offices have continued to cultivate their relationships with each other. Having been accustomed to eating lunch together, they have continued the practice using our aforementioned tech resources to create a virtual “lunchroom.”

We have also hired a yoga instructor who teaches weekly via Zoom. Staff can take the class live during their lunch hour or via tape at a time more convenient to them.

Regular Communication

Additionally, from the onset of the remote work we have had regular all-staff Zoom meetings. I hosted a weekly meeting, and the director of legal services hosted a separate meeting for all the advocacy staff. In the summer we began alternating the meetings so that I meet with staff twice a month on Wednesday to discuss general administrative and operational issues and the director of legal services meets with them the other two Wednesdays.

Besides discussing the business at hand at each of the meetings, we ask staff to engage and chat/comment on a non-work-related topic or prompt. For example, before St. Valentine’s Day I asked them to share their favorite childhood Valentine card message. We have

found this stimulates chatter between staff and adds a light, collegial spirit to the meetings.

The all-staff meetings have also been a time when staff could commiserate with their colleagues about the issues that came up after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the subsequent peaceful protests that occurred throughout the summer. We recognized that these events would have an impact on the staff and worked with them to ensure they felt supported and heard.

Shared Values

As I previously noted, we had just completed a strategic planning process right before the pandemic started. Out of strategic planning, we created organizational values. These values and our mission tie us together, bond us to one another. We have used our values as a way to foster staff engagement and support of each other.

During the all-staff meetings we invite them to give a “shout out” and offer kudos to a fellow staff member who exemplified one or more of the values. It is always a popular part of the meeting agenda.

We also focused on each value as part of the activities related to the staff summer social. We asked staff to nominate a colleague for recognition for a certain value, to submit a photo or image that represented a value or write/share a poem or quote about a value.

At the December holiday party, the art project we worked on was to create our personal visual interpretation of one of the values. Each staff member received a tile and Crayola markers to use for the project and were encouraged to use other media of their choice, like collage, to express the value. These pieces will be put together to make a staff mural, which will be on exhibit in our main office.

Staff Newsletter

We already had a monthly staff newsletter in place before the pandemic, and it has been another great way to foster connection. The newsletter features stories about our advocacy as told by staff, staff profiles, a message from me and one from our associate director of human resources, and a column devoted to staff pets/animal companions. Other columns include news about the staff book club, tech tips from our IT manager, and any other staff-related activities. This publication allows us to stay connected as we mix work-related news and updates with the more personal stories from and about staff.

Integrating New Staff

Needless to say, starting a job in a mostly telework environment during a pandemic can be challenging for our new employees. We have given a lot of thought about how to integrate our new employees into the stream so that they feel supported and connected to their colleagues, the work, the mission, and the organization as a whole. This project held special importance for our human resources team as they joined the program early in the pandemic and have not even met most of the staff in person.

The hiring process, onboarding, and training look much different in a virtual office environment. New hire orientations are longer than they used to be. The associate director of human resources takes more time to help the new employee understand our program's operations and where to access appropriate tools, technology, and organization-wide resources to help them settle in, begin their work, and have a successful and positive teleworking experience.

We encourage their supervisors to have frequent one-on-one meetings or casual check-ins with their new staff to ensure they have everything they need to be successful at their work. When engaging in the one-on-one check-in, supervisors are sensitive to not overwhelm the new employee, understanding they are engaging in a two-way conversation to respectfully gauge the employee's experiences and address their questions and needs.

When a new staff member joins our team, we introduce them to their colleagues with an email to all staff and at the all-staff Zoom meetings, sharing a picture of them for a personal touch. Also, each employee is provided with a "Connect with Your Colleagues" list with ways to meet and bond with their new colleagues, including our internal social media (the aforementioned Yammer), our staff book club, and via all staff virtual meetings, etc.

Though the remote office environment presents challenges for a new employee with building personal relationships with colleagues and feeling connected to our organizational values and culture, we have adapted

to the circumstances and created an effective infrastructure to support them. The associate director of human resources, their supervisor, the colleagues in their department, and eventually all staff, are there all along the way to help the new staff integrate into all aspects of what it means to work at our program CLA SoCal.

Winner of Staff Haiku Contest

Working from Home, by Michael Waldren,
Staff Attorney

*My pants optional
Kids in backgrounds, zoom zoom zoom
Now is tomorrow*

- 1 Kate Marr is the Executive Director at Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal), a non-profit agency with a staff of over 100 serving Orange and Los Angeles Counties. CLA SoCal works to fight injustice by providing compassionate, high-quality, direct legal services and through systemic advocacy that creates positive change in communities. Kate has devoted her entire 20-year career working in legal services, first as a staff attorney working primarily with survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Immediately prior to joining CLA SoCal, Kate was a managing attorney at Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) where she supervised the organization's family law and immigration work and the Greater Long Beach Medical-Legal Partnership, a project she developed and founded in 2011 to improve health outcomes for survivors of domestic violence and other trauma. Kate is the chair of the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Access to Justice Committee and the Vice-Chair of the Board of the Legal Aid Association of California. She received her JD from the University of Colorado School of Law and her undergraduate degree from Bryn Mawr College. Kate may be reached at kmarr@clsocal.org.

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