

# 2020 NPCR COLORADO CENTRAL CANCER REGISTRY SUCCESS STORY

STORY TOPIC/FOCI: Covid-19 impact/challenges overcome

STORY CATEGORY: Registry Operations

STORY TITLE: Colorado's Transition to Full-time Remote Work Due to COVID-19

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## SUMMARY

The discovery of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the COVID-19 global pandemic that followed resulted in the complete suspension of in-office activities for non-essential personnel at the Colorado Central Cancer Registry (CCCR). Within weeks the CCCR had to transition from primarily in-office work to near-100% remote work for the indefinite future. Most staff had previous experience working from home at least 1-day a week prior to the pandemic, but full-time remote work required additional infrastructure and procedural changes. Seven months after enacting the Continuity of Operations plan no decline in productivity has been noted and most staff have expressed satisfaction with the remote work conditions.

## CHALLENGE

In December of 2019, the discovery of a cluster of pneumonia cases linked to a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was announced in China.<sup>1,2</sup> Identification of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in other countries soon followed and the first positive case in the United States was reported on January 20, 2020.<sup>2</sup> A public health emergency was declared in the United States on January 31. On March 5th, the first two cases of coronavirus were reported in Colorado and six additional cases were reported the next day.<sup>3</sup> Governor Jared Polis declared a state of emergency in Colorado on March 10<sup>th</sup> as the total number of presumptive positive cases had increased to 17 before nearly doubling to 33 the very next day.<sup>4</sup> The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic on March 11,<sup>5</sup> and after demonstrated community spread,<sup>2</sup> a national emergency was declared by the President of the United States on March 13, 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic became the number one priority at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE). In order to protect those responding, other programs and staff not directly involved in the response were requested to reduce in-office staffing as much as possible in early March. Local and state public health orders, including stay-at-home orders,<sup>7</sup> soon followed and resulted in the complete suspension of in-office activities for non-essential personnel. Much like other businesses, programs, and services across the country, CDPHE and the Colorado Central Cancer Registry (CCCR), within a matter of weeks, had to create, implement, and execute a Continuity of Operations plan to transition from primarily in-office work to near-100% remote work for the indefinite future.

## SOLUTION

In partnership with Division and Department leadership, a plan was created to provide staff with enough resources, systems, and procedures in order to allow staff to successfully work from home (or other remote location) for the duration of the pandemic. Staff were instructed to collect their items from the office through the week ending March 13<sup>th</sup> and to begin working remotely starting Monday, March 16<sup>th</sup>.

At the state level, the number of available Virtual Private Network licenses were increased from 3,500 to 30,000 to accommodate a greater proportion of the state workforce working from home. The State's previous investment in Google for Government meant that email, instant messaging, shared drives and documents, and video calls and conferences were already fully integrated and accessible from anywhere.

Staff took laptops, docking stations, monitors, and other required office peripherals home with them. Additionally, select staff took with them limited office furniture, i.e., desk chairs, standing desk accessories, etc. to facilitate long-term safety and comfort while working from home. All state equipment was inventoried and "checked-out" to staff. Most staff had previous experience working from home at least 1-day a week prior to the pandemic and were already in possession of necessary equipment and software. For the limited staff that had only a desktop PC, "loaner" laptops with docking stations were provided.

A shared calendar was created for the employees in our immediate work area to ensure that staff would still have access to the office while maintaining enough physical space and in-person limits. Employees were required to fill out their expected in-office time on the calendar and complete a department health screening form prior to coming into the office. The Registry identified select staff who would access the office once a week to collect mail and scan important documents for electronic access.

## RESULTS

Seven months after enacting the Continuity of Operations plan, the CCCR has worked through most expected and unexpected hurdles. No decline in productivity has been noted and, despite massive external stressors, most staff have expressed satisfaction with the remote work conditions. While certain work tasks are slowed due to connectivity issues, the ability of staff to connect directly to the network server through a remote desktop connection greatly reduces those connection issues. Direct connections are limited in number so an additional calendar was created to ensure that the most time-intensive tasks are prioritized. The Registry has recognized the value of having those remote desktop connections to enable shared resources, programs, and faster processing and will be pursuing additional connections in the coming months.

Department and State leadership were driving factors in the successful transition to remote work. CDPHE, in February of 2019, had identified the expansion of remote-work opportunities and the reduction of in-office staffing as part of their 5-year plan with the end-goal of reducing emissions and improving quality of life for staff and employees. Those plans were greatly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the desire and commitment were already present.

This meant that the flexibility and initiative to test and implement innovative remote solutions was encouraged. Without buy-in and the infrastructural investments made by the State, the transition to full-time remote work would have been much more difficult.

Despite longer processing times for certain tasks due to connectivity issues, staff productivity has not diminished. The registry continues to be on track to submit our 2018 data and we have made great headway on our 2019 data as well. The transition, while sudden, has provided numerous advantages. The reduced commute and additional flexibility have been cited as the top benefits by existing staff. Staff retention is expected to improve, especially for those considering retirement and the ability to work from anywhere in the state expands our pool of eligible employees.

The largest issue identified by staff has been the loss of in-person contact, the water-cooler talk, quick brainstorming sessions, and collaborative lunches. While long-time staff members miss the camaraderie of the office, new staff miss out on the incidental training opportunities and skill building that previously occurred organically. Instant messaging, chat, and video calls provide some assistance, and we believe that with time we'll get better at it, but it has not come as naturally as we had hoped. We're continuing to work to improve our personal interactions through more frequent mini meetings, and by identifying periods of time where more-experienced staff are "on-call" and available for messages, chats, or phone calls.

Due to the foresight of state and department leadership, and CCCR leadership over the past decade, the CCCR was well-positioned to deal with the tumultuous period of an unexpected pandemic. The CCCR fully expects to continue to provide high-quality, complete cancer surveillance data well into the future.

#### SUSTAINING SUCCESS

The success of the registry in transitioning to full-time remote work during the pandemic proved not only that it was possible, but that it could be sustainable as well. The majority of CCCR staff have expressed the desire to continue to work remotely for the foreseeable future. The state of Colorado is looking to reduce their footprint, terminate leases and sell building space. The cost-savings are expected to reduce CDPHE's indirect costs and allow more of our budget to be spent on personnel and other programmatic costs. The registry continues to work to improve its personal interactions by identifying ways to ensure a cohesive, well-trained work unit. While the challenges have been great, the opportunities and benefits that have presented themselves provide hope for the future.

#### REGISTRY CONTACT INFORMATION

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## Sources

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