

Editorial: Learning From the Pandemic

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., Editor

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When I heard people whine and scream about municipal regulations ordering the wearing of masks, my thoughts drifted to my father. In the “Great War,” he was stationed in a foxhole, slept in mud, and of course, commonly had to wear a gasmask. Mustard gas was employed as a common offensive strategy in foxhole warfare during World War I. If a soldier had an uncomfortable gasmask, he could live but would sustain terrible blisters throughout his body. Without the gasmask, a soldier would die of blistering lungs and throat—an excruciatingly painful form of death. As I reflect on my dad’s life, I’ve become frustrated with the knowledge of his personal struggle and the warfare struggles faced by millions of men and women in defense of their country. Within this context, the inconvenience of wearing a mask to decrease the spread of COVID-19 seems insignificant. Although I keep my thoughts to myself, I have no tolerance for the mask whiners. They lack fortitude, civil pride, and patriotism, and frankly they are grossly egocentric—but that’s just my view—and perhaps a nonprofessional vision. Actually, my best descriptors of mask whiners include colloquial expressions that are clearly inappropriate for an academic/practice journal.

For 6 years, I served on NASW’s National Ethics Committee (NEC). During my 6th year serving on this committee, the pandemic emerged. The committee address the sudden changes that professional social workers would be required to make within the context of ethical practice. The process of therapeutic intervention faced retooling. For example: How does a social worker safely remove a child from an abusive environment during the pandemic? During one of our Zoom meetings to address the pandemic, Shana Swain of NASW and the staff leader of the

NEC asked if we could comment on our personal and professional experiences in dealing with the virus crisis. It took only a few seconds for me to be the first to speak up.

I explained that since my retirement, I continued to maintain a schedule. Even after retirement, my schedule locked me into a position where I could immediately acknowledge the day and usually the date. However, when the pandemic arrived and closures emerged, my work after retirement schedule became unintelligible. I had to make a concerted effort to concentrate on acknowledging the day of the week. Because of my sudden inability to know the day of the week, I missed two consecutive meetings of our hospital’s IRB. The IRB requires a quorum to successfully assess research. The chair was distressed because I confirmed I would attend but failed to live up to my commitment—TWICE. Eventually, I solved the problem by programming my iMac to produce a calendar at every cold boot. Thus, I saw all my monthly obligations and activities every time I turned on my computer.

Members of the NEC had three immediate reactions to my commentary. First, much to my happy surprise, others on the committee confessed to having trouble keeping track of the days. Relief came to me because I envisioned that my lapse of memory was a “senior” issue. Second, to reinforce that I was not alone with my lapse of memory, others on the NEC ask for the program to invoke a computer’s calendar with a cold boot. Third, Dan Liechty (Illinois State University), a member of the NEC with a doctorate in 16th century Reformation history, provided this humorous antidote:

In earlier times, days were often defined by the activities of that day. People knew it was ‘Monday’ because it was wash day; ‘Thursday’ is baking day; ‘Friday’ is market day; and so on. Vestiges of this (and many other elements of earlier society and politics) are still with us, echoed in children’s nursery rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, and such songs.

“This is the day we wash our clothes, wash our clothes, wash our clothes, this is the day we wash our clothes, so early Monday morning” is one I remember singing as a child myself. It went through all of the days of the week, even though by then, of course, technology had ‘freed’ us so that washing day was now any of seven days a week! Personally, in this time of quarantine, I am finding the daily pillbox works as a handy reminder of the day. More than once I have looked to see which is the last empty daily space just to double-check what day of the week it is!

The dialogue among the NEC members was thought-provoking, reassuring, and helpful. I hope all social workers had the benefit of a sounding board during this pandemic.

I wanted to uncover how other social workers addressed the difficulties and their positive actions taken to address the pandemic. Using various online sources, I contacted social workers to briefly address the strategies of personal/professional actions in a paragraph to be shared by publishing their experiences in this editorial. Following are the replies I received, in the order received.

If you would like to have your experiences published as a letter to the editor, email me at smarson@nc.rr.com. For a fast reply, include the word “pandemic” in the subject line.

THE REPLIES

My life changed so very much! I stopped all travel, and I am teaching virtually. I miss travel tremendously, but I also miss my in-person classroom. I believe my classes are so much better in person than over Zoom, although that is better than the asynchronous mode. I simply interact with students better and connect much more in person. I use my body extensively to teach, moving around the room, stopping for dramatic effect, getting close to a student to elicit a response, looking at a student to create discomfort, etc. I feel that I have lost much in my teaching effectiveness, and I mourn it.

Elena Delavega, PhD, MSW
MSW Program Director & Associate Professor

Due to the pandemic, we postponed classes for a week following spring break last March. All classes “pivoted” to online delivery for the rest of the semester. During the summer, all classrooms were reconfigured to permit social distancing, and a “mask expected” mandate was eventually approved, reluctantly, by our Board of Regents. Less than a month before fall classes were to begin, we were informed of the new modality for course delivery. My three face-to-face classes were changed to one online; one face-to-face (45 students in a large lecture hall for over 200); and one hyper-flex, where I was to meet with half the students one day and the other half the next day. In effect, my course load went from 3x3 to 4x4, and I had to go through the quality assurance assessment for the online class. All lectures had to be recorded so that students in quarantine had access. So, on the fly, I had to create weekly reading quizzes, lecture quizzes (to encourage those who did not come to class to actually watch the lectures), and application exercises. For the online class, I had a weekly help session by Zoom for the application exercises. I haven’t put this much preparation time into my classes since my second year here.

Consequentially, I did not get to know any of my new students due to the social distancing and masks. I had more withdraw this semester than I've ever had. We managed to convince an entire cohort of students that class attendance was simply unnecessary. One of the sadder consequences to me was the need to eliminate the nine-month team research project because I felt couldn't require students to work that closely together—and because we would have such limited access to dissemination venues in the spring for their findings. My total scholarly output has been two book reviews and a local presentation. My annual word count is down roughly 55%, and my manuscript reviewing is down a third.

Peter A. Kindle, PhD, CPA, LMSW
Professor of Social Work

Since the pandemic started, I've transitioned to a first-year assistant professor in a new city and state. Although I usually enjoy going into my office and interacting with colleagues, I've been teaching almost completely online and have only met a couple of other professors in person. Working from home has made it difficult to strike a balance between work and rest, but I do my best to maintain normal hours during the week and save the weekends for myself. It's difficult not being able to meet new people and explore a new place, but I have a lot to look forward to once the pandemic ends.

Hope this helps!

Samantha Jo Cosgrove, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Technical Communication
University of North Texas

Since March 2020, I have been inundated with queries from social workers about novel and daunting ethics challenges they face. "Can I provide telehealth services across state lines if my client had to move out of the area suddenly because of the pandemic?" "In what ways do I need to revise my informed consent protocols now that I am

providing services remotely?" "Can you explain the new federal rule concerning enforcement of HIPAA regulations during the pandemic?" "Suppose I am not comfortable providing remote services to a client who is high risk and needs in-person services. What is my ethical obligation?" "What boundary issues might emerge now that I am interacting with clients online so extensively?" "How do I obtain clients' informed consent to treat if I have never met them in person?" The list seems endless.

Frederic G. Reamer, Ph.D.
Professor
School of Social Work
Rhode Island College

Hi Stephen, so glad you are doing this, you are valued! ★

My work has drastically changed in that I am able to get 40h worth of work done in 20 hours. Most tasks are done virtually, and all Psychotherapy is held on a HIPPA-approved platform.

The most significant change has been learning to see the beauty in my life, my family, and surroundings, snuggle my Siamese cats Umi and Winnie Mandela, whom I love. It gave me an invitation to see the importance of rest as resistance, marvel the silver lining in this life, commune with the Ancestors, thank the Creator, and rekindle the magic.

Dr. Felicia Parker-Rodgers, LCSW, BCD, DAC.

The pandemic had a tremendous influence on the internal cooperation within my faculty—especially in the first weeks of the complete lockdown in spring. Since I am the dean of faculty, for a long time I was used to cooperating with my colleagues in a nonhierarchical way. At least in Germany—where the dean is elected for a few years and afterwards someone else takes over—there is very little hierarchy among the professors and teaching staff. It is based on the concept of *primus inter pares*. But especially in the first weeks of the pandemic,

everyone was looking for guidance and leadership. It became clear that in a situation like this, decisions had to be made and colleagues and staff needed orientation. I am not sure if this experience will change the way of future interaction. I actually hope not. But it was definitely quite an experience and actually a burden.

Best wishes,

Stefan Borrmann (Germany)

It is strange to think that, of my limited time in academia of three years, one-third of that time has been during the COVID-19 pandemic. From my perspective, pandemic has been an accelerant for trends in higher education—both good and bad—and, at the very least, pandemic has caused us to engage in a constant assessment and balance of ethical considerations. Through this grappling with the biological, social, political, and economic environments, I have found a faculty and student community who have risen in concerted fashion to meet these challenges. There is a profound sense that we are moving forward together into a new paradigm—that we are already in that new paradigm, though we may not entirely yet understand the full implications of this. Less rosy, however, pandemic in academia has demanded us to be stronger resources and advocates for our students; to recognize the impact of pandemic on our students' mental health, and our own; to work in isolation or communicate through what sometimes feels like an endless matrix of screens; to be more accessible, and perhaps to accept the gradual erosion of boundaries in terms of personal time and space; and finally, to look on as our senior faculty mentors retire. When the pandemic is over, we may be in the best position ever to reconceptualize higher education and its role in contemporary U.S. society.

Dr. Lauren Ricciardelli, PhD, LMSW
Assistant Professor
School of Social Work and Human Services
Troy University

We have taught 75% of our Social Work modules via a mix of asynchronous learning, recorded lectures and live online seminars. 25% has been taught face to face with face coverings and social distancing in place.

Regarding research, I have undertaken a number of online focus groups via MS Teams and helped to organise a webinar to distribute learning. Some of this will be carried forward as it has worked well.

Dr. Gill Buck
Senior Lecturer in Social Work
University of Chester

I am an Associate Professor at Eastern Kentucky University with the responsibility of leading the development of an online Master of Social Work Program. This has entailed a significant amount of work with many meetings across the university, but since March 2020 in response to the pandemic, my workload has shifted to being remote. Timely communication has been essential. I rely more on email, text messages, phone calls, and virtual meetings. I work on my computer a minimum of 8 hours a day. I answer two to three times more emails. This has allowed me to be more productive, but I also have to be more intentional about taking breaks and not looking at my emails during “off” time. Family time has changed too in that I am always at home which allows me to soften my rigorous work schedule. It also allows me to respond to emergent needs. A family pet had a stroke and needed emergency care at a time when I would not have normally been at home. I told my colleagues about this event, as it impacted my ability to attend a virtual meeting. I may not have volunteered this information in the past and so in addition to increased timely communication for task completion, remote work has resulted in more informal sharing that has improved our relationships. I hope remote work extends beyond this pandemic for it has allowed flexibility, productivity, and connection with people and in places that may not have been possible otherwise.

You can use any portion of my email signature below:

Ann M. Callahan, PhD, LCSW
Associate Professor of Social Work

Since I began phased retirement in 2007, my top priority has been taking care of loved ones: my wife until she died in 2017 and since then our new grandson. So the most difficult period for me in this pandemic thus far has been the 62 days during initial lockdown in spring of 2020 when I was not able directly to help with my grandson's care. Now I'm happy to be with him two-three days a week. Professional activities have actually been *more* feasible lately because I don't have to travel for committee meetings, conferences, or workshops. I have been able to teach an online individualized course in supervision ethics for the Minnesota Board of Social Work as well as continue reviewing and copy-editing manuscripts for colleagues and journals like JSWVE. With disparities in meeting human needs so starkly revealed by the new coronavirus, I value all the more social work's person-in-environment perspective and dual focus on both direct services and social change. Social workers are indeed essential.

Anthony A. Bibus III, PhD, LISW
Professor Emeritus
Augsburg Univ. Social Work Dept.

Due to the exponentially increased need for mental health care precipitated by the pandemic and other traumatizing events, I discovered an opportunity to recommit to diligently serving as many people as I responsibly can. Providers face temptations to be "in business," maximizing profit, while neglecting care standards. Each day, I pray to choose dedicated service over selfish ambition and to offer my time, attention, heart, and mind to welcoming, listening, responding to, and caring for clients' well-being. I am grateful for the privilege to serve.

Ravita T. Omabu Okafor, MSW, LCSW
North Carolina

As Winston Churchill famously said, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." As a social work professor and researcher, I have strived to put this notion into practice in light of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic, I put some of my other research projects on hold and started to publish articles and present online workshops related to social work ethics and the use of technology in the times of a pandemic. As many social work practitioners, students, and educators were moving to online practice and education, I wanted to ensure that the ethical principles of respect, social justice, safety, and privacy continued to guide social workers in whatever capacities that they served. Technology allowed me to engage with social workers throughout the United States and beyond its borders. It also enabled me to learn about ethical challenges that social workers were facing in various contexts of practice and with many different populations. Necessity has motivated many social workers to rethink their work and experiment with new methods of practice. As we move bravely into the post-COVID-19 world, we must continue to examine how ethics can inform our practice and possibilities for the people we serve.

Allan E. Barsky, JD, MSW, PhD
Sandler School of Social Work
Florida Atlantic University

I want to share what I have done differently.

I have taken all the required CEU's on-line to maintain my license in 2 different states.

I am participating in more training on-line or virtually.

I am holding classes and office hours virtually. I am virtually interviewing my BSW Students to prepare them for field placement.

I have not participated in a conference since the pandemic.

If I think of anything else, I will let you know.

Cardia Richardson, LCSW
Clark Atlanta University

I'm a dean, so my perspective might be a little different; but here are some of my thoughts:

I find I spend a lot more time checking in with people, seeing how they are doing, listening to their stories. Because I'm also pretty overwhelmed and because there are no impromptu watercooler conversations, I find I need to be much more intentional about it.

I've also found that during the pandemic, knowing the basics of trauma-informed interaction is really helpful, and I've become an informal consultant for some colleagues in other disciplines on how to handle situations, provide effective support, etc.

Finally, I've found that communication is HUGELY important and equally challenging when everyone is remote. I find myself holding daily drop-in Zoom office hours, setting up listening sessions, leaving more time at faculty and staff meetings just for venting and expressions of anxiety and concern, sending out a weekly "dean's digest" summarizing things that are going on that are COVID-related. (During the first 3 months of the pandemic, I was sending them out daily.) ...anything to be transparent and decrease anxiety and help people feel connected.

I've decided the top three things in fighting the pandemic are face masks, sanitizer, and a sense of connection.

Anna Scheyett, MSW, PhD
Dean and Professor
University of Georgia

Thank you for asking us to contribute.

I have learned how to incorporate technology and virtual therapy rooms in my practice. I have become more knowledgeable in the use of Zoom

and breakout rooms to allow my students a private space to make connections. I have learned that you can make a virtual connection and still move clients towards change. I have learned that students are still able to demonstrate skills and competencies doing remote work and I am trusting the process. I have also learned that we are resilient and need human connections more than we thought. I learned that the human spirit adjusts but not without change.

Maggie Dreyer, LCSWR
Director of Field Education, Clinical Instructor
Daemen College

The pandemic's impact on social work education at the University of Georgia brought a range of on-line and hybrid courses, internship experiences that ranged from virtual to face-to-face with masks, PPE in some specialized instances, social distancing, and handwashing, and Zoom meetings. A great benefit was that Zoom enabled me to welcome 13 guest speakers from New York City; Charleston, South Carolina; Athens and Atlanta, Georgia; and Hanalei Bay, Kaua'i, Hawai'i to speak with students live in my course on Grief and Loss. Yes, some students withdrew or took a year off from our program, but many others exclaimed that they learned new things and practice approaches that a traditional, non-COVID environment could not give.

Thomas A. Artelt, MSW, PhD
School of Social Work
University of Georgia

I used to live my work life in a three-dimensional world filled with colleagues and students. Now I live my life, all day every day, in the flat world of the computer screen. Since informal classroom conversations are not possible, I let students know I'll arrive in our virtual classroom 15 minutes before class starts and will be the last to leave. Some students have taken advantage of this for one-on-one or small-group conversations. As the pandemic grinds on, I have found it helpful to remind myself frequently of something I saw early on: *Don't let*

perfect be the enemy of good, and don't let good be the enemy of good enough.

Natalie Ames, MSW, Ed.D.
North Carolina State University

The spring was my last semester teaching. I am on sabbatical this year. I had big plans for my last class. I planned to have a meal for my students and deliver a short talk with what I learned from a long career. Then COVID-19 happened. I took my course online (actually the provost asked us to go online while I was teaching my class) and we had our final meeting on Zoom. The money that was supposed to go the meal was donated to a local restaurant to provide lunches for the nurses at the local hospital. This was disappointing, but my students were safe. I did three dissertation defenses online, and that isn't the same.

I was looking forward to BPD. I was a VISTA volunteer in the jail that was a block from the conference. I was so looking forward to it. I met Marcia in Birmingham and just wanted to be there again. I've attended several conferences online. It's different and there are things that I miss, but you got to see this as a glimpse of the future.

John McNutt, PhD, MSW
Professor
University of Delaware

My placement is with SafeCare at Children First; it is an evidence-based curriculum for parents of children 0-5 years old covering health, safety, and parent-child interaction modules. In the past, the curriculum has been discussed and evaluated face-to-face in the parents' homes. Removing this aspect due to the pandemic created a huge learning curve for my agency. How could we effectively contact, support, and evaluate the parents without actually seeing them? Was it fair to rely on technology? Could it be held against them if they were unable to connect to Wi-Fi? Would they be able to sign a digital document on their phone, if they do not have a

computer? There were many roadblocks that needed to be considered, especially if the parent's progress can be drawn upon in court. I am impressed with the adaptive measures my agency has gone to, to provide accessible support, resources, and curriculum to the parents; however, I believe that providing fully accessible services will require continuous research and adaptations. The global pandemic highlighted discrepancies in accessibility of resources, health care, and employment, amplifying the dire need for adaptability and accessibility.

Colleen Craven, BSW, 2021
University of Georgia

I remember sitting on a bench in the thick of the initial quarantine last spring when I got the call about my Fall 2020 internship placement. I was thrilled to be thinking about a time when COVID would surely be behind us all. I find it unfortunate that it is only because my internship is in a community that does not take the pandemic as seriously that I am able to truly experience an agency with true client interaction. I wonder what I am missing in my education from class discussions with others in my cohort. I've always heard older students talk about the physical School of Social Work feeling like a home, but my kitchen table where I Zoom is my familiar classroom now. I fear pursuing my MSW next year that I will not get the most out of kitchen-table classes and distanced internships. Social work is about togetherness and fostering connection in community and individuals. I long to get back to that.

Maggie Holt, BSW 2021
University of Georgia

One of the things which the pandemic necessitated (and afforded) for me was related to my MSW students in school social work clinical field placements. Suddenly they were expected to provide services online to their student clients, but their field instructors were as uneducated and unprepared as the interns. Having been a school social worker

myself previously, I had done very little in the way of teletherapeutic interventions. So, one of the first things I needed to do was get educated on the best practices myself so I could assist my students who in turn assisted their field instructors. We all learned a great deal. I consider this to be a “silver lining” of the pandemic cloud. This will help me be a better educator and has already broadened my conception of best practices.

Be well. Feed your soul. Provide rest for the weary.

Rhonda

Dr. Rhonda Peterson Dealey, DSW, LSCSW
Washburn University

Social workers are essential in even the best of times; in 2020, the work of our profession was needed more than ever. Like all social workers, the National Association of Social Workers North Carolina had to adapt quickly to the challenges of 2020. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NASW-NC staff pivoted immediately to support the social work profession by advocating for telehealth reimbursement, temporary licensure rules, COVID testing, PPE, and provided ethical and legal resources during a pandemic. All seven of NASW-NC’s conferences were quickly moved to a virtual format to ensure social workers could get their needed continuing education. In June, with mounting violence against people of color, NASW-NC issued a statement and call to action for social workers. The NASW-NC active Equity and Inclusion Taskforce was formalized into a committee that has been hard at work holding NASW-NC accountable to its members and the social work profession for advocating for policies and legislation that advance racial justice and address racism within our own profession. NASW-NC lobbied for social workers and our clients during two legislative sessions from a distance, endorsed candidates and got out the vote for the 2020 election, and continued to be the voice of the profession at the state level. We all did this while we tried to take care of our own mental health, children, partners, communities, and

relationships. The staff and volunteers of NASW-NC are committed to advocating for you because social work is essential and we are devoted to supporting and lifting up our amazing profession. We have much more work ahead, and I’m honored to be in the fight with all of you.

Valerie Arendt, MSW, MPP

Executive Director, North Carolina Chapter NASW

I remember last April when I first learned my field placement in the Fall would be at the Athens Community Council on Aging, a nonprofit organization that works to enhance the well-being and lifestyle of older adults through services and programs in the Athens area. I was so ecstatic to be interning at my field of choice. All I could think was, “*if I can just have this internship in person, I don’t mind being in lockdown for the summer.*” When they ultimately made the decision to hold the internship virtually, I understood the safety concerns with this population being so at risk, but I couldn’t help but feel disappointed that I would miss the hands-on experience. I worried I wouldn’t learn as much if I worked remotely. As classes were held on Zoom, I enjoyed the fact that I could learn from my bed and get to know all of my classmates’ pets, but I couldn’t help but think back to my advisor saying, “*Senior year is the year when the cohort comes together as a family through the shared work and internship experiences.*” During such dark times of our own, while working and learning about clients through our field placement whose struggles we may never fully understand, I longed for that community and closeness that was impossible to build through reaction emojis or chat boxes on Zoom. While the pandemic took so much away from me and so many others in terms of education, internship, and work-life experiences, there were some positive impacts that I saw as silver linings. Thanks to the pandemic, I added the course “Social Work in Healthcare,” a class I hadn’t intended to take but may very well influence my career path. I learned the ins and outs of Google voice and perfected my phone etiquette for my clients through my virtual internship. Most

importantly, it made my passion and value for social work clearer to me. Seeing how minority groups were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the racial inequality that resurfaced because of it, reinforced the importance of my education in this field. My commitment to pursuing my master's degree was solidified so I can continue to learn and be able to provide the resources and skills to better help those in need. The aftermath of the pandemic will be around for years to come, and I want to be equipped to apply solutions learned through my own personal, professional, and academic experiences.

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