

KHC's Response to COVID-19

Kentucky Housing Corporation
Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

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In March 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) became a new reality throughout the United States. In response to concerns related to this pandemic, Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC) had to implement several changes with guidance from Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and our partnering federal agencies. We shut down our building to the public, sent most of our staff home to work remotely, and suspended site visits and inspections to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and to protect the health of staff, clients, partners, and the public.

Understandably, tensions ran high and many of our staff and partners began to panic. Simultaneously, our staff was preparing to convert to a new phone system and at risk of exiting the pension system, where many of the employees have been vested for many years. To quell everyone's fears, we adopted a policy of transparency, regular communication, and levity amid the chaos. We wanted to become a source of reassurance and information for all who needed it.

We began by branding all of our communications with the tagline, "Open for Business. We've been opening doors for Kentuckians for almost 50 years. Ours is still open, too." It built on an existing campaign and helped reinforce that we were still here, still operating as usual, and still committed to providing all Kentuckians affordable housing solutions.

Meanwhile, we created an [internal webpage](#) for staff to consult about everything related to COVID – staying aware of the disease, preparing for it coming to Kentucky, our response, closing the doors to the public, transitioning home, holding virtual meetings, tips for managing work-life balance, new policies, federal benefits, and our phases of transitioning back to the office.

Similarly, we set up an [external page as a resource](#) for our partners and public informing them about our new policies and explaining how to make payments, drop off documents, and conduct business during the pandemic. KHC continued to use the communications vehicles we currently had in place – eGrams, an electronic newsletter to partners where we can make announcements and advertise policy changes and training webinars, all of which are archived on [KHC's website](#); the homepage of our [external website](#), where we could make announcements and direct people to our COVID-19 site; Preparis, our emergency alert system, which we used to make announcements to staff about closing the building; and [NewsBrief](#), an electronic internal newsletter that usually went out twice a week but increased to four times a week during the height of the pandemic. All *NewsBrief* articles are archived, which is also a great tool for management to maintain consistency with messaging.

The Employee Services and Communications and Marketing Services teams began assembling resources for staff, including links to mental, physical, and emotional, health benefits through our insurance provider as well as parenting and homeschooling resources, links to calming websites, ways to stay active and engaged, memes, contests, and games. We offered a [bingo card](#), a [home office photo contest](#), a [scavenger hunt](#), and a [private Facebook group](#) where people could interact and connect.

With 110 of 210 staff as members, the Facebook site seems to be a success. People share pictures, videos, and comments about working from home as well as recipes, memes, observances, and pictures of their family and pets. We pulled pictures from the group to help create a [Mother's Day tribute](#), and it also gives Communications and management another avenue to share corporate or COVID-19 news.

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But sometimes, people need a personal touch. KHC planned to host an open forum with the Communications and Marketing team for staff to speak freely about pension concerns. When everyone started working remotely, we moved the discussion online. [Conversations with Communications](#) became a virtual meeting from 12-1 p.m. ET twice a week to discuss struggles, ask questions, and check in from a distance. The first few of weeks, the meetings were well attended, but they quickly became stale. No one wanted to talk about the pandemic or working remotely. They wanted an escape.

To bring enthusiasm back to the Conversations with Communications, we decide to rebrand the discussion [Thursday Happy Hour](#) and to decrease the schedule to once a week from 12-1 p.m. ET every Thursday. Since the change, individuals have enjoyed the relaxing conversation and planned activities, such as a [cooking demonstration](#), [movie reviews](#), and [several games](#).

After researching how to communicate with employees during the quarantine, we encourage everyone to have their video cameras on throughout the Happy Hour, and we found it made people looser, more engaged, and more connected. We shared that information with leadership and encouraged them to have their team meets with their cameras on and to spend a few minutes each week chatting before delving into work tasks.

A few Thursday Happy Hour attendees said they attend because:

"It's a good way to stay connected to your coworkers and take a break from your workday. We all used to have little chit-chat opportunities in the breakroom or hallways, which we no longer have. These Happy Hour events help to provide that little bit of social interaction."

~Anthony Wright, Multifamily Programs

"The relaxed atmosphere, watching others enjoy themselves whether playing games or just in general conversation for an hour a week is a great change of pace. Everyone cope with stress differently, but this Happy Hour is a great way to destress."

~Gloria Wright, Corporate Planning and Accountability

Attendance has fluctuated based on reopening the Section 8 Waiting List, staffing the call center to offer forbearance and nonpayment alternatives, handling the transition to remote working, introducing and implementing a new phone system, and myriad other demands, but we have a core group, and we continue to add more new members each week.

The cost has been minimal. Including prizes for the photo contest, bingo, scavenger hunt, and Happy Hour, we have spent less than \$500, though prizes could be adapted based on each organization's budgets and available offerings. We offer \$5 and \$10 gift cards as prizes for winners and hosts. In the coming weeks, some of our more talented staff will share some of their skills, including painting and crafting, with Happy Hour attendees.

While we are connecting with our staff internally, our staff has been reaching out to our external partners. In our Single-Family division, our team has been connecting with lenders and real estate agents through a series of videos to say [hello](#), to [remind them](#) that we are still open, to [invite them](#) to contact us, and to explain the [homebuyer tax credit](#). All of these were done at no cost using their own technology. They also ran a [photo contest](#) through their eGram and a [video contest](#) to keep the lenders and real estate agents engaged. The lenders responded with photos of themselves, their kids, their pets,

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and one used the opportunity to announce she was pregnant. It was a way, during a time when some major lending agencies decided to stop working with HFAs, to keep our lending partners close and let them know that we are still here and still care about them.

To comply with state regulations and to keep everyone safe, in March, our Communications and Technology Services teams transitioned all Board of Directors meetings – full board and executive committee – from in-person gatherings to Zoom calls and [live streamed them](#) for the public. We shipped all of the board members tablets that they use typically in person at the board meetings, eliminating the question of their access to technology so that we can have a quorum with everyone visible and audible. The only cost was the shipping. The result was a success. All of the board members participated, many appreciated not having to make the long drive to our office, and KHC was able to quickly make some decisions, including whether to table the pension discussion during COVID-19.

Our executive director created videos encouraging Kentuckians to [complete the Census](#), using submissions and Zoom interviews with partners, and to give them an [update about KHC's progress](#) since we closed our doors publicly. An [extended version](#) of the video was sent to staff to show them the extent of their work and thank them for their dedication.

After seamlessly transitioning home in about a week, without any interruption in service and while juggling home, family, and increased work obligations, the executive management team wanted to show staff their appreciation. They added \$40 to every employee's next paycheck, which amounted to about \$25 after taxes. It was enough for a pizza dinner, but it was a token of their gratitude. Thank you emails flooded the executive director's email in response. People posted pictures of their \$25 dinner on the Facebook site, [thanking KHC](#). It was a chance for the corporation to virtually gather together, and the cost was less than \$10,000.

The executive team also sent the staff a virtual message on [May 1](#) to check in and thank them for their flexibility working at home. On June 11, the [deputy directors](#) sent each of their teams (16 total) individualized messages thanking them for their work throughout the quarantine. It was a chance for them to once again check in and personally thank their staff for their hard work. All of the interviews were done via 8x8, KHC's new phone system, and cost no additional money. We used free songs for the videos, software we already subscribe to (Canva and the Adobe suite), YouTube, and our email and *NewsBrief* system to distribute the messages.

All of these efforts seem small when isolated, but they created a steady stream of communication, reminding people that we are still here, still willing to help, and completely transparent. They were easily replicable and low cost. They simply took the ingenuity, hard work, and quick action of a few individuals combined with the collective buy-in and participation of the full corporation. As a result, KHC has been able to stay connected and engaged even though our employees and partners are spread throughout the Commonwealth, and they all feel informed and settled about the future and direction of KHC.