

THE CHALLENGE

Could Minnesota Housing's staff of 265 maintain a sense of agency identity when it was suddenly thrust into telework? Yes, but only if the communications team pulled out all the stops to knit staff and agency leadership together. And if communications were done well, staff might even say they felt more connected apart than they did when they were based in the same office. Survey results indicate that's the case, thanks to an internal communications tool created on the fly to address our new reality: The Daily. Having The Daily in our toolbox took on extra importance when George Floyd was killed at the hands of police. It occurred in Minneapolis, our state's largest city, and civil unrest broke out in the neighborhoods where many of our staff live. The Daily took on a new level of responsibility as the primary communications vehicle among staff as content expanded to include staff and community reactions to Floyd's death in addition to COVID-19 coverage. In this way a communications tool born of necessity helped a housing agency stay focused, united, and committed to anti-racism in a time that could have divided and splintered us instead, if done poorly or not at all.

INNOVATION

When COVID-19 reached Minnesota and Governor Tim Walz ramped up the state response to the global pandemic, momentum built quickly. It was a whirlwind time for us and undoubtedly for many across the country as businesses and agencies scrambled to transform in-person offices into remote work settings. On Thursday, March 12, Minnesota Housing staff members received notification from the state's Management and Budget office to plan for the possibility of telework. On Friday, we received an official email from the Governor asking all staff to telework if feasible. Theoretically it was feasible for all staff, so as of Monday, March 16, 95% of our staff was working from home.

On Tuesday, March 17, our communications staff sent an original all-staff email and a five-minute video featuring Commissioner Jennifer Leimaile Ho, explaining the state's move to telework and reassuring all staff that we would work together to make it as seamless as possible. By Wednesday, we saw there was a tremendous need for a way to reach all staff on a regular basis. We sent our second all-staff email and video that night. It was clear from the many replies rolling in that people were hungry for information and communication. We committed then and there to creating the email and video every day for the foreseeable future, so the name of the vehicle came easily: The Daily.

At Minnesota Housing we take the Governor's slogan to heart: We are "One Minnesota." This phrase harkens back to Sen. Paul Wellstone's adage, "We all do better when we all do better." Commissioner Ho brought Governor Walz's phrase home, asking all of us to strive to work together as "One Minnesota Housing." Her aspiration appeared quite lofty when "One Minnesota Housing" suddenly had 265 remote offices.

The Minnesota Housing's Communications Team has sent all-staff emails every weekday since telework was initiated on March 16, 2020, including a 4- to 10-minute video featuring Minnesota Housing Commissioner Ho or Deputy Commissioner Rachel Robinson, and sometimes invited guests. The videos are opportunities for agency leaders to speak directly to all staff on a daily basis, explaining new Executive Orders and how they relate to Minnesota Housing staff, and delivering morale-boosting messages recognizing how hard this new telework environment is on so many.

RESPONSE TO AN IMPORTANT STATE NEED

When our staff went home, there was no end to the content. Our technology division had updates on remote settings, Skype for Business, and whether state cell phones were available for telework. HR had information on COVID-19 leave for those whose daycares had suddenly closed, or had other issues that kept them from working. How should we communicate to our partners about the office being closed, but the agency is still open? When would it be safe to return to work?

But more than tech or HR updates, The Daily provided a personal link among all of us. The tone of it is unlike any state communication. It is human, casual and kind, expressing sincere concern for one another. In it, we have shared poetry and uplifting videos, scenes of residents applauding health care workers when their shifts ended, Zoom videos of musicians performing together, apart. We've included photographs of new babies born to co-workers while we were all home, and hummingbirds visiting their feeders. We've created video compilations of our staff's new co-workers: cats, dogs, and babies. Sunrises, sunsets, vistas caught on morning walks. We shared photos of our new work-from-home desk setups. And every day, we include a video of the Commissioner. Some days she's interviewing a colleague, someone who recently completed a degree through the state program, or our HR director to explain changing guidelines as we settle in for at least three more months of working from home, and likely longer. Most days she's on camera alone, speaking directly to the staff. "Hey, Minnesota Housing, it's day 77 of teleworking," or day 22, or day 100, she starts her videos, giving a daily ticker of how far into telework and COVID time we are. She's wished colleagues farewell as they head into retirement, and introduced new team members to the staff. [Commissioner Ho explained the Governor's Stay at Home order](#) and what it will look like as we continue to work from home. She even [read a bedtime story](#) in the voice of Grover to the children of staff parents adjusting to working from home with their young ones nearby.

ACHIEVEMENT OF INTENDED RESULTS

Staff members say they feel closer to the Commissioner now than when we were all together in the office. The video gives her a platform to express what is known and what is not known about the virus and about our office plans to telework for a long time to come. On a daily basis, she has enabled staff to hear from her far more often than they would have in the office.

Comments from staff in the first week include the following:

"Just to let you know and everyone who helps put these together, I think they are fantastic! They are compassionate, acknowledging, and motivating. Thank you!"

"I wanted to let you guys know that I ABSOLUTELY LOVE the daily emails and Commissioner updates. Thank you for putting this together and keep up the great work."

"I wanted to take a minute to say thank you for all you're doing to keep us up to date and informed about not only the pandemic but also things pertaining to agency operation and our individual obligations/resources, etc. The union meeting yesterday made it apparent that Minnesota Housing is unique in that respect. We are lucky to have you and your expertise during this unusual time."

These were among the 25 unsolicited comments we received by email that first week we started them. We had 50 such comments after the first month. After two months of doing the Daily we conducted a survey to see how people were feeling about it. Publishing the Daily every day felt important, and the

Commissioner was committed to creating them for all staff daily, but we wanted to be sure staff wanted to continue to receive them. We received nearly 100 survey responses, overwhelmingly positive. We asked whether The Daily emails and Commissioner's Video Updates helped them feel connected to the rest of the staff and the agency, with 5 being very connected and 1 being not at all connected. We received an average of over 4.3. Comments were affirming:

"Definitely yes. I didn't feel connected with the Agency until these Daily emails.... they help me to know what is going on within other divisions than Accounting/Finance group."

"I appreciate substance and meat to the updates. I like that sometimes the updates are more playful and light-hearted. A good mix of mostly substance with a sprinkle of fun or positive spin is good. Once or twice a week of making the updates upbeat and fun and hearing what our co-workers have been up to, provides a small but necessary lift of positivity to the day."

"I really like having a daily video/highlights for employees to be aware of. I feel more connected on agency-wide news right now than I did while we were in the office."

PROGRAM BENEFITS THAT OUTWEIGH COSTS

The costs are simply staff time, and in the beginning of the pandemic, tending to internal communications became our top priority. For the first month at home, the 3-person communications team spent a significant portion of their time on this project. Their goal was to keep up staff morale. And they did.

No one could have predicted how critical it would be to have a vehicle to reach all staff when George Floyd was murdered at the hands of the police, and civil unrest broke out across Minneapolis and St. Paul. The National Guard was called in, a police precinct burned, and protesters were met with tear gas. The unrest in the Twin Cities quickly spread to other cities across the US and even internationally. But it started here, with some staff "living in a war zone," as Commissioner Ho put it. And our staff of color, in particular, were hurting as they confronted yet another death of a black man at the hands of the police.

The Daily became a critical tool in fostering an anti-racist agency. The [May 27 Daily email included this video](#) of Commissioner Ho talking with consultant [Seena Hodges \("The Woke Coach"\)](#) about the murder of George Floyd and how they were processing it and grieving. Each of our Daily emails since May 26 has included links to articles and resources on issues of racism, such as on self-care, books on anti-racism, articles about community rebuilding efforts, and recognition of Juneteenth. We shared the Governor's reflections on laying flowers at Floyd's memorial, and in our [June 5 video](#), Commissioner Ho talked with two staff members, a leader on our agency's Cultural Competency Committee and our Community Development Director, about the agency's equity work with the state. Commissioner Ho regularly includes comments about the agency's ongoing racial equity work, such as this video from [June 16](#).

This survey comment says it all: "Before the Stay at Home order, as an agency we were sort of siloed. I think this was improving under Jennifer's leadership. Then, when we began to work from home, we also became isolated. In my opinion, these daily emails/videos bring us together in a way that couldn't be done from the office. I think this tool helps create comradery, builds pride in the work that we are doing and creates a sense of common mission: 'One Minnesota Housing.' Thank you again. You are all amazing. I am proud to work for Minnesota Housing."

Subject: The Daily, June 24, 2020
Date: Wednesday, June 24, 2020 at 3:07:52 PM Central Daylight Time
From: Mazullo, Jill (MHFA)
To: #MHFA__Everyone
Attachments: image001.png, image002.png, image003.png, image004.png, image005.png



Greetings, everyone.

It's happened. We've entered the triple digits. It is officially...



Thank you for bearing with all the changes the world – and the state – have thrown at us all. Thanks for making huge changes to how and where you work, for teleworking, for staying safe by staying home, and for doing what you can to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

Be sure to watch Commissioner Ho's video today for her reflections on Day 100, and more.

JUST ONE MINUTE OF YOUR TIME...

How are you doing on Day 100? Please share your thoughts in this [1-minute survey](#) (or less). We're just looking for a word or phrase from you as to how your telework journey is going, and what your hopes are in this brave new COVID-19 world. [Take the survey now.](#)

COMMISSIONER'S VIDEO UPDATE



(Link to video: <https://youtu.be/nf-uicoDAoM> - Produced by Josh Nguyen)

In today's video, not only Jennifer reflects on Day 100 of working from home, but she announces Anne Smetak's new role within the agency and congratulates Tom O'Hern and Rick Smith on their retirements.

NEW GENERAL COUNSEL NAMED

Commissioner Ho is pleased to announce that Anne Smetak has accepted the role as agency General Counsel. Her appointment officially takes effect today.

Her appointment comes as current General Counsel Tom O'Hern prepares to retire. His last day will be July 21. This will provide an overlap period during the transition.

Says Commissioner Ho: "I've enjoyed working with Anne up to this point and look forward to working with her going forward to support the legal team in the important work that they do."

Congratulations, Anne!

POWDERHORN PARK



Just blocks from Mr. Floyd’s deadly encounter with the police, the growing encampment of people experiencing homelessness at Powderhorn Park has drawn national attention. After the eviction at the former Sheraton Hotel, dozens of tents appeared in the park. The park has hundreds of tents and the number is growing each day. On June 19, the Minneapolis Park Board voted to allow homeless encampments in city parks, to “provide refuge space to people currently experiencing homelessness.” See what national news outlets are reporting on the developing local story:

- *New York Times*: [A Minneapolis Neighborhood Vowed to Check its Privilege. It’s Already Being Tested.](#)
- *Next City*: [The Story Behind the Minneapolis ‘Sanctuary Hotel’](#)
- *Mother Jones*: [They Built a Utopian Sanctuary in a Minneapolis Hotel. Then They Got Evicted.](#)

GETTING 8 HOURS OF SLEEP

Has it been difficult to get a full eight hours of sleep each night, or have you had trouble getting to sleep lately? You are not alone. Many people have had poorer sleep because of the pandemic. Vox News has some [tips](#) on how to make your bedroom a sleep sanctuary. Simply taking a 30-minute walk or any kind of cardio can help the body calm down and be physically tired by the end of the day.

THE POWER OF SONG TO BRING US TOGETHER



Over 70 members of the Long Island music scene have united virtually to create [“We Are The World 2020 - The Quarantine Mix, Long Island”](#) to bring hope and healing during the COVID-19 crisis. If you want to step back to Pre-COVID times for a moment, check out this [flash mob version](#) of We Are The World, held at a bookstore in Brasil in 2015. Thank you, Michael Peterson, for sharing these uplifting videos.

Stay safe and be well, everyone.

Jill, Josh, and Amanda

Your Communications Team

Minnesota Housing

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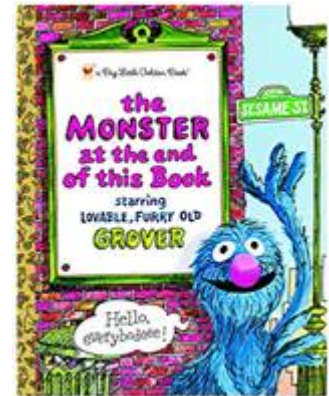
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Subject: The Daily, March 31, 2020
Date: Tuesday, March 31, 2020 at 7:07:27 PM Central Daylight Time
From: Mazullo, Jill (MHFA)
To: #MHFA__Everyone
Attachments: image005.png, image004.png, image008.png, image016.png, image017.png, image018.png, image003.png, image011.jpg, image002.jpg, image009.jpg, image010.jpg

Hi everyone.

Another gorgeous day out there. Hope you managed to soak up a little Vitamin D as you went about your day. I did a conference call this afternoon from my backyard. Bundled up, yes, but in the sunshine. There can be some upsides to working from home.

Of course, many of you are now navigating not only your own work, but the online schoolwork of your children. For those with small ones in your home, our Commissioner Extraordinaire has a treat for you. Truly, it's a treat for all of us. I encourage you to take a look at today's Video Update. That's a teaser on the right. Read on.



Household planning well worth the effort

As a family or household, you can plan and make decisions now that will protect you and your family during a COVID-19 outbreak. Stay informed and in touch:

- Get up-to-date information about local COVID-19 activity from public health officials.
- Ask your neighbors what their plan includes.
- Create a list of local organizations you and your household can contact in case you need access to information, healthcare services, support, and resources.
- Create an emergency contact list including family, friends, neighbors, carpool drivers, healthcare providers, teachers, employers, the local public health department, and other community resources.
- More resources can be found [here](#).

SEGIP has you covered

COVID-19 has led to an enormous amount of change for all of us. SEGIP has made changes too. Their changes provide you with additional insurance coverage, support, and peace of mind. Find more information about your benefits and other resources at the [SEGIP Website](#).

If COVID-19 is changing how you use daycare or commute to work, you can update your pre-tax contributions to dependent care or transit expense accounts. In addition, the federal government passed new legislation that provides more flexibility on how you can use health expense accounts. More information can be found [here](#).

If you have a question on insurance eligibility, enrollment, or your benefits, give us a call at **651-355-0100**. Specific questions about your claims, primary care clinic changes or coverage are better answered by your [health plan administrator](#). For faster service, send forms and documents electronically whenever possible. Email these items to segip.mmb@state.mn.us or fax them to 651-797-1313.

Parking Update

It is frustrating to pay for things or services that we are not using. We pay car insurance on cars that we don't drive because we are following the Stay at Home Order. We pay for museum or gym memberships that we cannot use because the facilities are closed during the Stay at Home Order. Many of us also pay for parking at the Treasure Island Center or Block 19 that we are not using. Realizing this is frustrating, Agency leaders reached out to the ramp owners to ask if they would waive the contract cancellation requirements or to reduce fees during this time, and they are unwilling to do so. Because the contracts are between individuals and the parking facilities, Minnesota Housing does not have the legal ability to intervene in these contracts. We will let you know if either of the facilities notifies us of any changes. In the meantime, interested employees can work with the parking facility to cancel their contracts. Note that there is no guarantee that monthly contract parking will be available when we return to normal operations.

Commissioner's Video Update, or, There's a Monster at the End of this Video



(Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOkrIJrIHEA>)

Stay-at-Home Order – Tracking Office Time

If you are leaving your home to conduct work for Minnesota Housing during the Stay-at-Home Order, whether at the office or elsewhere, we ask you to report when and why.

For each instance where you are working away from home during the Stay-at-Home Order, please email: Hannah Jirak at Hannah.Jirak@state.mn.us and copy your supervisor with the following information:

1. When you worked away from home: Date (ex: 3/30/20) and Time (ex: 2:15PM to 3:30PM)
2. Where you worked: In the Minnesota Housing office, or attending a meeting elsewhere (unlikely)
3. Why you worked away from home: What specific functions you performed, why these could not be conducted from home

Please submit this record as quickly as possible after ending your time in the office or elsewhere. This covers this past weekend and yesterday as well.

A reminder that you can only work in the office or attend meetings away from home if you are providing essential, critical services that cannot be deferred, modified, or completed from home. You and your supervisor should be in contact about the nature of this work regularly, and we now need to ask that you track this time.

Please note that any work travel (meaning, more than your commute) within the state or out of the state has been expressly prohibited for state employees for over a week. Minnesota Housing's ability to have limited staff in the office to perform services does not mean that the travel restrictions are lifted. You cannot travel for work and should contact Rachel Robinson directly if you have questions on that policy. FAQs and other resources are kept up to date at: <https://mn.gov/mmb/be-ready-mn/>

On the lighter side

Twitter is useful for tracking stories in the housing industry. It also offers the occasional cautionary tale.



Lesson of the Day: Have fun in your online meetings, but beware of the cutesy icons.

Be well, everyone.

Jill Mazullo
Communications Director
she/her/hers

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In accordance with Governor Walz's Stay At Home order, nearly all Minnesota Housing employees are working remotely at this time. Our work with you and all of our partners remains our priority.

Subject: The Daily, May 18, 2020
Date: Monday, May 18, 2020 at 11:24:09 PM Central Daylight Time
From: Mazullo, Jill (MHFA)
To: #MHFA__Everyone
Attachments: image001.png, image002.png, image003.jpg, image004.png, image005.png, image006.png, image007.png

Hi everyone,

Welcome to the next phase of the Governor's guidance, Stay Safe Minnesota, which went into effect today. There's more about the how and why of the order on the [Governor's site](#). The recommendation is that we all continue to wear a mask, stay home if sick, wash your hands, get tested if you are not feeling well, practice social distance, and stay home when able. And for us at Minnesota Housing, it means keep teleworking. [#StaySafeMN](#)



A SHOT OF SPRINGTIME

Thank you, Kim Stuart, for sharing a picture of your lovely cherry blossoms.





MYSTERY SUBMISSION!

“My daughter and her husband presented us with this surprise Mother’s Day present; it will be our first grandchild! She is still in her first trimester and we have been asked to not publicly share the happy news yet. I haven’t been able to tell my department coworkers, so sharing this “secretly” is the next best thing!” —
Signed, Secret for Now! Who can this be??



COMMISSIONER’S VIDEO UPDATE



(link to video: <https://youtu.be/qVaChNrXJgE> - Produced by Josh Nguyen)

In today's video, Commissioner Ho talks with Ryan Baumtrog about the closing of the state's legislative session and what it means for the agency. Also, what a special session could mean for the 2020 Bonding Bill.

WFH: STAYING IN BALANCE

Working from home is not easy. USA Today has some [tips](#) on how to cope and reduce stress during these trying times. Some of the tips include mastering your time with a daily schedule, taking time to call a friend or coworker if you miss socializing, and separating work and life activities.

IN THE NEWS

LOCAL

Metro counties have spent \$4 million to rent hotel rooms as emergency shelters

11:46AM



Over the weekend the work of the Interagency Council on Homelessness was highlighted in the Star Tribune. Below is a portion of the article.

"Metro counties have spent roughly \$4 million to rent hotel rooms as emergency shelters to protect the homeless and other [vulnerable people from the spread of COVID-19](#).

Contracts and invoices obtained through public records requests show a county-by-county patchwork of efforts to find and pay for lodging, transportation, food and other services for hundreds of unsheltered people in the seven-county metro, all within a matter of weeks."

HUMMINGBIRD NEIGHBOR

Last week, Diane Kline spotted a hummingbird in front of her yard. The bird is nesting in her pine tree. Can't wait to see the newborns in a couple of weeks. Thank you, Diane, for sending the pictures. Please update us when the babies hatch.



MORE GOOD NEWS!



SGN is back and there is always GOOD in the world! Check out the latest installment of [Some Good News with John Krasinski: The SGN Community Episode](#)

Thanks for reading! #StaySafeMN, and keep sending us your photos and news, whether anonymous or not!

Jill, Josh and Amanda

Your Communications Team

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