

# A TRAUMA SENSITIVE RESPONSE TO COVID-19 FROM ALIVE AND WELL COMMUNITIES



We at Alive and Well Communities wanted to take a moment to present some considerations for how our community responds to COVID-19, through the trauma lens. These suggestions assume that additional core institutions will close and/or must limit the ways they typically engage with community members. It is also assumed that a number of community members will have to self-quarantine and “shelter in place.” These suggestions are guided by the principles of trauma informed care: **trustworthiness, equity, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and safety.**

For ease of reference, we will present these considerations in list format.

- **Student and Staff Safety.** By now, we know that colleges and PreK-12 schools are closing across the country. Some of our students and staff may have physical and emotional safety concerns in their home community/environment. Others may be required to report to work and/or school activities. This may apply to students or employees who have reporting obligations for parole or other court-mandated requirements for engagement with organizations. Schools and other health and human service organizations might consider identifying those individuals in advance and work together to determine the consequences of absences due to mandated school/organizational closure. Developing a collaborative way to address the lack of participation/attendance can prevent unnecessary penalties and decrease the risk of retraumatizing individuals for circumstances that are out of their control. Additional considerations include:
  - Given that students will be at home and teachers will be unable to readily observe their condition/needs, consider “triaging” students (prioritizing based on need) for virtual home visits and/or family check-ins.
  - Consider triaging students and coordinating with mental health service providers for home visits or tele-health services.
  - Some students rely on time in school to receive items like toiletries and clothing. Consider coordinating with merchants, pantries, and volunteers to supply and provide care packages of these items.
- **Challenging Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia.** COVID-19 has brought with it a rise in anti-Asian racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and violence. Students of Asian descent have been experiencing increased bullying in schools and public transportation riders have been violently attacked. Unfortunately, this racism is not new: historically, global crises have led to scapegoating and blaming people of color. School and organizational leaders have an important opportunity to educate students and employees and prevent racist and discriminatory behavior.
- **Mitigating Financial Instability and Lost Income.** Yahoo Finance recently revealed a research report from Deutsche Bank that suggests 15 million Americans could lose their jobs due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Jobs loss could affect health, home, and auto insurance payments, housing costs, the ability to meet transportation costs, as well as the ability to secure food and medicine. The reality is nearly 8 in 10 Americans live paycheck to paycheck. Essentially, the closure of core institutions/businesses could destabilize stable households and further deprive households that currently struggle.
  - We encourage organizational leaders and communications and human resource directors to subscribe to diverse news sources and routinely share updates with their employees and stakeholders about ever-evolving government programs that can support community members during this time of crisis.



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- While some jobs are dependent upon face-to-face interaction, organizations might think creatively about how to realign job tasks/roles/project completion in order to maintain company viability as well as lessen the financial impact of an organizational shutdown on employees and their families.
- Consider developing work reassignment policies and processes. Often there is a lot of work to be done and not enough time to clear our to-do lists. The event of an organizational shutdown may present an “opportunity” to reassign tasks to workers who have the interest and competence to work on unfinished projects/products. This approach could leave the organization better equipped to respond to identified but unmet market needs while also supporting workers’ financial stability and security. Work reassignment would need to be approached with equity prioritized so that all in the organization feel the assignments are fair, unbiased, and potentially, are based on need (e.g. single parent/single income households, medical fragility, and insurance dependency).
- **Shoring Up Digital Collaboration Resources.** With the [CDC recommending “social distancing”](#) as one of the primary methods to slow or prevent transmission, [consider investing in digital platforms](#) that allow teams to collaborate and work seamlessly from offsite. Some platforms and internet service providers are offering trial, reduced cost, or free services at this time. There are many [digital collaboration resources](#) including shared drives hosted on your organization’s server(s) or through private tech companies and video conference/meeting platforms. Establishing work from home policies and providing [tips for maintaining a home office](#) can help staff stay productive and well. An organization might also consider the extent the policies, reports, procedures, and other work documents are on paper and not in digital format that can be securely accessed by workers offsite.
- **Caregiving in the Event of Isolation/Shutdown.** Now is an ideal time for health and human service organizations (including schools) to partner with entities that provide for the material needs of their vulnerable students/families, patients, clients, and colleagues. To be prepared to support those needs, organizations might consider the following:
  - As more organizations are considering shutting down, consider work reassignment to develop or reinforce an internal “community service” unit of the organization to be staffed by those with a social work or community health work background. These professionals could fully develop the referral lists and referral relationships with community organizations that provide food, housing assistance, support with paying utilities, as well as medication and food delivery. The “community service” unit could also work virtually, if your organization has the technology for digital and virtual collaboration.
  - As organizations consider workplace hours and employee supervision, we encourage being flexible. With school closures and childcare concerns, flexibility will support employees’ ability to meet the needs of their family members and balance work expectations.
  - We encourage families and caregivers to connect with their local or state homeschooling association to get strategies and connect with a social network of caregivers who are leading the home-based education of their students.
  - Those with a history of depression may be more vulnerable if they must quarantine alone. If you are vulnerable to disease transmission, you might collaborate with your doctor(s) in advance to develop a plan for prevention that includes maintaining psychological well-being.
- **Food Security.** For some of our students, the meals they receive in school are the only food they are ensured in a day. In fact, [11 million children \(and 26 million adults\)](#) do not have access to [enough food to support an active and healthy existence](#). If schools are not in session, the backpack programs that send food home with students for the weekend may not operate to full efficiency and effectiveness. To promote continued food security, schools, grocery stores, suppliers, and shelters might partner to develop food delivery and/or pick-up systems that limit exposure for workers and recipient families.



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- Some districts are working with their food service staff to provide two to three meals per day to families in need.
- In some cases, restaurants are providing free meals to families in need.
- The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has posted [COVID-19 related information about nutrition and wellness](#).
- **Validating and Managing the Natural Fear Response.** Fear of the unknown as well as the potential for a community shutdown have caused families to bulk buy and prepare for sheltering in place. This has raised fears about resource scarcity (will there be enough resources for everyone) as well as apprehension and judgement when others cough, sneeze, or sniffle.
  - We have to extend extra compassion and transparency with our neighbors and colleagues with compromised immune systems or those who are family members of those with health complications. According to public health experts, [those with existing health conditions](#) are at greatest risk for severe reactions to COVID-19.
  - Implementing clear policies and procedures as well as communicating those policies/procedures in a timely fashion can mitigate some of the fear caused by uncertainty. Be honest and vulnerable enough to say, “we are currently working on it” and then circle back to clarify decisions. Most stakeholders are not looking for perfection. They are seeking opportunities to share their wisdom and concerns. They are also seeking leadership that can relieve stress and reassure them that you are thinking systematically and planning ahead.
- **Volunteering and Giving.** Many of our stakeholders at Alive and Well have inquired about opportunities to give during this time. Here are several considerations for volunteering and practicing generosity.
  - It will take a community response to ensure all families have what they need. [Our health depends on the ability and will of community members to sanitize surfaces, treat their symptoms, and wash hands appropriately.](#) Hoarding cleaning supplies and health-related resources can prevent families from protecting themselves and us.
  - As we recognize the fact that our neighbors may not have the financial resources to accumulate 2 weeks of food, toiletries, and health-related supplies, we can consider buying a bit extra (not hoarding) to assist any neighbors in need, if able.
  - Since those with weakened immune systems and the elderly are at particular risk for complications, consider how younger family members and neighbors might deliver needed supplies to elders.

It is an understatement to say that the COVID-19 outbreak has changed life as we know it. We know this too shall pass, but in the meantime, there are significant adjustments that can be stressful. These adjustments can compound the trauma and toxic stress of communities, organizations, families, and individuals. We encourage individuals to reach out to their medical and mental health service providers or local referral hotlines as [the self-quarantine and “social distancing” practices affect their well-being.](#)

There are many additional ways organizations have and can collaborate to support our communities being Alive and Well. We encourage continued collaboration within institutions and among partnering organizations. Now, more than ever, we need to break the silos of expertise and information. We can bring our collective talents and passion for trauma-informed communities to bear on our rapidly changing circumstances related to COVID-19.

As we undertake this journey together, don't hesitate to reach out to us via email ([info@awcommunities.org](mailto:info@awcommunities.org)) or on social media.

For our communities' well-being,

*The Alive and Well Communities Team*



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