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Housing in a Pandemic

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Your experience during COVID-19: I began working from home in mid-march with my 3 year old toddler at home. My partner works in Custodial at Gonzaga and still had to report to their campus. We discussed the vast difference between the response of the two universities (which obviously have very different resources). I would often start work before 6am so I could have some uninterrupted time before my toddler would wake up. I went back to working on campus in mid-July 2020, only working from home if my child, or I, had symptoms of COVID (darn near any symptom in the history of humankind).

Housing in a Pandemic

In March of 2020 the world shut down, our students went on Spring Break, some never came back. Faculty and staff went home. Students evacuated, home offices the new way of life; Zoom meetings our only visual connection with people outside of our homes. The hauntingly empty campus, some may say boarded up campus, was the image of March 2020, but it wasn't the full picture.

An "empty" campus is not actually empty. The operations of running a physical campus, even if classes are online, are wide and varied; EWU Police patrols, Custodial sanitizes, Trucking adjusts furniture, Grounds mows and weeds, the Paint Shop creates signage, Maintenance keeps things running and addresses facility issues that inevitably arise. Dining Services is available to serve them all, as well as our students. I cannot name every department that still had people working on campus, but trust me, The Eastern Washington University Cheney campus was not abandoned.

Housing is never closed - full stop. There are always students to serve. There is always something that needs to be cleaned, to be fixed. There is always someone on-call for lockouts or responding to emergencies. There is always someone on campus.

The first few days, or maybe weeks, were a constant barrage of changing information and priorities which produced a plethora of questions. Updates came from the Executive Leadership Team at first daily, sometimes multiple times a day. New email, new direction, new email, tweak in the phrasing, pivot, pivot, PIVOT! Stay home, take what you need from your office, classes will be online, Housing is open; Housing is only open for students who don't have a safe place to go; students may continue to reside in Housing.

Some of the most immediate responses to the forthcoming budget shortfall were layoffs across campus. The Facilities and Auxiliary staff were laid off in short order to bare minimal staffing.

Pre-pandemic, we started with roughly 1600 residents in the Residence Halls and approximately 150 residents in our University Apartments. We had about 80 student employees, and 14 full-time Housing staff. We lost our student staff immediately. Through job searches and reorganization, most of the full-time staff that ended up leaving our team were able to find employment elsewhere. By the end of June, the Housing Team consisted of 7 full-time staff.

In Housing, we had a team of Housing Operations people who were working from home, many of whom had children of varying ages acting as their "co-workers." We also had our dedicated team of Residential

Life Coordinators (RLCs), the professionals who LIVE IN the Residence Halls were our boots-on-the-ground team, tethered to campus, rotating on-call duty 24 hours a day.

Colleagues across campus who were solely working from home were navigating how to connect with students in a virtual environment. In Housing we were planning, adjusting, consolidating buildings, identifying new problems, coming up with solutions, executing. We emailed and called students. Are you going to continue to live with us? Do you live here still? Did you take your belongings? Do you have your key? When are you coming back to get your belongings? RLCs were knocking on doors, checking on rooms, and verifying who was still on campus. Was a human actually living in that space or was their stuff just still there? RLCs would meet students who had come to move their stuff out; often the RLCs would wait for hours or get calls late at night to let a student into the building so they could pack. Custodial staff helped to pack up rooms and belongings for students that abandoned their property. Our final Spring number was 178 residents in the Residence Halls and roughly 125 in the Apartments. The unplanned mass exodus did not happen easily or overnight.

The Summer of 2020 was the season of pivoting in mid-air. We received direction from the Spokane Regional Health District. We need an isolation building, only use every other shower and sink, create space where it doesn't exist, no using lounges, move all the furniture out of the building so no one can congregate - that isn't feasible, ask Trucking for help, move and wrap furniture. Assign the students for the Fall, change to single rooms, reassign the students into single rooms, work on custodial's plan for sanitizing, plan maintenance protocol, attend virtual meetings with Housing professionals across the country to see what they are doing, order Plexiglas for offices, adjust the number and which buildings will be used, update custodial and maintenance, reassign the students, watch how semester schools responded, tweak our protocols, re-envision move in, we need a quarantine building too, hire student staff, wear a mask, no socializing, social distancing!

In Fall of 2020, we got to put all the planning into practice. Our drive-through move-in was incREDible and we will likely do something similar for years to come. We were so excited to see our students; well, their eyes anyway. Masks were imperative, we spread the word about masks, email, signs, presentations, social media, waivers, reminders. Wear your mask at all times when you are out of your room, yes of course you can shower or brush your teeth without your mask on but put it on immediately after. Don't be the mask police, but they need to wear their masks.

People work in Housing because they want to be a part of an organization that makes a difference in the lives of students and because it is fun. Students crave connection and helping provide that connection is what we are good at; COVID protocols crippled our efforts in many ways. Students must stay in their room, they can't be in the lounges. Mental health issues are on the rise in the United States, check-in on our students. How is their mental health? No, we can't open the lounges. No socializing. Our very small live-in staff of RLCs, Community Advisors, and Apartment Community Managers worked to connect with students across four residence halls and two apartment complexes. Fewer people to do shifts, similar amount of work; fewer people to be on-call, same amount of time to cover.

Students were socializing; some were moved to isolation or quarantine. Work with our incredible team of campus partners. Get the call from Health and Wellness, provide access, facilities needs to know someone is going to Q or I. They don't need to know who, just the room. Get the red bin to the room, change student access to buildings, meet them to exchange keys, don't get too close, can't afford to get sick, use sanitizer - set the keys down and have the student grab them from a safe distance. Tell the

student to order the food, Dining prepares, Trucking delivers, Custodial cleans at night, all staff that enters the building must suit up. Check on the student, arrange for the move back, redo access, red bin so they can move their belongings back, exchange keys, welcome back home. We had COVID cases, but nowhere near as many as were off-campus. Between March of 2020 and March 2021 there were 44 COVID cases on campus; off campus during the timeframe there were 294 student COVID cases.

Between Fall 2020 and the end of Winter 2021 Washington State had a few changes of phases and protocols. Higher education had its own separate changes. Single bedrooms were classified as a household. First, we were able to have two people sitting at a table in the PUB if they were eating; by mid-November, it was only one. During Winter Quarter we moved to our new Phase 2. We were able to open some lounges but you could only have one person at a time unless we were doing something academic. Off-campus restaurants could seat up to 5 at a table with a max of two households. On-campus you could have a max of 2 households, we have single rooms. Max was two people.

Campus had a very different vibe through Fall and Winter. Several of the athletics teams were able to compete; both basketball teams were able to compete, but students were not allowed into the stands. Football deferred their season to Spring; they were not allowed to have any fans in the stadium for the first home game. The Housing team was creative about ways they were able to engage students during this time. We had an event where we scoped out the rooms in Dressler, which was unoccupied, to find 10 rooms that had great views of the field. We then invited 20 students to watch the game from the Dressler "box seats." Students loved this event and we loved seeing how happy they were enjoying this small but significant piece of the Eastern experience.

Here we are now at the end of Winter Quarter. On Monday 3/22/21 we move into Phase 3 of the Governor's plan (the second Phase 3 if you are counting). Vaccines are rolling out. We have plans to have double rooms next year and we have hope that next academic year will be a little more normal. Our campus partners have been amazing to work with. Though it is clear that they feel burdened by the lack of staff and limited resources, they never gave up; they continued to work to keep our campus safe for our students, and for each other. Throughout the last year, our Housing team experienced a lot of ups and downs. As an individual would break down, the others would pull them back up. At times it felt like we were drowning, but there was never a moment that it felt like we were not all on the same team, supporting each other, and our students who lived with us. Our team is still small but mighty; they give me hope that we will make it through this.