

Leadership During Crisis: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

NORTHERN KENTUCKY COMMUNITY ACTION COMMISSION

Service Areas	Boone County, Campbell County, Carroll County, Gallatin County, Grant County, Kenton County, Owen County, Pendleton County
Locations	25
Main Office Location	Covington, KY
Leadership	Catrena Bowman-Thomas, Executive Director J.C. Morgan, Former Board Chair (retired July 2020) Aurelia Rodriguez, Current Board Chair
Staff Size	155
Annual Budget	\$20 million
Board Size	24
Major Program Areas	<p>Family Services Financial Assistance Food Security Financial Empowerment Health Care Enrollment Online Resources</p> <p>Housing + Weatherization Weatherization Affordable Housing Home Ownership</p> <p>Career Readiness YouthBuild of Northern Kentucky Senior Employment Program Scholarships Lincoln Grant Scholar House</p> <p>Children's Services, Head Start/Early Head Start Head Start Early Head Start Community Collaboration for Children Child Care</p>

INTRODUCTION

Catrena Bowman-Thomas picked up her office phone and called Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission's (NKCAC) board chair, J.C. Morgan. She had just left an early March 2020 executive leadership team meeting at NKCAC headquarters in Covington, Kentucky, and had a lot to report. The team had discussed the increasing uncertainty and chaos surrounding the coronavirus (COVID-19) threat. More and more, it looked like the Community Action Agency (CAA) would have to close its doors in some capacity. Amidst the myriad of issues weighing on Bowman-Thomas' mind, top of the list was how to balance meeting the needs of the community with keeping NKCAC staff safe. With no precedent for pandemic planning and little guidance to determine the best way to proceed, Bowman-Thomas and the leadership team recognized that they needed to meet daily and act fast to put the pieces in place to prepare for the pandemic and a possible closure of the agency's 25 locations across 8 counties. Working in tandem with the CAA's board would be instrumental to these efforts, and Bowman-Thomas wanted to begin immediately. When Morgan picked up the phone, the two exchanged their usual greeting and then started talking about how to best steer the organization through the pandemic.

TECHNOLOGY AND A CULTURE OF COMMUNICATION

The first priority for Bowman-Thomas was to ensure that each member of the executive leadership team could be fully capable of working from home at a moment's notice in the event of a shutdown. For a CAA set up for face-to-face interactions between staff and clients, the concept represented a significant shift—one that required a sizable investment in the technological capacity of the organization to procure new equipment and set it up quickly. But the leadership team felt it necessary if high level processes, including the ability to draw money and run key organizational operations, were to continue during an agency closure. Bowman-Thomas reported these decisions to Morgan in real time.

Morgan understood Bowman-Thomas' concerns better than most. He had served as a board member for 10 years and cared deeply about the organization. This year, his third as board chair, would be his last before his board term expired, and he wanted to ensure a smooth transition. He also related to Bowman-Thomas as an executive director navigating the crisis. As the Executive Director of the Campbell County Public Library, Morgan was accustomed to being responsible to a board of directors and was also navigating the impact of the pandemic at his own organization. Given his experience, he appreciated the respective roles of executive directors and board members and respected the boundary between them. He also knew the

importance of openness between an agency's leader and its board chair.

Even before the pandemic, Bowman-Thomas and Morgan spoke on a weekly basis, a pattern established from the time the board first hired her as executive director and they would check in two or three times a week. By early 2020, they had built a strong working relationship based on this continuous communication and the mutual trust it fostered. In addition, since the executive leadership team attended nearly every board meeting, board members and agency executives already knew one another. Board members trusted management's competence and skill, and senior staff trusted that board members had the best interests of the organization at heart.

Bowman-Thomas decided to regularly update the board throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. She wrote weekly updates on issues such as new sources of funding and staff developments, and sent them to each board member. When the executive leadership team needed to get board approval on a revised policy or another action, Bowman-Thomas communicated that need to Morgan, who ensured that the issue was raised at the next regular board meeting. If a matter required more urgent action, he called a special meeting of the board. The board members understood the chaotic nature of the crisis and what it could mean for the agency and members of the community. They were willing to do what was necessary to stay informed, attend meetings, and support the organization.

Certain regular board processes helped ensure that when the pandemic hit and board meetings went virtual, board members remained informed, engaged, and ready to act. For a number of years, board members had received board meeting packets and updated reports about the CAA via email. The board also maintained a Dropbox account where old meeting packets and meeting minutes were stored and easily accessible. These practices helped NKCAC and its board meet the growing challenges presented by the pandemic, including procedural concerns and compliance issues associated with holding virtual meetings.

KENTUCKY OPEN MEETINGS LAWS AND COVID-19

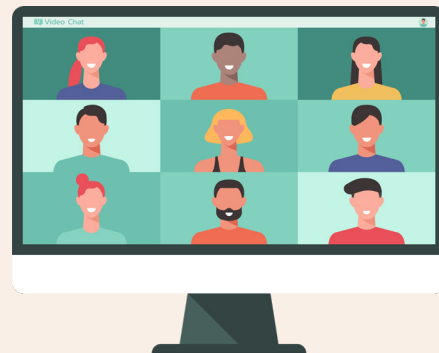
Every two months, NKCAC's full board held its regular meeting. The board's executive committee met on the months in-between. Though members had always met in-person, the realities of the pandemic forced the board to go virtual in the spring of 2020. As board members embraced the technology necessary to participate via phone and video conference, NKCAC still had another participant to consider: the public. In Kentucky, the state open meetings laws apply to both nonprofit and public CAAs. This means that CAAs must post where and when board meetings will take place so that members of the public may attend. This created an additional wrinkle as NKCAC planned its virtual meetings for the board.

Fortunately, NKCAC leadership was aware of some relatively recent developments that helped the organization comply with state open meetings requirements. In 2018, the Kentucky state legislature had amended the Open Meetings Act to allow public meetings to be conducted virtually, provided that each participating member could be seen and heard on the video and/or audio feed. In March 2020, state authorities increased this flexibility when the governor of Kentucky signed Senate Bill 150 on the state of emergency in the state due to COVID-19. Among other things, this bill allowed agencies subject to state open meetings requirements to hold those meetings via live video, or live audio teleconference if the agency lacked the technological capacity or availability to use video, during the state of emergency declared by the governor's March 6, 2020, Executive Order 2020-215 in response to COVID-19.

During the pandemic, NKCAC first adopted the phone conference for board meetings in April 2020, and later transitioned to a video platform. For board meetings that required public notice so that people could attend, NKCAC posted upcoming meeting dates and times on its website's events calendar. The announcements included information about the board meeting and an organizational contact's email address. Interested members of the public were instructed to email the listed contact in order to obtain dial-in information and/or a link to the virtual meeting feed. Though ultimately no members of the public attended the meetings, these were important steps toward compliance with state open meetings requirements.

Morgan admitted finding the virtual medium awkward at first. As the board chair in charge of taking votes, it was time-consuming to call out individual names when taking a vote. The board also experienced small hiccups as it adjusted to the video platform functionality. During one of the first virtual board meetings, the group experienced technical difficulties getting the agenda on the screen. But the board members remained patient and persisted, and soon efficiency improved.

Importantly, none of these issues prevented the board from performing its essential board duties or complying with open meetings requirements. During the pandemic, all board meetings continued as scheduled, with additional special meetings called by Morgan at times when certain issues needed to be discussed and voted on. Crucial among these issues were new and revised personnel policies that required due consideration and approval from the board.



POLICY AND STAFF CHANGES

NKCAC amended several personnel policies in response to the pandemic. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act expanded eligibility for paid sick leave and emergency Family and Medical Act (FMLA) leave for qualifying reasons related to COVID-19 that NKCAC policies needed to reflect. The Office of Head Start and other funders issued various instructions that gave more latitude to CAAs to pay staff even if they were unable to work remotely, but often that latitude required that an organization's board approve emergency paid leave along with revisions to its personnel policies.

NKCAC amended its FMLA policies to account for the changes, relying on guidance from its attorneys, human resources groups, and its own human resources manager. Staff health and safety guided these efforts. The revised policies provided full paid leave wherever possible for as long as possible. When Bowman-Thomas needed the board to consider these policy changes, Morgan quickly called special meetings and the revisions were presented, discussed, and approved. The board had taken action in recent years to attract and retain its talented team, and it felt that furloughing employees during the pandemic would convey to them the message that they were expendable. The board and executive leadership remained committed to these priorities and did not lay off any employees during the pandemic.

NKCAC even went further and arranged to pay some employees more. The leadership team took the issue of hazard pay to the board and explained how they felt it important that those out in the community interacting with people receive additional compensation. The board agreed, and a new hazard pay policy was implemented for those employees whose jobs put them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Of the policy changes, Morgan said: "We didn't have any problems with the board raising an eyebrow at anything Catrena was doing. We have a lot of faith in her and her ability, so I don't recall anybody having an objection to changes in procedure or policy."

The employees set to receive the hazard pay included a new "Food Squad." State authorities had asked child care centers across the state to close on March 20, 2020. As a result, NKCAC's Child Development Center and Head Start

programs had closed. Not only were children in those programs not receiving the educational benefits of the Head Start and Early Head Start programs, they were also not getting the breakfast and lunch provided at the Center. The executive leadership team recognized that this was a gap that existing staff could fill. NKCAC reassigned 25 staff to the new food team, many of them teachers and administrative support staff for Head Start and Early Head Start. They embraced the change and even wore shirts that read "Food Squad." NKCAC formed partnerships with food banks and distribution sites in northern Kentucky. Each week, staff distributed hundreds of boxes of food to families either by delivering them to homes or from a drive up location. The boxes for Head Start families even included educational packets for kids. Bowman-Thomas kept the board informed throughout. Morgan called the pivot to food distribution "an amazing feat." He added: "That's just not something that the agency did. It seemed like it happened overnight. The car pulls up, trunk pops up, put the box in the back, car is gone, no contact. It's awesome."



NKCAC ensured that staff stayed connected during the shutdown. As the pandemic progressed, it enhanced regular communications throughout the agency with the adoption of new technology. Staff increasingly utilized video conferencing to communicate with one another on a more regular basis. The organization held organization-wide staff meetings over the Zoom platform once or twice a week. This allowed staff to stay in touch across the organization, with both leadership and staff able to hear from one another about issues and concerns.

LEARNING LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

By the end of July 2020, NKCAC Head Start locations had been closed for 16 weeks. The agency's eight Neighborhood Centers also remained closed during the height of the pandemic, but offered services virtually over the phone throughout that time, and reopened for in-person services in mid-June. As part of its broader reopening plan, at the start of August, the organization cleaned and reconfigured all 25 of its locations. NKCAC wanted to go above and beyond the "Healthy at Work" reopening guidelines issued by the state. It set up cleaning stations with hand sanitizer, gloves, and masks just inside the entrance of each location. It purchased and installed plexiglass dividers for every workstation separating staff from clients. It measured and marked waiting areas so that people could stand six feet apart. Organizational leaders prepared annual program budgets that allocated more funds to maintenance and cleaning. These additional allocations were approved by the board.



Despite these efforts, three employees tested positive for COVID-19 in the first week the CAA reopened. Bowman-Thomas learned that staff were still traveling to several agency locations because that was what their jobs had always required. After hearing about the third confirmed case of COVID-19, she called Morgan. As executive director, she had the authority to close the agency, but she first wanted to notify him of the confirmed cases and discuss potential options. She then decided to close the agency locations down again for two weeks. The locations underwent a deep cleaning during those two weeks, and NKCAC adopted an employee policy that required staff members to stay in their assigned building. Morgan, who was dealing with similar reopening issues at the library, advised Bowman-Thomas to stagger schedules for CAA staff in the same department so that entire departments would not be sent home should someone in that department contract the virus. The agency reopened after two weeks at 50 percent capacity with new

measures in place to protect the health and safety of staff while providing essential services to the community.

NKCAC would carry these lessons learned forward, with Head Start programs scheduled to reopen in late September. Leadership continued to prepare and plan for that reopening, as well as the continued uncertainties related to COVID-19, as best they could. As expected, Morgan left NKCAC's board in July 2020, succeeded as board chair by Aurelia Rodriguez. Reflecting on his time at NKCAC, Morgan noted: "Working for a board and being chair of a board I knew where that boundary is, and you've got to trust the...executive director to do the right things and she in turn has got to communicate with you and tell you the things that she is doing...If there's anything that another agency should have I think it is that trust level between executive director and board."

Speaking via video platform in mid-September 2020, Bowman-Thomas and Morgan greeted one another and reflected on events of the spring and summer. They had helped NKCAC navigate those early days of an unprecedented pandemic. It posed unique challenges and tested the organization, its staff, and members of the board. As summer turned to fall, the virus remained on everyone's mind. Bowman-Thomas expected challenges to continue. But NKCAC staff and board members had met those before. With its reliance on good governance, communication, and professional relationships built on trust, the executive leadership team and board members stood ready to do so again.

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