

Bringing Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services teammates closer together

Health Equity Taskforce Forms to Address COVID-19 Disparities

Josie Rodriguez has led the Office of Health Disparities & Health Equity for the past nine years, handling outreach efforts into minority communities in Nebraska. More recently, she participated in assembling a multidisciplinary task force to examine the ethnic and racial disparities around COVID-19.

These disparities are nothing new.

“COVID-19 really shed light on health and social inequities that have existed for centuries,” she said, adding that the numbers that became available in the spring showed a need to mitigate these disparities.

Based on the data that was available on Oct. 5, 2020,

Hispanics accounted for approximately 29% of the positive cases, 31% of hospitalizations, and 19% of the COVID deaths in Nebraska. Asians accounted for approximately 4% of positive cases, 5% of hospitalizations, and

4% of deaths. African Americans accounted for 6% of positive cases, 8.5% of hospitalizations, and 7% of deaths. American Indians accounted for approximately 1% of the positive

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Josie Rodriguez speaks at Gov. Pete Ricketts' Spanish-language COVID-19 briefing.

Kristine Cornman Learns Identity of Birth Mother, Connects with Sister

Back in December 2019, Connections told you the story of Kristine Cornman. The Lincoln social services worker was adopted when she was 7 days old and raised in the northeastern part of Nebraska.

(See original story [here.](#))

Cornman began looking for her birth parents in earnest several years ago, beginning by entering her genetic record into online databases. In that manner, she identified several fifth or sixth cousins, whom she contacted. One of those distant relatives was able to give Cornman an unused genetic kit from Ancestry.com,

which has the largest family-tree database.

That test led to the discovery of some second cousins, but was ultimately disappointing.

“At least I was able to know my nationality,” she said at the conclusion of the interview in

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Meet the Man in Charge of Contact Tracing

Jeff Fry was hired in June to be the Director of Contact and Care in the Department of Health and Human Service's (DHHS) contact tracing efforts.

Contact tracing is one of the keys to slowing the spread of COVID-19. Those testing positive for COVID-19 receive a call from a health department contact tracer who asks about symptoms, general health, who they've had

extended contact with, and where they spent time while capable of spreading the virus.

"It sounds like a medical job, but it's really a call center job, and that's my background," the Grand Island native said.

Reporting to Felicia Quintana-Zinn and others in Public Health, Fry is basically the hands-on manager of DHHS's COVID-19 contact tracing efforts, he said,

controlling the workflow of contact tracers.

Speaking during the last week of June, he said he was currently working with three vendors that are providing contact tracing services as DHHS begins to taper off its work in that role. They are located in Omaha and in other Midwestern cities. At full capacity there will be

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Health Equity Taskforce to Address COVID-19 Disparities [\(continued from page 1\)](#)

cases, 2% of hospitalizations, and 2% of deaths. These are alarming rates because Nebraska's total minority population makes up less than 20% of the population in Nebraska. Hispanics account for 11% of the population, Asians 2.7%, African Americans 5%, and American Indians 1.5%.

As a result of concerning numbers in late May, Governor Pete Ricketts tasked DHHS to create a Multi-Disciplinary Health Equity task force to look at the data and come up with strategies to mitigate these disparities. The first meeting took place July 27. The group will continue meeting once a month through the end of the year with the goal of providing recommendations to mitigate COVID and to reduce health disparities and advance health equity in Nebraska.

Recommendations will be provided to DHHS and the Governor by December 31, 2020.

Twenty-one stakeholders representing community-based organizations, advocates, FQHC's, health departments, and other organizations that work with minority populations in Nebraska

are part of the task force.

"It was important for us to ensure we included the community voice into the task force," Rodriguez said, adding that all regions of the state are represented.

In addition, the task force will focus on strategies based on the needs of diverse communities across the state, potentially dividing itself into differing committees – however it is thought best to approach the problem. Rodriguez's office, as having the greatest connection to this work, will provide support services.

"Unfortunately COVID exposed the health disparities and inequities various populations face, but it's provided us with an opportunity to address disparities on a systematic level," she said.

"The social conditions in which people live, work, and play have a huge impact on one's health. The higher rates of COVID that we are seeing among minority populations are a combination of these social determinants of health and the health disparities that are a result of decades of inequities in income, education, housing, health

care access and other social conditions," Rodriguez said.

Racial and ethnic minorities often times work in essential professions sometimes keeping them in close contact with each other, like meat processing, or in the service industries, making it difficult to social distance. Another challenge is the ability to self-isolate or quarantine. Families may live in multi-generation homes with small living spaces and only one restroom, which increases the risk of transmission. Some minority groups also face higher rates of certain illnesses, like diabetes and heart disease, which are risk factors for the virus. Hispanic, African American, and American Indian populations in Nebraska often have about two times the rate of diabetes compared to the non-Hispanic population, she said.

Reaching all groups with mitigation efforts helps improve the overall health of Nebraska, therefore engaging communities of color in this work is vital.

The DHHS [dashboard](#) tracks COVID-19 on a basis of race and other factors.

Kristine Cornman Learns Identity of Birth Mother (continued from page 1)

2019. “I guess I’m mostly from England, Wales and Northwest Europe. MyHeritage.com, on the other hand, says I’m mostly Scandinavian, which I always thought because I’m tall. And that’s important. That’s who you are.”

And that’s where the story ended, until March 4, 2020, when she received an email from Olivia Biggs, a Lincoln-based Children and Family Services program specialist, saying she needed to talk.

She said, “Unfortunately, your mother passed away 4 years ago,” Kristine remembered. “But you have a brother and a sister.”

A few days later, Dixie Fischer, of DHHS Vital Records, sent her original birth certificate. On it was her mother’s name, Julene Wahe, but no father’s name. Her mother’s obituary was curiously short of details, too. It didn’t mention predecessors to her death or her parents’ names. No cause of death was listed.

“I didn’t cry – or maybe just a little bit. I was very disappointed that she passed away before I got a chance to talk to her, but I was excited to learn I have a brother and a sister,” she said.

Her mother lived in Omaha for most of her life. She worked for Falstaff Beer and volunteered with the Girl Scouts. Most of her family is from Iowa, just as Cornman suspected based on the genetic testing she’d taken.

There are also some interesting similarities.

“She was a bowler,” Cornman said. “And I’m a bowler. She read mysteries and that’s my favorite genre. She loved crafts and so do I.”

It took a little while to establish a relationship with her sister, Amy, who responded with initial wariness. Kristine sent a copy of the birth certificate and gave her time to think about it.

“A few days later she messaged saying, ‘I guess you are my sister.

When I saw your picture on Facebook, it was as if Mom was staring back at me.’ From her she learned her birth mother had died of cancer.

She also learned she was an aunt to three boys and a girl.

Kristine met her sister, nephews and niece for lunch at Red Robin this summer, when Amy gave Cornman some of her mother’s things, including a prize-winning Christmas quilt, a handmade patriotic pillow and other gifts.

“I was speechless. I was just thrilled to have some of the things that my mother had made with her own two hands,” she said. “I have a piece of my mom finally after 55 years.”

“It was just an awesome day talking and getting to know a little bit about this family,” Cornman added. “I fell in love instantly with my biological family.”

Cornman is still trying to complete her family tree, hoping to discover her birth father, and is planning a trip to Red Oak, Iowa, to see her sister again. She added she may travel to Adair, to see the graves of a lot of relatives she never got to meet.

“It was a huge blow to find out that even though I had been avidly searching for my birth mother for many years only to find out 4 years too late that she was only about an hour away the last 30 years, but I am thrilled to find my sister, who will surely let me know everything I need to about my mom,” Cornman said.

“I also feel so grateful for Olivia Biggs for doing what she did and for Dixie Fischer for helping me get that birth certificate as quickly as she did,” she added.



Kristine Cornman (at right) met her sister, three nephews and a niece at Red Robin in summer 2020.

CFS Teammates Throw Graduation Party for Shanese Andersson



Children and Family Service teammates threw Shanese Andersson a graduation party July 24 at the DHHS South office at 5220 S. 16th Street in Lincoln. She was to graduate with the 2020 Class at Lincoln Northeast the following day.

The gathering, held under a small canopy, featured cake, pizza, pop and other treats. It was attended by friends of Andersson, both fellow high school students and people she met while in the state foster care system, include several of the social workers who took care of her through her life.

The event also included a drive-by of socially-distanced celebrants.

Andersson said she plans to attend Southeast Community

College, with a plan to transfer to the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, to become a social worker, inspired by her current social worker, Megan Poland. She has cared for Andersson since May 2, 2019. Poland has been with DHHS for three years.

“She been like my second mom,” Andersson said. “She’s always been there when I needed her.”

Andersson said she wanted to work in a role where she could help people, adding that nursing would be her second choice.

Equity

Cornman

Fry

Andersson

Brennan

MLTC

Gratitudes

Zoom

Meet the Man in Charge of Contact Tracing (continued from page 2)



Jeff Fry said his new role aligns with past jobs at Time Warner Cable and Richie Brothers Auctioneers.

at least 1,000 people making the calls, “because that’s what the Governor has set for a goal,” he said.

At the same time, Fry has been doing the same contact tracing training that the contact workers will take, and even making some real contact tracing calls. Finally

he’s been doing all the training that new DHHS employees have to take.

Fry has an extensive background in running call centers, both at Time Warner Cable and Richie Brothers Auctioneers.

While noting that there are a lot more meetings than he thought

there’d be, he’s enjoyed working at DHHS, where he’s on loan from the Department of Administrative Services as an SOS employee.

“I’ve felt really welcomed here,” he said. “On my first day, I remember I sat in the lobby for a while and then Tom – Dr. Safranek – came out and greeted me.”

Troy Brennan Guided HR’s Return to Fifth Floor

The person who organized the return of Human Resources staff to the fifth floor of the State Office Building in Lincoln is Troy Brennan, deputy director of talent acquisition. He was asked to take on the role by Rochelle Campbell, the head of HR.

There are 16 people on the TA team. Three of them work in Hastings, one in Beatrice, one in Fremont, three in Omaha and the remainder in Lincoln.

He said they brought people back slowly, about 20% per week. “Two came back this week. We’ll

have a week off, and then more back the following week,” he said on July 21.

Nearly everyone had returned by the end of August.

The different shops that work on the fifth floor each appointed someone to manage the move in. Brennan said he worked with Zach Leech, of Central Operations and Materiel Services, to coordinate the move.

Brennan started at DHHS on March 16, having worked for Pfizer in several locations for 37 years, also in human resources and

operations.

“DHHS told me when I started that they’d be moving so don’t bring anything,” the Lincoln native said, gesturing at his nearly empty office.

Since his start, he’s tried to provide his team the chance to work in areas they are passionate about. For example, Holly Socha is highly knowledgeable about how social media can be used to recruit candidates. The responsibilities of teammates have been organized to allow people to work in areas that complement their strengths.

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MLTC Gears Up for Medicaid Expansion

Luke Bremer, Medicaid service delivery administrator, said the Customer Service Center at the Speedway Motors campus in Lincoln is ready for increased activity due to Medicaid expansion, which began to provide services Oct. 1.

Questions and applications began to increase after Aug. 1, when applications began to be processed.

There's been a customer service center in these offices for a long time, but with the Medicaid expansion DHHS added team members in anticipation of the increased volume of applications and calls, he said.

Additional staff are located in a space that used to be a training lab. The new team is led by Peyton Lantz. She said she and her team moved into the new area in

November in 2019. Bremer added the new-look cubes were put in a little more than a year ago.

Other team members were added in Fremont, Omaha, Lexington and Scottsbluff.



Peyton Lantz leads a team that was newly formed to handle increased call load from Medicaid expansion.



The customer service center features the new style of cubicles gradually being rolled out throughout DHHS.

In Gratitude

The Nebraska Department
of Health and Human Services' mission:
Helping people live better lives.

Here are some letters & notes DHHS teammates have received thanking us for the work we do every day to help people live better lives:

A voicemail from a client of MLTC. Donna Case is a Social Services Worker at the Lexington CSC:

Hello, Jana Peterson, I'm from Central City, NE. I had an occasion to call Donna in Lexington at your office and I just wanted to tell you that she was very, very helpful had a super attitude. I guess I would like to give her an "atta girl," so that is all. I don't need any call back or anything like that. I just wanted to give Donna a compliment – Donna, from the office in Lexington. Thank you and you also have a good day. I am about to call your office back so hopefully I get somebody as nice as Donna. Good Bye!



**THANK
YOU!**

The following e-mail was received by Cindy Kelley with the Licensure Unit:

Good afternoon, Ms. Kelley,

I want to share my sincere thanks to you for your assistance in this process. Nebraska is the third state I've worked with re: licensing in the 3 1/2 years since I've become a military spouse. Your communication and updates on the process far exceeded anything I have previously experienced. I am so grateful to be able to begin my job search with my in-state license. Thank you, thank you!

We look forward to making Nebraska our home. Thank you for the work you do, and have a wonderful weekend!

A Zoom Call Before Zoom Calls

Received April 17 from Lynnae Johannes, Developmental Disabilities Service Coordination Supervisor:

Service coordination in District 1 is making an effort to show our providers how much we appreciate them. They are truly essential staff, caring for our community's vulnerable population. We couldn't do this without them!



Make the Connection...

DHHS Public Website: www.dhhs.ne.gov

DHHS Employee Website: <http://dhhsemployees/>

DHHS Helpline: 1-800-254-4202, (402) 471-6035 in Lincoln, or via e-mail at dhhs.helpline@nebraska.gov

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