

A Recreation Department's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

By Michael Simmons and Steve Shih-Chia Chen

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has severely impacted the operation and financial vitality of recreation, fitness, and sports industries (Byrne, 2020; Dolesh & Colman, 2020). This case study addressed how recreation and fitness sectors were impacted by the outbreak of virus and described how the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (RPCA) department of a satellite city near the National Capital, Washington D.C., operated its facility with proper emergency responses and best practices under the guidelines of Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the State Health Department. In addition, challenges (i.e., staffing and financial compensation) faced during different phases of reopening are also discussed. Mask wearing, maintaining proper social distance, contact tracing, and taking extra safety precautions are advocated as the key elements to minimize the increase of infected cases, keep the community safe and reopened, and avoid a draconian shutdown.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, recreation management, recreation facility, social distancing.

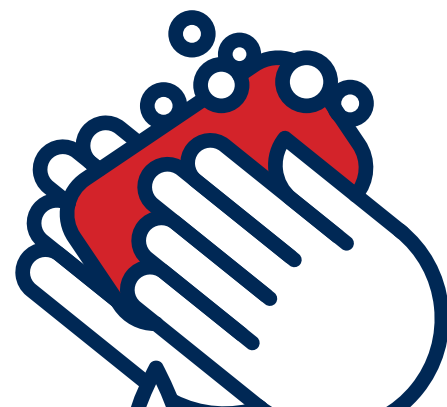
On January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) released an announcement that the organization had tracked a virus in Wuhan China that would later become known as COVID-19. COVID-19, a respiratory virus which spreads from person to person, was caused by a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 (Georgia Department of Health, 2020). Infected individuals who are in close contact, most likely within six feet with others, can spread the virus through respiratory droplets by speaking, coughing, and sneezing. The virus was also thought to spread when individuals touch surfaces that are contaminated with aerosolized particles that have landed on these surfaces. Older adults and people who have severe underlying medical conditions such as heart or lung disease or diabetes seem to be at higher risk for developing more serious complications from COVID-19 illness. While the virus does affect children and younger adults as well, most seem to quickly recover and

or be asymptomatic. There is a disease, Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C), linked to COVID-19, that can severely impact children and toddlers. This is a condition where different body parts can become inflamed including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, and other organs (CDC, 2020a). This new coronavirus likely originated in bats, but there are also speculations that was purposely developed in a laboratory.

Recreation, fitness, and sports industries were one of the most severely impacted businesses, along with transportation and the hospitality industry, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Byrne, 2020; Dolesh & Colman, 2020). Many recreational and sports programs and activities had been cancelled and/or delayed worldwide (City of St. Louis, 2020; University of North Carolina, 2020). The activities and events that continued to operate would focus on whether physical distance could be maintained throughout competition among players and spectators.

Excessive cleaning costs before and after recreational programs that seemed to be unreasonable are now more in line with the new normal (BayCare, 2020). The operation of recreation, fitness, and youth sports have completely different looks and procedures (Eschner, 2020). Basketball has become a drill-only sport where each participant has one's own ball. The Little League World Series was cancelled for the first time in history, and Fall football was either delayed or cancelled with possible practices and games played in the spring. In the past, recreational summertime programs were focused on bringing kids together. Now, these programs have been focusing on keeping kids away from each other. Participation numbers have been limited because enrollment capacity has been slashed in half according to

¹ Due to the fact that the writing of this case study occurred in the summer of 2020, information concerning COVID-19 has changed over the past 6 months. The modifications described in response to the pandemic are within the context of the spring and summer of 2020.



the CDC guidelines or due to the lack of staff (County of Santa Clara, 2020). Equipment within gyms and playgrounds must be sanitized before and after use, and only program or staff members have the privilege to use the facilities. Facilities are limiting foot traffic by scanning the temperature of the children before entering buildings and parents are to remain in their vehicles (University of North Carolina, 2020).

The fitness industry has struggled with many fitness centers going out of business (Bowling, 2020; Horton, 2020). High-intensity circuit training can no longer be as widely offered and classes have to take place in parks due to physical distancing rules. For example, a gym in Sierra Madre takes equipment outdoors to avoid shut down orders amid COVID-19 (KABC, 2020). A popular circuit training program has been limited to half capacity with each participant using their labeled equipment during the class (Roth, 2020). Circuits are being performed in different rooms with multiple trainers for one class. Excessive cleaning costs place a heavy burden on small gym owners who attempt to offer their customers a safe place to work out. Gymnasiums and facilities put shields up between treadmills, hire staff to do temperature checks, and wipe down equipment as soon as people stop using the machines. Locker rooms and water fountains are locked down to avoid contamination. These adjustments are impacting facilities across the country.

The purpose of this case study was to address the emergency responses and best practices utilized by the City of Alexandria, Virginia, regarding the operation of the city's recreation, park and cultural facilities. The director of the city's Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA) Department tried to be forward thinking in responding to the pandemic. Shared information and practices were implemented by the department and received positive feedback from the staff. It is the authors' goal to share these existing practices

and reopening policies with other field practitioners in order to incorporate useful information to ensure the health and safety of patrons of community recreation and fitness departments.

The Operation of RPCA in the City of Alexandria under the COVID-19 Pandemic

Early COVID-19 History

On March 10th, 2020, the Alexandria Health Department was notified that a guest who had tested positive for the COVID-19 virus attended a church meeting. After further investigation, the health department found the exposed individual attended the church on both February 26th and March 4th. On March 11th, the health department announced that an Alexandria resident had been identified as the first positive case within the city. At that time, the Director of Health for the City of Alexandria, Stephan A. Haering, released his first public statement regarding the pandemic. His statement indicated the general Alexandria community was still at low risk for COVID-19,

and that the city's Health Department was prepared for the evolving pandemic (City of Alexandria, 2020). March 11th was also the same day the City of Alexandria activated its Emergency Operations Command Center. On June 18th, the City of Alexandria and the health department reported its first case of MIS-C in children.

After three months of a temporary lockdown and a series of emergency responses held by the health department, the pandemic in Alexandria has been kept under control. As of June 30th, Alexandria has had 2,507 cases and 56 deaths related to COVID-19. Almost all the cases and fatalities included individuals with preexisting health conditions or the elderly. Over a fifteen-week period, the City of Alexandria had a weekly average of 170 cases and almost four deaths. Since the cases and causalities seemed well controlled when compared to the national average, the city's administrators had the confidence to execute the reopening plans for general businesses and public services. Please see Figures 1 and 2 for detailed information on COVID-19 related cases in the region.

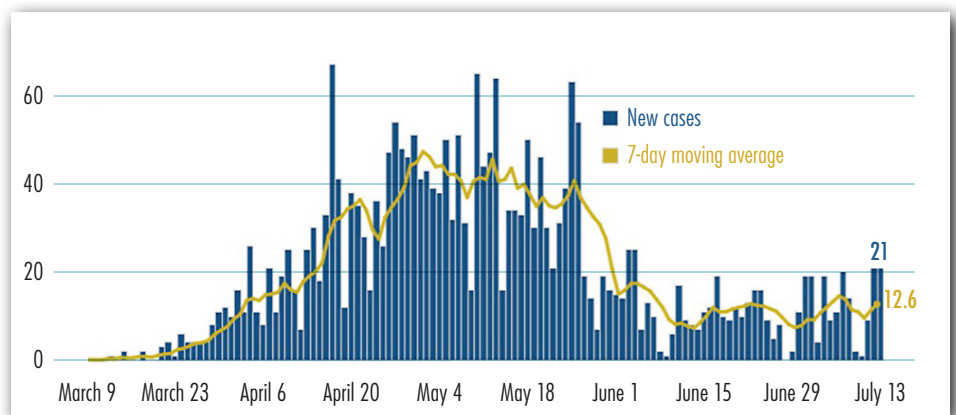


Figure 1. Average weekly new COVID-19 cases from May 9 to July 13¹: New Cases and 7-day Moving Average (Image courtesy of City of Alexander, VA)

¹ For dates before April 18, the case count includes only laboratory-confirmed cases received by the Alexandria Health Department as of that day. For dates on and after April 18, the case count includes both laboratory-confirmed cases and probable cases (symptomatic patients diagnosed by a doctor but not tested) reported by the Virginia Department of Health the following day.

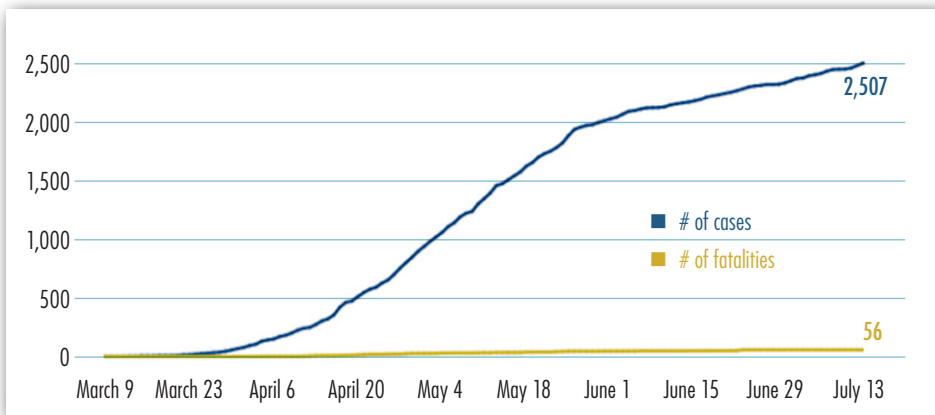


Figure 2. Cumulative COVID-19 cases¹ and casualties² in Alexandria, VA (Image courtesy of City of Alexander, VA)

¹ For dates before April 18, the case count includes cumulative laboratory-confirmed cases received by the Alexandria Health Department as of that day. For dates on and after April 18, the case count includes both cumulative laboratory-confirmed cases and cumulative probable cases (symptomatic patients diagnosed by a doctor but not tested) reported by the Virginia Department of Health the following day.

² For dates before April 24, the fatality count includes cumulative fatalities reported to the Alexandria Health Department as of that day. For dates on and after April 24, the fatality count includes cumulative fatalities reported by the Virginia Department of Health the following day.

Daily COVID-19 Briefings

The City of Alexandria's COVID-19 briefings occurred twice daily, one at 10 A.M. and another at 4 P.M., starting on March 16, 2020. The primary focus of these briefings was to discuss and share information that pertained to the impact and spread of the virus and how it was directly affecting recreation, parks, and cultural activities. The briefings were handled by the Head of COVID Response updating the leadership and upper level management team with all the information that they had received throughout the day. Additional information was shared in the conversation that followed. After several weeks, the briefings became more complex and organized with more groups being formed and the head of each group communicating information to the other groups. The groups were broken down into finance, RPCA safety and health, human resources, communications, recreation facility and programming, park operations and management, capital projects, and the director of briefing.

The finance division discussed matters involving funds, coding of labor hours regarding overtime, essential pay, telecommuting, and purchasing. The safety division covered topics related to employee well-being, personal protective equipment, safety supplies, and the procurement of all RPCA safety needs. The human resources department handled compliance and training for all staff and was the main contact point for all employees with questions. The communications department handled all social media accounts while relaying closed, cancelled, and opening messages to the public as well as drafted emails to be released to staff. Recreation programs and facilities organized community outreach programs during the pandemic such as housing shelters for residents, showering areas, and child-care centers for essential city workers. The office of park operations and management handled park closures, daily maintenance, and upkeep of all parks during the pandemic. The capital projects group discussed status of projects and how the pandemic was affecting

dates of compliance and the ability to get the work completed. Finally, there was a briefing informing all participants about what the director had shared and handled daily. After June 2020, the meetings were cut down to once a day and occurred only during the weekdays.

The Operation and RPCA during the Pandemic

On March 21st, Alexandria Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA) closed its first amenity to the public. Eventually, this led to all City of Alexandria parks, recreation facilities, and community-based activities being closed or cancelled. While parks and trails remained open, amenities such as playgrounds, athletic fields, courts, parking lots, dog parks, picnic shelters, restrooms, and water fountains were closed and/or turned off. Recreation facilities were closed thus canceling indoor and outdoor swimming, summer camps, exercise classes, and recreation free play. All community centered activities were cancelled including adult programs, sports leagues, farmers markets, special events, park reservations, and community service events. The City of Alexandria also closed two local facilities which included The Torpedo Arts Factory and the City Marina. All City of Alexandria recreation, park, and cultural activities were cancelled completely on March 23^d. Figures 3 and 4 show the signs and instructions that RPCA gave to the residents about the closure of the parks and facilities.



Figure 3. Park and Facility Closure Sign (Image courtesy of City of Alexandria, VA)

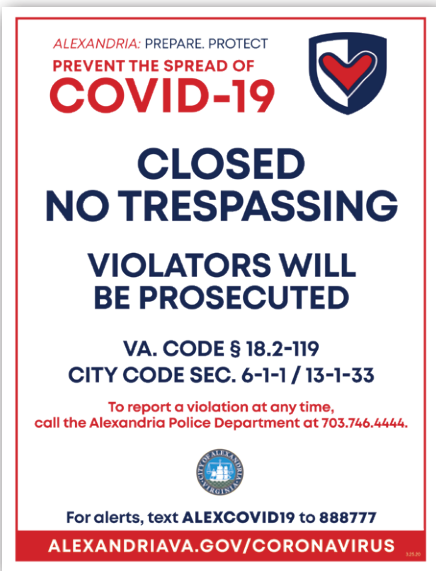


Figure 4. Park and Facility Closure Sign (Image courtesy of City of Alexandria, VA)

Phases Reopening

A three phased reopening approach (see Table 1 and Figure 5) was adopted by the City of Alexandria in accordance with guidance presented by the governor of Virginia. This phased opening aligned with the Northern Virginia region which offered a later opening plan than all other regions of Virginia. While most of Virginia opened under Executive Order 61 in early May, Northern Virginia delayed its phase one reopening until May 29th due to not meeting guidelines set by the Governor. The delay of Northern Virginia opening several weeks after the rest of Virginia continued throughout the phased opening approach. Each phased reopening plan detailed what could be opened, the capacity allowed within each area, the safeguards needing to be in place, and the expectations for each facility. Virginia Governor Northam implemented several guidelines that had to be met before the start of reopening. The state had to experience a steady drop in the percentage of positive cases over a fourteen day period, a decrease in the number of hospitalizations over a fourteen day span, have enough hospital beds and care units to handle a

TABLE • 1

Designated schedule of 3-Phased reopening in 2020	
Stage	Date
Phase One	May 29 th
Phase Two	June 15 th
Phase Three	July 1 st

surge, an increase testing and tracing, and maintain sustainable supply of personal protection equipment (PPE) (Virginia Department of Health, 2020).

Essential Workers and Teleworking

Shortly after March 21st when RPCA began closing different aspects of RPCA park amenities, facilities, and programs, the division transitioned to two different work formats. Within RPCA, each employee was either: (a) deemed essential and needed to continue working onsite, or (b) classified as telework staff and could perform all job duties at home. There were some employees who were

not essential but also did not have teleworking capabilities or job functions that allowed them to work remotely. Those members continued to be paid throughout the pandemic. Very early in the process, the city manager said no employee, whether full-time or seasonal, would be laid off and not get paid. Unfortunately, there were no plans for employees to make up their lost working hours, but some staff members were able to transfer to other job positions within the city. In this case, the cost due to the COVID-19 pandemic was not completely absorbed by the RPCA, but shared with a different City of Alexandria department, such as the Health Department.

Essential workers consisted of park operations and maintenance staff who took care of daily operations of parks and facilities. Upkeep of ground maintenance, park amenities, and recreation facilities still needed to be carried out, even if the location was closed or had limited use. To keep essential workers safe, their schedules were split into two-shift groups with no overlap with other

STOP THE SPREAD OF COVID-19			
RPCA REOPENING PHASES			
The timing of the RPCA reopening phases is anticipated to align with the phases in the Governor's Forward Virginia blueprint for Northern Virginia, but is subject to change. Programs and facilities will operate according to federal, state and local health guidelines, which include significant adjustments to capacity and format.			
	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
All Parks	Open	Open	Open
Playgrounds	Closed	Open	Open
Trails & Paths	Open	Open	Open
Picnic Shelters	Closed	Closed	Open
Fields	Closed	Open	Open
Sport Courts	Closed	Open	Open
Dog Parks	Closed	Open	Open
Restrooms	Closed	Open	Open
Nature Center	Closed	Closed due to facility repairs	Closed due to facility repairs
Recreation Centers	Closed	Open for limited use starting June 20	Open for limited use
Outdoor Pools	Closed	July 1	Open
Out of School Time	Not offered	Not offered	Offered
Summer Camp	Not offered	July 6	Offered
Classes & Nature Programs	Virtual options & limited outdoor fitness	Offered	Offered
Marina	Only open to slip holder & reserved transient	Only open to slip holder & reserved transient	Open
Torpedo Factory Art Center	Closed to public/open to artists	Open	Open
Special Events	Cancelled	Cancelled	Conditional
Special Event Permits	No permits being issued	No permits being issued	Conditional
Sports Classes & Leagues	Not offered	Limited sports instruction	Offered
Spragground	Closed	Closed	Closed
Registration & Reservation Office	Closed	Open by appointment	Open

Department of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities • alexandriava.gov/Recreation • 703.746.5414
FOR CURRENT REOPENING INFORMATION, VISIT ALEXANDRIAVA.GOV/CORONAVIRUS

Figure 5. Detailed plan of PRCA reopening phases (Image courtesy of City of Alexandria, VA)

shifts. Along with the staggered scheduling, deep cleaning, individual vehicle allocation, and mandatory PPE were other ways employed to increase safety measures for essential staff.

In April, the city manager made Alexandria the first jurisdiction in Northern Virginia to offer a COVID-19 emergency response pay supplement. This pay increase consisted of an additional four dollars per hour to all essential employees who still worked onsite. The emergency response pay expired on June 26th, when the City of Alexandria entered Phase Three, and teleworking staff began to come back to the office. With the additional four dollar increase on hourly wages, \$320 of cleaning spending would be paid to the cleaning crews every two weeks. With the additional cost in cleaning spending, labor cost, sanitizing items, and PPE, the City of Alexandria would need to spend \$750,000 monthly to maintain the operation of its recreation facilities. Until the end of June, the total COVID-19 emergency response cost had exceeded over two million dollars (Browand, 2020).

All staff who were not deemed essential moved to teleworking from off-site locations. Most worked from home and remotely logged into their work database. After some glitches in the early process, teleworking worked well for recreation, parks, and cultural activities. With essential staff working onsite and teleworking staff working from home, RPCA was able to have a business as usual approach. There were some hybrid staff that had some essential onsite responsibilities as well as performing some work from home teleworking.

Various Guidelines and Executive Orders

Throughout the pandemic, the governor issued several executive orders (see Figure 6) to help stop and slow the spread of COVID-19. The following executive orders had a direct impact on the City of Alexandria recreation, parks, and cultural activities division (Commonwealth of Virginia, 2020).

STOP THE SPREAD OF COVID-19
DETENER LA PROPAGACIÓN DE COVID-19

TIPS FOR USING CLOTH FACE COVERINGS
CONSEJOS PARA USAR REVESTIMIENTOS FACIALES DE TELA

Even when wearing a face covering, practice physical distancing and stay home when sick.
 Incluso cuando se cubra la cara, practique el distanciamiento físico y quédese en casa cuando esté enfermo

Wash hands with soap and warm water BEFORE putting on a face covering.
 Lávese las manos con jabón y agua tibia ANTES de ponerse una cubierta facial.

Your face covering needs to cover your nose and mouth and fit snugly behind the ears or back of head.
 La cobertura de la cara debe cubrir la nariz y la boca y ajustarse cómodamente detrás de las orejas o detrás de la cabeza.

Do not touch the front of your face covering when wearing.
 No se toque la parte frontal de su rostro cuando lo use.

After using, place your cloth face mask in the laundry and WASH YOUR HANDS with soap and warm water.
 Después de usar, coloque la máscara facial de tela en la ropa sucia y LÁVESE LAS MANOS con agua tibia y jabón.

Unless you are an employee who has been issued an N95 respirator, do not use an N95 respirator. They are needed for healthcare workers and first responders.
 A menos que usted sea un empleado que haya recibido un respirador N95, no utilice un respirador N95. Son necesarios para los trabajadores de la salud y los socorristas.

Alexandria COVID-19 Hotline: 703.746.4988 Mon.-Fri. 9am-6pm
 Alexandria COVID-19 Línea directa: 703.746.4988 Lunes a Viernes, 9am-6pm

ALEXANDRIA.GOV/CORONAVIRUS

Figure 6. Best practices for stopping the spread of COVID-19 (Image courtesy of City of Alexandria, VA)

Executive Order 51 declared a state of emergency for the state of Virginia due to the Coronavirus. This declaration allowed for the City of Alexandria to gain state resources such as funding, employee staff support, and allowance for express actions. Executive Order 53 stated the information about the restriction policies and closures of facilities and recreation programs.

Executive Order 55 was declared on March 30, 2020, and enforced a stay-at-home order for all residents of Virginia unless deemed as essential employee. According to Executive Order 61, Virginia would enter Phase One of reopening on May 29, 2020. Executive Order 63 announced the requirement for wearing a face covering while inside a

building. The order required individuals ages ten and older to cover their mouth and nose with a face covering when entering, traveling through, spending time in, and exiting public buildings. Excepted from the order were people who are eating, receiving medical care, exercising, communicating through lip reading, or have preexisting health conditions that would deem the face covering harmful to their health. Executive Order 65 stated Virginia would enter Phase Two of the reopening plan, and Executive Order 67 stated Virginia would enter Phase Three of the reopening plan.

The operation and reopening of the RPCA required closely abiding to the policies and guidelines listed in these seven executive orders. These were

recommendations and tips for protecting oneself and others from getting infected by the COVID-19 or spreading the virus.

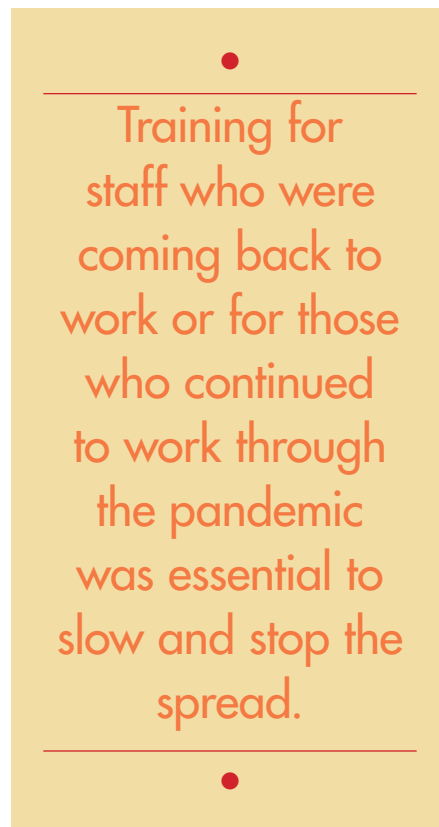
Overall Impact and Reopening Attempts of RPCA

Financially, RPCA will continue to face challenges from COVID-19 and budget stressors throughout FY21. The salary savings and other budget reductions decreased existing available resources by \$1,258,546 (Browand, 2020). Each department had to realign budgets showing a five to fifteen percent budget decrease. While this was the initial discussion, divisions were made aware that other deductions could be forthcoming depending on how long restrictions are in place due to COVID-19.

Training for staff who were coming back to work or for those who continued to work through the pandemic was essential to slow and stop the spread. Health and safety of staff and residents were the key elements to reopening of the City of Alexandria. With physical distancing being necessary to slow and stop the spread of COVID-19, most training and education was done through video calls and recordings. Trainings covered knowledge and understanding of COVID-19, handwashing, physical distancing, methods for working from home, six steps to stop the spread, proper face coverings, and returning to work to the "new normal." Each facility also had a plan developed for what to do if a person was in the facility and tested positive for COVID-19. This plan detailed who was responsible for: (a) contact tracing; (b) shutting down, cleaning, and reopening the facility, and (c) speaking with staff and facility participants on the matter while still respecting the privacy of the individual who tested positive.

Staffing

With such a wide variety of skill sets and job tasks within RPCA, staffing during the pandemic has been challenging and difficult. Since RPCA had teleworking individuals, essential staff and hybrid telework/essential staff, it was important to have open communication when discussing the rotations of available onsite workers, types of available remote tasks, and all safety measures that needed to be taken. Some essential staff questioned why they were working



while some teleworking staff wondered when they could come back to work. A few staff questioned the effectiveness and integrity of safety measures, while others were thankful for what was being provided to them. Some groups perceived that their work or positions were not important at all, while others felt it important to provide the community with clean, friendly, and welcoming parks regardless of the crisis.

Impact of COVID-19 on Staff Members' Family

Families of RPCA all handled the COVID-19 pandemic a little differently. Having conversations with staff throughout the closing period, it was easy to notice that each family had their challenges. Some families had no children in the household, so for the most part everything was normal for them besides the aspect of working from home. Other staff either had or lived with family members who had preexisting condition; thus, they were forced to work from home and limit their exposure to anything in public. Others had children staying home due to the closure of their school or child-care center and were now working long days as well as taking care of their children. Through multiple conversations with the employees, it was found the older the children were, the easier it was to have them home. All staff agreed that having a newborn, infant, or toddler at home while trying to work remotely was nearly impossible.

Park amenities closed on the week of March 21st and remained closed for more than a month. Closing the amenities included taking basketball rims down, locking and taping off playgrounds, shutting off water to fountains and restrooms, and fencing and locking fields and parking lots. Part of the closing down process included continuous signage replacement and redoing the tape of closed areas. Throughout the time that the amenities were closed, a lot of residents challenged the process and would often hop fences and take off tape so they could use the closed area. Once the phased opening started, staff members were able to have a great plan developed.

Initial Phase of the Shutdown

Recreation facilities were closed after the week of March 21st, but this did not mean the places were not being used. Shortly after shutting down all

recreation facilities and activities, one location was converted into a living shelter. The center itself housed up to twenty-five individuals throughout the days and nights. Another RPCA location was used for shelter showering. This location was open five hours a day to assist with showering needs of the community residents. Furthermore, one recreation center was turned into an essential City of Alexandria employee childcare center. This was the easiest transition, because very little facility conversion was required. Lastly, some locations were used as food kitchens and food distribution centers. Not only were these RPCA locations used for alternative means, but recreation staff worked these facilities throughout the hours they were opened.

Once the phased reopening was introduced, the division of RPCA had to develop cleanliness standards and provide safety measures for each emergency need so facilities could be operated safely. Protective shields were

installed at front desks, office cubicles were extended for height, additional cleaning wipe stations were installed, and temperature locations at entrances were among some of the changes made at each facility to improve safety.

Supplies

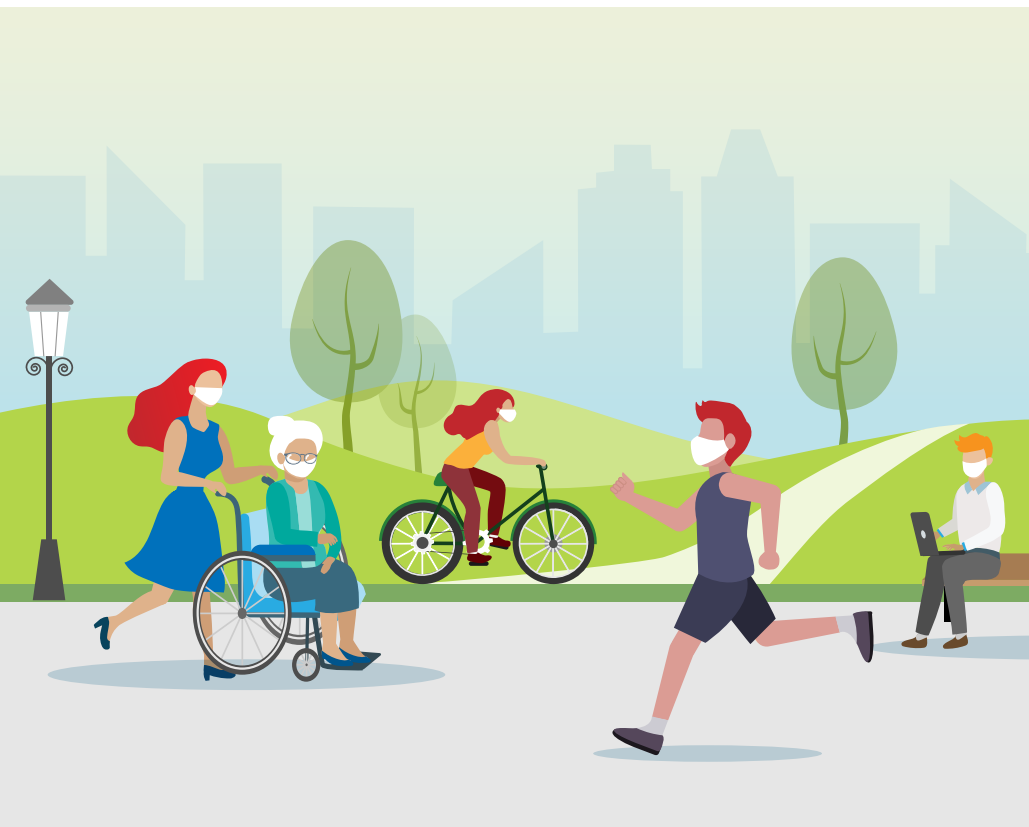
Traditionally, the RPCA only maintains a month stockpile of PPE, cleaning supplies, and other materials regarding staff safety and cleaning procedures. Once the pandemic set in and panic purchasing began, RPCA started to notice shortfalls immediately. Having most of the RPCA facilities temporarily closed definitely helped with preserving its supplies. Nevertheless, RPCA still struggled to obtain standard cleaning supplies along with gloves, ear plugs, and safety glasses for its normal operation. Standard two-day shipping had turned to a minimum three-month wait, even if supplies were available. With limited stock available, cleaning supplies and PPE were placed under the direct

subversion of the RPCA's head of safety. This individual oversaw all aspects of procurement, distribution, and tracking. The head of safety had worked with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and logistic division within the city to purchase supplies in bulk. Under this operational process, supplies and PPE became available and sufficient.

Conclusions

The City of Alexandria and its RPCA department faced an exceptional challenge while handling the COVID-19 crisis. Being able to limit cases and fatalities to a minimum gave the city and its community a sense of confidence to reopen the parks, recreation facilities and the community in a safe and secure way. Being within the Northern Virginia Capital Region, residents and city staffs of Alexandria have responded to the pandemic with an open mind by wearing masks and taking extra safety precautions according to the rules set forth by the Governor and City Manager. The cost for these extra measures was considered minimal when compared to the cost of lives lost. The financial benefit of reopening will gradually pick up. The initial cost of the first shut down would be relatively small in comparison to a second shut down due to the reckless behaviors of people (i.e., not wearing masks or maintaining proper social distance) in reopening phases. A few staff tested positive; however, with all the measures and safeguards in place the RPCA was able to effectively contain the spread (Browand, 2020).

As the weather gets cooler and more activities take place indoors, the cases of the COVID-19 infection would continue to surge. Although the development of vaccine and medical treatment for this deadly virus sounds promising, it is still not going to be available for the public to be vaccinated before the winter. The economy of our nation is just too important that our communities just cannot afford to have another draconic lockdown. As health experts



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suggested, mask wearing, maintaining proper social distance, contact tracing, and taking extra safety precautions are still the most effective measures to combat this virus and keep the community safely reopened (CDC, 2020b; Children's Mercy, 2020; Health Department of Minnesota, 2020). By following rules and guidelines issued by the state and local government and the CDC, the authors believe many recreation and fitness agencies can be safely operated and move in the right direction like City of Alexandria has done.

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Michael Simmons is the Waterfront District Park Manager, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities in Alexandria, VA. He was a former graduate assistant coach of Morehead State University football team.

Steve Chen is the Professor of Sport Management of Morehead State University. He currently serves as the managing editor of the KY Shape Journal.

