The Operational Success of Tracing Health

The Tracing Health Program

The Public Health Institute and the Oregon Public Health Institute created the Tracing Health program in the spring of 2020 to meet the needs of the COVID-19 pandemic and to mitigate the exacerbation of health inequities. Tracing Health combines best practices and an equity-driven approach to provide a comprehensive suite of COVID-19 support services to health departments and healthcare partners who are navigating COVID-19 response and recovery.

A leadership spotlight with Audrey Seger-Sprain, Tracing Health & Public Health Institute Senior Director of Operations

When the Tracing Health program launched in Spring 2020, Audrey Seger-Sprain, a Public Health Institute operations veteran, was brought in to design the Tracing Health program's operational structure. Her background in standing up programs in emergency environments around the world informed her approach and ensured that Tracing Health would meet the needs of the COVID-19 pandemic surging up and down the west coast.

Tracing Health's operational structure and goals were built on four key pillars that guided Audrey throughout the operational build-out:

Tracing Health Operational Pillars

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Impact Hiring

As COVID-19 surged in communities of color in California and the Pacific Northwest, the Tracing Health leadership team focused on how to strategically build a new kind of public health workforce to best combat the pandemic. From the outset, they prioritized hiring people from within the most impacted communities to work as contact tracers and resource coordinators. This approach allowed Tracing Health to offer culturally centered and primary language services to thousands of people while also offering employment opportunities within these communities.

Tracing Health Director of Operations Audrey Seger-Sprain worked closely with Mary Lashinsky, Tracing Health's Director of Recruitment and Talent, to streamline the process of identifying, interviewing, and onboarding this new public health workforce. They started by building a Recruitment and Talent team that reflected the type of workforce they wanted to attract (culturally and linguistically representative of the communities they would serve). Then, despite having a narrow scope and short window to focus their recruitment, the team onboarded nearly 700 team members to the Tracing Health program in less than six months.
Non-traditional hiring practices allowed Tracing Health to achieve this milestone. For example, the Tracing Health leadership team identified the relevant skill sets and experiences required for the work and weighted these more heavily than educational degrees. They waived the requirements for a high school diploma or a GED if an applicant could demonstrate relevant experience (for example, community health worker certification), community knowledge, or compatible interpersonal skills such as solid communication and trust-building skills.

The impact hiring strategy that Audrey and the recruiting team implemented ensured that Tracing Health was building a workforce uniquely suited to working with communities most impacted by COVID-19. Most of the 600+ staff ultimately onboarded were bilingual or multilingual and were from Tracing Health’s target communities. By hiring from communities of color, and low-resourced areas and prioritizing bilingual or multilingual staff they ensured that the program could establish trust and encourage positive health behaviors (e.g., quarantining and resource coordination) with the most high-need neighborhoods.

**Training and Onboarding**

For many of the new team members, this was their first foray into remote office work. Audrey knew that to succeed Tracing Health needed to help build up employee confidence and competence in the work they would be doing.

Audrey recruited Sarah Thorwirth to be the Training and Development Manager. Bringing her experience with equity, leadership, and the human side of staffing and training, Sarah helped design a custom training program focused on supporting new team members throughout their onboarding experience. The initial onboarding program included over 100 hours of training and certificate courses.

Example workshops from the first week include:

- **Remote Office Literacy and Capacity Building:** An Intensive skills training on technology setup and remote work protocols that covered topics such as: setting up and using Zoom, troubleshooting IT issues, setting expectations for virtual and video meeting attendance, setting standards for professional calls and gatherings.

- **Adapting Customer Service Skills to an Office Setting:** Helping new team members to discover and draw upon transferable skills from previous employment such as; customer service, professionalism, and communication.

- **Terminology and Respect:** Defining and discussing appropriate and respectful language to be used with both staff and clients. This training acknowledged and celebrated the diverse background of skills and experience each person was bringing to the work and ensured that all understood they were valued and appreciated.

An external evaluator (Garrow Consulting, LLC) conducted an employee feedback survey early on to identify weaknesses in the training and onboarding procedures. With honest employee feedback Tracing Health could more easily adapt and improve its training package to meet all of the needs and expectations. Audrey and the operations team prioritized this type of direct engagement and transparency while building and refining the workforce development program. The training and onboarding procedures were understood to be purposefully nimble and responsive to the needs of the pandemic.
Developing a Public Health Workforce for the Future

Audrey knew that the operational planning needed to account for the eventual sunsetting of the program when/if the pandemic was controlled. While the need for COVID-19 contact tracing, case investigation, resource coordination and vaccine technical assistance might diminish, the need for a trained public health workforce that is both culturally and linguistically responsive would not.

Thus, training Tracing Health’s workforce to be ready for the next public health emergency was always a goal of the program. Increasing the diversity of the public health field is a key step towards health equity. To that end, Tracing Health ensured their employees gathered skills that would create opportunities and increase their employment chances through a workforce development program and through strengthening transferable soft-skills such as:

- **Professional Acumen and Emotional intelligence.** Including areas such as; telephone customer service, interview techniques, emotional intelligence, conversations/communication strategies, and self-care. Providing training in these specific soft skill sets helped bring a cadre of people to the public health field in an expanded way.

- **Mental Health First Aid Training.** All Tracing Health staff were certified in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). All supervisors had trauma-informed supervision skills, and all Tracing Health staff are trained in de-escalation strategies, a key skill to possess when working with a public who are experiencing stress and uncertainty whether with COVID-19 or other public health concerns.

Honoring Staff and Treating Employees with Respect

Audrey’s own priorities and deep background in building out diverse teams informed a singular focus on treating every team member with respect while making sure leadership and managers always worked to ensure the well-being of their staff. Key strategies to achieve this goal included:

- **Workforce Training and Development:** Prioritizing employee capacity building, and improving team dynamics, personal performance, and goal setting is an important focus of workforce development and training efforts. Upon their departure from Tracing Health, all members were offered a severance payment and a one-year subscription to the online education platform Coursera for future skill acquisitions.

- **Clear and Transparent Communication:** Tracing Health made every attempt to define clear expectations and provide transparent and honest communications, empowering employees to make the best decisions for themselves and their families.

- **Support for Schedule Adjustments:** A minimum of 2-3 weeks advance notice was given for any schedule changes. Additionally, employees were provided with 2 days of supervisor-approved time off to help transition and organize their personal and professional schedules between schedule adjustments.

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Key Strategies for honoring staff and treating employees with respect (continued...)

- **Employee Appreciation:** Tracing Health staff were given a $250 gift card during the winter holiday, and a new ergonomic set of equipment for the New Year. These gestures helped to keep spirits and energy up during particularly stressful periods.

- **Equity in Employee Compensation:** Tracing Health paid all team members well and equitably. All contact tracers got paid the same hourly wage, regardless of their background experience or expertise. This sent a message to employees that their work was valued, regardless of their education, professional experience, or former titles. Supervisors and managers were also on an equal pay scale.

Future Program Implications and Recommendations

*Audrey Seger-Sprain’s Operational Takeaways from Rapidly Building and Deploying a Diverse, Equity-Driven Workforce.*

Under Audrey Seger-Sprain’s leadership the Tracing Health operations structure has stood up to the immense challenges of an unpredictable pandemic. By staying flexible, communicating clearly and truly supporting all staff the operations team has played a crucial role in helping Tracing Health deliver life-saving contact tracing services throughout the pandemic. *These are some of her key takeaways:*

1. **Be Prepared:** Developing a quality program of this size in a short time frame takes a tremendous amount of energy, focus and effort and there is little room for errors in emergency situations.

2. **Clearly Communicate with Funders:** It is paramount that program management and funders are clear on the operational lift that program decisions will require. For example, if contractual end dates get extended, it is helpful to execute this prior to layoffs and sunsetting activities, to ensure core team members are retained for future activities.

3. **Look forward:** Set yourself up to meet all future eventualities in an organized manner. For example, some program officers were consistently monitoring trends to try and understand what they could expect in the future. As a result of this planning, they were well equipped to handle sudden increases in COVID-19 cases.

4. **Clarify Roles and Responsibilities:** Taking time, especially during a pandemic, to identify roles and responsibilities for funders, management, and staff can seem time-consuming and unimportant. However, it cannot be stressed enough: basic project management and coordination activities are worth the upfront investment. They will save time, reduce opportunities for miscommunication, and help bring clarity, focus, and organization to a complex effort. A lack of clarity will lead to organizational dysfunction.

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Tracing Health | Operations Spotlight: Audrey Seger-Sprain
Clarify Contractual Agreements: Having funders, decision-makers, and stakeholders clear on contractual agreements, clauses, and legal mandates will help avoid costly confusion and will help define program goals and objectives.

Support the Staff: Ensuring vertical support of all programmatic staff – internally and from centralized departments – is key to maintaining employee satisfaction, retention, and productivity.

Listen to Partners: In many instances, it was not contact tracing staff that counties needed – it was epidemiologists, communication experts, and public health professionals. Understanding client and customer’s needs helps your program run efficiently and respond to real-world needs.

Incorporate Bureaucracy: Many programs are given limited control and must simultaneously report to funders and managers, who may have different priorities and directions. It is important to account for this in both your timelines and budgeting. Preparing for time-intensive reporting and multilevel approvals process helps you plan effectively and execute on schedule.

Eliminate or Reduce Bureaucracy: While planning for bureaucracy is important it is equally important to streamline processes as much as possible. Tracing Health’s operational success - 800 hires in 6 months, a full training and employee workforce development program, and program evaluation metrics - was due, in part, to agencies, management, and funders who were willing to eliminate unnecessary steps in executing quality work and fulfilling contractual agreements.

Understand that Personnel Issues are both Unavoidable and Preventable: Personnel issues take up a tremendous amount of time and energy. Clarity on roles and expectations, ensuring the right employees are in the right positions, and having management support of program leaders helps promote employee satisfaction, program efficiency, and funder engagement. Always make sure that employees are listened to and that complaints are taken seriously to reduce the possibility of legal action.

Multilevel Collaboration: A great strength of the Tracing Health model was the pairing of senior-level management with strong project coordinators and managers who could help execute programmatic visions and functions while organizing the senior director’s priorities and protecting the time and focus of leadership. These are crucial positions, and the roles that Diane Royal, Lynn Jensen, and Danielle Theberge played in supporting our senior management cannot be understated.

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Hire the Best Managers Possible: Recruiting and hiring top managers for the positions you need, may require providing compensation in line with standards outside the public health industry. A large operational lift in the middle of an emergency requires big picture thinking and allocating extra budget to specific human resources may be required.

Recruit Leadership from Within: Hiring leadership roles from within an organization can expedite the rapid ramp-up of a program like Tracing Health. Without the internal leadership of Audrey Seger-Sprain and Dr. Marta Induni from PHI and Emily Henke of OPHI, who were familiar with existing policies, forms, and company standards, it is unlikely that Tracing Health would have reached the same level of success in such a short time frame.

Do Not Let the Perfect be the Enemy of the Good: When standing up a program of this size there will be things to improve. But delaying the “good” to make way for the “perfect” can cost more than time in an emergency situation. Throughout the Tracing Health build up, several deliverables were delayed unnecessarily which lessened their value and impact.

Support and Trust Your Staff - Then Get Out of the Way: PHI and OPHI saw the need to put tenured, experienced, high-performing staff in charge of the Tracing Health program. When you pair excellent managers with effective recruitment and remove bureaucratic barriers - it creates an environment and a path to success. With this combination Tracing Health was able to quickly address the surging and shifting needs of the pandemic at every turn.

Tracing Health onboarded over 600 new employees in six months, with the majority of the hiring happening within the first three months. Although this was accomplished in the context of a global public health emergency, Tracing Health’s leadership did not waver in following an equity-focused impact hiring approach.

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Tracing Health's leadership succeeded in hiring a majority of their team from within communities most affected by COVID-19 and built a diverse and multilingual workforce uniquely effective in providing frontline contact tracing services. The success of Tracing Health has implications for future public health programs and responses. Below are a few of the outcomes that can be seen as positive indicators:

**Key Tracing Health Outcomes**

*Tracing Health created competitive job opportunities for working parents.*

Many parents struggled with school closures and a loss of childcare during the pandemic. Working parents who may lack time, opportunities to leave the home, and transportation in rural areas, did not experience these barriers at Tracing Health. Competitive pay, acquiring new skill sets, and work schedules conducive to single parents and working families, were possible in the Tracing Health remote environment.

*Tracing Health Explicitly Incorporated the Values of PHI & OPHI:*

Led by Dr. Marta Induni, Emily Henke, and Audrey Seger-Sprain, Tracing Health built a structure that lived up to PHI's core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, thoughtfully and transparently.

*Dedicated Tracing Health Team Members:*

The personal sacrifices that many staff made in honoring the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understated. Many people worked long hours and made personal sacrifices to help Tracing Health achieve its current status. The operational team that took this effort on has made a lifelong contribution to slowing the spread of COVID-19 in California, Washington, and Oregon.

*Preparing a New Public Health Workforce:*

The effectiveness of Tracing Health’s diverse workforce has been noticed. Due to their impressive response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) has initiated discussions to bring on multiple cohorts of Tracing Health bilingual contact tracers to serve the state of California. Previous CDPH staff that were assigned to the COVID-19 as a special assignment are returning to their normal job functions thanks to Tracing Health’s workforce. With the delta variant and vaccine outreach remaining top priorities, CDPH is looking to engage a highly trained and competent workforce to serve California’s county health departments.

Furthermore, The CDC Foundation now contains a screening question: “Are you a member of PHI’s Tracing Health Program?”, which demonstrates the excellent reputation that Tracing Health staff have gained throughout the pandemic.

We are an experienced, effective and equity-driven contact tracing solution.

We are Tracing Health.