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## The Intersection of **HEALTH, DUTY** and **COMPASSION**

During emergency feeding operations, safety for  
staff and community members is paramount.

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*A Special Digital Supplement  
to School Nutrition's  
Ongoing Coverage of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic*

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# The Intersection of **HEALTH, DUTY** and **COMPASSION**

During emergency feeding operations, safety for staff and community members is paramount.

**T**he master bedroom. That's where Vivien Watts intends to quarantine herself if she gets infected with COVID-19. Watts, the Executive Director of Food and Nutrition Services at **Alhambra (Calif.) Unified School District**, has been on the front lines with her staff, orchestrating community feeding efforts at three distribution sites. "Our master bedroom has a slider to the backyard, so that person can still see outside even though they can't go outside," she explains of her plan.

She's worried for her personal health, the health of her staff, the health of her husband and the health of her elderly parents, whom she regularly checks on. When Watts returns home after a long day of feeding needy students in her community, before she even says "hello" to her husband, she makes sure to wash her hands. She takes seriously *all* of the recommended safety protocols for this pandemic. "Even if I'm not at the curbside and I'm at my desk, I promised him I'll wear my mask," says Watts.

Watts is far from being alone in her worries: As hundreds—indeed, likely thousands—of school nutrition professionals continue to orchestrate emergency feeding operations and work the front lines in their communities, there remains a pervasive fear for personal health and safety. But, coupled with the immense sense of responsibility and dedication to keep feeding those students who rely on school meals as a vital hunger safety net, operators continue to show up daily to prepare and serve meals. There's no denying that for some, it can be a very tough decision.

To keep these essential emergency crews safe, safety measures and protocols have been dramatically increased and implemented at food preparation sites, meal pick-up points and on meal transport vehicles. School nutrition professionals already have a reputation for taking food safety



and sanitation procedures seriously, but these are now at a heightened level with increased hand washing, sanitization and wiping practices. Gloves and masks are donned and continually changed. And meal preparation and distribution methods also have adapted to reflect the practice of social distancing—staying at least six feet away from others.

While these increased safety measures cause some level of inconvenience and worry, the school nutrition operators *School Nutrition* spoke with are still committed to their students, communities and addressing hunger. "Safety is second nature to school nutrition professionals, and this has been a really easy change for us to embrace," says Jessica Shelly, MBA, SNS, Director of Student Dining Services at **Cincinnati (Ohio) Public Schools**.



## THE ART OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

As emergency feeding efforts continued into April and nationwide cases of COVID-19 increased, many directors interviewed for this story have adapted their typical meal preparation and distribution practices to reflect the practice of social distancing.

At Alhambra's distribution sites, cars pull up, and the driver holds up fingers to indicate how many children need a meal. The driver pops the trunk, and the meals are deposited right inside. For walk-ups or those who can't access their vehicle's trunk, meals are placed on utility carts and staff step back to allow people to take their meals by hand.

When the sack lunches are prepared at **Ponca City (Okla.) Schools**, two staff members are stationed at a 30-foot table on opposite ends and tables are spaced about 10 feet away from each other. Elizabeth Glaser, Assistant Director, describes it as "organized chaos." For meal distribution, methods have changed to increase space between staff and the public. An extra table was added to the pick-up process, and the adult is expected to get out of the car, tell staff how many meals are needed, and the meals are placed on the empty (and repeatedly cleaned) table. It's been a learn-as-you-go process, reports Glaser.

The distribution of weekly meal kits in **Cobb County (Ga.) School District** was an answer to keep both school nutrition staff and community members safe. Meal kits are

prepped by staff on Fridays and distributed on Mondays, says Emily Hanlin, MBA, RDN, LD, SNS, Executive Director of Food and Nutrition Services. "We came up with the idea of giving staff just one day a week where they have that exposure to the general public versus having it every day."

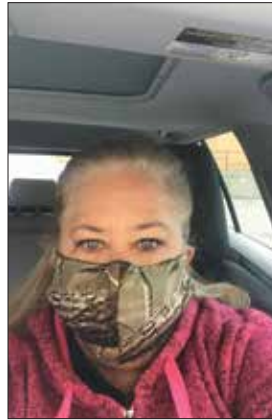
Despite established procedures, social distancing is a hard habit for most of us to adopt. Whether navigating the close quarters of a small kitchen footprint or resisting the instinct to huddle close for a team-building photo, keeping apart goes against instinct. Directors are continually reminding staff and community members—using signs (see the simple laminated design the team in Alhambra use on page 6), digital reminders and vocal cues—to stay away from one another. It's not that team members are defiant or don't understand the importance of social distancing, it's just that, in most cases, they simply forget.

Shelly's heart breaks that her staff can no longer hug each

## THE BASICS

There's never been a better time to refresh awareness of **food safety basics**. SNA will present a two-part webinar series on **April 16 and April 23: "Rewind & Repeat: Science-Based Basics to Food Safety."** Experts with the Center for Food Safety in Child Nutrition Programs at Kansas State University will reiterate the importance of food safety standards in schools. Both Part 1 and Part 2 are being made available with the support of SFSPac Food Safety and Sanitation System. Visit [www.schoolnutrition.org/webinars](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/webinars) for registration details.

All webinars in the COVID-19 series are free to members and non-members.



other for comfort in this high-stress environment. Phones can't be swapped to show photos of cute grandkids. "Staff are so used to being each other's moral support through everything. It's hard to see someone and *not* give them a hug," says Shelly. And it's not just connection with other adults. Glaser says she and her team miss the warm hugs from their students. "It's hard not to hug kids, especially when they're coming at you with their arms wide open," she laments.

## WHAT TO WEAR, WHAT TO DO

School nutrition staff are no strangers to stringent hand washing, cleaning and sanitization practices, but the current crisis has prompted an increased frequency for each step. "We are experts at hand washing, and we're used to wiping

down everything because that's what we do," says Shelly.

The wearing of personal protective equipment (PPE) or gear has become obligatory for front-line school nutrition staff—their hands gloved and their smiles covered behind masks. Masks are in short supply for public use, so to ensure that every staff member's face is covered, there have been community donations of paper masks and hand-sewn masks, along with the purchase of bandannas and buffs.

In Alhambra, the safety protocols look like this: Every 20 minutes, Watts' staff must change their disposable gloves and aprons—in addition to sanitizing surfaces at pick-up locations. Her staff wear face masks, and she notes, she had to fight for those. She worked with her superintendent and maintenance staff to acquire masks that were stored in their district's emergency supply bins—happily, there were



CINCINNATI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## STUDENT DINING SERVICES

Visit [cps-k12.org](https://cps-k12.org) for a list of our meal distribution site locations, dates, hours and additional information.

thousands. (On social media, Watts also shared a design she created on her home embroidery machine [pictured page 2]. She doesn't have the personal bandwidth to make more than a few to give to friends.)

At Ponca, Glaser's staff wear masks during food prep and service—some of these were donated by a local construction company, and others were handmade by community members. "You can actually breathe and work in them," Glaser says of the handmade masks. "It kind of feels like you have your face in a Speedo."

Eight portable hand washing stations have been erected throughout select distribution sites at **Jefferson County (Colo.) Public Schools**, says Executive Director for Food & Nutrition Services Beth Wallace, MBA, SNS, who is also SNA Vice President. These stations were hard to acquire because many distributors were out. "We've also confiscated every bit of hand sanitizer we could find in any of our schools." And, she adds with a chuckle, a local vodka distillery has started making hand sanitizer to give to her school meal team.

In Cincinnati, staff graduated from wearing double-layered buffs (what the staff affectionately called their

"Survivor buffs," inspired by the reality television show) to cloth masks recently purchased from an online party retailer. "The things we didn't know we needed, we didn't know we needed until we needed them," laments Shelly. Since, she has opted for cloth masks in order to save N95 masks and other paper masks for hospital workers. Even still, she encountered a two-week backlog for her order.

In addition to wearing PPE and frequently washing hands, the Cincinnati Student Dining Services team has implemented taking staff temperatures before the beginning of each shift. Shelly is proud to note that steps like these were outlined well before schools were closed and government mandates announced.

"Back when H1N1 was going around back in 2009, my district developed a pandemic emergency plan," she says. "Every year since, we dust off that plan. So when COVID-19 came around...we had an amazing framework to work from." Only a few updates were required to reflect the specifics of this pandemic. She credits the plan with being a bona fide game changer in how her team—and other district departments—have been able to rise and meet the current challenges.



## OTHER SAFETY CONCERNS

This is an emotional, stressful, uncertain and overwhelming time for everyone. Reactions to this kind of stress can prompt some people to act out in ways that may range from disrespectful to threatening. Additional precautions and measures may be necessary to keep safe the school nutrition team, volunteers and any others responsible for curbside pick-up or meal delivery. While most school nutrition professionals have reported overwhelmingly positive community interactions, there have been some accounts of unfortunate incidents.

To maintain order at feeding sites, several directors have worked with school administrators to ensure that school resource officers or community police officers are present. “We weren’t sure if there were going to be issues, and moreover, we wanted to make sure our employees felt protected, safe and valued, and that our scholars and families felt protected and safe,” explains Shelly. The officers provide a sense of comfort and relief for everyone.

At meal distribution sites in Jefferson County, security is also supported by nurses. These healthcare professionals are present to take staff temperatures daily and serve as forward-facing experts to community members. The nurses answer questions, help with delivery and will alert management if they determine an individual is ill. While there have

not been situations with rude or threatening community members, there have been incidents of individuals coughing at pick-up sites or non-foodservice staff entering food preparation areas, making Wallace’s staff decidedly uncomfortable. In these situations, the presence of the officers and nurses has been invaluable.

Dealing with public misinformation actually has been the hardest struggle, Wallace asserts. “People don’t understand that if you’re COVID-19 positive, or you think you are, you don’t drive *anywhere*; you stay *home*,” she notes.

## WHEN ILLNESS STRIKES

Social distancing, increased sanitation, wearing PPE or gear—practicing these steps across school meal operations is essential, but they are no guarantee against someone on the team getting infected. Now several weeks into these emergency feeding efforts, news stories have circulated of school meal distribution operations shutting down—temporarily and permanently—because someone has contracted COVID-19. There are also the considerable emotional burdens associated with being deemed essential personnel and working for an extended period with this level of stress. The toll on the long-term mental health of their staff is a major concern for a number of school nutrition directors.



“At some point, we’re going to run out of staff either through illness or those who are overwhelmed,” says Cobb County’s Hanlin, “I want to protect my people, and we may get to the point where we can’t sustain service.”

Watts has similar concerns in Alhambra. Her goal is to partner with neighboring school districts to establish partnerships that would ensure food-insecure children continue to be fed. For example, Watts says, with an “inter-agency agreement” in place at two nearby districts, should one district have to close down operations because of illness among the staff, the other two districts could step up to provide meals for the expected two-week period that staff should remain in isolation.

For Wallace in Jefferson County, the extended closure of schools has meant that she requires her entire school nutrition team to work as essential personnel to prepare meals for emergency feeding. Staff work on rotation, rough-

ly every three weeks, for three days a week. “The majority were happy to go back to work, but obviously there are some that show a real resistance,” notes Wallace. To address fears, she ensures they understand the rigorous safety protocols in place. For example, if someone on the team at a particular meal prep or distribution site tests positive, that site will be shut down for a mandatory two-week quarantine. During that period, school custodial staff, who have received extra training in cleaning protocols, will thoroughly clean the area.

Roy Pistone II, RDN, MED, SNS, is practicing what he preaches in terms of social distancing—living alone, he says, makes this easier. But should he become ill, the Director of Food Service knows he can rely on his team at **Citrus County (Fla.) School District**. “We have processes and procedures in place to where my office staff, site managers and foodservice associates know how to carry out our mission and continue to feed our children,” notes Pistone.

## EMERGENCY FEEDING BY THE NUMBERS

*A look at the scope of emergency feeding at the districts highlighted in this article.*

### Alhambra (Calif.) Unified School District

**Enrollment:** 17,000  
**Percentage Free/Reduced:** 62%  
**Average Daily Emergency Meals Served:** 2,000 breakfasts, 2,000 lunches  
**Total Staff:** 117  
**Total Emergency Staff:** 25  
**Curbside Sites:** 3  
**Delivery Routes:** N/A

### Cincinnati (Ohio) Public Schools

**Total Enrollment:** 38,000  
**Percentage Free/Reduced:** 83.5%  
**Average Daily Emergency Meals Served:** 5,000 (breakfast and lunch)  
**Total Staff:** 398  
**Total Emergency Staff:** 60 + admin  
**Curbside Sites:** 24 (2 staff)  
**Delivery Routes:** 4 (2 staff on truck)

### Citrus County (Fla.) School District

**Total Enrollment:** 15,300  
**Percentage Free/Reduced:** 68%  
**Total Emergency Meals Served:** 63,000 breakfasts and lunches (at press time)  
**Total Staff:** 113  
**Total Emergency Staff:** 86  
**Drive-Up School Sites:** 11  
**Drive-Up Bus Stops:** 36

### Cobb County (Ga.) School District

**Total Enrollment:** 111,000  
**Percentage Free/Reduced:** 40%  
**Average Weekly Emergency Meals Served:** 4,466 weekly meal kits (about 40,194 meals) served Mondays  
**Total Staff:** 1,200  
**Total Emergency Staff:** 100  
**Curbside Sites:** 8  
**Delivery Routes:** N/A



### Jefferson County (Colo.) Public Schools

**Total Enrollment:** 86,000  
**Percentage Free/Reduced:** 31%  
**Average Daily Emergency Meals Served:** 14,000 breakfasts and lunches (three days per week)  
**Total Staff:** 400  
**Total Emergency Staff:** 130  
**Curbside Sites:** 12  
**Delivery Routes:** N/A

### Ponca City (Okla.) Schools

**Total Enrollment:** 5,000  
**Percentage Free/Reduced:** 62%  
**Average Daily Emergency Meals Served:** 1,450 breakfasts and lunches  
**Total Staff:** 72  
**Total Emergency Staff:** 8-20  
**Curbside Sites:** 4  
**Delivery Routes:** One bus to Native American reservation





## IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES

Directors interviewed for this story all said the same thing: Staff are scared and worried for their own health and safety, but they also want to continue feeding students in their communities.

Glaser admits to her own conflicted feelings: While her district has gone to great lengths to keep teaching staff, building staff and students safe, she feels as though school nutrition workers are not afforded the same concern by district decision-makers. She and her staff are simply expected to keep showing up at their four curbside distribution sites, with no apparent regard to their safety or anxieties. “We meet every day after we serve the lunch and sit at tables six feet apart...and we regroup and vent,” recounts Glaser. “To tell you the truth, we didn’t feel like we had a choice. They said ‘You don’t *have* to work,’ but like we’re going to let *each other* down? We would never run out on our coworkers.”

Glaser also acknowledges that attitudes shift daily—there are high highs and low lows. What gives her comfort, she notes, is that she knows they are doing good work and helping the community’s most vulnerable, and that includes her own team. “We had one [school nutrition employee] say she couldn’t come back, that it’s too dangerous,” Glaser reports. “We totally understand.”

Directors, supervisors and central office staff may or may not be working on the front lines of meal prep and distribution for a wide range of reasons, and this can create another level of anxiety, tension and stress. One director, asking to remain anonymous, acknowledges making the difficult decision to work from home exclusively to protect the health and

safety of an immunocompromised partner. The decision was heartbreaking: “I don’t feel like I’m with my team,” shares this individual. “I don’t feel like I have their backs...This is a horrible feeling.” But it was a decision made in the face of a strong caution by a doctor about the deadly risks at stake for their family member.

Every day that schools remain closed during the pandemic, *everyone* working emergency feeding efforts make a difficult decision: Stay home in isolation and relative safety or risk possible exposure to ensure impoverished children—and sometimes whole families—get the life-sustaining meals they rely on. It’s an incredibly tough choice because so many in this profession are devoted to their students and know well the tremendous responsibility of their work. For many, the anxiety about what happens to those children if service is curtailed is just as stressful as their concerns about infection.

Some can set aside apprehensions in favor of focusing on the positives and witnessing how people step up in the face of crisis. Pistone, in Florida, is quick to note that these massive efforts have brought his team together. “We are all here for our children,” he says. “How blessed are we to have so many people stepping up?”

Physical separation, masks that hide smiles of care and encouragement, continual wiping of surfaces—all these safety protocols remind us that there’s something to fear. But the courage of these essential workers shines through. “We’re all a little nervous and scared,” says Shelly. “That’s why the safety of our staff and the safety of our students are paramount, and that usurps anything else that we do.” **SN**

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