

## **In This Together**

### **Documenting COVID-19 in the Commonwealth**

**Name:** Melissa Coulston

**Date of Submission:** 2020 May 24

**Biography:** I grew up in northern Kentucky and came to Lexington for an undergrad (Classics, 2008) and grad degree (MA in Art History, 2011) at UK. Lived in South Carolina for four years before moving back to be near friends and family. I had just started a position as a librarian at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives at the beginning of March, just before the state of emergency was declared and shut downs instituted.

**COVID-19 Experience:** I think I started hearing about the Coronavirus from my mom in January 2020--she is very online and started sending me articles about it before really anyone else was talking about it. It wasn't until the end of February that plans started changing in any way. I'm an Irish dancer, so we were gearing up for all of the performances around Saint Patrick's day and we actually did a performance on March 7th at the Paul Sawyer Public Library in Frankfort. I remember shaking the librarian's hand and wondering to myself if that was such a good idea, but the room was packed with families and we danced as well as can be expected for the first performance of the season. We already had some performances cancelled at senior living and nursing homes, but once that weekend passed, the rest were cancelled in quick succession. My friends gathered one last time for a birthday party where we all tried to be very good about washing our hands, but we all kind of knew that would be the last time for a while.

I had just started a new job at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, working as a librarian in the Archives Research Room. Nearly all of the collection of public records is on physical media, so we remained open to the public for a few weeks. It was weird to continue to commute at my regular hours, but the reduction in traffic was welcome. Many of my friends and family were either already working from home or quickly switched to that set up. On March 20, I was told along with some other colleagues at KDLA that we were being detailed to work in the Office of Unemployment Insurance. Our supervisors didn't know how long the detail would last or what the work would entail, but were very apologetic that we were being taken from our positions. I tried to be very vocal that public service means stepping up when necessary and that I was happy to serve in that capacity, especially because it meant I would be working from home. The others echoed that sentiment and we all joined a hastily scheduled training that introduced us to the software we would be using. We each left that day with all of our equipment so that we could work from home.

The first week of working UI was a lot of waiting. We needed training and access and were among about 120 people that were all of a sudden brought on board, so it was slow at first. We were brought on to handle tens of thousands of what are called Failed Identity Verification (FIV)

issues that were preventing claimants from being paid. After the Equifax data breach, OUI put an identity verification system in place that claimants have to pass and, if they fail, they have to provide two forms of documentation so that we can verify their identity before payment. Of course, there are myriad other ways that folks can be prevented from having their claim process on the first try. Once we started processing those FIV issues, my team leader (Tammy) started training a few in the group on more complicated procedures. The software system is overwhelming and it takes years to fully understand how all of the processes and components work together, so it was good to start slow. Every new piece I learned about would help me to understand the whole system and I started to put the pieces together after a few weeks.

Tammy recognized my progress and that of three others, so she enlisted us each take a small group of folks from our team to train on some of the things we had learned. Around that time is when I started to be inundated by emails from claimants I had never worked with or been assigned to help. The more of those folks I tried to help, the more emailed me with questions about their claims. And the more all of that happened, the more questions I had for Tammy about different aspects of the system. Soon after that, I took on a different small team that worked on processing the payments for claimants that do not normally qualify for unemployment, like those that are self-employed or independent contractors (Pandemic Unemployment Assistance or PUA claimants). The UI software is built to specifically exclude that kind of claimant, so the processing was a bit more intensive. Once I started working on so many of those claims, I became a kind of a PUA expert on our team and team members started coming to me with their questions.

A few weeks passed and emails from random people became overwhelming to the point that I was forced to leave them unanswered. I was told that my email was being passed around on Facebook as a good person to contact--they are all looking for any help they can get and it can be really difficult to focus on trying to work in a systematic manner. Around that time, I also learned more about the system and was given access to do more complicated procedures. There was a big push at the beginning of May to ensure that all claimants that had filed in March were paid. Many of those claimants had very time-consuming separation issues that require an experienced adjudicator to work with the claimant and the employer to determine if a claimant is eligible for unemployment or not. Tammy was pulled back from her position as team lead to work on those claims and she asked me to step up and take her place as team lead. I agreed and now, for the first time in my life, I am a supervisor and actively managing a team of thirteen.

To say that the past two months have been weird and overwhelming is so reductive to be pointless. I have been working harder than I ever really have at a job I never expected to have during a crisis that is difficult to fathom. I sit down at my computer each morning knowing that I will be there for the next eleven hours as I try to make progress to help the thousands of people that are in need. Some days are better than others, but I have been very fortunate to have a great group of people to work with, even though I've only met a few of them in person. The problems feel insurmountable and our efforts to help people feel like taking a step in a mountain climb that

only gets more complex and longer with each step. But I know that our efforts mean a great deal to those that we are able to help and their thanks are some consolation.

There are a lot of things I struggle with, but one of the weirder things is being held up as some kind of front line worker. I'm a librarian, so I'm used to being on that front line. It is very fulfilling to know that I can help people, but that feeling comes in the context of knowing that I have a folder full of hundreds of emails from people that I haven't helped. I could help them, but I haven't. It is very difficult. But then in the next moment I am able to help someone in dire need. Everything is urgent all the time, but the payment system only processes overnight. So all the urgency is buffeted by this knowledge that we won't know that something has gone through until the next day. It's complicated! And I don't think I will be able to fully process this time in my life until it is well past.

Like many aspects of life during Coronavirus, all of the changes happened so all of a sudden that it is so hard to conceive of life before or how I could possibly turn toward life after. How do I convince myself that the crisis is over? Or that the danger is gone? I know that it is easier to *\*not\** take precautions and obsess over every little thing, but when will that little voice in the back of my mind quiet down? When will we all feel safe again? I don't actually know anyone that has come down with COVID, but that almost makes the anxiety and uncertainty worse. I am fine with knowing that reacting appropriately will seem like overreaction in hindsight, but it makes living in a community that isn't all on the same page very complicated.

I take comfort in my friends and family and coworkers. The work we are doing is important and tough, but we are helping each other through these challenging times. My cats are very happy that my spouse and I are home all the time now and so are we. Whenever things get difficult or overwhelming, I take a break to go check in on my garden. It gives my eyes and brain a chance to rest and a chance for me to remember that life continues, keeps growing and bearing fruit. We stay in touch with family and friends with Zoom calls and FaceTime and all the ways technology can bring us closer. These challenges are immense, but we are all living through this moment together.

And everything is temporary.