

Changing Paths During the Pandemic

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/responder-stories/changing-paths.html>

The staff at CDC's [National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey](#) (NHANES) are not the kind of people who sit on the sidelines – even during a global pandemic.

On a typical day, you might find them on streets across the United States in one of their mobile examination centers. This fleet of mobile laboratories trailers is fully equipped so that staff can conduct physical exams and perform laboratory tests on the spot. Data collected from these in-person exams help NHANES track national rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, chronic kidney disease, STDs, hearing loss, osteoporosis, and more.

In the face of COVID-19, NHANES was suspended and the mobile units temporarily shuttered as the country moved toward social distancing and staying at home. Meanwhile, drive-up testing centers and other screening sites sprang up everywhere to meet a new need for more COVID-19 tests.

NHANES staff quickly decided to turn down another path and provide this much needed service.

“We realized that there were people out there who needed COVID-19 tests, but they may not be able to get to a doctor’s office or even to one of the drive-up testing sites,” says Cynthia Ogden, who leads a team of researchers at NHANES. “We also realized that we might be in a perfect position to help those people.”

“We had this resource that was really untapped,” adds Jessica Graber, who handles operations. “Not only did we have regularly used mobile units which were no longer being used to collect data when the pandemic hit, but we also had access to several other units in storage. We wanted to take advantage of those resources.”

With everyone’s work, the NHANES fleet didn’t stay idle for long.

Cynthia began sending out a flurry of emails asking if anyone could use the NHANES truck or the trailers. As a graduate of CDC’s Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), she knew she could tap into a broad network of fellow EIS graduates, many of whom now held positions in public health offices across the country.

At the same time, others began the huge task of reviving the trailers that had been in storage and preparing the mobile units. Staff worked to get the unused vehicles ready to go and to get labs inside the mobile units prepared and certified for COVID-19 testing.

Cynthia’s flurry of emails soon paid off. Washington, DC’s Department of Forensic Sciences, which handles all the COVID-19 testing for the area, was interested in what NHANES could offer. The two groups came together and decided to begin with the truck. They enlisted the help of other District of Columbia public health officials and the public works department to drive it to nursing homes in the area for rapid testing.

“Right now, staff on the truck can conduct about 50 nasal swab tests in four hours,” says laboratory expert Renee Storandt. “They will soon be adding more of the quicker instruments to increase that.”

With this success, the Washington, DC, team requested two of the trailers to use for antibody testing. Two more trailers are headed to the Montgomery County, Maryland, Department of Health, and the NHANES team continues to reach out to more states.

What started with a good idea was put into action in a matter of weeks – and with equipment that would have otherwise sat unused. “I’m so happy that we’re able to do something very concrete that will help people,” Cynthia says.

Recently, the Smithsonian Institution noted the importance of this work by including a picture of the truck in a series of photos for their archives on the pandemic.

Putting the NHANES mobile exam centers into service has truly been a team effort, both within NHANES and with many others working tirelessly to fight the pandemic at the state and local levels. As Renee sums it up: “Collaboration is the key to combatting COVID-19.”