

Fortifying the Frontlines Against COVID-19

Working about 12 hours a day, seven days a week, to fight COVID-19's spread attests to a person's dedication. Helping steer billions in funding and hundreds of support staff to people fighting outbreaks around the country attests to her leadership.

Peggy Honein has spent most of that time in CDC's COVID-19 response heading up efforts that have strengthened the nation's health departments and revamped how CDC responders collaborate with them.

In early 2020, when the world was beginning to hear about COVID-19, like most of us, Peggy was going on with life as normal.

She was planning a celebration with her extended family for her father's 80th birthday in the summer. And as director of CDC's Division of Birth Defects and Infant Disorders, Peggy was preparing to give a presentation at a conference on birth defects and disabilities in Sri Lanka.

Then COVID-19 began spreading in Asia and Europe.

"They weren't calling this a pandemic yet, but I was getting increasingly concerned about international travel for my staff and for myself, so I cancelled the trip," Peggy says.

Since her calendar was already blocked for Sri Lanka, Peggy volunteered to join the COVID-19 response. Almost immediately, she was asked to deploy to Northern California to lead a team at Travis Air Force Base (Travis) where the US Government was opening a federal quarantine facility. Her departure was in 48 hours.

"I recorded my presentation for the conference in Sri Lanka and went home to pack," Peggy says.

Her team's main mission at Travis was helping evacuees from the [Diamond Princess](#) cruise ship, which had been anchored off the coast of Japan with a COVID-19 outbreak on board.

"They had been quarantined on the ship for about 12 days. Then they had a long flight to the United States to start a new 14-day quarantine," Peggy says. "Many passengers were older and had medical conditions that put them at increased risk for severe illness."

"The passengers were fearful of this new virus; they had spent a lot of time confined to very small spaces on the ship and were lonely. Some had family members who were still hospitalized with COVID-19 back in Japan."

The passengers' anguish deeply affected staff, and mental health professionals tended to passengers and staff. Despite the challenges, Peggy's team and health department colleagues stayed focused on slowing COVID-19's advance in the United States and on buying time for the country to prepare.

After wrapping up work at Travis, Peggy flew to Seattle to co-lead a team of 42 deployers to support a health department fighting outbreaks in long-term care facilities while rapidly learning about the spread

of the virus among staff and residents. Many patients died before the implementation of prevention measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the facilities.

“The gravity of the impact of COVID-19 on staff and residents in long-term care facilities became real,” Peggy says. “There were staff members afraid to come to work. Some were working at multiple facilities just to pay bills. This unfortunate reality risked spreading infection between facilities.”

After returning to Atlanta, though symptom-free, Peggy quarantined at home for 14 days to protect her CDC colleagues who were still going to the office. Rising cases of COVID-19 also began to affect her personal life. Her father’s birthday celebration was postponed indefinitely, and major holidays were celebrated on video chat.

Peggy’s success in building relationships with health departments in California and Washington soon paid off across the country. In Atlanta, she became deputy lead, then lead, of the response’s State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial (STLT) Support Task Force, where she is the face of the response to the nation’s health departments.

“State and local health departments are the frontlines, the on-the-ground truth. They let us know when they’re frustrated with what seems like insurmountable obstacles,” Peggy says. “We like this kind of communication because it helps us determine next steps for the response.”

Response staff usually work temporarily on the response then return to their normal duties at CDC. To provide health departments with continuity in communicating with partners, Peggy on-boarded more than 40 full-time responders on the STLT Task Force.

Peggy, an epidemiologist by training, has continuously gathered information on COVID-19’s spread on her own and from health departments. Her name appears notably often on CDC’s scientific studies on the pandemic. She has addressed key questions like decisions and policies needed for [safe school re-opening](#).

Peggy has also made sure that health departments are informed of new discoveries that come from data gathered from them. This helps them improve their efforts against COVID-19’s spread. Even with vaccines being given, Peggy says we cannot lower our guard.

“While everyone is tired of the pandemic and wants it to be over, we need to continue distancing and wearing masks to slow the spread as we diligently work to achieve high vaccination rates,” Peggy says.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/communication/responder-stories/fortifying-the-frontlines-against-covid.html>