Overview

Major Public Information Initiatives in April 2020:

Coronavirus Update: Since January 2020, Mecklenburg County Public Health (MCPH) has worked with the NC Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Management, other area health departments and community partners to prepare for novel coronavirus. With the potential crisis looming in early February 2020, Public Information began working closely with MCPH and the Manager's Office to enact a comprehensive communication strategy, using every communication channel, to make sure employees and the public were kept informed at every step.

To help coordinate the community's response, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Management activated the Emergency Operations Center in mid-March. It will remain open until the threat from the pandemic subsides.

Following is a timeline of highlights of Public Information's tactics as the COVID-19 crisis continued in April 2020:

April 2: Atrium and Novant Health systems asked Mecklenburg County and its partners to build a Mass Care field hospital to treat as many as 3,000 additional COVID-19 patients during the anticipated surge of the virus. Public Information coordinated major media interest in this request, which was eventually withdrawn.

April 2: Amendments regarding the Stay At Home Order and car sales are announced and pushed through all communication channels. While there was not much media interest, public interest (via email and social media) was high since the beginning of the Stay at Home Order began.

April 3: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 3: Amendments regarding the Stay At Home Order and real estate sales are announced and pushed through all communication channels. While there was not much media interest, public and Realtor interest (via email and social media) was high since the beginning of the Stay at Home Order began.

April 3: Public Information hosts a virtual press conference.

April 6: Following the City of Charlotte's suspension of yard waste collection during the pandemic, Mecklenburg County Solid Waste Services began to report a high level of yard waste being found in garbage and recycling bins. Public Information pushed out a reminder reminding residents that during the COVID crisis, yard waste is still accepted at any of Mecklenburg County's full-service recycling centers.

April 6: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 7: A COVID-19 update and a proposal to help local small and micro businesses highlighted the first-ever virtual Board of County Commissioners meeting. Public Information worked with Information Technology Services, the Clerk to the Board, and the County Manager's Office to use WebEx to bring Board members and staff together for the meeting, which was broadcasted normally on GovTV, MeckNC.gov, and Twitter. Another first for the Board meeting was the addition of an American Sign Language interpreter team and live closed captioning in Spanish as well as English. Members of the public could also access the meeting via telephone to listen or to make comments during Public Appearances.

April 8: Public Information hosts a virtual press conference.

April 9: In response to the local economic impact of the current health crisis, Mecklenburg County created a COVID-19 Small Business Emergency Stabilization Loan Fund and a Micro Business Stabilization Fund. Public and media interest was high. Public Information also received a large number of inquiries via social media and email.

April 9: Addressing heightened public and media interest, Public Information uses all communication channels and provides a list of reminders and clarifications about the Stay At Home order.

April 10: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 10: Mecklenburg County Public Health warns residents that some rapid tests for COVID-19 may provide misleading results, giving a false sense of security that they are safe and not infectious. Media interest was high; Public Information pushed the Health Department's warning out through all communication channels.

April 10: The behind-the-scenes work of Emergency Management during the COVID crisis has been incomparable. Public Information highlighted their efforts with a Mecklenburg Minute video.

April 13: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 14: Public Information hosts a virtual press conference.

April 15: Atrium Health and Novant Health say the hospital bed surge capacity they are building is sufficient for now and they do not need a field hospital for the COVID-19 patients they serve within their systems. Public and media interest was high.

April 16: The Mecklenburg County Public Health Department (MCPH) releases guidance to the whole community on when masks should be worn and what types of masks are appropriate.

April 17: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 19: Mecklenburg County releases the latest housing report. This is especially notable because for the first time, the report generated media interest.

April 20: The previous week, Public Health released a communications toolkit to better inform vulnerable communities about the COVID-19 virus with information, tips, and where to get help if and when they need it. To help people best use the toolkit, Public Health hosted an online webinar facilitated by the County's Deputy Health Director, Dr. Raynard Washington.

April 20: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 20: COVID-19 modeling projects "frequently asked questions" are released.

April 20: Public Information hosts a virtual press conference.

April 21: The Department of Social Services (DSS) ~~is~~ launches new programs and services to keep children and families healthy and safe during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The programs include a new initiative to feed children who cannot access meals due to school closures, online purchasing with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card and opportunities for Telehealth services.

April 23: The Public Health Department issues a warning concerning COVID-19 and tobacco use.

April 24: Mecklenburg County churches interested in hosting "drive-up" worship services for their congregations were given the green light.

April 24: In response to the State of Emergency declared by the United States of America and the State of North Carolina, and Mecklenburg County's Stay at Home Order, the Office of the Tax Collector (OTC) issued an extension to the application and payment of the local Beer & Wine Privilege License.

April 24: Mecklenburg County COVID-19 data is released.

April 24: Public Information hosts a virtual press conference.

April 28: Mecklenburg County, the City of Charlotte and the six county towns, agree to follow the State of North Carolina's Stay at Home Order starting April 30. Mecklenburg County Manager, Dena R. Diorio, announced the agreement to the Board of County Commissioners at its public policy meeting one day before the county's current order was set to expire. The Stay at Home order is extended to May 8.

April 28: ITS and Public Information produce the WebEx and TV broadcast of a Special Meeting between the BOCC and Rep. Alma Adams.

April 29: Mecklenburg County's Stay at Home Proclamation moves under North Carolina's Order and ~~that~~ its plan~~'s~~ for a three-phased approach to reopen the state.

April 30: Parking lots for parks, greenways, and nature preserves reopen for vehicles, instead of simply walk-in and bicycle access. In addition, boat ramps at Ramsey Creek, Blythe Landing and Copperhead Island reopen.

April 30: Public Information hosts a virtual press conference.

Employee Communication Update

With many employees suddenly working from home ~~suddenly~~, Public Information has worked with the Manager's Office to make sure ~~the~~ workers are kept up to date.

Following is a summary of employee communications sent in April:

"Your County Manager" Emails

- 4/9 Employee Assistance Program
- 4/23 Michael Bryant Promoted to Assistant County Manager

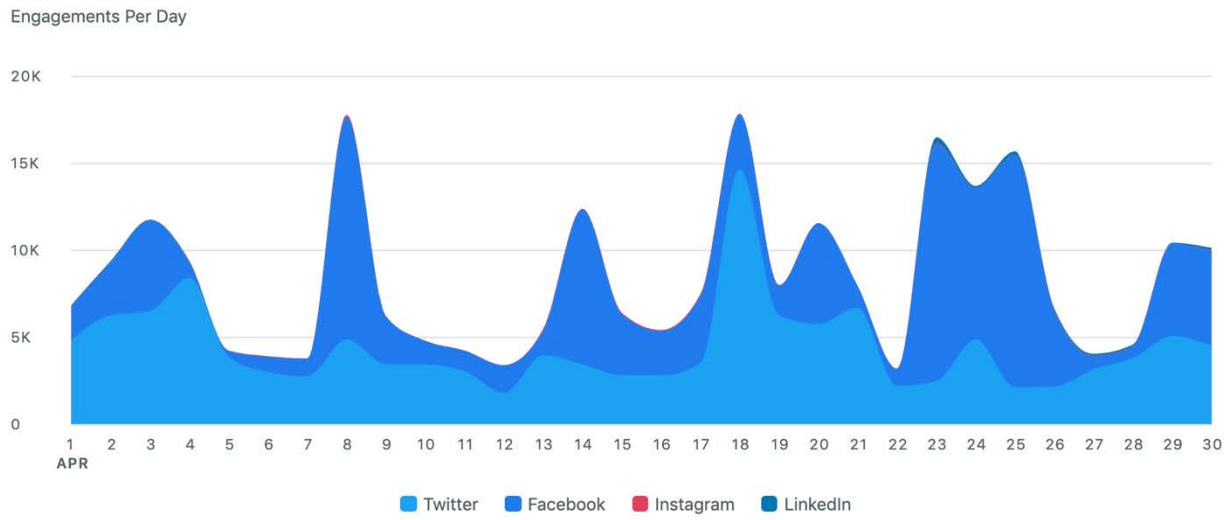
MeckWeb Posts

- 4/1 Families First Coronavirus Response Act in Effect April 1
- 4/9 Employee Assistance Program and Employee Climate Survey Postponed
- 4/23 COVID-19 Media Update
- 4/23 Michael Bryant Promoted to Assistant County Manager
- 4/23 County Manager to Present FY21 Proposed Budget

Employee News Now (ENN)

- 4/1 Families First Coronavirus Response Act
- 4/6 HR Q&A, Employee Assistance Program, Cybersecurity Tips
- 4/16 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Stimulus Act, COVID-19 Scam Alert, Dependent Flexible Spending Update
- 4/23 Virtual Media Update on COVID-19, County Manager's Proposed FY21 Budget, CARES Act and Retirement Planning
- 4/27 Town Hall – Impacts of COVID-19 on the African American Community
- 4/30 Virtual Media Update on COVID-19, County Manager's Proposed FY21 Budget, Work-From-Home Heroes, Vacation Cash-Out

30 Days on Mecklenburg County Social Media: April 2020



Across 19 Mecklenburg County social media accounts in April 2020:

- Acquired **4,509 total followers**
- Sent **575 messages** (posts and responses to various direct questions asked on social media)
- Received **8,716 messages** from social media users and followers
- **3,391,995 total impressions** (number of times ~~the~~ social media content was viewed)
- **252,392 total engagements** (graph above)
- **2,660 Twitter viewers** of 2 board meetings ~~we~~ broadcasted
- Tasked and resolved **47 items** requiring attention on social media (questions, comments, and feedback).
- Published 5 blog posts

When compared to March, the department's engagement, impressions, and incoming messages did decrease. This is due, in part, to the large spike we saw in March during the announcement of the Stay at Home Order. Overall in April, the department still saw a large increase in metrics when compared to its typical numbers. This can all be attributed to communication about COVID-19. The department broadcasted six news conference updates throughout the month and had an average of 2,472 viewers on Twitter per broadcast and an average of 16,838 viewers on Facebook. Before COVID-19, a majority of the County's Twitter broadcasts had under 500 viewers total. Once again, the increases over the County's average speaks to the relevance of its content and that the County is viewed as a reliable source of information during the pandemic.

Context for Social Media Performance Indicators

Social media "@mentions" (i.e., posts by others that tag @meckcounty) and "retweets" are measures of how well content connects with the audience and is shared more broadly. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn followers are measures of how many people are actively engaged in Public Information's social media presence. Public Information tracks social media trends relevant to Mecklenburg County.

Community Relations Update

In April 2020, the community relations coordinator organized and/or tracked five virtual community events. These events are listed below. The community relations coordinator also categorized and responded to questions directly from the public regarding the Stay at Home Order. View the questions and responses.

On April 15, County Ombudsman and Assistant to the County Manager Timmothy Tibbs shared information about the Microbusiness Stabilization Fund to a group of highly engaged nonprofits agencies. This event wash hosted by Share Charlotte.

On April 15, County Manager Dena R. Diorio participated in a panel discussion series: Unmasked | Healthcare in the Black Community Beyond the Virus, hosted by the Harvey B. Gantt Center.

On April 21, Public Health Director Gibbie Harris participated in a panel discussion series: Unmasked | How the Virus Impacts the Black Community, hosted by the Harvey B. Gantt Center. These events were livestreamed on the Gantt Center YouTube page.

On April 21, the Economic Development Program Manager spoke to the Urban League of Central Carolinas General Body at a virtual event. He shared information about the Small Business Local Program.

On April 30, Public Health Deputy Director participated in the first Joint City/County Joint Town Hall on Addressing Racial Disparities during COVID-19. The Community Relations Coordinator worked with the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Director to develop this program. These events are broadcast and saved on the City of Charlotte Facebook Page.

Media Relations

Public Information creates a report of all media inquiries and responses every day. The list is provided to the County Manager and Executive Team at close of business. Public Information also actively "pitches" County information via news releases and media advisories to selected media outlets as needed. Public Information is currently upgrading its tracking system for media stories to provide better analysis of what media outlets are covering what County news.

During the COVID-19 crisis, media inquiries increased from an average of about five per business day to nearly 20 per day. All were routed through the Joint Information Center at the Emergency Operations Center for more efficient and coordinated response.

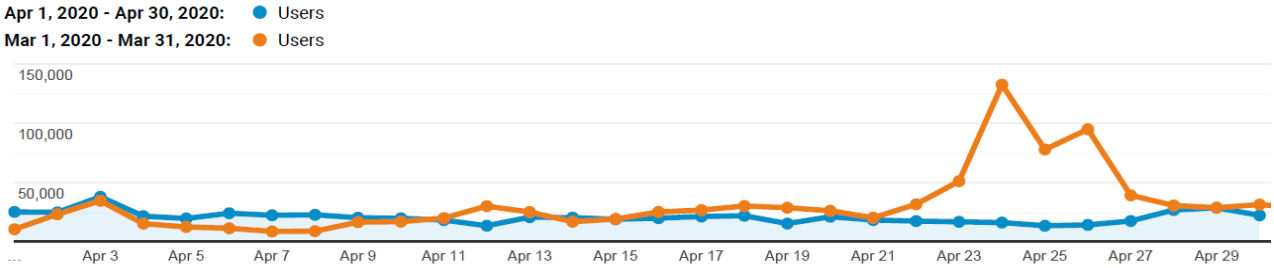
In April, over 30 News Releases and Media Advisories were pushed out to hundreds of media partners. Regular data releases with information about COVID-19 cases were provided.

Public Records Requests Management Update

As of mid-May 2020, 61 public records requests are in process by Public Information. Since Mecklenburg County began using the secure Exterro system for public records requests and legal review and collection in late June 2019, nearly 700 public records requests have been received and put in process by PI. In February and March 2020, Public Records requests increased more than 30 percent due to increased media requests for public documents concerning COVID-19.

In the first six months of use, the Exterro system has reduced non-County public records inquiries (court documents, City of Charlotte records, etc.) by about 50 percent over the same time last year when Public Information used email as a primary receiver/delivery system for requests.

Web Services



In April, the Public Information Web Services team continued to manage the County's COVID-19 website presence. MeckNC.gov received slightly over a million pageviews over the month of April. This is lower than the previous month of March, with more than 2 million pageviews. Even with the decline in pageviews, this still continues to be greater traffic than the normal workload of all of MeckNC.gov combined. Mecklenburg County continues to use MeckNC.gov for up-to-the minute information during the COVID-19 crisis. The MeckNC.gov site is used to share news, resources, and information related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Analytics for April
Total Sessions: 719,969
Mobile Users: 276,975 (61.27%)
Social Media Referrals: 35,998
Accessibility Score: 85.6 (Industry benchmark: 73.4)

FY20-FY22 Strategic Business Plan Update

- **One of the Public Information's strategic goals is to "Create direct communications efforts to better serve county residents by utilizing communication methods such as media relations, marketing, advertising, video, social media, the web and multimedia campaigns."** During the COVID-19 crisis, Public Information created a new process to hold "virtual" press conferences to protect the safety of staff and the media.

- **One of the Public Information's strategic goals is to "effectively identify communication trends for internal customers and employees."** During the COVID-19 crisis, Public Information has continued work with Human Resources to keep employees informed via Employee News Now emails, Your County Manager emails, MeckWeb, and live presentations from the County Manager and Human Resources Director.