

# Spring Boards, May 5-6, 2020

## A. ISSUES SUBMITTED/SUPPORTED BY ALL ASSOCIATIONS

### 1) Budgets & Fees

- i) Due to the economic impact of the pandemic and lower oil prices are having on the state's economy, what are extension administration's thoughts about what our potential budget (and anticipated cuts) may look like going forward? We have not yet received direction from the TAMU System or state about budget cuts. We are beginning to learn of county-level budget pressures.
- ii) What strategic steps is Administration taking *now* to minimize impact of potential budget issues, other than hiring "freeze"? The hiring freeze has resulted in significant savings. We have also begun to work with the VC's office to explore efficiencies to be gained across AgriLife and within Extension. We have also engaged the CLT to prioritize Extension's current positions.
- iii) Moving forward, will a plan be developed that prioritizes when and where to make cuts should cuts be needed? If so, when will plan be announced and put in action? As mentioned above, we are in the process of establishing priorities across Extension. If reductions must be made, we will use the priorities to guide our actions.
- iv) How long are our jobs secure? Particularly with undetermined end date for changes related to COVID-19?. With the uncertainty around state, federal, and county budgets and the fact that no direction has yet been received, we can't answer this question.
- v) Promotion monies(
  - Will the economic/budget situation have any effect on appointing eligible agents to Level V? If so, how and when will those agents be notified? As of now, there is no plan to eliminate any part of the CEA Career Ladder, including the Distinguished Agent level. We typically ask Regional Teams for nominations in the Fall, and announce Distinguished Agents in January. Promotions still go in effect September 1, like all other promotions.
  - And will it have any effect on promoting agents to Levels II through IV? No planned impact at this time.
- vi) There is inconsistency in how fee-based programming is being executed. If everyone does their part (Agents, Specialists, etc.), it will send a unified message and strengthen the agency's financial standing in the long run
  - Were told at Winter Boards we would get a one-pager on fee-based programming and how the finances are actually allocated. Is that still in the works? The statement was made that we would see what we could do about a "one pager". Fee based program funds conducted by the agency are used for such things as professional development travel, conference registration fees, mileage, faculty rentals, telecommunications, utilities, janitorial, maintenance, copiers, supplies, computers, software and operating.

Fee based money accounts for 1% of the Agency budget. It's roughly 10% of the funds from a program with 90% of the funds going to the event and ultimately back to the program associated with the agent or specialist. We trust that the 90% is handled in an ethical manner and follows appropriate protocol.

## 2) Communications & Reporting

i) Recent email communications have made it increasingly difficult for agents to keep track of most recent/important information. Additionally, there is conflicting guidance and messaging when multiple personnel are sending same information

- Conflicting “messaging” on whether agents will be held accountable for atypical programming during this time. Dr. Hyde's message clearly stated that work expectations are/should be different. Some DEA/RPL are implying a different message and expecting “traditional” performance standards to still be met.

(a) Suggested solution: Need administration to confirm in writing, across the agency, that Agents/Specialists/Staff will not be held responsible for atypical performance during this time (assumes personnel made good faith efforts to work during stay-at-home orders) Hyde has addressed this at least twice with the CLT. We understand that there is uncertainty associated with this for both the individual and the supervisor since this is a situation unlike any other that we have faced. In general, though, the expectation is that the individual and the supervisor gain mutual clarity on performance expectations.

- Request that frequency of repetitive emails be reduced (e.g. if email goes to EXT-ALL, we do not need it from our DEA and RPL, if it comes from State 4-H we don't need it from our 4-H Specialist). So noted and shared with Central Leadership Team members.

(a) Suggested solution: Request that **one person exclusively** send information out state-wide.

- Request that content of emails be reduced. Emails that are several paragraphs long, and a repeat from previous email with minor updates, make it hard to find the new information. With information so fluid with COVID 19 that has been our intent to streamline, condense and utilize bullet points as appropriate. Whether an update is minor or major we felt it needed to be included in communication.
- Request that critical information take “center stage” in the email. For example, “cancelling 4-H Roundup” should **not** be a one-liner buried in a newsletter that participants received at the same time Agents did. Not prepared to field questions when information is buried.

The information regarding the cancellation of Texas 4-H Roundup was sent out to agents in an agency-wide announcement on April 6<sup>th</sup> with the subject line “Agency Update COVID-19: Texas 4-H Roundup Cancelled.” The original plan was to alert agents first in an afternoon announcement and then to send information to families and members the next day. However, when we were first alerted that a social media post had been made, Dr. Williams made the decision to go ahead and release the information to everyone. He wanted the information to get to families from him and not through the social media channels. The news was too important to families for them to hear through the

“grapevine.” The oversight that occurred was when we sent the agency announcement and did not ask agents to not distribute the information via social media until the notice to families went out the next day.

- Agents experiencing a multitude of repetitive reporting requests, sometimes with conflicting/little guidance. Example:

As of 4/14/2020 some agents are still reporting ALL activities (4-H camps, ag producer programs, etc.) into Covid-19 Qualtrics. Other agents have been instructed to only report activities directly related to Covid-19 programming/response. Which is the correct answer?

Both could be correct the following is the explanation on the COVID 19 time sheet reporting form: Reporting can be related to internal and external audiences. Activities should be around the agency response to COVID 19 or the planning and implementation of activities and information that help citizens deal with the response to COVID 19.

- Numerous districts required Agents to submit daily reports (via Google, Qualtrics, etc.) to their RPL on work activities, no explanation.

If more specifics can be provided on this, that would be helpful. I have reached out to the FCH RPLs and they have indicated they were not asking for a daily report. The only reports they asked for were in reference to the question below. Is it possible this question is referring to the daily Covid-19 reporting? RPLs did include Covid-19 reporting information in their updates to agents. -Courtney

I reached out to the ANR-RPLs and they were unaware of daily reports except for possible reports related to COVID19. I would say that the ELT have sent several requests for information related to COVID and program planning during COVID19 so it may seem like daily reports. I did stress the importance of over-communicating the why behind our requests but at the CLT and ELT levels. – Dan

- Numerous districts required Agents to submit a complete list of programming activities to RPL, without any explanation, and a 2-day turnaround time, no explanation.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit and the agency went to skeletal crews and a directive of no face-to-face programming, we felt it was important for Extension to continue to have a presence in the local communities and attempt to continue some programming efforts. At the state level, administration requested a list of programs and activities planned through the Spring to ascertain the impacts of Covid-19 and serve as a guide in making alternative plans. RPLs requested a list of programming activities so they could begin developing cluster/program teams to foster collaboration and support and agents continued to move forward with altering program implementation plans. As FCH RPLs worked with those teams, they did ask for communication back to them on their plans, including a D-1016 planning form, so they were aware of the plans and could support programming efforts, connect agents to specialists, etc.

I made a request about three weeks into COVID for RPLs and ADHs to make an assessment of the programs that were being done digitally over the next 8 weeks. We had been asked at several levels to determine how well the Agency was responding to the needs of our stakeholders. This also needed to determine the needs and required training of our Extension personnel in moving to a digital format over the next few

months. Their turn around was 5 days which I would say was too short and would consider that in the future.

### **3) Programming & Performance**

- i) Agents are concerned that AgriLife is losing sight of the importance of face-to-face programming and our grassroots presence within each county. When face-to-face meetings are allowed again, they must continue to be a critical component of educating clientele. Agents recognize that online programming is one tool in a tool box, and should be a component, not entirety, of our delivery method. Please verify that AgriLife is not moving towards a “virtual only” delivery platform. Messaging from the Director has consistently indicated that Extension personnel should utilize a variety of tools to meet customer needs. A balance of approaches is critical for success. Since I arrived, there has been consistent urging from me to explore digital approaches because they were not used as much as they could be to expand our reach and impact. We are to a point at which most individuals should know how to present via webinar as well as they know how to present in person.
- ii) How will reduced programming success (attendance, number of programs, etc.), attributed to Covid-19, affect promotion potential and/or performance review?

Regional Program Leaders have been working with various regional and district program teams to continue virtual programming as appropriate. We do understand the impact that the pandemic may have on some agents’ program success and that will definitely be taken into consideration. The Vice Chancellor office and the Directors office have both stressed that expectations over the next few months will be different than in normal years. DEAs will certainly consider all aspects of performance, including how programs were planned and conducted during this unusual time.

- iii) Thinking proactively, when we get the go-ahead across the state, will there be a slow or structured roll-out of face-to-face programs, or will it be everyone return to work as normal? How will Extension handle extended local stay-at-home orders? Yes, it will be a slow structured rollout in accordance to the executive orders of the Office of the Governor and the Texas A&M University System
- iv) If the Shelter in place order ends, but High-Risk Individuals are still encouraged to stay home, will Extension make allowances for that? Yes

### **4) Miscellaneous**

- i) When will Extension Sounding Board members be announced state-wide? What effect will the Extension Sounding Board have on professional associations? Will Associations still have a direct line with administration and be able to approach them with an open door? An announcement with team members was shared agency wide on April 20. The Sounding Board had a one-hour introductory meeting on April 21 and will set quarterly meetings very soon. My intention in launching the Sounding Board is to establish a formal group through which the administration connects with agents and specialists in a way that all agents and specialists are represented. As it relates to the traditional engagement that AgriLife Extension administration has had with the associations, it changes only the channel through

which input such as this Q&A is conveyed. We will implement an agency-wide process with the Sounding Board so that all personnel are able to provide questions/comments/concerns and all agency personnel receive responses. In my brief experience, this Q&A has dominated the interaction with the associations rather than discussions of our shared goals of supporting personnel through professional development, scholarship opportunities, leadership development, etc. The associations have an incredibly valuable role to play in making the agency successful.

ii)

### C. ISSUES FROM TEXAS EXTENSION SPECIALISTS ASSOCIATION (TESA)

1) What is the role of a RPL, DEA, Specialist, Program Specialist, and County Agent when it comes to programming and achieving the Agency mission? Background Info:

- i) "Over time that model seems to have changed. Specialists and Program Specialists offer their own programs that are grant funded or fee based. At the same time, county agent may offer similar programming that is a revenue program as well. Specialists are told they are to work with the Agents since that is a performance measure. Agents are told to work with Specialists, but there is no continuity. In some areas Specialists and Agents, along with their RPL and DEA have great relationships and programming works as it supposed to. In other areas, RPLs, DEAs, or Agents make requests that often resemble a demand more than a request of Specialists. While everyone has a position description something that is lacking is clear definition of roles. Even on the organizational chart Specialists, Program Specialists and Agents are listed but again there should be page two with clear direction on everyone's role."

There are district and regional difference in agent and specialist expectations and in program planning. The ELT along with the CLT and other Extension personnel are working to establish best practices in program planning and implementation. The strategic plan will be taking these issues under consideration.

2) When a new program is being developed and a registration fee will be charged. If it is a county program is it reasonable for a specialist to ask to have their travel covered? Are there any guidelines that could be shared with all of Extension Personnel to allow everyone to understand how this works?

If the program is being managed through the local county or a local committee it is reasonable for the specialist to request that their travel expenses be reimbursed. Under the current funding model many specialist's travel expenses may not be able to be covered through departmental allocations and therefore they may need to request their travel be paid by the hosting entity.

3) The District Centers have always served as regional hubs for the Agency supporting county programs. However, over the past decade many of the Specialists and Program Specialists support special programs or issues. This question again has to do with roles of DEA, Office Manager and Support Staff and how they work with Specialists and Program Specialists. What are the reasonable expectations that a Specialist can expect from support staff? Should every Specialist have a support staff person at their Center? At each Center this response is very different and changes as office managers and DEAs change. As Specialists at any level are required to do additional distance education and web-based instruction, are there any plans to hire personnel at the district centers to assist those individuals?

Every District has limited support staff available for all faculty/professionals to work with. It is not reasonable to expect a full time effort from a support staff, but assistance with travel and basic office functions is reasonable. Many Centers assign support staff to specific tasks, and not to specific people. We agree the sustainable business model will need to address these issues. The strategic plan will be addressing these items and we will involve extension personnel in assess the best course of action.

4) Budgets are created by extension units, however, these budgets are not typically shared with specialists. At the same time, specialists are encouraged to generate funds to support their

program and yet they are not part of the process as to what these funds do for their unit. What sources of funds are and are not included in a unit's budget, and how do funds generated by specialist affect a unit's budget? Typically, each unit may handle this differently. No across the board answer.

5) AgriLife Learn the online class portal has been established and there are classes going on. However, I recently heard that we are supposed to be reporting that course participation to Texas Data. However, the Design team is not aware of this requirement and getting reports from this system is not easy. It would be nice if Admin would look at this venue and give Specialists guidance on how to report and what to report, how often, etc. Meetings have occurred to help alleviate this situation. The plan starting in September will be to dump the data from AgriLife Learn to TexasData.

6) According to the Program Specialist Career Ladder guidelines, those who are currently up for promotion (promotion packets were submitted last summer) should have heard a decision by the Director through their unit leader by the end of March. Any idea when these announcements will be made?

The final approvals of the program specialist career ladder promotions have been submitted to the Director's office and letters are being prepared. They were sent out last week,

#### **D. ISSUES FROM EPSILON SIGMA PHI (ESP)**

1) What is the preferred web-conferencing service by AgriLife and will we invest resources so that all staff have the appropriate access? Answer forthcoming

2) With shelter in place declarations, some have had to cancel previously planned vacations. Now that vacation time might not be able to be used before the year is over. Will the Agency allow the use of this time or allow additional roll over hours this year? Short answer is no. This is a System Policy rather than an agency decision. Unfortunately, this may be a year where employees may be unable to travel as planned but hopefully will still take advantage of some time off and use their vacation.

3) Different districts seem to have different policies regarding schedule adjustments for salaried Agents. For example, if travel requires long distances or evening programs, is it permissible to alter the schedule for that week to accommodate the work hour changes. What is the view of Administration in these examples? Is there a formal policy that allows for schedule adjustments on office hours? This doesn't include emergency events or other duties as part of the job, but more for flexibility and work / life balance. We very recently shared a Statement on Professional Scheduling to everyone in the agency. It should be clear what our expectations are based on this document. Extension is not, and will never be a 40 hour job. Yes, you should have flexibility to manage your schedule, but your schedule will very frequently involve nights and weekends. The statement can be found on the employee website at <http://extensionemployees.tamu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019-10-Professional-Work-Scheduling-Statement.pdf>

4) *Questions below do not need to be answered as they have been relocated to Section A. Kept here to indicate complete list of questions submitted by Association.*

*i) How bad will the anticipated budget damage be?*

*ii) What strategic steps is Administration taking now to minimize the impact of the crisis on the budget?*

*iii) Will there be a plan developed to prioritize where to make anticipated cuts?*

#### **E. ISSUES FROM TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF EXTENSION 4-H AGENTS (TAE4-HA)**

- 1) Is there a possibility for us to be able to use Google Sites & Google Classroom to continue some of our online/virtual camps? We are supposedly partners with them on the national level and I would like to see us use this to benefit our kids. Right now we're not supposed to use those products because of branding concerns – what are the branding guidelines for if not to help us with this? I am unaware that we have actually told anyone to stop using these tools. The strategic planning process will guide us in establishing ways to support agents and specialists in a way that doesn't "splinter the brand" by adding even more websites, blogs, and other digital landing points. Right now, we are underinvested in support for digital product creation and program decision making that accounts for the market. A few individuals in the agency may feel held back by this process but it will be developed to benefit all agency members.
- 2) If we are not able to use these products, is there a possibility for some freedom with downloading widgets to make our WordPress sites more usable? Ours are currently severely out of date and my experiences with First Call have been rather unpleasant and unproductive – they don't understand what we do and they often ignore my requests or demean my requests by referring me to an unnecessary tutorial when I already know how to develop the site and just need to download a widget that requires admin permissions. How are we supposed to be creative and reach our clientele from a distance with unusable tools and technical helpers who don't know/understand what we do? Since AgriLife IT is a shared service, we don't manage that. We can, however, influence the type of support they provide within the policies that have been established at various levels within the TAMU System. My best suggestion is that individuals with this sort of issue should work through the CLT and ELT to make a case for IT to provide support where it can.
- 3) Are we zooming? Teaming? Webexing? Can we make a decision and allow agents to have full access to the technology with licenses needed. These tools are not perfect substitutes for each other. They vary in some important ways, including whether or not someone can join a meeting by phone and how many participants may join. Some have chosen a tool based on the pros and cons each provides. We are working to more fully utilize Teams over time.
- 4) *Questions below do not need to be answered as they have been relocated to Section A. Kept here to indicate complete list of questions submitted by Association.*
  - i) *During this time of crisis, we have received numerous communications from different people within our agency that have conflicting messages across all levels. Why was our agency unable to meet together to address concerns and create a cohesive message to send out to all employees at all levels on a regular basis? This has led to a lot of confusion and concern on what agents should be doing and what we should be focused on at this time.*



**G. ISSUES FROM TEXAS EXTENSION ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY & CONSUMER SCIENCES (TEA-FCS)**

- 1) Do you anticipate that we will continue to direct clients to the eLearning platform for some programs, while also using Zoom/Teams to prepare our own online programs? These tools should both be considered when making decisions about how to provide educational content. The online courses provide asynchronous training, potentially to a world-wide audience. Zoom/Teams is most often used for live presentations and frequently allow for some interaction in real time. Both can be used to convey the same content.
- 2) *Questions below do not need to be answered as they have been relocated to Section A. Kept here to indicate complete list of questions submitted by Association.*
  - i) *In light of the hiring freeze, will monies be available to appoint eligible agents to Level V? If so, how and when will those agents be notified?*
  - ii) *With an undetermined end date for changes related to COVID-19, how long are our jobs secure?*
  - iii) *More information about what the reporting is used for, as some Agents feel there are duplications*
  - iv) *If the Shelter in place order ends, but High-Risk Individuals are still encouraged to stay home, will Extension make allowances for that?*

## I. ISSUES FROM TEXAS COUNTY OF AGRICULTURAL AGENTS ASSOCIATION (TCAAA)

### 1) Positives

- i) In many districts, there has been more regular communication with DEA/RPL.
- ii) SE Region RPL have taken progressive approach to trainings for using technology (use agents as presenters)
- iii) AgriLife staff is looking at a different way of presenting programs, which has been successful in a number of instances
- iv) Demonstrated that some activities are well-suited to virtual approaches (agent trainings), which cuts down on drive time

### 2) Personnel

- i) Specialists continue to conduct county programming without involving OR informing county personnel (specific examples will be provided during PEAC meeting). Need Agents, Associate Department Heads, Specialists, RPL, and Administration to be on the same page so this stops occurring. Suggested solutions:

The ELT and CLT members are working on the program planning process and agent-specialist communication continuum. It is our expectation that specialists communicate with RPLs, DEAs and/or with agents when conducting programming in specific county.

- ii) Across the state, Agents need to know when high-level employees are hired, and certainly should know about new personnel before our clientele know. Suggested solution: Weekly email from administration announcing high level new hires (district and state specialists for example). Agents should not be required to subscribe to news feeds to get critical info (specific examples will be provided during PEAC meeting) I don't see why we couldn't provide a periodic digest of comings and goings.
- iii) Similar to above, agents should be informed when new agents join a district. Currently there are several districts where new hires are not known until the District gathers for bi-annual total faculty conferences. Suggested solution: Instruct DEAs to send regular emails (monthly?) to communicate District news. Many Districts already do this, we can certainly suggest this practice to all DEAs.
- iv) Request job description of 4-H Specialist, does it include onboarding new agents and assisting with their plan of work?

The job description for a 4-H Specialist may vary based upon their specific role and whether or not they are a state-level specialist or a district-based specialist. While onboarding is the primary responsibility of the RPLs, in collaboration with the DEAs, 4-H Specialists are engaged in the onboarding process as it specifically relates to the 4-H Youth Development Program. That may currently look different in each district, but regions have put plans in to place for onboarding specific to 4-HYD be facilitated at the regional level in a group setting (vs. one-on-one). District 4-H Specialists may be asked to provide support for agents in developing their plan of work, but that would likely be facilitated by the RPL.

- v) Request status update on DAR positions (why the delay in filling positions, what happens to those not filled, how is AgriLife ensuring they are being deployed/managed in a similar way across the state?). We are filling these positions as quickly as we can find qualified

candidates. Clearly the filled positions are currently being deployed and utilized to full the roles needed during the COVID19 response efforts. Dr. Dozier is coordinating the statewide efforts to maintain consistency in how these positions are engaged.

### 3) Programming Efforts

#### i) Texas Department of Agriculture

I will discuss these items with the Ag and Environmental Safety group.

- Request document with additional guidance from Dr. Renchie and Dr. Matocha that would help Agents get CEU approval (documents with example text that ensures TDA would approve CEU request)
- What does TDA claim the average turnaround time is for processing applicator licenses? Our experience is that it takes months for clients to get their verification to take the test, and then weeks-months for them to receive their license. Specific examples will be given at PEAC meeting

#### 4) *Questions below do not need to be answered as they have been relocated to Section A. Kept here to indicate complete list of questions submitted by Association.*

- i) Is there any speculation about what our potential budget may look like going forward? Is there a plan in place to deal with potential budget cuts, such as altered hiring approaches?*
- ii) There is inconsistency in how fee-based programming is being executed. If everyone does their part (Agents, Specialists, etc.), it will send a unified message and strengthen the agency's financial standing in the long run*
- iii) Agents are receiving conflicting "messaging" on whether they will be held accountable for atypical programming during this time. Dr. Hyde's message clearly stated that work expectations are/should be different. Some DEA/RPL are implying a different message. Suggested solution: Need admin to confirm, across the agency, that agents will not be held responsible for atypical programming during this time (assumes agents made good faith efforts to work during stay-at-home orders)*
  - *How will reduced programming success (attendance, number of programs, etc.), attributed to Covid-19, affect promotion potential and/or performance review?*
- iv) Request that frequency of repetitive emails be reduced (e.g. if email goes to EXT-ALL, we do not need it from our DEA and RPL, if it comes from State 4-H we don't need it from our 4-H Specialist). It is becoming consistently harder to keep track of most recent/important information, and who to look for emails from. Ideally, request that one person exclusively send information out state-wide.*
- v) Request that content of emails be reduced, and that critical information take "center stage".*
  - *Example: "cancelling 4-H Roundup" should not be a one-liner buried in a newsletter that participants received at the same time Agents did. Not prepared to field questions when information is buried.*
  - *Emails that are several paragraphs long, and a repeat from previous email with minor updates, make it hard to find the new information.*

vi) *Agents experiencing a multitude of repetitive reporting requests, sometimes with conflicting/little guidance. Example:*

- *Covid-19 Qualtrics Survey: as of 4/14/2020, some Districts told to report ALL activities (4-H camps, ag producer programs, etc.) into Qualtrics. Other districts are told to only report activities directly related to Covid-19 programming/response. Which is the correct answer?*
- *Numerous districts required AGNR Agents to submit daily reports (via Google, Qualtrics, etc.) to their RPL on work activities, no explanation.*
- *Numerous districts required AGNR Agents to submit a complete list of programming activities to RPL, without any explanation, and a 2-day turnaround time, no explanation.*

vii) *When will Extension Sounding Board members be announced state-wide? What effect will the Extension Sounding Board have on professional associations (e.g., TCAAA)? Will we still have a direct line with administration and be able to approach them with an open door?*

viii) *Agents are concerned that AgriLife is losing sight of the importance of face-to-face programming and our grassroots presence within each county. When face-to-face meetings are allowed again, they must continue to be a critical component of educating clientele. Agents recognize that online programming is one tool in a tool box, and should be a component, not entirety, of our delivery method. Please verify that AgriLife is not moving towards a “virtual only” delivery platform.*