

# Providing Resources During the Crisis

**By Maria Cristina Fuentes**

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The mission of the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family is to develop and implement programs, strategies, and initiatives to strengthen the continuum of services through partnerships with community, faith, private, public, and tribal partners.

This cabinet-level agency administers state and federal grant programs and engages stakeholders across all sectors throughout the state to improve services and service delivery to our citizens. Through a trauma-informed lens, we develop programs, coalitions, strategies, and initiatives to support Governor Doug Ducey's priorities related to substance abuse prevention, human trafficking, sexual and domestic violence, juvenile justice delinquency prevention, service & volunteerism, aging, and child well-being.

Since the pandemic began, the Governor's Office, in partnership with state agencies, has been implementing innovative strategies to ensure Arizona's families have the resources and support they need to thrive.

## Health and Well-Being

The Arizona state government's embrace of **remote work options** is a significant innovation sparked by the pandemic that will continue after COVID-19 has subsided. These new options are helping to provide Arizonans better service, reduce the state government's footprint and strengthen employee engagement.

With over 33,000 state employees and the second-largest workforce in the state, the pandemic brought concerns about the health and well-being of our workforce. By mid-May 2020, 15,000 of our state employees had transitioned to working remotely. Because of these transitions, we now have thousands of fewer cars on our freeways during rush hour. Not only

does that save daily commuters time, but it also reduces our state government's footprint by almost 50% and will save taxpayers more than \$5 million over the next two years.

The Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS), Arizona's Medicaid agency, embraced telework. The agency determined that 65% of its employees can remain in a permanent virtual office setting, allowing the agency to consolidate two main campus buildings into one. That is generating savings of \$1.2 million annually.

Flexible work arrangements give Arizonans more time to be with their families, pursue their hobbies and interests, and take care of other important tasks.

## Cutting Red Tape

This past year, we've seen how important it is for people to have access to reliable, effective health care. For our rural and underserved communities, that can sometimes be a challenge. Early on last year, we realized **telehealth** could remove some obstacles people face in obtaining health care, especially in harder-to-reach parts of our state.

By expanding telehealth coverage across Arizona, we were able to get health care to the people who needed it most. The governor issued an Executive Order last year that made this coverage possible. This year, Arizona became the first state in the nation to pass a bill that makes this telehealth expansion permanent.

This bill also goes a step further and gives Arizonans access to medical professionals across the country — something that was previously only available to those with the time and money to travel. Arizona plays host in the winter to tens of thousands of visitors from our sister states. Many of these visitors are older and have pre-existing conditions. A winter visitor from Iowa, for instance, should have the ability to see their home physician, who knows them and their medical history and has treated them for years. This bill lets them do that.

Sparked by the pandemic, this major policy expansion of telehealth will be critical for our rural populations, Arizona's visitors, and many others.

Another significant policy change undertaken during the pandemic that improves equitable access to care, protects healthcare capacity, and eases regulatory burden is the Arizona Surge Line. In April 2020, we designed and activated our first-ever hospital surge line, which helped transfer over 8,000 COVID-19 patients to open beds across the state. This program facilitated a pathway for any overwhelmed hospital to get their COVID-19 patients access to necessary care. Unlike most other regional transfer lines, we also included mechanisms for transfers to lower levels of care, centralized discharge transportation, and real-time palliative care and critical care consultation. A key component to the Arizona Surge Line was that patients would be cared for at in-network insurance rates regardless of what hospital they were transferred to. None of this would have been possible without the innovation of dedicated public health and healthcare partners and the collaboration of Arizona's hospitals. The Arizona Surge Line will continue to operate for the duration of the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, Governor Ducey created transportation solutions to ensure people could get to work, see family, go to school, receive medical attention, and more. He started by cutting red tape around **driver licenses**.

The standard Arizona driver's license expires when an individual turns 65 and renewing a driver's license required an in-office visit. Governor Ducey recognized this posed a significant health threat to the older, more vulnerable population in Arizona. Therefore, in September 2020, he issued an executive order deferring requirements to renew driver licenses with an expiration date between March 2020 and December 2020 by one year from their original expiration date. In December 2020, Governor Ducey issued an executive order further deferring renewals of standard driver licenses with an expiration date between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021, by one year from their original expiration date.

Then, in February 2021, the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) — at the direction of Governor Ducey — took this policy a step further. Before the window of his Executive Order ended, the Motor Vehicle Division announced they would allow many Arizonans to renew their driver's license online at [AZMVDNow.org](https://www.azmvdnow.org). Previously, renewals could only be processed during an office visit. Now, an in-office visit is only required to renew a standard Arizona driver's license if an individual's photo was taken more than 12 years prior to renewal.

This policy change saves people time and keeps our vulnerable population safe. Arizona has been a national leader on driver's license renewal changes, and other states have reached out for information on implementing similar policies.

On October 25, ADOT announced that its self-serve online website had recently surpassed 2.5 million account activations, getting millions of Arizonans out of the MVD line and safely on the road.

During the most recent legislative session, the governor also expanded on these policies by signing legislation that ensures Arizonans will not have their driver's license suspended if they cannot afford traffic fines or fees. This legal change helps ensure people can keep getting to work, school and all the other places Arizonans go to keep their families thriving.

## Serving Arizona Families and Communities

Governor Ducey's office and agency directors worked with community members and utilized resources across the state to quickly act and serve families during the pandemic.

For instance, in April 2020, the governor launched **Arizona Enrichment Centers**. These centers offered childcare for the children of first responders, critical healthcare workers, and essential public sector workers, including child safety workers. The initiative was made possible thanks to a broad network of child care providers and numerous state agencies, including the Arizona Departments of Education, Health Services, Administration, Economic Security, First Things First, and the Government Transformation Office. At the governor's direction, his office and state agencies stood these centers up in two weeks — and continued to expand the program as demand increased. Overall, the centers served more than 11,000 children and 6,000 families throughout the pandemic.

As another example of service-oriented innovation, the **Department of Economic Security onboarded a call center vendor** to respond to escalating demand for economic assistance. The pandemic had so many devastating economic consequences on Arizonans across the state, and we wanted to ensure Arizonans got the assistance they needed. Since the call center was expanded during the pandemic, it has answered over 2.5 million calls regarding unemployment insurance. This program has helped ensure that Arizonans are assisted quickly and without headaches. Today, nearly 90% of clients in need of basic assistance, employment support, and child support services are served conveniently

online, aided by call center staff who help field questions and provide assistance related to the online portal. In addition, local office wait times have been reduced from six hours to just 30 minutes, and we are reaching rural Arizonans in their communities.

In October 2020, the Arizona Department of Economic Security announced a partnership with ID.me to **allow unemployment claimants to securely verify their identities online**. This partnership is another significant change that will keep Arizona's unemployment insurance program efficient and guard against fraud long after the pandemic subsides.

ID.me is a federally certified identity verification provider specializing in digital identity protection used by several states to address the high volume of unemployment

fraud across the nation. ID.me has helped Arizona protect taxpayer dollars from criminals while ensuring that Arizonans in need can promptly access unemployment benefits.

This secure, online identity verification program is much faster than the paper process. It has allowed Arizonans to obtain unemployment insurance from the safety of their home without exposure to any potential health risks.

Through ID.me, DES has verified over 505,000 people to receive unemployment insurance and blocked approximately 140,000 users for fraud. It's through efficient programs like this that DES has been able to prevent more than \$75 billion in unemployment benefits fraud during the pandemic.



Maria Cristina Fuentes was appointed as director of the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family by Gov. Doug Ducey in November 2017. Previously, she served in the administration of President George W. Bush in the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Justice. Following her time in the George W. Bush Administration, she worked at Casey Family Programs.