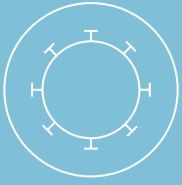


SUDDENLY  
**VIRTUAL**



# Delivering Workforce Services in the COVID-19 Environment

April 2020

by Michele Martin and Liana Volpe



**HELDRICH CENTER**  
FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

**RUTGERS**

Edward J. Bloustein School  
of Planning and Public Policy

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In the early weeks of March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly shut down much of the U.S. economy. Stay-at-home orders forced the closure of all "non-essential" businesses and anyone who could, began working from home, generally with little planning or preparation.

The sudden shutdown upended all aspects of life and work, creating tremendous uncertainty, despair, anxiety, and hardship. By mid-April, nearly 17 million Americans had filed unemployment claims and that number surely will go higher as the nation grapples with containing the virus.

In April 2020, in order to understand how the public workforce system immediately responded to this unprecedented emergency, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey surveyed 160 frontline staff and managers in the public workforce system in seven states and conducted three virtual roundtable discussions with 31 participants. These workforce professionals are on the front lines as "second responders" to the crisis, helping millions of Americans cope with abrupt unemployment. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, most workforce development services were provided by staff in offices with minimal technology tools or virtual service delivery. Given the nature and extent of this crisis, the Heldrich Center wanted to understand how the public workforce delivery system initially adapted to both working in virtual teams and providing virtual services, particularly in the event that this situation continues for some time.

The findings from the survey and roundtable discussions are a snapshot of responses in the immediate aftermath of the public health and economic crisis that is still ongoing. The Heldrich Center's intent was to understand the urgent challenges workforce professionals are facing and to identify, share, and amplify successful practices and solutions. The size and nature of this emergency requires ongoing collaborative problem-solving and novel solutions to unprecedented challenges when professionals will be working remotely and providing virtual services for several weeks and months, if not longer. The Heldrich Center will continue to engage with workforce professionals across the United States to find new ways to help unemployed Americans as the situation continues to unfold.

# Overall Themes

The Heldrich Center received survey responses from 160 public workforce staff, split almost evenly between supervisors/managers (47.5%) and frontline staff (52.5%). Responses came from seven states – Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia. In addition, the center conducted three open virtual roundtable discussions with 31 participants to deepen understanding of the survey responses during the period of April 1 to 8, 2020.

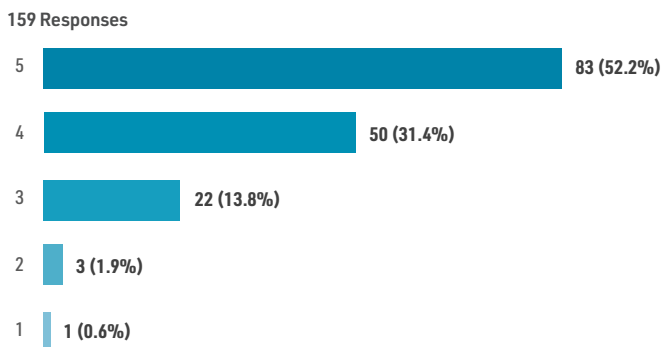
Clear themes emerged from the survey responses and roundtable discussions.

## Assumption that there will be a “Return to Normal” by Fall 2020

Over 80% of survey respondents believed that the need for remote teams and service delivery will likely continue for several months (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Need for Remote Teams and Service Delivery Lasting Several Months**

On a scale of 1–5, how likely do you think it is that the need for remote teams and virtual service delivery will continue for several months?

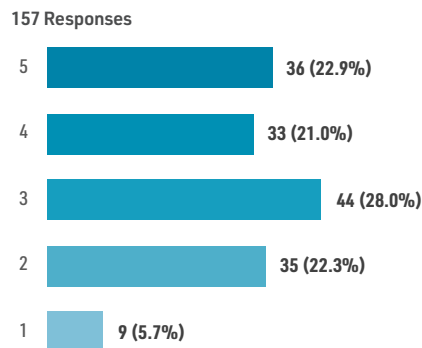


Data as of April 17, 2020.

When asked if the situation would continue “indefinitely,” responses were more mixed (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The Need for Remote Teams and Service Delivery Continuing Indefinitely**

On a scale of 1–5, how likely do you think it is that the need for remote teams and virtual service delivery will continue indefinitely?



Data as of April 17, 2020.

Roundtable discussions revealed that **most workforce staff believe they will return to work in their physical locations by fall 2020 at the latest**. Some are already planning for this “return to normal,” and anticipate that it may occur as soon as July or August 2020.

While a few recognized that there might be a “new normal,” most staff seemed to regard this as a relatively temporary situation to which they must adapt in the short term, believing that they will eventually transition back to providing in-person services.

## Figuring Things Out for Themselves

Most roundtable participants reported receiving little guidance or help from State Departments of Labor in making the transition to work-at-home and virtual service delivery,

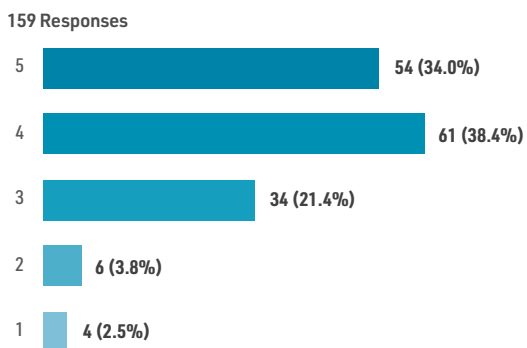
noting that they recognize state officials must prioritize unemployment insurance operations in order to be able to respond to the overwhelming number of unemployment claims. As a result, individual local workforce areas, in order to maintain some continuity of operations, were researching various online tools and applications for themselves and, in some cases, forming ad hoc groups to discuss issues and share information. For example, several workforce areas reported they were researching and procuring secure online documentation services, such as DocuSign or Adobe Sign, that would allow new customers to sign documents in order to provide services. Overall, there was a sense that each area needed to find their own solutions and strategies to the challenges of virtual service delivery to maintain some continuity of service and to communicate with one another. This has implications both for the quality of services and the procurement of tools for virtual service delivery and teaming.

### Staff are Stressed but Rising to the Challenge

As illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, the majority of staff reported that their teams had transitioned well to working remotely (72%) and to providing virtual services (70%).

**Figure 3: Transition to Working Remotely**

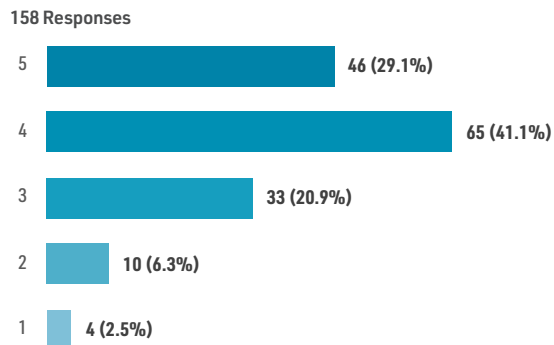
On a scale of 1–5, how well do you think your team has transitioned to working remotely?



Data as of April 17, 2020.

**Figure 4: Transition to Virtual Service Delivery**

On a scale of 1–5, how well do you think your team has adapted to delivering services to customers virtually?



Data as of April 17, 2020.

In survey comments and roundtable discussions, workforce staff felt that they and their colleagues were communicating well and providing much needed support to one another in making these shifts. As one roundtable participant noted, “The staff want to work and support others – both their colleagues and clients. People in crisis want to give to other people and the best thing to do for the staff is to empower them with the tools and knowledge to serve and help.” Fundamentally, staff felt they were doing the best they could in a difficult situation. Some reported that traditional service silos were breaking down and they were seeing more collaboration between various workforce and unemployment insurance programs. Indeed, some believed this presented an opportunity to learn, focus, and be more creative and innovative. Overall, they felt this was an unprecedented chance to show their value and rise to the demands of this new way of working.

At the same time, they discussed many stressors. Staff reported feeling distracted, overwhelmed, disheartened, isolated, confused, frustrated, and exhausted. Some commented on the loss of their “work family” and the impact of doing their work physically separated from their colleagues. In addition, many said that they were juggling

family responsibilities (such as homeschooling children) with increased job demands and the need to learn new tools and processes. They also talked about the emotional demands of working with frantic and anxious customers, trying to ease their fears, and provide them with resources and information. The workforce professionals in the roundtables felt motivated that they are doing their best in a challenging situation, but expressed how it is taking a toll on them.

### Staff and Customer Access to Technology is a Major Concern

Access to reliable Internet services has presented itself to be critical in the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was especially voiced both by the workforce development professionals as well as for the customers they serve. The survey results and roundtable discussions illuminated the need for essential technology infrastructure and tools to stay connected, stay informed, and to perform key work functions. Staff noted that they need technology to provide virtual services and participate in remote teams, and expressed concerns that customers vitally need it to access services that cannot be offered in person.

The issue of access to technology was a major concern of survey respondents:

- ▶ **86% of staff reported that their clients lack the appropriate technologies and skill sets for using online services.**
- ▶ **70% of staff said that they also do not have the tools and skills to function effectively in a remote service delivery environment.**

Specific challenges identified include:

- ▶ **Inadequate hardware devices**, such as older, slower computers and phones and/or shared devices with other members of the household, such as school-aged children learning remotely.
- ▶ **Lack of access to affordable broadband services** and needed equipment, including routers. Both staff and clients are contending with slow Wi-Fi speeds and interruptions to online connections that interfere with services.
- ▶ **Caps on mobile data plans** limiting the ability to use Smartphones for services. One roundtable participant noted, "Clients are telling us they don't have any more phone minutes. Staff are looking for information on what providers are doing for clients, particularly youth, to make sure these individuals are not losing connection in any way. We must keep customers engaged rather than just waiting."
- ▶ **Lack of technology skills in using specific applications**, such as videoconferencing services and online learning. Both customers and staff are struggling to learn new platforms and applications to adapt to this environment.

[More information on the technology issues is available here.](#)

During the roundtable sessions, staff said that they could manage the new remote working model if it lasts for a relatively short period of time – no more than three months. However, there was little discussion of what plans would be made if the remote work lasted for a longer period of time.

## Other Issues of Concern

In addition to these overarching themes, there were specific issues related to providing virtual services to customers and working in remote teams to provide these services.

### Providing Virtual Services

Survey results and roundtable discussions indicated that **local areas are primarily working on ways to convert their in-person services to a virtual environment**. Of particular concern were:

- ▶ Finding secure online ways to continue assessment, eligibility, and case management documentation for workforce programs.
- ▶ Providing ongoing case management to current customers.
- ▶ Identifying virtual strategies for reaching new customers.
- ▶ Providing general information and resources about available services, job openings, and resources in a COVID-19 environment.

Many local areas have begun putting recorded job search PowerPoint presentations online and have been promoting online coursework through services like [Metrix Learning Systems](#). They are also working with their local education providers to enroll job seekers in approved training programs that have moved online.

Staff reported that office phone lines were overwhelmed with questions about unemployment claims and available benefits, but these must be referred to already overloaded state staff. Local areas were doing their best to make referrals and to listen to the fears and concerns of these customers.

In providing these virtual services, staff reported several concerns:

- ▶ **Privacy issues with using personal cell phones to contact customers.** Some areas were instructing staff to use services that mask a private number such as Google Voice, Jabber, and TextNow to address this issue.
- ▶ **Uncertainty about the best mix of tools to use for various services.** Local areas were researching a variety of tools to use and some had quickly adopted new tools, such as Zoom video conferencing. Some reported, however, that they needed more assistance in making decisions about how to build a virtual services infrastructure and more knowledge about the tools that are available. One Workforce Development Board director commented, "This has been developed on the fly. I need guidance and help thinking through how to create a continuum of virtual services more systematically. I don't want to leave current customers floundering or put new customers into a queue for when things go back to normal because I'm realizing that things aren't going back to normal."
- ▶ **Keeping customers engaged.** Several staff reported that it was difficult to keep customers engaged through virtual services, especially when these primarily consisted of "check-in calls" and taking online courses. This was of particular concern for out-of-school youth where workforce staff already struggled.
- ▶ **Addressing the emotional needs of customers.** Staff reported that many customers are confused, anxious, and frustrated, and that workforce staff don't necessarily have the skills to deal with these issues, especially as these emotions are heightened by the current economic uncertainty, and the staff's own anxieties and fears.

Roundtable participants indicated they were interested in learning more about how to use various technology tools to provide more services more effectively.

### **The Transition to Virtual Teams**

As local areas rush to convert in-person services to a virtual environment, they also noted that they are grappling with the challenges of working in remote, stay-at-home teams. While a few local areas had anticipated that remote work might be required and had planned accordingly, most only had a day or two – or even just a few hours – to respond to the stay-at-home orders.

Survey respondents indicated that the top three concerns for working virtually were:

- ▶ Technology tools for working in remote teams (86%).
- ▶ Secure file and document sharing (52%).
- ▶ Effective work processes for working in remote teams (38%).

Roundtable participants elaborated further, reporting that some of their challenges were:

- ▶ **Accessing files and documents needed for service delivery.** Several staff reported they were going into their offices to retrieve necessary information, while others were looking for ways to share documents online.
- ▶ **Keeping staff updated and "on the same page."** Most areas reported that they were conducting daily conference calls or video conferencing sessions to keep staff informed about new priorities and shifts in policies and practices as they occurred.
- ▶ **Keeping staff motivated and inspired.** Recognizing that workforce staff are dealing with their own personal challenges in addition to these new ways of working, local areas said that they have become mindful of addressing staff motivation. Several reported that they are using this time for professional development, offering daily webinars and learning opportunities to build skills. They are also using daily team meetings to do check-ins and provide inspiration.
- ▶ **Monitoring staff activities.** Some areas indicated that they were using tools such as Survey Monkey to have staff report on their daily work.

It is also important to mention that several areas noted that they had staff who were currently unable to perform their regular job duties, either because their duties required face-to-face interactions (receptionists, for example) or because their work depended on processes that weren't up-to-speed

yet. In these cases, local areas were focused on using this time for heavy professional development, although some mentioned that there was a concern that a staff divide had been created when some staff had to perform their job duties while others did not.

## Initial Lessons

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The picture that emerges from the Heldrich Center's survey and roundtable discussions is one of a system still grappling with finding its footing in the midst of an unprecedented and ongoing crisis. Not surprisingly, the initial focus has been on quickly setting up remote teams and finding ways to continue serving existing customers. Local areas have also been mindful of attending to staff and customers' well-being as everyone navigates this challenging time.

In responding to the crisis, there are some immediate key lessons that workforce areas have learned. These are foundational lessons for moving forward.

- ▶ **Work with "low-hanging fruit" in going virtual.** Most areas have started with the technology tools easily available to them and with which staff and customers are most familiar – phone, text, and email. They have updated their websites with the most critical information and created screen recordings of workshop PowerPoint presentations that they uploaded to YouTube. Starting with tools that are more familiar has allowed them to move quickly in getting some initial services online.
- ▶ **Provide ongoing, transparent two-way communications with staff.** Daily meetings, weekly check-ins, frequently asked questions, shared documents, and frequent use of email, text, and other easy communication channels have been critical lifelines for staff and managers during this national emergency. These practices create a sense of stability and camaraderie in uncertain, isolating times.
- ▶ **Attend to both the technological and emotional needs of staff.** Staff need technology to perform their job duties. Several workforce areas quickly surveyed staff to determine gaps and find ways to address those gaps.

Where they could, they provided laptops to staff who lacked access. They showed staff how to use tools like Google Voice to mask their cell phone numbers. At the same time, local areas have attended to staff emotional needs, specifically focusing on how staff are feeling, looking for ways to help them find purpose and connection. This has kept motivation relatively high during a stressful time.

- ▶ **Foster a spirit of innovation and opportunity in the midst of crisis.** Those local areas that were most positive were engaging with the crisis as an opportunity to think differently. One workforce area has formed teams to brainstorm and innovate around key service areas while another is working actively with partners to find new ways to move online. Several mentioned that solutions they were finding now (using DocuSign for eligibility paperwork, for example) were going to help them in the future, even when they returned to their physical offices. Rather than seeing the crisis as a barrier, these workforce areas are treating it as a catalyst for new ways of thinking and working, which is having an impact on them in positive ways.
- ▶ **Communicate and collaborate with other local areas across state lines.** All local areas are grappling with similar issues and problems. Some are finding solutions to one issue, while others are developing solutions to other problems. One thing the roundtable discussions revealed was the need for ongoing communication and collaboration across state lines. The most fruitful exchanges during these sessions were between areas that were not located in the same state. While most states have mechanisms for sharing information within their state through professional organizations and other channels, collaboration between states offers new potential for ideas and cross-cutting solutions. This will be sorely needed in the months ahead.

# Recommendations

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To continue building on these initial lessons, the Heldrich Center offers the following recommendations.

▶ **Increase access to affordable and essential technology.**

Broadband access and technology devices are critical in this time of social distancing and stay-at-home orders. The state Department of Labor and local workforce areas should consider how to assess and fund customer technology needs, including increasing access to broadband Internet, addressing mobile data plans, and getting technology into the hands of customers. Potential ideas to consider include:

- ▶ Subsidizing Internet-related expenses in major federal-state benefit programs such as Unemployment Insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
- ▶ Soliciting private-sector donations of new equipment, including Smartphones and laptop computers to low-income residents and/or using the bulk purchasing power of government for distribution to low-income communities.
- ▶ Encouraging Internet and cellular providers to eliminate, waive, or change fees and charges for unemployed and low-income individuals.
- ▶ Ensuring that publicly financed programs with resources for supportive services include providing low-income clients access to Internet/broadband service and equipment so that they can participate fully in a virtual environment.
- ▶ Building out Wi-Fi hot spots at public buildings, such as libraries and One-Stop Career Centers, so that citizens can connect to the Internet for free from the parking lots of those buildings.

▶ **States should consider statewide solutions to address the challenges experienced by local workforce areas.**

Many local areas are experiencing the same challenges as well as investing time and resources into finding potential solutions for their individual workforce areas. This current piecemeal solutioning process is not efficient. Collaborative solutions at the state level are needed in this time of crisis and transition. States may be able to access tools such as DocuSign at a lower cost than if each individual local

area procured them on their own. The emphasis should be placed on expediting procurement to get essential technology tools and services out to the field. States should also research using National Emergency Grant or federal CARES Act funds to support such enterprise procurement.

- ▶ **Explore and experiment with tools and strategies to provide virtual services.** While email, text, and phones can be important service delivery tools, there are a number of other ways to deliver services and engage with customers. Zoom breakout rooms can be used for small group discussions, résumé reviews, and interview practice. Facebook groups can provide a forum for customers to ask questions, share concerns, and participate in Facebook Live streaming of content. Through email list services such as Constant Contact and MailChimp, programs can offer scheduled “drip campaigns,” that deliver daily lessons or tips. As local areas move forward, they should explore a variety of options outside of their comfort zones to use new technologies in engaging ways that invite interaction with customers. Multiple engagement strategies will be necessary.
- ▶ **Develop staff capacity to operate in remote teams and provide virtual services.** As the crisis continues, staff will continue to need to develop their skills. Operating in remote teams requires new ways of communicating and sharing information and work processes must adapt. Communication tools such as Slack and Microsoft Teams can be used to ease social isolation and improve information flow. Project management tools like Trello and Range can help teams visualize work and document their progress. Local workforce professionals will also need to adapt their in-person strategies to virtual environments for today, as well as plan for this in the future. For example, workshops that may have been interactive in person will need to be re-imagined for delivery through Zoom or other video conferencing options. While some of these skills can be introduced through online training, opportunities for discussion about implementation and safe places to practice new skills will also be required.
- ▶ **Expand and strengthen in-state and cross-state collaborations.** Local areas should continue to build coalitions of support, ideas, and collective problem-solving



to address the challenges of the months ahead. The depth and breadth of the crisis demands ongoing engagement with each other and continued opportunities for conversation, resource sharing, and cross-cutting solutions. No local area will be able to adequately serve its customers on its own. Now is the time to grow and strengthen new relationships to meet this challenge together.

- ▶ **Treat empathy, community building, and emotional support as vital services.** Given the level of confusion, anxiety, fear, and social isolation that many job seeker customers are feeling, it is important to recognize that addressing these emotional needs is an important aspect of the work they now must do; this is a time to expand and portray a sense in the public workforce system of “how we can help.” While customers certainly want information and resources to address their needs, they are also in dire need of opportunities to connect with others, to feel heard and validated, and to connect to their own resilience. As the

system grapples with providing virtual services, workforce professionals should look for ways to create connection and community and to provide an empathetic, listening ear.

- ▶ **Plan for different futures.** Although survey responses and roundtable discussions indicated that many local areas are hoping to return to in-person services by the end of summer 2020, this may not be realistic. Rather than planning toward that one potential future, local areas should consider various scenarios that may occur and create plans for how they will respond to these different situations. How will they serve customers if they are allowed to return some staff to the office, but must continue physical distancing and can't have more than 10 people gathered at a time? How will they serve customers if they must work in remote teams, providing virtual services through the rest of 2020? Strategic plans are useful when most of the variables are certain. This is the time for scenario planning so systems can respond to many different futures.

## Conclusion and Commitments

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This initial study of public workforce system responses to the COVID-19 pandemic paints a portrait of caring staff scrambling to support their customers and each other in a suddenly virtual environment. In the first weeks of stay-at-home orders, these outstanding professionals have quickly adapted to an entirely new environment and embraced doing whatever it takes to maintain contact with customers and find new ways to connect and provide services.

In the coming months, the system will continue to face unprecedented challenges, serving unimaginable numbers of job seekers in a constantly changing and wildly uncertain environment. It will take collective, sustained effort to rise to the demands of these times.

The Heldrich Center recognizes this need and is committed to providing resources and opportunities to serve the field. Toward that end, the Heldrich Center is offering:

- ▶ **Access to a free online Community of Practice** where staff can ask questions, share ideas, and take part in online learning to build their skills in providing virtual services and operating in remote teams. The link to join the community is [here](#).
- ▶ **Ongoing staff development opportunities**, including Lunch & Learn sessions on using various technology tools, virtual sharing sessions to showcase promising practices from the field, and coaching and practice sessions for staff who are implementing new practices and tools.
- ▶ **Monthly roundtable discussions** with workforce professionals to share new ideas and support collaborative problem-solving and the creation of new connections.
- ▶ **Ongoing research and issue briefs** and [Medium](#) blog posts to share what is happening in the field and identify challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for action.

We are in uncharted territory but together, we can respond to and even grow professionally through the challenges we are currently facing.

## Acknowledgments

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## About the Heldrich Center

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The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- ▶ Career and Technical Education
- ▶ Data Collection and Analysis
- ▶ Disability Employment
- ▶ Job Seekers in Transition
- ▶ Program Evaluation
- ▶ Trend Analysis

Learn more: [www.heldrich.rutgers.edu](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu)