FM essential employees are busy giving our campus a makeover

University Communications
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Much of the University of Arizona campus is in the middle of an unexpected makeover.

With thousands of University faculty and staff members working remotely to promote social distancing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Facilities Management employees have remained as essential service providers, ensuring that mechanical, electrical, plumbing and fire systems continue to work as expected. Meanwhile, employees in custodial services and grounds services are helping to maintain a safe and disinfected environment for those still on campus.

On top of all that, FM employees — with unprecedented availability of time and access — are simultaneously tackling renovation projects.

"It has been a total team effort, and I couldn't be prouder of everyone involved in these amazing efforts," said Chris Kopach, assistant vice president of facilities management. "Never once have I heard a team member say, 'No, we can't do that.' Every step of the way, everybody has come through and been there for each other. It's been really inspiring."

Nearly everyone on Facilities Management's 600-plus-member staff has helped the University navigate its response to the pandemic. When University of Arizona President Robert C. Robbins announced that students should not return to campus provided they had suitable living arrangements, Facilities Management coordinated with Housing and Residential Life to bring remaining students and their belongings into fully disinfected dorm rooms, while maintaining water, heat and electricity for everyone still using campus facilities and resources.

Kopach credits the collaborative effort of his team alongside a "top-notch crew" at Housing and Residence Life — headed by Alexander Blandeburgo, senior director, David Ward, associate director of housing facility operations, and Megan Mesches, director of housing and residential facilities — in helping with this especially challenging transition process.

"I can't say enough about our custodial staff," Kopach said, noting in particular the efforts of Luis Rocha, director of operations, Cecilia Madrid, superintendent of custodial, project managers Paul Ronstadt and Jose Solis, and custodial supervisors Brian Longseth, Janeth Garcia, Josephine Contreras and Rosa Arballo.

They, "along with many others on our staff, have done an exceptional job and have continued to step up at every request. They've taken our disinfecting procedures to another level. Everyone is fully trained in COVID-19 response procedures and protocols. The health and safety of our campus community is our top priority, and they really take that responsibility to heart," Kopach said.

Meanwhile, Facilities Management has taken advantage of this unique situation to tackle
some of the most pressing maintenance issues on campus. Kopach said many of these kinds of projects typically have to take place at night in order to avoid major disruptions. But with a nearly empty campus, major renovations and construction can happen during daylight hours with maximum efficiency.

"We're trying to make the best of a very difficult situation," Kopach said. "Any contractor working with us right now knows they have to send detailed protocols for social distancing, personal protective equipment and disinfecting. We've all been able to work together to get a truly incredible amount of work done."

For example, project manager Joe Thomas led an effort to increase the size of chilled water lines from 6 inches to 16 inches near Cochise Hall. The work was projected to take a year or more. But with the ability to work daylight hours and fewer concerns with trenching and removal of sidewalks—work that would otherwise disrupt pedestrians—the project will likely be finished much faster, delivering far more efficient air conditioning output for that section of campus.

Additionally, an $11 million deferred maintenance project at Steward Observatory is progressing well ahead of schedule. Senior project manager Steve Mikitish—who has worked at the University for more than 40 years—has overseen the replacement of the air-handling unit at the observatory. Under typical circumstances, replacing the ductwork and air-handling systems would have to take place at night, as it would require major interruptions in electricity and air conditioning.

But with a mostly empty campus, Kopach says the team is "flying through the project in record time" while also maintaining physical distance and following protocols for ensuring their work environments are clean and safe.

Along with these major renovations, the team has also used this time to finish a variety of projects, from routine electrical work to street striping to everything in between, Kopach said.

"This campus is going to look and feel incredible once we're all back together again."

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