SHIELD Illinois AITS Interview

AJ Lavender, Director of Project Management, SHIELD Illinois
Christina Molitor, Lab IT and Operations, SHIELD Illinois
Tanya Williamson, Collection Site Project Manager, SHIELD Illinois

Note: All three interviewees work for the Administrative Information Technology Services Department (AITS) for the University of Illinois System and were pulled to work on SHIELD Illinois as members of AITS

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SPEAKERS
Inbar Michael, AJ Lavender, Christina Molitor, Tanya Williamson

Inbar Michael 00:01
Awesome. Okay, so my name is Inbar Michael, and I'm a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives. I'll let my interviewees introduce themselves. Could you state your name, professional title and the department that you work for please?

AJ Lavender 00:18
I can go first. My name is AJ Lavender, and I am the Associate Director of PPMO [Portfolio and Process Management Office] in AITS [Administrative Information Technology Services].

Christina Molitor 00:32
I'm Christina Molitor. I am a senior project coordinator within that same office at AITS.

Tanya Williamson 00:39
And my name is Tanya Williamson. I'm a Senior Project Coordinator for AITS.

Inbar Michael 00:45
Great, thank you. And just to keep track of the date and everything. Today's date is November 16, 2022, and we're meeting here via Zoom to discuss the Department of Project Management in conjunction with SHIELD Illinois and the University's responses to COVID-19, the COVID-19 pandemic, for inclusion in the University of Illinois' COVID-19 Documentation Project. And just to get started, could you let us know what AITS stands for, please?

Christina Molitor 01:28
Administrative Information Technology Services.

Inbar Michael 01:32
Okay. Thank you. Just so I can keep that in my mind and also for anyone listening to this recording in the future. Okay, great. So I know that you mentioned in your titles, but would you be able to explain a little bit more about the departments that you all worked for before coming into SHIELD, to the SHIELD

Illinois project? Was it like a long-standing department or something that was developed more recently, and then what were the primary functions and goals of that particular department?

AJ Lavender 02:12
So our department, the PMO department is a long-standing department that has existed for more than fifteen years at this point. Our main goal is to manage system wide projects at the University of Illinois that have an IT component. So that is our main work. And so we were brought on to SHIELD Illinois because it is a, was a, system-wide effort. And we were requested to provide project management services. So it wasn't going outside of our wheelhouse doing this sort of thing. And it actually started helping with the campus SHIELD efforts, and then rolled into the SHIELD Illinois effort. So we were requested by the CFO [Chief Financial Officer] to assist with the campus level efforts. And it was a situation where we kind of came in to offer any assistance that we could, that was already well established. And then it wasn't very long that we were involved in that piece that we moved into the initial startup of SHIELD Illinois, are us three, as well as Cynthia Cobb and others within AITS were probably the first 10 individuals that started working on SHIELD Illinois when it started.

Inbar Michael 03:58
Great. Um, did anyone else want to elaborate or I know that you all work in the same department. So that might be it...[inaudible].

Tanya Williamson 04:07
Yeah, I think she covered it.

Inbar Michael 04:08
Okay, great. So from what it sounds like, your roles--during like, when the pandemic started--shifted to help with that, but it wasn't like anything extremely different from what you were already doing.

Christina Molitor 04:26
Initially, that is accurate.

AJ Lavender 04:27
Yeah, it definitely grew.

Inbar Michael 04:29
Okay.

AJ Lavender 04:29
So as we get into more of the questions about what our roles and responsibilities were in SHIELD Illinois, you will find that myself and Tanya stayed within a project management space role, whereas Christina did move into a more lab expert role. But initially, what we were brought on to do were things that we knew how to do and it was within our function as a system. We did have to put projects on hold, because we were working full time on projects to be able to manage this effort.

Inbar Michael 05:11

Okay.

Christina Molitor 05:14
Right. So we've always, we were always AITS stuff, though we worked, and were allocated completely to the SHIELD initiative. We never really were employed by that org. So that never changed. We've always been with our department.

Inbar Michael 05:31
Okay. Thank you for clarifying. Just since we want to focus majority of the interview on the SHIELD questions with the limited time, I'm going to jump to those now. And also kind of related to what we've been talking about. What was your involvement with the project management within SHIELD Illinois? And when did that begin? And I know you talked a little bit about your respons--initial responsibilities-- being pretty similar to what you've already been doing. But with SHIELD--could you elaborate on those responsibilities when you started.

AJ Lavender 06:04
So the responsibilities that we had in the start up of SHIELD Illinois, which was in...was that August of 2020, guys?

Christina Molitor 06:15
I feel like that's right, it started. We started meeting a little before that with Ron [Watkins]...

AJ Lavender 06:24
It was around that July/August timeframe...

Christina Molitor 06:26
...that's right, that's what I recall as well...

AJ Lavender 06:28
...of 2020. And so our initial role, or what a project manager does, is we established a kind of document center, we utilized Teams and helped them divide up work into streams and areas of concentration. We helped them with task management, and action item management, document storage, helped ensure that we removed any roadblocks by working with executive leadership on the project. We were in daily meetings at one point in time, I had four daily stand ups. And we were meeting almost 24/7 at times. Our normal work life prior to SHIELD Illinois was more of an 8-5 type scenario where, with SHIELD Illinois, it would not be shocking if we were working until 11 o'clock at night at times. There was a much different type of work experience, or work-life balance, than what we were used to. But we were all in to try to get testing started in these colleges. Tanya or Christina, did you have anything to add there?

Christina Molitor 08:07
Tanya, did you have anything you wanted to add?

Tanya Williamson 08:09

I don't think so. I mean, I agree with the amount of hours were, was not what we were used to, you know, there were times I was getting up and being on a phone call or connected with schools at 5am. Or late into the evening to troubleshoot and be the conduit between the school and our technical people to figure out what issues might be happening. So it started to go a little bit beyond, you know, just doing project coordination work, as far as that's concerned, with the actual collection sites.

Inbar Michael 08:09
Right. And when you say schools, do you mean, like the University? Or do you mean, like, the K-12 system?

Christina Molitor 08:57
Initially, it was...the K through 12 came on later, after, I think FDA approval. So prior to that, we've already, we'd already been in progress with trying to get labs established. And to determine that client base or the patient base. It grew into the K through 12 later, so initially, that was just colleges and organizations.

Inbar Michael 09:21
Okay. Great. Um, Christina, I know you were like added [to the interview] a little bit last minute, so if this question applies to you, then you can totally answer it as well. I know for the others--you both worked with SHIELD as COVID-19 saliva Test Collection Site Project Manager and Director of Project Management, respectively. So what did those responsibilities entail in those positions? What did day-to-day operations look like? Yeah, we'll start with those two questions.

Tanya Williamson 09:59
So like AJ had already stated, you know, we, we were on calls and working meeting calls all day long. Specifically for the collection sites, I worked with Carle Hospital because we used their technology in the beginning. So I worked with them on getting the appropriate people together, getting that all set up. And then taking that technology out to the universities and collection sites. And in hooking them up and getting them ready and trained on how that process worked.

AJ Lavender 10:43
So my role was not as much tied to a specific area, as it was kind of an overseeing of all of the different areas and ensuring that obstacles removed. So there were meetings, I was at leadership meetings, talking about the things that were going on in each of the different areas. So I was in more of a leadership role, I would say on day one, I was doing more hands on project management. But as time went on, it was more of a as a leadership role over all of the project management activities.

Christina Molitor 11:33
And then for me, it was very short after I came in that I transitioned over to a much different role, which I helped design the [LIM?] system. So the lab information systems that we used with Carle Epic, I did design, or drew the...I went to visit sites that we were looking at for labs to help determine if they could be a lab. I have experience from other, like, construction-based project management and other things...so I was able to kind of draw, so to speak, a floor plan, and how the flow would work and where equipment would be in the labs. I worked to help train lab staff on all the technology, train and support

anything that was IT related throughout. I learned the very specific COVID SHIELD workflow, I visited VDL [Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory], which is the lab on UIUC campus that established the testing for campus. So I was able to tour and understand the workflow, the equipment, the testing, the science, the regulatory information. And then we transitioned into utilizing another lab information system, which I helped to configure and customize for our workflow, and then implement that into our labs as well. So if I wasn't a--I didn't continue project management related activities in the same way, so I'm not sure if that throws off this. It's a much different, I guess, conversation. So for question wise, I'm not sure if that is helpful or not. But yeah, so I moved into that other role very quickly.

Inbar Michael 13:25
Oh, no, no, no, it's great. Like I appreciate you sharing. I did have a couple of questions that I wrote for your role as well. So...

Christina Molitor 13:32
[Laughing] Okay.

Tanya Williamson 13:34
I could follow up with just a little bit more information. You're right. As people start talking about it, I'm remembering a little bit more. So under my purview, I had people who were responsible for developing the training as far as how to train the collection site employees. I went out to a couple of collection sites and help them set up and help them run and troubleshoot any issues. I worked in our what we called our...I don't know, our shipping?...I don't know, what would you guys call [Gertie?] Where we kept all of our inventory in the beginning, and we came up with a shipping process with everything that needed to go into the collection site, materials that would go into a box that was mailed out to all of the collection sites, universities. And then after a while, when that kind of took off and was working really well. I was moved over to Beth Goldberg's team for community outreach and help them with some project management and tasks and roadblocks and things of that nature.

Inbar Michael 14:59
Great, okay, so that was good to know, because I also have a question coming up about the evolution of your work overtime. So this is like, a good introductory to that. So yeah, thank you. Um, and then, again, kind of specific to the saliva test collection. Were your oversight roles related only to that? Or were you involved with SHIELD in other ways? I know, again, we've touched on it a little bit. But if there's anything else you wanted to add, in regards to that, I'd love to know.

Tanya Williamson 15:33
Sorry, um, so yeah, I not only worked with the, well, I guess in conjunction we...working with Carle, it was more the IT part of how the system worked when logging in, collecting, scanning, doing all of that behind the scenes. And I'm trying to think, oh, and after a while, you know, it was hard for the team to take calls from the collection sites and determine what their issues might be. So I also worked with, can't remember names, but worked on getting a call center set up with, for SHIELD Illinois, that was a contracted out and I can't even remember the name of the company at the time right now. But worked with them in getting that process all set up as far as them, the contractor company taking over the collection site calls for issues that they might have been having. And then kind of being the go-between,

between Carle, SHIELD Illinois, and that vended company. [Christina sends Tanya a direct message over Zoom.] Talon! Yes, that's right. Talon was the name of the company.

Inbar Michael 17:01
Okay.

Tanya Williamson 17:02
Thanks, Christina.

Inbar Michael 17:12
Awesome. All right. And then, are there any other particular projects that you oversaw during your time with SHIELD Illinois that anybody wanted to elaborate on? Again, Christina, I mentioned that I have a specific question relating to your work, but I'll ask that in a couple of minutes. But [connection cut out] or was this your focus for the majority of the time of SHIELD?

AJ Lavender 17:39
So I oversaw a lot of the technology and the purchasing of vehicles. So as a part of SHIELD Illinois, we needed to be able to have folks be able to access these systems that we're talking about onsite. So we needed cellphones, we needed scanners, we needed laptops at the labs, collection site people needed laptops. So I assisted in ordering those things. And then had regularly scheduled meetings to make sure that our internal IT department within the U of I was configuring those. And that was in assistance with lots of other people. I just managed those meetings. And then we determined, you know, how many more laptops do we need to order? What types of laptops, all of those sorts of details. And then what configuration needed to be on those. Some of the legal parts of, you know, cell phones and what sort of data packages and things like that needed to be on them, how we accessed them, what security needed to be there. Then also we needed a fleet of cars because we were doing collections, and I assisted with working with our transportation at the U of I. They got quotes for vehicles and then myself with two others we picked out from a large list of cars, which ones that we wanted in the fleet and then I assisted with purchasing of those vehicles with our purchasing department.

Tanya Williamson 19:39
I guess within the, within SHIELD Illinois, not only the collection sites and project man--coordinating--all of those activities. Within that we, after we set up with some of the universities and colleges, we also branched out to to businesses such as ADM, Argonne National Labs, Rivian. And that then moved to some camps that were... actually I think in Wisconsin, or right on the border of Wisconsin and Illinois, getting those set up and ready. And then, you know, as it grew, and we became not only working with K 12, public entities and universities, we also started a mobile collection. So that's...we came up with processes for that. And, a lot of those were with universities, private universities, actually, the legislature in Springfield, we ran a mobile site there. So all of that encompassed me not only leading the meetings for those, but also in the beginning, acting as the technical assistant, as far as any issues that were happening in the go-between, those collection sites and Carle, and getting issues resolved in a timely manner.

Inbar Michael 21:20

Sure, just wait, real quick, to clarify, the timeline for everything... when did y'all start these other, additional, projects...was it closer to the beginning, or like 2021? Yeah, just so we can keep track of the timeline.

Tanya Williamson 21:39
I don't remember, let me take a look at my email here. I think...

Christina Molitor 21:46
As far as some of the activities go, the one thing to note is, when we all came on and there wasn't very many people, there was a lot of setting it up and pulling from our own past experiences or contacts. So AJ being able to do transportation was based on some contacts and experience that she's had in the past. So we were very, very active not only as project managers, but going way beyond our role to help establish this. As it continued to scale and grow, they were able to start hiring more people. And so as they got bigger then we were able to hand off, there was some things that, activities that, we were doing hands on that they may have been doing, but it just opened up the opportunity for, for instance, Tanya, to move on to help them identify a process for mobile collection. So you would set up, we would have that, and you, I mean, you have to follow specific regulatory [item?] things, with temperature control, a million things, we'd also looked into, I think, the kits that made it easier for if we were going to do at home kits, they also implemented rapids at some tests and worked that in from a technology standpoint, also from just a process standpoint, and how to work through that. So the communications, and everything else just grew. But it was as SHIELD scaled, that the roles did expand or contract, they just changed and we went with it. We were very familiar with that. In the beginning, we were a lot more hands on. All of us were because there were not very many people yet, since that test was still being looked at for FDA approval. It was taking just a little bit of time before we were able to get other organizations signed on for it. So that was...it really aligned with the timeline that was associated with the FDA approval of that test on when that got rolled out and grew significantly. So when you can look back to the funding that was provided by the state, the public health, money that was given from the Governor, that was all around that FDA approval point. And we were able to take the test and provide it to public schools, offer that mobile service for colleges that were unable maybe to get those tests to labs for that testing, and then to build it out as mentioned, with all of those things. But to do those, you had to get a fleet of cars, you had to do those other things, so a lot of that background work was going on. But a lot of the timeline did associate with the actual test getting clearance to be used and approved FDA, for FDA approval.

Inbar Michael 24:31
Okay, um--

Tanya Williamson 24:32
--I will say that, you know, we started in August of 2020.

Inbar Michael 24:37
Yes.

Tanya Williamson 24:38

The very first thoughts about mobile came in early November of 2020. That's when we started putting together a draft of how mobile, what mobile would look like. And I think that we by December, mid-December, we started with our first mobile site.

Inbar Michael 25:04
Okay.

Christina Molitor 25:08
I think the test became approved in, I want to say January or December, but now I'm going to look at the timeline on that.

Tanya Williamson 25:16
Yeah.

Inbar Michael 25:17
Okay, I was going to ask, but it's good to know, December or January.

Tanya Williamson 25:22
Yeah. December, January.

Inbar Michael 25:24
Okay. Um, Jessie [tech for this interview] just sent me a message saying, January 2021.

Tanya Williamson 25:33
Okay.

Inbar Michael 25:34
Thank you, Jessie. [inaudible]

Christina Molitor 25:40
From that point on, you can imagine that it scaled quite quickly.

Inbar Michael 25:45
Right.

Christina Molitor 25:46
And there were tons and tons of tests, and we'd continue to grow and we had to open labs very, very quickly after that point.

Inbar Michael 25:56
Mhm, great. Alright. So, Christina, the question that I had for you was um, I know that all of you were involved in the initial startup team for the creation of the network for SHIELD Illinois labs for COVID testing, that was using the COVID SHIELD saliva tests from the campus, and so I was wondering if you

could elaborate on the responsibilities that came with this creation. What were the significance of these labs?

Christina Molitor 26:33

The labs themselves? For the SHIELD Illinois lab. So initially, we had established the first lab in Decatur, we built out a number of labs throughout the state. We worked with hospitals that already had a lab space available or colleges. So in Rockford, Chicago, UIC Rockford, we had a lab we utilized and leased a space at and we currently still have a lab in Springfield, which is part of the SIU [Southern Illinois University] School of Medicine. And then we had established, we've used a lab here on UIUC campus. For a short while it was called the "mobile lab" or the, it was like kind of a trailer that was right outside of Vet Med, it was an extension essentially. And so the, initially we had started and...with that Decatur lab, it was very important to first, of course, establish we had to get a software for the lab to use, we had to be able to audit and actually do the work to match the workflow. So the test was already something that was established. So that we could train and work for but we had to create, and work with Epic, and Carle, to establish the lab information software that would be used as part of that and customize towards our workflow. Epic is very large, it is a very gold standard, I guess, for medical usage. So it's highly utilized across hospitals, which obviously are very diverse in the tests that they offer, as opposed to the very one singular workflow that we were doing. So Epic was a bit big, but we were able to customize it and work with the designers to get something that would work the best for us and get it in right away in a fast way, since they're pretty knowledgeable and established in doing this type of work, so that we could get testing started quicker. We did grow to understand that it was just a little too much software than necessary. And it was not necessarily something we needed to pay for at that expense. So we worked with NCSA, which is National Computing Science...I can't remember the A stands for, maybe Administration? I'd have to look that up, but it as an organization within the UIUC University of Illinois, and they had been working initially with a research PI to kind of set, establish, the ability to make a mobile lab, which is where that mobile lab from Vet Med came from initially. And they worked with another SHIELD organization, or arm, called SHIELD T3. As part of that, they worked to develop a very--their own lab information system--that was very, very specific to the workflow that is COVID SHIELD. So we were able to build on what they'd already created for them and just modify it to match how our labs worked versus how the T3 labs worked, which were slightly different and were popping up. They were established across the country in different locations. So the labs that we built, follow the COVID SHIELD workflow. [Long pause.] Sorry about that. And so we had modified and brought in our own developer within AITS, the same unit that we belong with, to learn the code that was used to build the LIMS system is what it is called, LIMS, Lab Information Management System, and then make the modifications necessary and build on it to give us even more capabilities across our labs. That came on, we had two labs that were utilizing the Epic system. And we had to established a downstate lab, Decatur, was our first one. And we were in the process of doing Springfield but also got the one at the Loyola Hospital up north in next, so they were utilizing the Epic software that we had established, and doing a lot of our testing. And then when we decided we had to grow, we knew that we were growing into a different lab information system as well. So we wanted to get that established for the other labs to use initially, instead of transitioning them from one system to another. So we opened up--and I don't know if that was five or six within a couple of months--labs of each other we went on a, like a, rock star tour of the north. And we hit and trained and made sure that the labs were ready to go and actually start getting and taking in patient samples. And there's a lot of work that goes on for that to

happen. One of them being just the kind of audit or the LIMS systems verification along with the instruments need to be verified, and validated, and the test and the assay. But in addition to that, the LIMS system, or the lab system that you would use, is audited and put through different tests to ensure that patient samples are running through as they should, that the right samples are getting the right results and different things like that. So we had a lot of work that was associated with that. And all the labs, we opened up a large number of them in different areas to try and accommodate the number of tests we were estimating for up north and then making sure that we had established some labs down south as well. So we did have Decatur, Springfield, the Urbana campus location, we had that as well. And then a good portion of them up north.

Inbar Michael 32:47
Thank you so much. That was very helpful. And especially because I came up with the question a little bit earlier, just because I didn't know you were joining until recently, but that is pretty good to know. Also, just to backtrack real quick, I know you said you established, or helped to create, two lab IT systems. So one of them was Epic--and I don't know if you mentioned other one yet, maybe you did--but what is Epic stand for? If it stands for anything.

Christina Molitor 33:22
I actually don't know if it actually stands for anything. But that is the name of the system. Epic is used across multiple hospitals, including Carle, Christie, locally, if you're familiar with those hospitals and doctor systems they utilize. And so, when we partnered initially to get a system in place right away, we used Epic in conjunction with Carle. And I know Tanya had mentioned that earlier, the work that we've done with them and to establish collection sites to utilize the same front end I guess, or the user end of that. So we utilize different modules, I'll say, within Epic and one of them would be their end, that was more of the patient end, getting them logged in and then the lab system's called Beaker...funny, after the little...I think of it as--there's a beaker in labs that you use--but Beaker being the funny Muppet that was always in a lab. So, but, the lab information system module that we use was Beaker within Epic overall. Epic is so large...it has ambulatory, it's got doctor, nursing, it's got patient side, it's got lab side...it's very, very large, but it is utilized across hospitals and we partnered with Carle to get a, have them help host us within their Epic system, to allow our own kind of chunk of that system for our use. So we used Epic and I do not know if it actually stands for anything or not. I'm sorry. I can look into that and provide that if necessary. But we helped just configure our portion to work for us. But we did that with Carle's help, and utilizing their hardware and established Epic system.

Christina Molitor 35:16
And the second system that we transitioned to was built, as I was mentioning by NCSA, which is in a unit within University of Illinois. They had built that initially for researcher and in conjunction with T3, which is another arm of SHIELD. And that was just called LIMS--L, I, M, S--which does stand for Laboratory Information Management System. So. And, that is currently still being used by SHIELD labs currently, today.

Inbar Michael 35:16
Okay.

Inbar Michael 35:54

Okay, um, let's see. So I know that, I believe that, none of you are still working with SHIELD, but, kind of like a reflection question...how has SHIELD evolved over the course of the time that you've worked with them? And then what were your thoughts on the evolution of the relationship between campus SHIELD and SHIELD Illinois?

Christina Molitor 36:15

AJ, did you want to start?

AJ Lavender 36:28

So I can start with...so, you are correct that none of us are actively working in SHIELD. I would say Christina probably has the most potential for some continuation, because she has some knowledge of those systems that she was talking about, that there's a possibility that someone might ask her for that. But the evolution of SHIELD Illinois, as I said in the beginning, we started with a team of very few people. And as time went on, and we realized the scope of our work was growing immensely, more and more people were added. In the beginning, we thought that, you know, a team of thirty would be insane that we were never going to get that big. And I think at this point, they're, they've gotten to over 200 employees, including all of the like lab staff. We would continue to get new scope, like we determined we needed to open up labs, we needed to, you know, have our own system of moving around saliva from one location to another. We originally we tried to tap into existing companies that already did that. But none of them oftentimes did the amount of flexibility that we needed. And so we needed to build all of these infrastructures in place to work the way that we needed to work. So it started out very small, with us just needing to test some universities. We did not plan on testing K through 12 early on, and it expanded shortly after that approval came through to a large organization.

Christina Molitor 38:41

Yeah, that's very well said. And that's exactly right. Tanya, did you want to add to that?

Tanya Williamson 38:51

I don't think so.

Christina Molitor 38:52

Yeah, she said it well. I was just gonna, like, give a thumbs up a second ago.

Inbar Michael 38:55

Okay. All right. So with that, just curious if you experienced any challenges or roadblocks in managing SHIELD Illinois projects? What did that look like? And then, I guess, when did that happen, timewise?

Tanya Williamson 39:20

I can say that we did experience some roadblocks with...I want to be PC here, but...with Epic in the beginning, there were a lot of little bugs that needed to be worked out on the technical side, as well as on the collection side, I guess. You know, we just learned a lot as we went along. And we used those lessons learned as we opened up new sites and figured out, you know, all of the little details that we were missing in the beginning. But Epic was a huge part of it because we did not own it, we could not

make changes, we had to rely on third and fourth party, you know, to do--or second and third party--to do that. So, a lot of times we had to depend on their availability, when they could meet when they could talk and what changes they could make in it in a timely manner.

Christina Molitor 40:22
Yeah, that. Epic was, like I said, a bit bigger than we needed it to be. And just because of that, it was quite complex. And the requirements that it had for us up front kind of, as I think AJ had mentioned earlier, we had to utilize telephones, like phones, and laptops, as part of that workflow on the front end, and the logistics and asset management behind what collection sites got what and, you know, perfecting that process, and...but still dealing with plenty of issues and in those startups that those collections was more complex than it really needed to be and required a little bit more work upfront from everybody than it needed to be. You know, you would think that it would need to be for a single workflow. And that's why I tried to point that out, Epic is built for hospitals, and because they do so much. But it was something that we could get into place quicker. But as Tanya kind of alluded to, we we did find out quickly the pain points from that, and the, some limitations, where we needed extra things. And luckily, NCSA had gotten to a point with their LIMS system, where we could configure it to meet our needs, and it presented a much simpler collection site front end for folks to use and reduce the amount of hardware that was required upfront that we were having to provide and establish at all the collection sites. Including networking, we had to meet with their--I mean, as Tanya mentioned, they would meet and give a checklist to the local IT for each of those colleges, to ensure that their networks were set up a certain way, or that they had all these other things certain way, and that there was WiFi available, if it was an external collection site, so that all these wireless devices would actually work and it sometimes presented problems or complications for that local college, to provide all of that infrastructure to be able to proceed with this testing. So we learned along the way, tried to simplify it as much as we could, and make things more efficient. And then it got even more efficient and a little easier on that end as we transitioned to different information systems. And I think you had asked earlier and I don't know if we addressed this...the campus connection to SHIELD, of course, is the test, naturally. And we worked very closely, we were able to get at times--so initially, starting out, we did have some of our leads for labs, lab directors and folks, go and they visited VDL, which is Veterinary Diagnostic Lab, to learn the process and work really closely with campus scientists, along for that, and then things that we learned from campus, we took that knowledge in with us to SHIELD Illinois, there were plenty of contacts. Tanya worked very closely with the epidemiologists who were on campus when we were working directly with the campuses to help them ensure the rollout and, you know, she became-- I think it was Becky [Smith]--became very involved, at least for training or presentations, to--

Tanya Williamson 41:35
--I forgot about that, Christina--

Christina Molitor 43:55
Yeah, she helped. Um, so--

Tanya Williamson 43:58
--Yeah, we had webinars. Webinars that I would arrange and get speakers for and then send out invitations to and run the webinars. [Long pause.] Sorry, Christina.

Christina Molitor 44:10

No, no, that's an--yeah, so there's just...it's...you remember all these things. And then we we did a little bit more, and then it was a little bit more, and we all did very, very much. But that was an example of how she was very active obviously, and still, with campus. And helped to kind of roll that into information that was being presented to and working with SHIELD in that way. SHIELD Illinois, I should say. And so, then of course, we did have UIC campus. So we helped get this test going for the other campuses and became more of a IT type of thing when we rolled out, after we were successfully helped. And actually that was very much in motion, as AJ said, before we got on but we helped as much as we could to document processes, put together this big book of, if we were to try and help other schools initially, I think, to take on those which actually just, it helped us very much in SHIELD Illinois, to get all those things documented...the process, to set up collection sites, the different things that were necessary...and I know Tanya, you had a big role in that, too. And then taking that into HIPAA training and all the other things that we had to do to provide and help get set up for SHIELD Illinois, and those colleges to get prepared. Along the way, all that work, all the roadblocks, all the issues that they've faced really helped to continuously improve what, how, SHIELD rolled things out to, not only from collection sites, but also we've made it more efficient when we're looking at labs, hiring lab staff, or training for lab staff. But then, you know, additionally, collection sites in those schools and helping them understand how they can do tests with five year olds and eight year olds and get that to work. And, you know, we'd have conversations that are fun, like, should we use a straw, or should we use a funnel, and that was, you know, the strong funnel conversations or the labels, were always fun and exciting, we'd have to test them in water and make sure they can survive so and then we'd help try and, you know, follow up and or reach out in contact. So it's all these little things screw and the activities that we did, definitely are not something that we would do on most projects. But we just got so I guess good. And we were so knowledgeable in different areas and or we just needed the people to do it, that we took on all those different roles throughout there. But the connection between campus of course, naturally is the testing, the testing allowed and the lab allowed for people to come in learn some of the the things that we learned and how they could roll out those on campus, roll out the collection sites and things that helped us to at least establish those processes within SHIELD Illinois. And then like AJ said, everything goes to scaled up and and they end up hiring a lot more people than we thought they could actually hire at a public institution, you know, in such a quick way.

AJ Lavender 47:18

If we were not set up, I mean, the University of Illinois is a institution of higher ed learning, like that's what...and so what we do is we manage projects that are IT-focused to ensure that our students have what they need to be able to learn, our teachers have what they need to be able to teach and that their, you know, the administration has what they need to be able to pay people and access data that they need. So this, even though we were doing project management, we were tapping into all different kinds of backgrounds and skill sets. And, you know, we were hiring people like crazy. And so I had background in, I used to be a recruiter, so I was on a ton of search committees. And so we just use each other's skill sets. And you had people who were at the top, who were doing, coming in and helping with printing labels. Like, nobody cared what their job description or their roles were, we did what we needed to do to get the work done. We created this bond of people who had a goal to get testing out to the community of Illinois to reduce the spread of COVID-19. And we brought people in who were recent

grads and gave them opportunities that they would have never ever had at other organizations and just said, you know, here go try to do this work. And they, you know, came from having a little bit of background to being an assistant director within a year because they were willing to put in the work and put in the effort.

Inbar Michael 49:06
Great, thank you all for sharing. So to kind of wrap things up, I wanted to ask question that, I guess it's about the pandemic overall. So the pandemic has been a roller coaster of waves, variants and constantly changing guidelines. I just want to know your thoughts on the University's responses, like the guidelines or requirements, etc., to the evolution of like-- what do you think of the University's responses to the evolution of the pandemic?

Tanya Williamson 49:40
I think it was an amazing response and that, you know, the leaders of the University of Illinois pulled together this, our lead, Ron Watkins, and he put together a team very quickly like, you know, AJ just mentioned, you know, and agree with that, with everyone that was working in the beginning just did whatever they needed to do to get this up and running. I think that, you know, a great team was selected, as far as, majority of the team anyway, as far as working to get that done and just giving whatever it took to get that done. Like, you know, we said before, we would be working till 11 [pm], midnight...up at 5am. So I think that...I don't know that it could have gone any better as far as the response that the University offered to the state.

AJ Lavender 50:42
I think nobody knew what they were doing. [Group laughs.] I mean, the world. Nobody knew. We had never encountered this before. And, were there mistakes made? I'm sure. I'm sure that there were different areas, but we didn't know. And so I think people did their best with their best intentions. They were trying to keep people safe. And not just their staff safe. But their staff's family safe. The University's response was go home and be safe. They reduced--I mean, there were so many times when AITS, just our department always made us feel like our lives were more important than the work. Like, we will get back to that. We will, you know, when this is over, we'll get back to the work. Like we just needed to get SHIELD running, and we needed to maintain all of our systems. But I felt very much so that the University of Illinois treated us like human beings and not just like workers who needed to continue to work at that same capacity where the world was literally falling apart around us.

Christina Molitor 51:56
Yeah, I completely agree. They, the health and the wellbeing of the employees was definitely I think at the forefront, and you felt it and you knew it. And at the same time, they felt so, they wanted to lead the way to get campus open with the test that they felt very strongly that they supported from their researchers, and the doctors, that developed...[Martin] Burke...yeah, so the developers of the test, that they felt, so they're very confident in it, and they wanted to roll it out, and they felt they wanted to, you know, lead the way and showing that you could go to, you could still do school, we could still hold all this and keep the people safe. And you never, just because we were looking at ways that we could do that and lead the way in having still provide that education during a pandemic...in no way did it change, kind of AJ was just saying, did it feel like that was more important than the human perspective or the

person either. So it was, it was I think that they handled it wonderfully, I think that they proved that you could continue work, you could continue education in a pandemic, and we could still keep people safe, we could save lives, actually, by identifying those that are positive and getting them to isolate quicker with this test. So I think that we showed that when a lot of other universities could not do the same thing in a safe way for their employees and their students. So the way that they evolved was, again, just based on ever changing guidelines for different things on how, what our restrictions may be, and have been, but it always felt like the person was definitely the most important thing, as we were approaching what to do with those guidelines. And again, their guidelines. Um, you know, and they did what I think protected the most and made good choices in that sense. And then they wanted to lead the way not only to help our campus, but once they proved that to help other educational organizations across the state to do the same. To be able to have classes and keep their teachers safe when there're, you know, million kids in there and they're all kind of shoved into a small space. You know, and to provide that was a wonderful mission. Which is why I think so many people in the beginning were--they were chosen, I think, based on some of their awesome skill sets. The folks that were there initially at the beginning of SHIELD Illinois were amazing. They're amazing people. And I think that that is probably what drove a lot of the success for SHIELD Illinois. But the mission that drove everyone also provided the same goal and the same drive and desire for everyone to make this successful.

Inbar Michael 55:12
Thank you so much for sharing. All right with that, that concludes the interview. Again, thank you for taking the time to sit with us and answer these questions. I really appreciate your responses. And yeah, if there's anything else you want to share, you can, but that is all. I know you have a meeting at 11, so I just wanted to be cognizant of that.

Tanya Williamson 55:33
Thank you so much.

Inbar Michael 55:35
Thank you.

Christina Molitor 55:36
Yeah, thanks.

AJ Lavender 55:37
Thank you.

Inbar Michael 55:38
Thank you, bye.

AJ Lavender 55:43
Bye.

Christina Molitor 55:44
Bye!