

THE CLEAN WATER UTILITY GUIDE TO SURVIVING A CRISIS

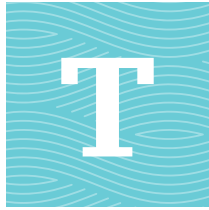
Four NACWA Members Share
Lessons Learned

ANDREW LEE | SEATTLE, WA
SUE F. MCCORMICK | DETROIT, MI
TODD SWINGLE | KISSIMMEE, FL
BARBARA BIGGS | LITTLETON, CO



Decisive Leadership Charts a Path Forward for Utilities in Early Hotspot

BY ANDREW LEE | SEATTLE, WA



The first confirmed coronavirus case in the US was in Washington state, and the first epicenter was the Seattle region. Like municipalities across the country, the City of Seattle scrambled to respond safely and effectively to the emerging threat. We were fortunate for the leadership of Mayor Jenny Durkan and Governor Jay Inslee, who responsibly enacted the recommendations of public health experts as it evolved.

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) provides solid waste and wastewater services and delivers clean drinking water to over 1.4 million customers. Our team knows these services form the basis of any successful response to infectious disease. So, when King County confirmed its first coronavirus death in late February, SPU immediately mobilized the Incident Command System to centralize and streamline COVID-19 planning, logistics and communications. We updated our Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) to minimize the risk of any interruption to our most essential services. The COOP helped us identify essential employees – operations and maintenance crews, customer support staff, and others – and ensure they had the tools and support they would need. Finally, we

coordinated with city, county and state partners to deliver timely, consistent and accurate information to the public and our employees.

Within the first two weeks of March, employees were issued guidelines on social distancing and sanitizing shared facilities and vehicles. Travel was limited to essential travel only. Crews began dispatching remotely, staggering start and end times and limiting vehicle occupancy to one person. Office staff were asked and equipped to telework wherever feasible. To prepare supervisors, we provided protocols for different coronavirus exposure scenarios. To protect customers, we eliminated water shutoffs, allowed longer, more flexible payment plans, and expanded fast-track self-certification into our Utility Discount Program.

Within three weeks, we closed non-essential facilities and customer service counters, prohibited non-essential visitors to our facilities and issued public health guidelines for those interacting with our essential employees in the field. We offered paid leave for employees who were medically or demographically at-risk for COVID-19 – or who took care of someone at-risk – and pooled sick-leave donations in case a colleague needed extra help.

Within a month, Governor Inslee issued his “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order and all non-essential

“ TO THANK OUR ESSENTIAL
EMPLOYEES, WE CREATED THE
GRATITUDE PROJECT.”





businesses were shut down. The City activated its COOP and City departments wound down all non-essential operations. Employees reporting to City facilities were required to complete health checks before work. We made scheduling changes, allowing employees to work in smaller teams for longer hours, with extended breaks between work weeks. We provided new tools to help make teleworking more possible, efficient and secure for our employees. To thank our essential employees, we created the Gratitude Project – a communications campaign delivering public messages of appreciation and encouragement.

In mid-May, at the direction of our Governor and Mayor, we began transitioning back to more regular operations. Guidance from the Washington State Department of Health has been invaluable. During the recovery phase, health protocols, temperature checks, and social distancing guidelines have remained vital to protecting the health and safety of the public and our employees.

COVID-19 has caused tremendous suffering, but also demonstrated our capacity to collectively overcome extraordinary challenges. The creativity, dedication and optimism I have seen in my city and in SPU employees gives me reason for hope that we can make progress on other hard problems like waste and water pollution, climate change, and racial and economic injustice. This crisis has presented an opportunity for us to see our relationship to each other and to the environment more clearly and to come together to bring change. At Seattle Public Utilities, we are excited for this opportunity and eager to discover what we can accomplish together with our community.

Andrew Lee is Deputy Director at Seattle Public Utilities.