

# RESPONDING TO COVID-19 THROUGH COMMUNITY & ADVOCACY

BY NATHAN GARDNER-ANDREWS



The COVID-19 pandemic has upended normal life across the United States and around the globe. It has forced governments, including the municipal clean water community, and the private sector to fundamentally rethink how they operate and serve the public.

But despite all these disruptions, NACWA's members have come together, showing amazing resilience in the face of the pandemic, to support one another as a clean water community in our shared goal of protecting public health and the environment. They have accomplished this through peer-to-peer sharing and a heightened commitment to advocate for clean water priorities.

## Initial Pandemic Response

In the early days of the outbreak, NACWA members quickly began sharing information with each other on a variety of operational and management challenges presented by the virus. Given that the outbreak hit certain parts of the country, mainly the West Coast, before it did other parts, NACWA was able to play a valuable role in facilitating utility-to-utility peer conversations to help those

utilities already dealing with the virus inform those that were just beginning their planning and preparations. This first started with a teleconference among NACWA's Board of Directors, followed soon thereafter by a national webinar in early April on clean water utility COVID-19 response issues which had over 1000 participants.

NACWA members also banded together from the beginning of the pandemic to share resources online via a COVID-19 Resources webpage set up on the NACWA website. Various kinds of utility documents including Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs), Emergency Response Plans (ERPs), outreach to staff, media messaging, HR policies to address telework and leave considerations, and other relevant information were shared by members and posted on the page. Members also used NACWA's online Engage platform to share resources and engage in multiple discussion threads on issues ranging from personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff to potential revenue losses from the economic impacts to disinfectant procedures for cleaning fleet vehicles.

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through maintaining a strong sense of community. Since public health considerations forced NACWA to cancel all its in-person conferences through the end of 2020, the Association has instead held a number of virtual events drawing record crowds as we transitioned to a virtual Water Week focused on our national clean water advocacy priorities and webinars focused on pretreatment issues, strategic communications, legal/regulatory challenges and others. Many of NACWA's standing committees have also met virtually to discuss both COVID-19 issues and other clean water priorities.

## Advocacy Engagement

While NACWA members have gone above and beyond in recent months to aid one another during the pandemic, they have also significantly upped their advocacy game to make sure the needs of the public clean water community have been front and center in the federal government's COVID-19 response.

Early on during the outbreak, NACWA successfully helped to get public works personnel designated as “emergency responders” under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and securing a designation from EPA, the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Labor that water and wastewater utility workers were “essential workers” as it related to exceptions to state stay-at-

home orders. NACWA's advocacy also led to a press statement from EPA reminding all Americans not to flush non-flushable items down the sewer during the pandemic – an important message given the influx of inappropriate items being flushed as a result of widespread toilet paper shortages.

On the Congressional advocacy side, NACWA members have sent countless letters to Members of Congress telling individual stories about the revenue and other impacts on their utilities and their communities from COVID-19. In line with this, NACWA helped spearhead two broad water sector letters to Congress – one in March and one in May – highlighting the key needs of the sector in response to the coronavirus and how the federal government can best assist.

One of the key factors expressed by NACWA members in their outreach has been the financial impacts on utilities due to the massive economic disruption from the pandemic. With many businesses, offices, factories, airports, train stations, restaurants and other commercial establishments closed or dealing with dramatically reduced demand for extended periods of time, many utilities estimated likely annualized revenue losses of 20% or more. At the same time, NACWA members have been extremely proactive in ensuring all households have access to clean water for basic hygiene and sanitation during the outbreak – even if users are

unable to pay – absorbing these costs on top of the significantly reduced revenue.

NACWA has estimated that, on a national basis, the economic impact of COVID-19 on the public clean water sector could top \$16 billion. The loss of revenue could be potentially devastating to some utilities, requiring massive rate increases in the future to make up for these losses and ensure basic operation and maintenance needs are met.

But the impact of these potential rate increases will only exacerbate affordability challenges in many communities, most directly hurting those households that have already been most impacted by COVID-19 and its economic repercussions. NACWA has been active in informing Members of Congress that federal assistance is not only needed in the short-term to help utilities maintain service to low-income households, but that the overall revenue shortfall at utilities also must be addressed to avoid even worse affordability challenges for these same households in the medium to long-term.

### What Comes Next

NACWA, like the rest of the world, has no clear idea of where things are headed as it relates to COVID-19, slowing its spread, and returning to some sense of “normalcy” in social and economic life. NACWA and its members mourn the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives across the globe – including its victims in the clean water community – and are redoubling their efforts to protect public health and the environment.

On the operational and management side, NACWA’s members will continue to share and exchange information with each as more becomes known about the virus and we have new ways of responding to it and managing it within our utilities. One approach that is being more broadly deployed during the pandemic tracks the presence of COVID-19 in wastewater. While the efficacy of these techniques is still evolving, it could allow utilities to partner with local public health officials

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to better understand the disease and its presence in individual communities.

NACWA will continue to advocate strongly with the federal government and Congress to ensure the needs of the public clean water community are addressed as the nation recovers from the pandemic. As of press time, Congress had not yet included a specific allocation of funding for the water sector in any final COVID-19 relief package – although the House of Representatives did include \$1.5 billion for water and wastewater utilities to assist low-income households in its HEROES Act passed in May. The good news is that the sector is well-positioned to be included in future legislative packages, especially any jobs or stimulus bills, and Congress will likely need to continue addressing COVID-19 issues well into 2021.

While the pandemic has challenged the municipal clean water community like nothing before in recent memory, NACWA and its members are proving to be up to the task. And as NACWA starts its next 50 years of service representing public clean water agencies, it and its members will use these challenging times as a foundation to chart another five decades of clean water progress and success.

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