THE CLEAN WATER UTILITY GUIDE TO SURVIVING A CRISIS

Four NACWA Members Share Lessons Learned

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The coronavirus pandemic has created challenges that our sector has not experienced during my four-decade career. We have had to set aside many of the ways we work and adapt quickly and creatively without a rule book.

Our sector is often seen as slow to adapt. We are risk averse because practices that assure our outcomes protect public health and the environment and are critical to the economy in our communities.

I believe that the Great Lakes Water Authority, a regional water and wastewater treatment services provider for approximately 3.8 million people in southeast Michigan, has been successful in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic because we have understood that like with any crisis, our response must evolve as the situation evolves. Over the course of this pandemic, we have focused on two priorities: 1) our team members’ health and safety, and 2) assuring our continuity of operations and service levels. Our evolution will continue with these same priorities as we move from response to reconstitution.

We have identified a few keys to success in our organization. First, we immediately opened our Emergency Operations Center and began holding daily calls that have kept all areas of the organization in sync, provided for quick and seamless adjustments, assured procurement of essential items and allowed us to be one step ahead of orders that have been issued at the local, state and federal levels.

Another key to success has been clear, honest and concise communications with our Board of Directors, team members, member partner communities, and other stakeholders. Early on, we established a regular cadence of consistent communication, first daily and now once or twice a week. For example, our weekly CEO Update shares critical information and allows me to express my gratitude and acknowledge the passion and compassion in our team members throughout this challenging time.

As it relates to operational changes, we have remained focused on those same two established priorities. With these priorities in mind, we have done what many others have: suspended non-critical business travel and visitors to our sites, placed approximately one third of our team members on flexible work arrangements, implemented a visitor questionnaire and temperature checks, staggered start times, instituted one person per vehicle limits, and many other operational adjustments – some of which we borrowed from our peers at NACWA. Most recently we began on-site COVID-19 testing for our team members working at our water and wastewater operating facilities.

We have also supported our team members and their families with their overall well-being. In addition to the services included in our Employee Assistance Program and Health Care Benefit Providers, we have sought out mindfulness/meditation resources, distress hotlines and a host of other family-focused resources.

With the situation stabilizing, we are now shifting our focus to what a ‘new normal’ might look like. The reconstitution plan we are developing will take a measured approach to assure we do not create a
problem where there is not one now. Rather than returning everyone to the workplace at once, it will be more gradual, and we will measure our success against the benchmarks in the general population in our region.

Each facility and each Area, Group and Team in the organization is identifying priorities for those who should return from remote workplaces based on operational need. Our planning includes actively seeking input/concerns from our team members and our bargaining units.

The timing of our return to work is yet to be determined. It will depend largely on our state’s Declaration of Emergency and Stay Home, Stay Safe Executive Order, but moreover, our confidence that we can accomplish returning our team members that have been working remotely in a manner that ensures everyone’s well-being and the interests of the communities we serve.

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