

THE CLEAN WATER UTILITY GUIDE TO SURVIVING A CRISIS

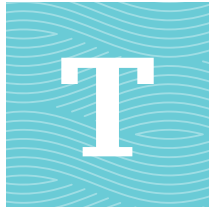
Four NACWA Members Share
Lessons Learned

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Combating COVID-19 Through Care and Compassion in Central Florida

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Tourism, a mainstay of the Central Florida economy, plummeted as once-thriving theme parks were shuttered and tens of thousands lost their jobs due to the impact of COVID-19 throughout the country. Over the course of only a few weeks, the domino effect of contagion could have sidelined our utility, which serves over 100,000 connections. Instead, we took an adaptive stance from the get-go. Our mission: provide calm reassurance to our employees and customers.

Our overarching operations goal throughout the crisis has been to provide as much flexibility to the organization as possible so that we could continue to deliver the services that our customers depend on while keeping everyone safe. Every supervisor and team member were encouraged to identify solutions within overall organizational guidelines that fit their teams and continued to achieve both of these goals.

Early on, we identified the need to expand our remote work policies, and employees were encouraged to take advantage of these if they were eligible and able. Essential staff members at our 13 water and 8 wastewater treatment plants, as well as field services teams, continued to report to work due to the nature of their positions. However, reporting times, reporting locations and other operational plans were adjusted to provide as safe an environment as possible.

Effective communications became even more of a cornerstone for our utility. The fluidity of the ongoing situation was one of many challenges we were forced to address early on. In doing so, we embraced uncertainty, realizing that it is okay not to have all the answers. Messages were shared with the understanding that the information presented is what was known at the time but would most certainly change based on new information from health officials and our local governments.



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Internally, we used a variety of tools – from regular email updates and policy materials to talking points – to keep our 300+ person workforce abreast of the latest information. The top priority was ensuring that the employees were aware of what safety steps were being taken. All-hands calls were organized and offered at different times of the day to accommodate schedules, and employees were given the opportunity to submit questions in advance or live during the calls.

As the situation evolved, our employees stepped up. A weekly light-hearted email update called “A Drop of Positivity,” featuring recipes, jokes, puzzles, and more was created to keep employees smiling. Check-in phone calls were initiated by Human Resources. It sounds like a small gesture, but it helped the well-being of many in the workforce.

Throughout the situation, the commitment of Toho’s people and families never wavered. Taking the time to acknowledge and thank people meant more than ever.

While managing all these internal concerns, we never lost sight that providing additional customer value is front and center for our organization. In

addition to suspending disconnects, additional financial commitments were added to our community assistance program to help those who found themselves facing new financial concerns to pay their water bills.

With this in mind, we quickly learned that external communications should be created with empathy and compassion. Concerns and perspectives will vary, but how individuals are treated will have a lasting impact.

Overall, our utility learned how to adapt, trust more in each other and focus on finding hope. We made sure to be respectful and do the right thing by our staff and our customers, which will be remembered most as reopening unfolds and beyond. We do not know what the future will hold, but the lessons learned and the approach of adapt, communicate, and care will be central to our efforts moving forward.

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