

# AWWA Webinar: Utility Actions to Sustain Operations During COVID-19

Friday March 20, 2020, 1:00pm MT

The following provides an overview of the key discussion points from the American Water Works Association (AWWA) webinar on *Utility Actions to Sustain Operations During COVID-19*, which took place on March 20, 2020. Below is a summary of the key takeaways from the webinar.

- Based on AWWA’s survey of utilities to gauge the initial impact of COVID-19, absenteeism/continuity of operations is the top concern for all respondents. In addition, some supply chain concerns are anticipated.
- It is important to update (or develop if not available) your municipality/utility’s **Business Continuity Plan** to ensure that it addresses contingency response measures arising from COVID-19. The Plan should include the following elements: Precautionary measures that the utility is implementing to reduce impacts from COVID-19; Reactionary measures that address the specific response to various COVID-19 impact scenarios; Reduced workforce plan; Chain of command to ensure that the decision-making structure continues as people leave the workforce/become quarantined; Emergency contacts (include contact information for current and alternate operators and suppliers).
- **Communication is key.** Ensure that a communication plan is in place for clear and concise communication with internal staff, suppliers of essential chemicals/parts/equipment, public health officials and the public. If possible, initiate communications with local law enforcement in case the need arises to have staff accompanied by law enforcement officials so they could proceed safely through communities as they conduct repairs.
- **Update Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) manuals** to make sure it is complete and includes the latest versions of all the operational manuals, checklists and procedures. Ensure a copy of the updated SOP manual is printed and placed in a conspicuous place for reference (in the event that the majority/all of the staff is quarantined and a new/external operator is brought in).

For more information, please refer to the overview of webinar content on the following pages.

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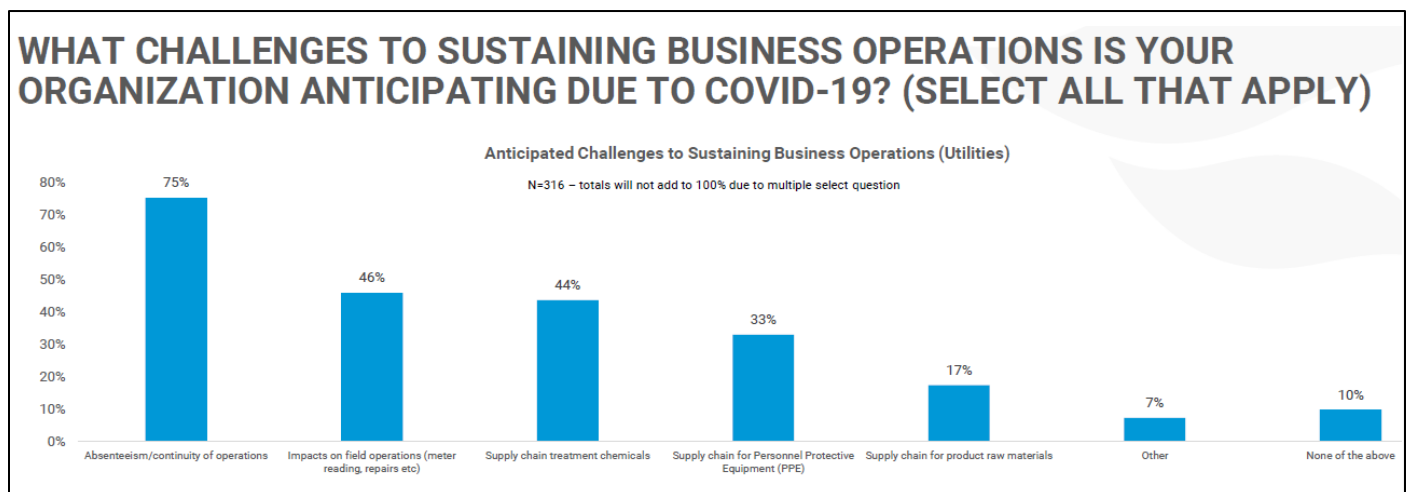
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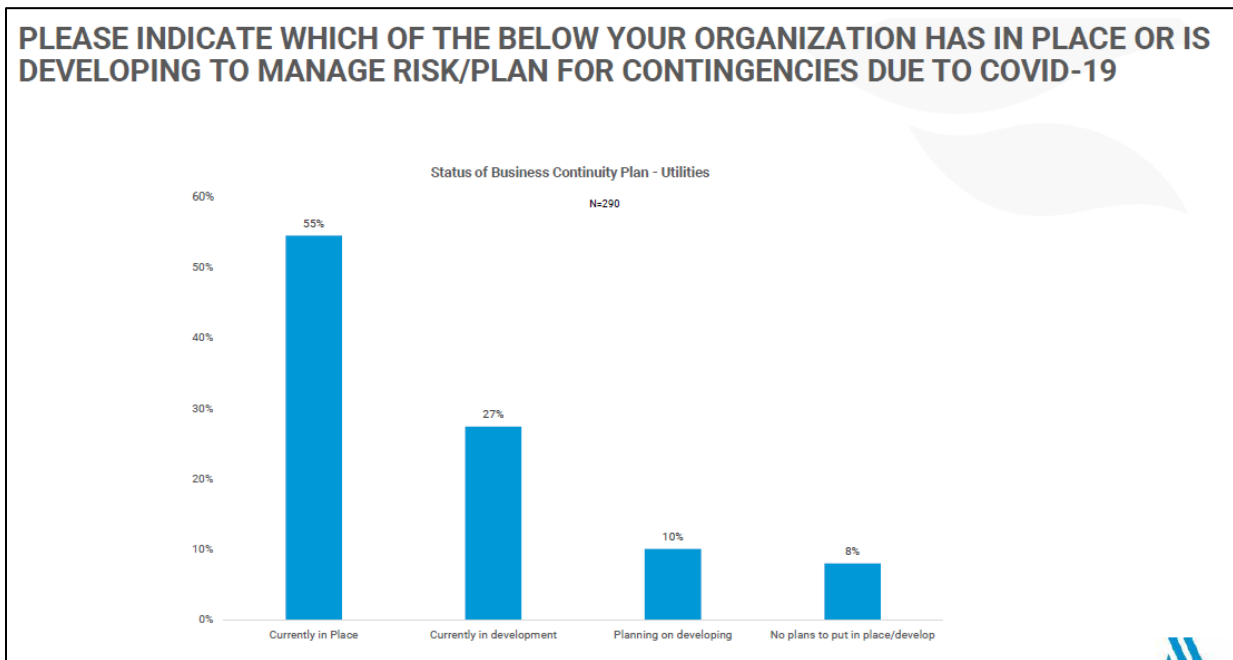
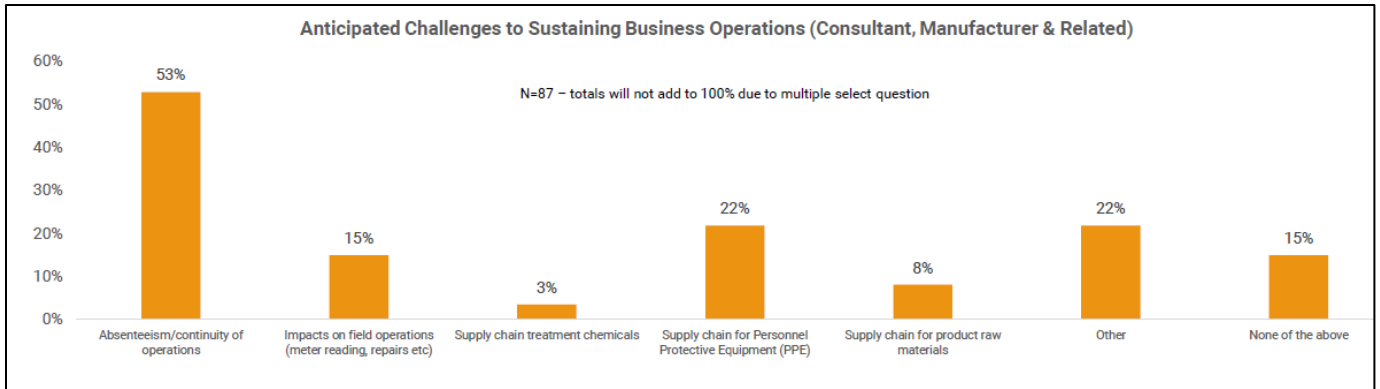
## Notes on Key Pandemic Considerations from AWWA

- Workforce contingency plan to sustain operations
- Coordination with local public health officials to ensure workforce access to facilities and ability to make necessary repairs to distribution or collection systems if travel restrictions are imposed in a community
- Communicate frequently with suppliers of essential treatment chemicals and supplies
- Communicate with customers about the safety of the water supply per EPA and CDC guidance (for U.S.)
- Consider alternative payment methods for typical face-to-face transactions with customers
- Consider postponing customer shut-offs to sustain hygiene and sanitation during the outbreak

### AWWA Survey of COVID-19 Impacts on Water Sector:

- For the period of time between March 10th and March 16<sup>th</sup>, AWWA surveyed utilities and other sector organizations to gauge the initial impacts of COVID-19 and actions being taken to manage risk and plan for contingencies.
- Total of 495 responses with 335 responses from utilities.
- Key takeaways:
  - 82% of utilities have business continuity plans (BCPs) in place or are in the process of developing them. 10% have plans to develop BCPs.
  - Absenteeism/continuity of operations is the top concern for all respondents.
  - Some supply chain concerns are anticipated.
  - No adverse effects on budget, revenue, or spending restrictions for a majority of utilities at this time.
  - COVID-19 is affecting water professionals' personal decisions, including increased likelihood to minimize business travel, work from home (if an option), and use sick days if experiencing cold/flu symptoms.
- Summary graphs from some of the survey results are presented below.





**In the United States, the Department of Homeland Security has developed guidance on essential critical infrastructure workforce under COVID-19:**

- Operational staff at water utilities were recognized as essential staff
- See the following link for more details:  
<https://www.cisa.gov/identifying-critical-infrastructure-during-covid-19>
- Under the guidance for water and wastewater, employees needed to operate and maintain drinking water and wastewater/drainage infrastructure are considered essential, including:
  - Operational staff at water authorities
  - Operational staff at community water systems
  - Operational staff at wastewater treatment facilities
  - Workers repairing water and wastewater conveyances and performing required sampling or monitoring
  - Operational staff for water distribution and testing
  - Operational staff at wastewater collection facilities

- Operational staff and technical support for SCADA Control systems
- Chemical disinfectant suppliers for wastewater and personnel protection
- Workers that maintain digital systems infrastructure supporting water and wastewater operations

**Resources to support utility actions during COVID-19:**

- AWWA: [www.awwa.org/coronavirus](http://www.awwa.org/coronavirus)
- United States Environmental Protection Agency: [www.epa.gov/coronavirus](http://www.epa.gov/coronavirus)
- United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)
- Water Environment Federation: [www.wef.org/coronavirus](http://www.wef.org/coronavirus)

**Presentation #1 by Sandy Smith: DeKalb County, Georgia Department of Watershed Management COVID-19 Response**

- Very aggressive response to COVID-19 at DeKalb County
- The Department of Watershed Management took their Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) and tailored it to pandemic planning for COVID-19
- From the COOP, below are their guidelines for pandemic planning
  - **Item 1: Preparedness**
    - Develop a communication plan/phone-tree for key staff and management within the organization.
    - Develop flexible leave policies to allow personnel to stay home to care for sick family members or for children if schools dismiss students or childcare programs close.
    - Establish policies and practices, such as flexible worksites (telecommuting) and flexible work hours (staggered shifts) when possible to increase the social distancing between personnel at work.
    - Notify all personnel of the organization’s Pandemic Plan to explain what policies are in place, including workplace/leave flexibilities, pay, and benefits.
    - Purchase supplies to encourage healthy habits in the workplace, including tissues, soap, and alcohol-based hand cleaners.
    - Order the vaccine for key staff/high-impact staff members (*note: this is for when the vaccine becomes available in the future*).
    - Ensure adequate supplies of hand sanitizer are maintained and placed in multiple locations in the workplace.
    - Encourage respiratory etiquette by providing education and reminders about covering coughs and sneezes.
  - **Item 2: Response**
    - Prioritize life safety.
    - Ensure the safety and accountability of all personnel.
    - Check-in with immediate supervisor on a regular basis to report status and availability.
    - Personnel with symptoms should notify their supervisor and stay home.
    - Advise personnel to be aware of any signs of fever or other flu-like illness before reporting to work each day.
    - Conduct active screenings of personnel when they arrive at work.

- Clean commonly touched surfaces such as workstations, countertops, doorknobs, and light switches.
    - Close all non-essential facilities such as fitness centres, lunchrooms, and other high traffic areas.
  - **Item 3: Recovery**
    - Provide Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) to all responders and employees.
    - Report any deaths or injuries to Human Resources.
    - File necessary claims.
    - Reassign critical responsibilities to available personnel.
  - **Item 4: Mitigation**
    - Provide security for the facility.
    - Develop a business impact analysis to determine the potential effects on the workplace due to increased absenteeism generated by a pandemic event.
    - Review the comprehensive emergency management plan quarterly and update as necessary.
- In addition to updating the COOP, the organization has also implemented the following actions:
  - Implementing the screening questionnaire which all employees must complete as soon as they arrive at the entrance to the plant (see screen capture of questionnaire below).

**Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Screening Questionnaire**

**1. Have you traveled outside of the country in the last 14 days?**  
Yes  No

**2. Have you had contact with anyone with confirmed COVID-19 in the last 14 days?**  
Yes  No

**3. Have you had any of these symptoms in the last 14 days?**

- Fever greater than 100: Yes  No
- Difficulty breathing: Yes  No
- Cough Yes  No

**4. Are you currently experiencing fever over 100, difficulty breathing or cough?**  
Yes  No

- Eliminated access to the public at their facility.
- With respect to the chemicals required for operation, they keep everything topped off, have extra emergency storage (in case of supply chain disruptions/delays), and are in constant contact with their chemical suppliers to check the status of the suppliers' operations (call suppliers every 2-3 days).
- Took inventory of all First Aid Kits and medical supplies and placed infrared thermometer in the staff room for self checks.
- Stocked up on PPE, wipes, hand sanitizer, etc.

## Presentation #2 by Joey Witcher: COVID-19 Response Plan for the Sinclair Water Authority, Georgia

- The Sinclair Water Authority is a small, wholesale-only plant that services 30,000 customers in Georgia
- Joey Witcher presented on their COVID-19 Response Plan. Below are a few key takeaways:
  - The Mission Statement of the Response Plan should be simple, easily read and understood by all staff.
  - The Plan should not be overly complicated – supporting materials can be included as needed and the Plan should lead the reader to these materials as needed.
  - Key Response Plan sections:
    - **Precautionary Steps:** List resources for education on COVID-19; Remind employees to monitor their own condition; Include description of symptoms; Include infection prevention measures.
    - **Reactionary Steps:** List specific steps that can be taken to protect employees and ensure that critical supplies are not exhausted; Utilities with large workforces may wish to designate specific personnel as decision makers for this section so that implementation/retraction can happen without bureaucratic interference.
    - **Critical Supplies:** This is part of the Reactionary Steps section but is listed separately to highlight its importance; Supplies include chemicals and tools/replacement parts; For each supply, include maximum inventory levels, number of days of supply, normal lead time for deliveries, possible alternative supplies; Include safe practices for receiving shipments.
    - **Safe Practices at Work:** The objective of this section is to give the employee with the least amount of understanding of the pandemic practical steps to follow that will minimize the chance that they will be infected or infect others; This section should be precise and as easy to follow as possible to ensure compliance.
    - **Reduced Workforce Plan:** This section is intended to address the possibility of workers becoming ill or quarantined and dropping from the workforce; Include sample schedules and plan for alternating workers as groups; *Utilities may wish to include the contact information of other entities with the capability to operate their facilities should the entire workforce become quarantined.*
    - **Chain of Command:** The objective of this section is to ensure that the decision-making structure continues as people leave the workforce/become quarantined; This section must be worked out in advance and strictly adhered to – any gaps may cause conflict during the high stress of a reduced workforce.
    - **Emergency Contacts:** Include contacts for key personnel, alternate critical supply vendors, supporting utilities and any other resources which may be useful.
- Other considerations:
  - Update the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) manual to make sure it is complete and includes the latest versions of all the operational manuals, checklists and procedures.
    - Ensure a copy of the updated SOP manual is printed and placed in a conspicuous place.
    - In the event that the entire staff is quarantined, the SOP manual should provide someone with no prior experience at the utility enough information that they could perform all normal daily tasks without instruction from anyone who works there.

## Presentation #3 by Alan Roberson: COVID-19 Considerations from the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators

- See <https://www.asdwa.org/covid19/> for information on COVID-19 and drinking water
- Three key things are needed for water treatment: People, power, and chemicals.
  - All utilities must think about the supply chains for all three and ensure that a contingency plan is in place in case of disruptions to the supply chains.
- There are a number of questions about how State agencies regulate utilities and how utilities comply at this time:
  - Compliance monitoring
    - How much flexibility?
    - What is most important to monitor for and when?
    - Monitoring locations?
    - Laboratory capacity?
    - Where/how to report results?
  - Operators
    - Operator-in-charge – how to monitor treatment and distribution system remotely?
    - Reciprocity, if needed quickly (i.e. borrowing operators from nearby treatment plants)
    - Training – how to conduct training remotely?
    - Testing – remote testing is not simple

## Presentation #4 by Dawn Ison: COVID-19 Considerations from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Water Security Division

- Important to develop Business Continuity Plans for COVID-19 and keep them updated as the situation develops
- See the following list of resources for more information. The EPA will update these webpages as more information becomes available.

### EPA RESOURCES

For general information from EPA about COVID-19 and water, see [www.epa.gov/coronavirus](http://www.epa.gov/coronavirus)

#### General COVID-19 Information

- [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) Drinking Water and Wastewater COVID-19 (CDC)
- [World Health Organization](#) COVID-19 (WHO)

#### Information on Hygiene, Worker Safety and Access

- [OSHA Guidance for Wastewater Workers](#) COVID-19 (OSHA)
- [Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Waste Management for COVID-19](#) (WHO, UNICEF)
- [Crisis Emergency Response and Recovery Access](#) (CERRA) Framework (DHS)
- [Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers During COVID-19 Response](#) (DHS)

#### Mutual Aid Programs

- [Water/Wastewater Agency Response Network](#) (EPA)

#### Emergency Response and Continuity of Operations Planning

- [Drinking Water Emergency Response Plans](#) (EPA)
- [Business Continuity Planning for Water Utilities: Guidance Document](#) (WRF, AWWA, EPA)
- [Tabletop Exercise Tool, Pandemic Scenario](#) (EPA)

#### Other Tools and Resources

- [Water Laboratory Alliance](#) – Drinking Water and Wastewater (EPA)
- [Water Utility Communication During Emergency Response](#) (EPA)
- [Water Utility Response On-The-Go](#) (EPA)
- [Resources for Small Public Water System Operators](#) (EPA)

Presentation #5 by Ray Riordan: San Jose Continuity of Operations Plan

- Important to maintain two-way communication with the public to ensure that the public is aware that the water is safe (lots of misinformation these days).
- Below is a summary of the City of San Jose’s roadmap for reducing and slowing the spread of COVID-19.

<b>Roadmap Through Epidemic</b>  <b>Slow and reduce the spread of COVID-19</b>	<b>City Response – Top 10 Highest Priority Actions</b>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. City Continuity of Operations/Essential Service Provision</li><li>2. Enforcement of Public Health Order ("Shelter in Place"/Self-Quarantine)</li><li>3. Ensure Safety of First Responders/Essential Staff</li><li>4. First Responders/Essential Staff Families Support (including childcare)</li><li>5. Senior Support and Services</li><li>6. Medically Vulnerable Support and Services</li><li>7. Homeless Support and Services</li><li>8. Food Distribution and Feeding</li><li>9. Housing for Quarantine and Isolation</li><li>10. Small Business Support</li></ol>
	<b>Enabling Actions in Support of Top 10</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Communications with Community Language Capacity</li><li>▪ Non-Profit &amp; Private Sector Mobilization for Response</li><li>▪ Volunteer Mobilization for Response (Food Distribution)</li><li>▪ Scaling Telecommuting Options and Capacity for City Staff</li><li>▪ Reassignment of Non-Essential Staff</li><li>▪ SJ Strong Campaign</li></ul>