



# Water Utilities' COVID-19 Challenges and Request for Assistance

**In response to the current COVID-19 (Coronavirus) outbreak,** NEWEA solicited feedback from water utility employees, including operators, lab technicians, and superintendents, on how this outbreak is impacting facility operations. We received feedback from employees at facilities of various sizes from four of the six New England states.

The feedback provides the data needed to draft this document. We urge you to send the completed

document to elected officials and regulators in New England. This will inform them of what they can do to assist the clean water industry during these critical times.

Water and Wastewater utilities are essential infrastructure that protect public health and our environment. Maintaining critical infrastructure and having staff to run the systems is crucial. There are several challenges that utilities are already seeing as a result of COVID-19. We need your help.

CHALLENGES	ACTION
<p><b>Keeping employees safe</b> Facilities require an adequate supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), soap, and sanitizer to maintain employee health and safety and to ensure facilities stay sanitary. Additionally, trusted public health organizations recommend social distancing, which requires at least six feet of physical space between people, to stop or slow the spread of the virus from person to person. Facilities must adhere to these protocols while continuing to schedule people to work at the plant and maintain adequate staffing coverage.</p>	<p><b>Support the workforce</b> Provide funding and resources to ensure adequate supply of PPE, sanitizers, soap, and cleaning products. Provide better information about what to do if an employee is sick, namely how long to stay home, and develop a plan with new practices to transition back to normal.</p>
<p><b>Clogs because of wipes</b> With customers buying toilet paper in bulk, grocery stores are struggling to maintain their inventory. Some customers who are unable to buy toilet paper are instead turning to the use of wipes, as well as tissues and paper towels. These items, including wipes that label themselves as flushable, do not dissolve in sewers as toilet paper does and instead clump together and create clogs. The current surge of wipes and other items in the system is overloading wastewater facility headworks, which require time consuming, costly fixes.</p>	<p><b>Educate the public</b> Provide information to the public about the harm of flushing paper towels and wipes into the sanitary sewer. Encourage everyone to only flush human waste and toilet paper.</p>
<p><b>Staffing uncertainty and continuity of operations</b> People who become infected with COVID-19 are required to quarantine until up to 72 hours after their symptoms cease. There are concerns about losing workers due to COVID-19 sickness and addressing operator coverage in the event of operator sickness. Small facilities only have one main operator and an assistant or just one operator to run the facility. There are concerns about who operates these systems in the event of sickness. Many utilities have gone to a 50% reduction in staffing of all O&amp;M positions to hopefully keep skilled employees home and healthy. Additionally, facilities need adequate staffing for hauling sludge and at disposal sites.</p>	<p><b>Support the workforce</b> Provide assistance with training temporary workers. Ensure water professionals, as well as those professionals working for the vendors who supply and support normal utility operations, continue to be declared essential workers.</p>

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CHALLENGES	ACTION
<p><b>Communicating with customers</b></p> <p>As we maintain social distancing protocols, facilities must minimize in-person meetings with customers regarding permits and inspections and outside vendors regarding payroll, mail, etc. Facilities are also focused on receiving and disseminating true and relevant information to workers and the public.</p>	<p><b>Disseminate information</b></p> <p>Help with sharing information between Cities/Towns and Homeland Security, CDC, EPA, and other federal and local agencies. Prioritize information from trusted health officials/organizations and avoid rushing to return to normal functioning before the risk for transmission and infection has been properly reduced. Develop and disseminate a plan with new practices prior to returning to normal functioning.</p>
<p><b>Project delays</b></p> <p>At this time, preventative maintenance is being deferred and only reactionary maintenance is ongoing. Water professionals must also address logistics associated with ongoing construction and/or design contracts within consent decrees/administrative orders.</p>	<p><b>Keep utilities informed</b></p> <p>Because planned maintenance is on hold, it is important for facilities to understand how long measures will be in place and how that will affect items like capital planning and projects. Receiving updated, reliable information is important for understanding how long these projects will be delayed.</p>
<p><b>Funding</b></p> <p>The Department of Labor’s Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA or Act) requires “certain employers to provide their employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19”*</p> <p>This act, as well as revenue losses related to this outbreak, will contribute to putting financial strain on utilities.</p> <p>* <a href="https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employer-paid-leave">https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employer-paid-leave</a></p>	<p><b>Provide necessary funding</b></p> <p>Throughout this outbreak and as we recover from it, facilities will need funding from emergency relief to cover employees laid off and concerns about revenue losses. Making grant funding available would assist utilities in kickstarting operations when full staff returns to work.</p>
<p><b>Getting needed supplies</b></p> <p>Facilities require a variety of chemicals to clean water before returning it to the environment. Some of these chemicals are regularly shipped from Canada. If the border between the United States and Canada closed, this could complicate facilities’ ability to maintain the stock of supplies they need for regular operations.</p> <p>Additionally, workers, specifically those handling the treatment of wastewater, need a steady supply of PPE to protect themselves. Between citizens purchasing PPE for their own personal protection and the high demand for PPE in healthcare settings, we are facing potential shortages.</p>	<p><b>Provide necessary resources</b></p> <p>Ensure the steady, reliable, and cost-effective shipment of chemicals and uninterrupted supply chain for trucking.</p> <p>Provide funding and resources to ensure adequate supply of PPE, sanitizers, soap, and cleaning products.</p>
<p><b>Complying with required regulatory reporting</b></p> <p>Clean water and drinking water facilities are required to complete routine reporting to demonstrate compliance with federal and regional regulations. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, there could be concerns about reporting requirements while also continuing to complete the day-to-day work around the facility.</p>	<p><b>Manage regulatory requirements</b></p> <p>A March 26 EPA memo emphasizes that while continued regulatory compliance is expected, utilities should communicate any concerns to regional EPA offices or their State agency. Utilities request that regulators demonstrate flexibility in allowing additional time for consent decree/administrative order work, so the remaining workforce can focus on providing essential services.</p>