

Municipal Emergency Response Preparation for COVID-19

March 13, 2020

I am a city administrator dealing with coronavirus and first responders. What do I do next?

Breathe. This is what first responders do, every day. When everyone else is panicking and fear mongering first responders have the training and instincts that take over to get the job done. But you, the administrator, have some planning to do.

What if the system gets overtaxed? (It will.) What if the employees themselves start to get sick? (They will.) What if we run out of deployable service units? (You will.)

This is your worst case scenario day. It is here. If you have an Emergency Operations Plan, go get it and ring the alarm bells. If you do not have one, here are the contingencies you are planning for:

SCRIPT: What is the communication script for your area? Have schools and businesses already been shut down or is everything in planning stages? The key to handling any crisis is consistent communication. Constant communication with state and local officials will ensure the message and direction you are providing to your municipality is consistent with announcements going out over television, radio and social media. It is near impossible to quell social media rumors and fears, so consistency from your municipal officials on a readily accessible portal is vital.

INFORMATION AVAILABILITY: One unique aspect that was implemented in both China and Italy are phone banks to take phone calls from scared citizens. This is an excellent way to use volunteers and provide a written script. All the same information goes out and people are not crowding hospitals and calling 911. Take the pressure off of your 911 operators! That being said, citizens needing immediate assistance due to breathing problems need to be advised to go to the hospital.

SERVICE AREA: Within your service area, there are hot spots for service. But a new view of hot spots has to be identification of COVID-19 spots. Where there are concentrated areas of populace -- churches, funeral homes, schools, etc. -- are going to be new natural hot spots of outbreak. Encourage citizens to stop flocking to Costco and Meijer.

911 SCRIPTING: 911 scripting must include additional screening questions for coronavirus. For instance, Dallas Fire-Rescue, has added questions to their script to ensure that first responders know before they arrive that they may need to take additional safety precautions and have specialized equipment at the ready before approaching a citizen's home. Firefighters need to be prepared in safety gear beforehand, not after taking the initial assessment.

RESOURCE AVAILABILITY: Make a plan right now with neighboring communities about available resources. Communicate on the front end because diversion efforts, once the system has become taxed, just cause confusion without communication. If you are calling a neighboring community for “help,” know exactly what you are asking for, when and for how long. It does no one any good to throw up panicked arms and just say indefinitely, we need everything. Ask for, a case of masks, an ambulance for a few hours during shift changeover, or assistance at one nursing home for transports to the hospital. Communicate to your employees when you have requested and received assistance, this quells fears among first responders who want to be supported as well. This issue also raises concerns for hospital diversion. Once beds are fully at capacity, will the hospital require your ambulances to divert to another location? Both 911 operators and transporting units must have this knowledge.

SICK FIRST RESPONDERS: The brilliant doctor that raised the alarm for COVID-19 died. Many other healthcare providers have become ill while tirelessly serving their constituents. It is inevitable that some first responders will become ill. If you have employees with underlying health conditions (i.e., asthma, bronchitis), assess now whether they can be repurposed to another role. It is possible those employees can provide scripting and answer telephone calls, or provide restocking and supplies. Do not expect personnel to work continuous overtime. They must rest and be ready for the next shift. If people are forced over every shift and become angry, you will get call offs in the middle of this crisis.

If first responders are exposed to COVID-19, they must be quarantined for 14 days. Follow this guideline. Most municipalities will be under the auspices of a collective bargaining agreement that will dictate sick time and vacation time payments. Pay it, if at all possible.

LABOR/MANAGEMENT: There needs to be immediate discussion with your labor team. Labor wants to keep their people safe, but so do you. Communicate that with respect and understanding, while recognizing the public health is at stake. While rules must bend in times of crisis (HINT: not safety or pay) those decisions must be made without compromising the safety of your workers.

The most important step you can take right now is to be malleable. Everything is subject to change. This is your checklist to keep handy while having administrative meetings and making difficult decisions.

Plunkett Cooney is available and ready to help you legally and operationally with COVID-19 virus during this stressful time. Please contact us anytime with questions.