

PUBLIC WORKS AND THE COVID-19 CHALLENGE

by Jason A. Dailey, Director of Public Works, Cranberry Township, Butler County

Day in and day out, public works employees are on the front lines to ensure that essential municipal services are open, operating, and functioning properly. You might say they are the caretakers of the literal foundation that communities are built upon. The recent COVID-19 pandemic sends a vital reminder that despite their rough and gritty exterior at times, public works employees are still fragile and subject to the same threats as every man and woman. Therefore, it's critical that municipalities take precautions to protect their most valued assets — their employees — and keep them safe.

According to medical and scientific experts, social distancing and good hygiene are the most effective ways to prevent and mitigate COVID-19. Vigilance is key to avoid being exposed to and spreading the virus. This tech sheet reviews some best practices to ensure the health and safety of public works employees in the time of coronavirus.

Knowing the Risks

Public works employees must first understand the transmission risks they are exposed to in their garages and shops and while performing their various job functions. The virus is spread both directly and indirectly through contact with airborne-infected droplets. Locations of direct-contact transmission risks include vehicle enclosures, breakrooms, locker rooms, timeclock areas, conference rooms, and other enclosed spaces where distancing is hard to maintain. Indirect transmission examples include high-touch surface areas, shared equipment or tools, and touching your face.

Even if someone does come in contact with the virus, there are preventative measures that can be taken to lower one's chances of infection. Stress to employees the role everyone plays in preventing the spread of the illness.

On the Job

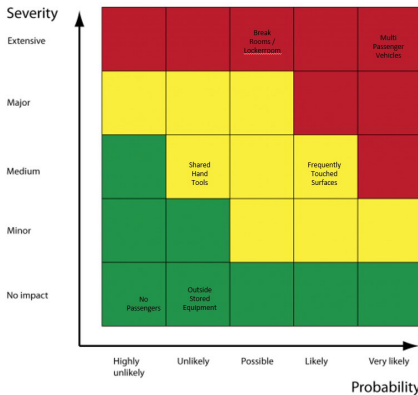
Prevention begins with the individual. Workers should be encouraged to be vigilant, observe social distancing protocols, and practice good hygiene. Here are some general guidelines for municipalities and their employees to implement while in the workplace:

- Anyone who is feeling sick should not report to work.
- Report times should be staggered to limit everyone congregating at the same time. Depending on the size of your crew, individuals or small groups could report in 15-minute increments.
- Employees should be screened upon their arrival. This screening could be done either by asking questions about how the employee is feeling and whether they could have been recently exposed to the virus or by taking the employee's temperature to make sure they are fever free (below 100.4 degrees F).
- Anyone who develops symptoms throughout the day should report this information to their supervisor (preferably via phone) and head home.
- Employers should consider adjusting their leave procedures for illnesses if the policies are too restrictive or require an employee to complete paperwork first.
- Workers should wear masks while at work to protect themselves and those around them. Mask wearing is considered one of the simplest preventive measures. Cloth masks, including bandanas, and other non-surgical masks are acceptable.
- If a mask needs to be removed for some reason, employees should avoid touching their face with their hands.
- Municipalities and their employees should be familiar with Pennsylvania's Return to Work guidance (www.oa.pa.gov/returningtowork/Documents/employee-returning-work-guide.pdf) on wearing masks in the workplace. These include that masks:
 - Must always be worn around others, even if social distancing can be maintained.
 - Must be worn when in a vehicle with another individual and when using drive-through services.
 - Must be worn by all visitors to the worksite.
 - Must be worn by employees when conducting business at the worksites of other entities.
 - May be removed if the mask impedes vision, an employee has a medical condition, or the mask would create an unsafe condition in which to operate equipment or execute a task.
 - May be removed to eat or drink during breaks and lunch periods. During those times, social distancing should be practiced.
 - May be removed when driving alone or when isolated in a closed personal office.

At Worksites

Municipalities should institute the following measures to protect employees and visitors at job sites:

- Require masks and encourage everyone to social distance from one another.
- Promote good hygiene by placing hand sanitizer in vehicles and around equipment for workers to use.
- Encourage frequent hand washing by setting up portable wash stations or water coolers filled with hot water



The Public Works COVID Activity Risk Matrix shows the severity and probability of transferring the virus based on the activity being performed.



Employees should be screened to make sure they are fever free upon arriving to work.



Encourage frequent hand washing by setting up portable wash stations at a worksite.

- with hand soap and disposable towels nearby.
- Require tools to be wiped down and disinfected at the beginning and end of the day and in between users.
- Limit visitors to sites. Anyone who must visit should be screened and required to wear a mask and safely distance from others.

In Breakrooms and Locker Rooms

Breakrooms and locker rooms serve as meeting locations, meal spaces, and gathering spots for start-of-day instructions and end-of-day cleanup. These areas have hard surfaces, soft fabric chairs, soiled clothing, and, of course, communal coffee stations, all of which are prime locations for the virus to be spread. Follow this guidance to ensure safety in these areas:

- Limit persons in the room to half occupancy.
- Remove chairs or install physical barriers to prevent close interaction and space out the seating to 6 feet minimum from one another.
- Regularly disinfect all hard surfaces that are frequently touched and provide personnel with supplies to disinfect areas they have touched.
- Provide hand sanitizer on every table.
- Implement a schedule for use of a locker room at the beginning and end of each day to avoid congregating.
- Hang signs indicating consecutive sinks and urinals are not to be used and take them out of service.
- Store and seal soiled uniforms in a container or bag for laundry pickup.
- Educate personnel about using disinfectant supplies to increase the cleaning and disinfecting of areas daily. If your municipality uses a cleaning service, consider increasing the frequency and requiring them to use a stronger product to disinfect.

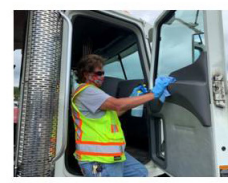
In Vehicles

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides health and safety guidance about vehicles on its website at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/disinfecting-transport-vehicles.html. The page “Disinfecting Your Non-Emergency Transport Vehicle” offers the following simple guidelines:

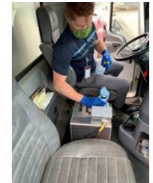
- Limit passengers, if possible, and either keep windows open or do not use recirculating cabin air.
- Require everyone to wear a mask when transporting others. (Cloth masks are acceptable.)
- Limit close contact while inside the vehicle (try to use larger vehicles if possible) and ask all passengers to practice regular hand hygiene.
- Sanitize vehicles and equipment with EPA-approved cleaning products that are registered as antimicrobial for hard surfaces, soft porous surfaces, and electronic surfaces. A list of products that meet the minimum requirements for use against SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) is available on the website of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2-covid-19 The list can be further searched by active ingredients, use site, contact time, and EPA registration number.
- Assign employees to clean and disinfect vehicles and equipment that they operated at the beginning and end of each shift. Ensure they are wearing the proper personal protective equipment (PPE), including nitrile gloves (for use while working with chemicals) and a mask or face shield. Additional PPE may be needed depending on the product used.
- Require employees to clean all commonly touched surfaces, including but not limited to the areas depicted in the photos above:



Door handles and grab bars



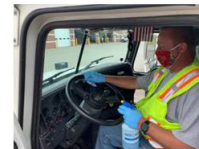
Interior door handle and surface



Instrument panel, gear shift, and control knobs



All other devices used during shift



Steering wheel, radio, and microphone



After cleaning, wash hands for min. 20 seconds

Managing Confirmed Cases

Municipalities should have a plan in place in case an employee or visitor is diagnosed with COVID-19. General guidance for what to do when someone in the workplace is confirmed to have contracted COVID includes:

- Ventilate and isolate known areas that could be contaminated.
- Disinfect with EPA-approved products. Be sure whoever is doing the disinfecting wears the proper PPE. You could also contract with a cleaning service.
- Determine what other employees had close contact with the infected person. Close contact is defined as being within 6 feet of the infected person for 10 or more minutes, including during the 48-hour period before symptoms appeared. Employees’ names should be kept confidential, and contact with employees should be handled by the individual responsible for human resource matters at your municipality.
- Encourage the employee with the confirmed diagnosis to follow CDC guidelines.
- Require all employees who had close contact with the infected person to contact their medical provider for testing and not return to work without a medical release.

Additional Prevention Tips for Other Areas

Sewer Operations — Plant and field operators who work around wastewater should follow the same guidance as other public works employees. However, these essential service employees must use specialized PPE to protect themselves from exposure to human waste. Equipment includes goggles, face shields, liquid-repellant coveralls, gloves, and boots. Additional information from the CDC can be found at www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global/sanitation/workers_handlingwaste.html.

Solid Waste Handling — Trash haulers should also heed the same advice given to other public works employees. Industry guidance requires haulers to follow additional protocols, such as all waste to be bagged, employees to be assigned one per truck, if possible, and hand hygiene to be followed.

The adage “An ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure” has been proven throughout this pandemic response. Basic hygiene combined with social distancing work to reduce the spread of the virus. Until a vaccine is available, everyone must take precautionary measures to protect themselves and those around us.

Public works crews are great at planning and executing their plans to build great things and remedy problems, and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic should be no different.