

Central Contra Costa Sanitary District Martinez, CA

I. Respondent and Presenter:

Teji O'Malley, Human Resources and Organizational
Development Manager

II. Treatment Plant Characteristics:

- Wastewater Collection and Treatment
- 291 employees
- 500,000 residents and 3,000 businesses served

III. HR in the Time of Covid-19

A. Description:

The biggest change for us was the transition from all staff being onsite to remote work for a large percentage of our staff. Prior to COVID-19, we had no employees who teleworked. Post COVID-19, approximately 15% are working remotely full-time, 25% in a hybrid remote/onsite capacity, and 60% onsite. Majority of employees working onsite are those that cannot perform their duties remotely. Essentially, it is our Operations staff, Plant Operators, Collection System Workers, and our Maintenance staff.

B. What percentage of staff work off-site and how is that working out?

We have about 40% of our employees that are currently working either remotely or in a hybrid situation (either some type of rotation or come onsite as needed). It was extremely difficult for us at the onset of the pandemic to make that transition.

Since remote work was not the norm for Central San, it took huge amounts of technological resources (hardware to software) and a learning curve to make that transition successful. The way many of us did our work literally changed overnight. As we navigate our new normal, things have been a lot smoother. We have conducted studies on both the productivity of employees as well as evaluating our service levels to our customers, both internally and externally. Minus the first few weeks of the transition, our employees have exhibited productivity levels at 90% and we are finally at the point that almost all our service levels with very few exceptions is at the pre-COVID levels.

C. What barriers/challenges have you encountered in planning and implementing the change?

Challenge #1: Communication. In times of crisis, communication, at best, is challenging and this was no exception. With so much confusion and lack of clear and consistent information from our country, our state, and the local community, it was extremely difficult to be able to try to communicate with our employees and unions and provide them with accurate information in a timely manner. As more and more information is learned about COVID, we are having

an easier time communicating and providing clear and consistent information to our employees but those first few months were extremely difficult. We developed a COVID-19 Exposure Prevention Plan which incorporates CDC guidelines, county and local orders and guidance, and agency specific information to help us ensure we are implementing safety protocols that would prevent employees from being exposed or transmitting COVID-19 in the workplace. That has helped a great deal in ensuring that all of our employees and unions are on the same page.

Challenge #2: Balancing employee safety while maintaining service levels: Another challenge for us was trying to determine how many employees could work remotely and yet still be able to maintain the essential and critical services to the public. To address this, we started evaluating what core services needed to be maintained and what services could be paused or halted. As we moved through the pandemic and our safety protocols were implemented, we slowly began to phase in other services such as those open to the public and resumed our maintenance and construction projects.

Challenge #3: Acquiring and deploying the technology that was needed for those employees that needed to work remotely: Since we aren't an agency that necessarily encouraged teleworking, we didn't immediately have the resources, hardware and software, and/or the knowledge of the technology when we first sent employees home. We had to do it backwards. First, send as many employees home as we could out of an abundance of caution and to be compliant with our Shelter-in-place orders. Then the next step was to provide them with the hardware and software, and then train employees on how to use it.

Challenge #4: Varied opinions on the severity of the pandemic: We had to deal with a wide spectrum of opinions on the severity of the virus and the measures we were implementing. As we started developing and implementing our response to the pandemic, we worked with our unions in a collaborative manner to ensure we were incorporating employee feedback along the way. Implementing our response in a consistent manner became difficult since some employees believed that this pandemic was not severe and the District response was blown out of proportion to some employees terrified to even come onsite for fear of being exposed to the virus, and, of course, everything in between these two ends of the opinion spectrum. We and the unions found it difficult to explain to all employees that the protocols in our exposure plan are there for a reason-limited exposure and transmission in the workplace. We decided on one mantra from the union and District management - No one had the right answers and that as an agency, we are responding to the best of our ability and with an abundance of caution.

Challenge #5: Virtual Communication: Although this has been a benefit which has allowed us the ability to telework, it has been a challenge as well. There is always something lost in translation when communication is almost 100% virtual. We have seen miscommunication or lack of communication when there is no face-to-face contact. Social cues that we took for granted pre-COVID are missing. Body language is a vital part of the communication process so if there are nuanced or complex issues to discuss, it has been difficult to communicate effectively through only virtual communication.

Challenge #6: Pandemic Fatigue: We are starting to see behaviors indicative of “pandemic fatigue.” We had a lot of employees express fear and confusion in the beginning of the pandemic, but lately I am seeing many more of the long-term psychological impacts that the pandemic has caused. This has been exacerbated by what our nation and state have gone through this year as well. This has ranged from less stringent compliance with our safety protocols, depression and anxiety from social isolation, stress from balancing telework and children engaged in distance learning, divide amongst our employees that are required to be onsite and those that are continuing to telework, and HR has seen an uptick of employee grievances, complaints. and more requests from employees on how to manage, as well as other emotional wellness services. This seems to be proportionally increasing as the pandemic drags on.

D. Are there any benefits from the change?

Benefit #1: Technology: We definitely were a lot more agile than we originally thought we could be when implementing our response. The, in some instances forced use of technology, has allowed us to discover and fine tune technological tools that allow us to communicate and conduct work in ways we never have before and in some ways, even more effectively than pre-COVID.

Benefit #2: Increased Participation: We have been able to plan and schedule meetings, trainings, and other types of events virtually. This has allowed for increased participation since less logistics are involved in order to participate in a virtual event.

Benefit #3: Accessibility: This has been another advantage. Employees have a lot more accessibility to each other virtually than they did pre-COVID.

E. How has working from home affected staff competencies and training needs?

We have seen an increased use of technological tools by our staff which have made us more efficient and skilled. Everything from the more prevalent use of electronic signatures to collaborative team orientated software like MS Teams and Sharepoint. That has definitely increased the skill set of many of our employees who weren't necessarily technologically advanced.

We have not had many issues with developing and maintaining staff competencies when it comes to staff that is tenured and have been through their training period(s).

On the other hand, we are experiencing some difficulties in getting employees onboarded who are also working remotely. We have hired approximately 10 new employees and have had several departmental transfers since COVID and have noticed that the lack of in-person training and guidance has been a deterrent to getting employees trained and onboarded as effectively as it was pre-COVID.

F. What are the lessons learned so far?

Lesson #1: Technology: Options that were available and now in use are a lot more advanced than I had even thought were possible. This allows us greater flexibility to allow employees to work remotely effectively. Even more for those

employees who cannot report to work onsite, such as those with underlying health conditions and/or with school aged children that are engaged in distance learning.

Lesson #2: Agility: I always thought we were an agile agency but the agility with which we handled this transition was impressive. Although the first few weeks of the initial transition were difficult, however, employees have adjusted quickly and resiliently.

Lesson #3: Telework is not easy: The perception that working from home or remotely was easier than having to come onsite every day was prevalent at our agency. Now that it is our reality, we are seeing that employees are having a harder time “shutting” down when they are working remotely. The line of demarcation between home and work is blurred more than ever and making sure employees have resources to help with finding that balance is important. From providing ergonomic reminders to wellness and work/life balance seminars, both mentally and physically, need to be provided to employees more than ever before.

Lesson #4: Don't forget the emotional well-being of all employees! These have been trying and difficult times for all of us and similar to #3 above, we are making sure that we are providing resources for our employees to keep them healthy and remind them that this will pass.

G. What are your plans, post-Covid-19?

We will be phasing employees back to the worksite when it is safe to do so, however, we will definitely continue to utilize the technology that allows us to be flexible wherever an employee is working!