COVID-19 Considerations for County Government

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Below is an overview of considerations and priority activities the Association recommends for county governments in the immediate term. This situation is evolving and priorities will almost certainly change in the coming days and weeks. The Association is extremely grateful to those in the Emergency Management community whose expertise and experience formed the core of this report.

First, it is recommended that counties focus on the following five priorities. Each of the recommended areas will require a tailored response from each county. The information below is not intended to be an exhaustive list but rather an overview of considerations to assist county administrators and chairs in focusing their efforts within the next few days.

Priorities:

1. Coordination of policy-making and community impact considerations
2. Continuity of Government (COG)
3. Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP)
4. Support for public health emergency measures
5. Messaging to the community

1: Coordination of policy-making and community impact considerations

At this point, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are changing on almost an hourly basis. It is clear that the virus will have considerable impacts on the daily lives of Alabamians for months. It is unknown when the number of people experiencing symptoms of the disease will peak or how long the healthcare system will be dealing with patients who require definitive medical care. Recommendations for social distancing, hygiene and enhanced awareness of your possible exposure to the virus are intended to help reduce the number of patients requiring care at any given time in order to take stress off the limited resources of your community medical infrastructure.

Counties should, first and foremost, maintain open and regular communication with their EMA directors and other chief staff members. It is imperative for local elected and appointed officials to proactively engage with public health and emergency management authorities, as well as healthcare stakeholders, in their communities. County leaders should work with their EMA directors to ensure they receive the latest information from the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) and ADPH's Emergency Preparedness Team.

Each county is different. The economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak will affect Alabama's communities in different ways. The reaction should be evaluated in the context of your local community.

Factors influencing the extent of the impacts include employee absenteeism in workplaces, how the pandemic will impact especially vulnerable populations, and potential interruptions of business demand and/or supply chains in your particular county. Likewise, within the county organization, important policy questions to be addressed include

possible travel restrictions, future cancellation of official functions and activities, increased attention to staffing, review of human resource procedures and policies, legal concerns, and support of the community as it deals with the impact of the pandemic in general.

The key to successfully addressing the public policy implications of this pandemic is regular, robust and candid communication with key community partners. County leaders should ensure they maintain an open dialogue **at a strategic level** with local municipalities, the local healthcare sector (hospitals, EMS, long-term care facilities, etc.), public safety (fire and law enforcement), judicial officials, education leaders from K-12 and higher education, the county EMA office, and ADPH and/or county health department officials.

Likewise, close coordination with local business leaders—especially in those industries likely to be particularly affected by the impacts of the pandemic—is also important to ensure that community protection measures and messaging are consistently shared through multiple avenues. It may also be helpful to engage proactively with the state legislative delegation by inviting them to observe and participate in these conversations. Open communication will help overcome much of the community unrest that we all hope to avoid.

Some counties have already established special coordination committees, work groups and task forces to facilitate these conversations or may have active committees that can be repurposed to address the issues outlined above. Regardless of what form these committees take, elected and appointed county leadership should be prominently figured in these discussions. Proactive engagement and management of this event will ensure that the right messages get to the right people. Discussions about important considerations related to social distancing measures (such as possible school closures, business closures, event cancelations and the like) can be improved when local elected officials are engaged with each other to provide their perspectives and policy expectations to those who will be formulating decision recommendations for later action.

ADPH has worked for the past several years to establish Healthcare Coalitions across Alabama that comprise many of the parties who would need to be a part of policy-level discussions. County leaders should immediately consult with their EMA directors to learn more about the role of the Healthcare Coalitions in the COVID-19 response. In some cases, many of the key players in the community's response to the pandemic may already be assembled and meeting in another forum that county leaders can "plug into." In other cases, creating a new, focused conversation may be the best course of action. Whatever the proper approach in your county, it is important that an organized and regular communication system be initiated today.

Recommended parties to include in a formal policy coordination group:

- County Commission Chairperson
- Probate Judge
- Sheriff and other local law enforcement leaders
- Presiding Judge
- County Administrator
- Mayors and/or municipal representatives
- Superintendent(s) of education and higher education leadership
- Local healthcare leaders (hospital and nursing home management)
- EMA Director
- 9-1-1 Director

- ADPH and/or county health department
- Local business leaders from major industries
- Chamber of Commerce
- Human resources manager
- Legal counsel
- County public relations manager

2. Continuity of Government (COG)

It is vitally important that county government focus its attention immediately on the issues of continuing county services in the face of possible growth of COVID-19. An essential part of success in this arena is to establish responsibility inside the organization. Counties should proactively request those employees who have traveled outside the United States within the past month, who have experienced a fever or a persistent cough or trouble breathing, to identify themselves. Likewise, county employees should be encouraged to provide immediate information to their supervisors should anyone in their immediate family develop these symptoms or be diagnosed with COVID-19.

The Association is working on a "Q&A" on human resource questions that may arise as part of this outbreak and will provide that document within the next few days. County administrators are encouraged to review their current personnel policies to ensure they are familiar with leave policies and other issues that may arise.

Counties should immediately evaluate their processes to ensure the continuity of government (COG) in the event one or more elected or appointed leaders are unavailable to perform his/her/their duties due to isolation or sickness.

Factors to consider:

- Are any local elected and appointed leaders particularly likely to suffer severe effects of the virus? In general, COVID-19 hits hardest those who are older and who have pre-existing health conditions—such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and respiratory impairment.
- How will the county continue to operate and conduct official business if the county commission is unable to maintain a quorum? Consider procedures in place to cancel public meetings if necessary, as well as procedures to defer official action on non-essential matters.
- Look at the agenda for the next commission meeting and add important items that are necessary to ensure the continued operation of county government. What items should be added to the agenda in case a future commission meeting must be cancelled? Also, consider the frequency, time, location and attendance of public meetings.
- Can your meetings be streamed or shown on Facebook or another medium to reduce the gathering and interaction of the public as much as possible?
- What legal authorities exist to provide for delegation of authority to alternate individuals in the event responsible persons are unavailable to perform their duties? Evaluate your current delegation of authority for things like signature authority, and the like, as well as ensuring that those commissioners with "vice" or other supporting roles are ready to assume a primary role if it becomes necessary. Ensure that meeting procedures are up-to-date, and spend time talking with officials about how the governing body would

operate, as a practical matter, if one or more commissioners were unavailable to participate in deliberations.

- This discussion should expand to your other elected officials—has the sheriff established a process to hand off duties should he or she be infected? The same questions must be considered, and plans must be put in place by the other elected officials, such as the tax officials, probate judge and even coroner.
- Likewise, the county administrator should provide leadership to ensure county department heads have designated alternates who are cross-trained and empowered with authorities to perform essential duties. Establish clear guidance on when and how alternates will be expected to assume direct responsibility for their areas of responsibility and clearly spell out expectations with regard to communicating with department heads and other managerial staff who may be working remotely or isolated at home.
- Review policies, procedures and legal authorities for those instances when closing government offices may be necessary or for other situations arising that interfere with the public's ability to conduct official business with the county.
- Educate elected and appointed leadership on social distancing measures—such as reducing interpersonal contact, avoiding travel, avoiding public gatherings and observing standard hygienic precautions. This is especially important for local elected officials who are accustomed to spending much of their time interacting with constituents in a variety of public settings. Encourage these officials to leverage social media as an alternative to in-person engagement whenever possible.

3. Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP)

From a day-to-day administrative standpoint, a primary focus area for county administrators should be on continuity of operations planning (COOP) within county government. Regardless of the impact of the pandemic, the county must exert its best efforts to continue comprehensive local government services to the community.

Some counties have pre-existing COOP plans that outline a wide variety of essential functions, vital records, IT backup and disaster recovery procedures. If you have such a plan, it should be reviewed and put into action. If you do not have a COOP plan, it is not necessary to develop a comprehensive plan in a short timeframe in order to bolster the county government's ability to successfully maintain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the absence of a plan, the primary factors to consider for continuity of operations include:

- How will day-to-day business processes be impacted in the event of reduced staffing levels?
- Are county systems accessible remotely, and are personnel properly equipped (phones, computers, internet access, etc.) to work from home if necessary?
- Do county personnel policies allow tele-working, and have employees been trained on procedures to utilize in case they must work from an alternate site?
- If so, what are the cyber security considerations that should be evaluated and addressed before placing an emphasis on remote work?
- Are backup systems in place to ensure critical business tasks continue to be performed in the event key staff are unavailable to perform their duties? Special things to consider here include signature and approval authorities, cross-training of specialized personnel, and designation of backup personnel for "single resource" individuals who have no backup already within the organization. As just one example, is there

someone who can serve as the alternate to perform the duties of the county attorney in the event he or she is incapacitated?

- Has the county established a list of those functions that are essential to public safety and government business that must continue to be performed in all cases? If not, this list should be developed immediately, and plans should be developed for the continuation of these services.
- Has the county identified backups for specialized vendors in order to limit disruption in the event a particular vendor is unable to deliver goods or services?
- Does the county have "devolution" procedures in place to limit, pause or discontinue performance of functions that are not essential or that may be performed at a reduced level? Has the county identified these services?
- Are systems in place to allow county personnel to coordinate remotely, such as through the use of teleconference systems and virtual meeting applications?
- Is clear guidance available to county employees on when they should not report to work (if ill or possibly ill) and notifications to supervisors regarding health status; expectations with regard to the county's time, attendance, and leave policies; and understanding of how roles and responsibilities of individual personnel might shift as the county deals with the pandemic and works to maintain essential functions?
- Does the county have a consolidated document that outlines COOP policies and procedures, and has it been communicated to county personnel?

Counties are likely to be asked about the closing of the courthouse or other county facilities. This is an issue that should be considered when specific exposure circumstances warrant, and any such decision can only be made effectively—should the circumstances arise—if the COOP details are in place and can operate effectively.

4. Support for public health emergency measures

The county should proactively follow developments about COVID-19 "good practices" from the ADPH, the local EMA and national authorities (e.g., CDC). It is important that county government set a positive example for the local community by following guidance and demonstrating the efficacy of recommended public safety measures.

It is possible that the county government may be called on to make decisions in support of public health efforts, provide resources to support healthcare and public safety authorities, and fill gaps in essential community services otherwise degraded by the impacts of the pandemic.

In general, county officials should embrace a "whole of government" response to the pandemic and work to remember that no single agency, organization, or level of government can, on its own, handle all the requirements brought about by the pandemic. Cooperation and mutual support are essential.

At a minimum, counties should continue efforts to post signage encouraging people to wash their hands, provide scaled-up sanitation efforts within county facilities, and closely monitor and enforce recommended protocols with regard to ill or potentially ill personnel not being in the workplace.

The commission may need to consider signage at the entrance to county buildings that encourage those with high risk factors—fever, cough or difficulty breathing—to consider doing county business remotely, by mail or by having a friend or family member outside their home handle their "business" inside the courthouse.

5. Messaging to the community

County officials are important, trusted authorities within their local communities and will be asked for both official and conversational responses to this outbreak. Their comments and concerns will be immediately spread through a variety of mediums (including social media). It is vitally important that the information provided be consistent, accurate and proactive.

Administrators must work to ensure commissioners and other officials are routinely provided with updated talking points on the community's posture with regard to the pandemic and its impacts, information about best practices for pandemic interventions (such as, at this time, social distancing and basic hygienic precautions), and clear guidance on how to amplify—not discredit—the messaging from state and national public health authorities.

Without accurate and timely information, the elected officials can unintentionally contribute to more community confusion and unrest. Please ensure that all elected officials have the same information and that all elected officials are encouraged to respond with the same information. To the extent possible, each county commission (as well as county government as a whole) needs to speak with ONE Voice for the duration of this event.

Resources

Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) COVID-19 page
https://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/infectiousdiseases/2019-coronavirus.html

National Association of Counties (NACo) COVID-19 page https://www.naco.org/resources/coronavirus

International City-County Management Association (ICMA) COVID-19 page https://icma.org/coronavirus-resources-plan-and-prepare-now-it-hits-your-community

National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) COVID-19 page http://narc.org/coronavirus-2019/

HHS/Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Community Mitigation Strategies Guide (10 pages)
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community-mitigation-strategy.pdf

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