

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Maintaining Your City's Fiscal Health and Essential Services

Leaders must ensure that essential city services continue to operate during the COVID-19 crisis. Many local governments are being forced to change policies and practices to maintain operations due to the spread of the coronavirus. From moving to remote work to ensuring that essential workers are protected and able to perform their duties, the action steps outlined below can help you navigate the uncharted waters of sustaining municipal services during COVID-19 while protecting your city's fiscal health.

1 Closely monitor local infection rates as a key indicator of whether to expand or limit city operations.

The pandemic is taking a devastating toll on local economies and city budgets across the nation—with over \$360 billion of projected budget shortfalls expected. At the same time that revenues have taken a hit, efforts to get the American economy moving again are creating pressure on local governments to reopen their cities, towns and villages and restart or expand vital services to help residents and businesses recover.

As local leaders weigh decisions about reopening and how best to protect the public's health and safety, it's vital to constantly monitor data on local infection rates. Furthermore, cities must disaggregate this data by race and ethnicity to understand the full story of COVID-19 in a community and discern disproportionate impacts on different population groups.

The mapping company Esri has built an online GIS system to help local leaders track the spread of COVID-19. The [site](#) includes relevant data resources that municipal officials can use to develop their own dashboards, web maps and apps.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises that a phased reopening approach utilizing specific “gating criteria” is the smartest path forward. Gating criteria are based on the data required (declining case numbers, etc.) to move to the next phase of reopening. Local leaders can consult guidance from federal agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and CDC when analyzing local data on infection rates.

2 Develop clear remote work and in-office protocols to keep city workers safe and infection rates low.

Cities, towns and villages often have led the response to the COVID-19 pandemic – by adopting measures to flatten the curve, and by ensuring that communities of color and low-income residents who have experienced historic inequities have the support they need to stay healthy and access critical services. In some communities, these and other local measures are paying off and cities are able consider reopening municipal facilities. But doing so requires constant vigilance about the changing situation, close adherence to health department guidance, and a safety-first mindset and focus.

Considering how and when to close or reopen city facilities requires local leaders to make difficult tradeoffs and tough choices. The best path to balancing economic concerns and public health is developing clear health and safety protocols, as well as work-from-home options that allow city employees to serve the public virtually. When developing remote-work policies, local leaders should consider providing necessary cybersecurity training, as well as ensuring that all employees have broadband access. NLC recently published a [comprehensive report](#) on what local leaders need to know about cybersecurity. The recommendations are even more imperative in the wake of COVID-19.

NLC also has developed a [toolkit](#) that helps local leaders prepare for reopening with considerations like providing increased workplace signage, determining appropriate requirements for personal protective equipment (PPE) and maintaining social distancing at work. State municipal leagues may offer cities, towns, and villages additional tailored resources to navigate reopening municipal facilities. For example, the Georgia Municipal Association created this [checklist](#).

3 Maintain engagement with your workforce and with the public.

Local government is the most trusted level of government in the United States. This is due in large part to the close relationship local leaders have with the people they lead and serve. Maintaining this trust is critical to sustaining an effective emergency response operation during the pandemic—and it all starts by insisting on clear communication with the municipal workforce. The key to a successful local government response to crisis events like the COVID-19 pandemic is keeping employees informed, motivated and able to adapt quickly to changing situations. It is critical that this communication is provided using trusted messengers and in multiple languages.

In **Durham, NC**, City Manager Tom Bonfield hosted “mid-day moments” for all city employees to join a video call to receive updates, ask questions, and learn about the City’s response to the virus.

In addition to communicating clearly and often with city employees, local leaders have a responsibility to keep residents engaged—and safe—in times of crisis. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, cities have adopted many creative ways to both share information and engage with residents. For example, the **City of Eugene, OR** has hosted a “Sunday Slow Roll” with a DJ who plays on the back of a flatbed truck to allow residents to listen to music from the safety of their front porches. In the **City of Tupelo, MS**, the City launched a Mayor’s Music Series where residents could tune in to a live online concert each day at 5:30 pm. In addition to entertainment, the series provided income to local artists. Efforts like these can help build trust and encourage residents to stay safe and positive during these trying times.

While keeping up residents’ spirits is vitally important, local leaders must also find ways to provide critical, and sometimes legally mandated, engagement opportunities about the business of local government. Numerous cities have already taken their public input meetings online, including planning and zoning committee and city council meetings. Many states have revised public meeting requirements to allow for safety precautions to be taken. As the rules and regulations in your state may shift, keep up to date with your state municipal league. In Colorado, for example, the league published a [guide](#) on how to facilitate online meetings.

It’s also important to share timely service changes with residents. For example, when the **City of Baltimore, MD** experienced staff shortages within its Department of Public Works, it issued a clear [update to residents](#) about changes to recycling pickup and instituted citywide drop-off centers to fill the gap. As local leaders grapple with the staffing and logistical challenges associated with COVID-19, clearly communicating service changes and adaptations is imperative to maintaining trust with the community.

4 Examine local revenue sources to understand impacts on the city's fiscal health.

The extent of the economic downturn due to COVID-19 is yet to be fully known, but the impacts on cities are already significant. Faced with significant tax revenue shortfalls, particularly from sales and income taxes, many cities have been forced to cut services, layoff and furlough employees, and pull back on capital projects. All of these decisions can impact local employment, business contracts and the local economy. While the crisis is affecting different cities and their budgets in different ways, it makes it hard for local leaders to plan for the future.

City leaders are always monitoring local revenues and expenditures, but as the crisis continues you may need to examine emerging trends more carefully and frequently. This will allow you to plan for how to shift operations and plans as needed. With no clear idea of exactly when the pandemic will be resolved, and limited ability to raise revenues outside of state tax and expenditure limits, many cities may need to make significant budget cuts for years to come. As presented in NLC's City Fiscal Conditions 2020 [report](#), cities are considering several actions to cope with COVID-related revenue losses. Considering how to balance your budget and making staffing trade-offs can be complicated, but leveraging resources [like this one](#) from the Government Finance Officers Association can help with your planning.

5 Communicate your needs clearly and often to your federal representative.

Cities are essential to the United States' economic recovery and our country's sustained response to COVID-19. To ensure that you have a strong partner in the federal government, it is essential to reach out to your members of Congress to share the most updated state of play in your city, town or village. Providing the latest data on fiscal impacts, staffing and service changes, and overall community challenges will help your federal officeholders be better partners. Using a format like NLC's [economic conditions briefing](#) template will help you provide important data points in a concise and easy-to-grasp form for federal leaders. With this information, these important stakeholders can connect you with the appropriate federal agencies as needed, in addition to advocating for your city's interests in Washington, D.C.

The National League of Cities has called on the federal government to provide at least \$500 billion in direct, flexible funding to local governments over the next two years to assist in their response to COVID-19. Sign up to join the campaign [here](#).

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