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Appreciation and Recognition of Essential Water Services During COVID-19 Pandemic

As we all adjust to a new way of life due to the current coronavirus pandemic, the essential work of water utilities has become more evident. The orders for utilities to restore service and cease service disconnections are a demonstration of how vital clean water is to protect public health, as are the actions by federal agencies related to the water sector.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has recognized that the most important job of utilities at this time is to ensure that their services continue without interruption. The Agency's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance (OECA) issued a [memo](#) on March 26 to explain how enforcement discretion will be used during the pandemic. The policy recognizes that staffing may change due to the need for safe distancing between workers and that staff shortages may occur due to quarantines and illness.

The DHS [Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency](#) (CISA) has issued a [memo](#) that identifies essential critical infrastructure workers during emergencies. Water utilities workers are included on the list, with the functions listed serving as a guide, not a comprehensive list. The memo is meant to assist state and local governments with prioritizing activities and ensuring access of workers in the sectors listed. The Department of Labor has similarly [recognized](#) public works employees as emergency responders as it relates to recently enacted laws regarding additional sick and paid leave.

The dedication of utility workers to serve the public is also on display – while other professions can work from home, many utility staff must continue the work at their facilities. Utilities have also shown their willingness to assist one another by sharing resources. NACWA established a dedicated COVID-19 resources website page that is password protected for NACWA members as a means for members to freely share continuity of operation plans and other guidelines for dealing with the pandemic. NACWA encourages other Associations to set up a similar website page for their members to share resources amongst themselves.

Finally, the toilet paper shortages and increased disinfection of surfaces is causing more wipes and other materials to be flushed, increasing clogging problems for some utilities. Local and national media, and even [EPA](#), have been getting the message out to only flush the 3 Ps: pee, poop, and toilet paper. And last week, Washington became the first state to [pass a law](#) mandating that non-flushable wipe packages have a prominent “Do Not Flush” logo.

NACWA is operating as usual during the pandemic – with staff working remotely – so please [reach out](#) to any of the NACWA staff with questions or just to let us know how you are doing.

*This article was drafted as a regulatory perspective and written for NACWA's March 2020 Regulatory Update.