

PANDEMIC AAR AGENCY INPUT

Agency: Department of Licensing (DOL)

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Executive Summary

The Executive Summary provides a brief overview of the agency's response to the pandemic, identified impacts, major strengths demonstrated during the response and areas identified that require improvement and/or changes to agency plans, policies, or procedures.

DOL's initial response to the pandemic was swift and targeted at employee safety. The Agency was well connected to EMD to receive communications about the virus spread and to begin immediate preparations for a pandemic response. Our continuity plan was excellent for getting the right people together in the EOC to make decisions, but proved to be too focused on moving operations seamlessly from one building to another during an incident, with minimal information about mass teleworking.

Prior to the pandemic, we were not structured for a large telework capability and, therefore, did not have the capacity to immediately switch employee workstations for continuity of our operations. However, our IT division used pre-identified working connections to quickly link into WaTech and 3rd party vendors to obtain additional hardware, software, and licenses to make many employees telework capable for the short term.

DOL tried to get a jump on PPE and sanitation supplies from vendors prior to lockdown and was able to obtain some items. However, this access quickly dried up and we were left with inadequate supplies for onsite essential employees working in the buildings. As supplies became more readily available through the SEOC, we were readily able to obtain more supplies to protect onsite employees, but did not have a full suite of protection until supply chains began producing and distributing more items.

The Agency was able to assess operations and determine what rules and legal requirements needed waivers. The Director's Office was able to request and obtain necessary waivers from the Governor's Office. In turn, we were able to provide multiple notice to the public about waivers, extensions, and creation of increased online services.

Through these changes and the increased PPE/sanitation supply, DOL was able to bring back onsite essential personnel relatively early in the pandemic to provide services to the public and assist in the emergency declaration. Through interagency resource requests, DOL was able to provide remote work personnel to assist other agencies (like ESD and DOH) in need of emergency staffing to provide pandemic operations.

Agency Impact

Identify the impacts to the agency in these main areas:

Internally (how did the pandemic impact the agency's internal operations/administration)

Initially, there was some overlap between the work of the Agency IMT and Executive Leadership Team. This created some confusion and frustration during the initial response when we were identifying onsite essential services/personnel, necessary protective measures, and legal requirements for services/operations. This eventually was corrected for a smoother, more efficient experience. There was also some confusion in the beginning of the response when we were looking for waivers and answers from the Governor's Office about how to move forward with requests. This, too, was eventually corrected for a streamlined process.

Later on in the pandemic,

Externally (how did the pandemic impact the agency's operations with its customers)

There was a very immediate impact to the public from closing our buildings and stopping all of our services. With the emergency waivers, we were able to shift the public burden for the very short term and there was public tolerance of this, as it was thought to be for only a short duration. However, we found a very real need to provide immediate services for truck drivers and some other professions utilized in the emergency.

As the pandemic continued, we felt more public pressure to provide our services. Lack of PPE, sanitation supplies, and straight-forward health guidance hindered our ability to reopen for face-to-face transactions. Our increased online capabilities helped alleviate the initial loss of a large portion of the pre-pandemic services, but some of the public were not able to receive what they needed until we reopened physical locations.

Once we had adequate health guidance, PPE, sanitation supplies, and available personnel, we were able to begin reopening field offices for services – starting with areas indicating the most need and expanding from there. We still faced limitations due to occupancy, distancing, and masking restrictions.

Our back-office support services were able to ramp up relatively quickly once we had adequate IT connections and equipment. This has remained functioning throughout the pandemic.

Interagency (what was the impact to interagency operations)

The biggest impact was not having a clear communication channel between the Agency and State Incident Response Lead, especially in the beginning of the response. At times this created confusion and misinformation, as the Agency had to interpret messaging or locate/create communication pathways to receive more specific guidance and direction.

Agency's involvement in areas specifically listed in the legislation [SB 5092 (9)(d)(i) (A)-(H)]:

(A) Aspects of the COVID-19 response that may inform future pandemic and all-hazards responses.

While DOL had good communication with the SEOC throughout the pandemic, it was unclear who was leading the statewide response. We looked to the SEOC for direction, but received multiple communications from different agencies with sometimes conflicting guidance. For specific pandemic-related questions, there was not a clear point of contact or call center to help fine tune safe emergency operations. The SEOC provided good coordination of some task forces during the pandemic, but did not always use or include SAL contacts in communications. This created considerable confusion at times for

Agency Emergency Management as information was entering the Agency through multiple pathways and did not always make it to all members of the Agency IMT.

(B) Emergency responses that would benefit the business community and workers during a pandemic.

During the initial PPE shortage, some of the DOL licensed professions were denied access to supplies. For members of the death management community, this proved taxing on their ability to provide services. It would be useful to have pre-developed handouts to provide to licensees that would explain the situation clearly and provide alternative actions that would maintain safe pandemic operations in the absence of adequate supplies. In addition, using or including Agency SAL contacts for special Task Force communications (like death management, professions outreach, etc.) would be extremely helpful for a complete understanding of Agency emergency operations and involvement.

(C) Standards regarding flexible rent and repayment plans for residential and commercial tenants during a pandemic.

No Impacts.

(D) Whether establishing regional emergency management agencies would benefit Washington state emergency response to future pandemics

No specific information to provide. Having a clear understanding of who is in charge of the response and who/how to contact emergency positions for better coordination would be helpful.

(E) Gaps and needs for volunteers to support medical professionals in performing their pandemic emergency response functions within Washington state.

DOL was able to provide offsite employees to assist ESD and DOH in emergency operations, including contact tracing and call center responsibilities. This undertaking would be much easier with a predefined process and clear communication channel between the requesting, coordinating, and providing agencies. Also include the SAL contact in these communication for a comprehensive understanding of the Agency emergency operations.

(F) Gaps and needs for tools to measure the scale of an impact caused by a pandemic and tailoring the pandemic response to affected regions based on the scale of the impact in those regions.

DOL did well assessing the need from the public for specific services. This allowed us to focus limited onsite resources on the operations and services most requested or needed. A template of questions or topics that would benefit the SEOC or other response entity would be useful anytime specific information is desired from the Agency. This would ensure that the correct information is provided and we are not overburdening the public with unnecessary questions.

(G) Gaps and needs in health care system capacity and case tracking, monitoring, control, isolation and quarantine, and deploying medical supplies and personnel; and

The main concerns for DOL operations were with receiving contact tracing reports and responding with adequate quarantining and isolations. The Agency and employees at times received conflicting guidance from contact tracers and local health departments. We were not always sure how to appropriately respond when employees were notified by WA Notify app about possible exposures versus clear direction from LHDs when reporting cases. From an HR perspective, it may have been better for overall

Agency understanding of impacts to require all employees to report positive cases/exposures instead of only onsite employees.

(H) Implementing guidelines for school closures during a pandemic.

Effective guidance for school children and parents has a direct impact on our employees. Implementing protective measures for schools must integrate with the guidance for employers and employees. As children remained at home, so did parents that were part of the workforce. Employees impacted from school closures reduced the Agency's ability to provide services at times and created a strain on the system to continue operations.

Strengths

The Agency brings the right personnel into the IMT for quick and effective assessments and decision-making.

There is robust communication within the incident response operations between Supply, Facilities, Safety, Administration, and the Executives which promotes a common operating picture and more effective actions.

External communications to the public through a variety of methods and sources was quick and accurate which helped alleviate some public confusion and frustrations.

Interagency communications integrated into Agency operations helped maintain one path forward with a firm focus on pandemic safety.

Very effective processes were created to assess PPE needs and distribute items to employees across the state.

The newly minted DOL Pandemic Rapid Response Group proved to be very effective and efficient for dealing with onsite reports of illness, supply needs, reporting requirements, and employee concerns/needs throughout the pandemic and filled in once IMT was demobilized.

Areas for Improvement

Integrating increased telework capabilities into Agency operations through robust policy, IT equipment and software, culture changes, and ongoing assessments will better enable resiliency for future incidents.

Increased interagency collaboration during emergencies will aid the Agency in quicker response actions, especially in a pandemic.

Identifying better approaches to internal needs assessments and emergency communications will help ease the stress and miscommunication within the Agency.

Incorporating a comprehensive set of pandemic-specific health guidelines within plans, procedures, and policies will speed up the initial response with focused, effective actions that provide lasting impacts.

Identifying and documenting external contacts for executive level use during emergencies will promote a quicker response with better collaboration.

Increasing a stockpile of pandemic specific supplies to withstand the initial impacts of another emergency will ensure better onsite continuity of operations until supply chains can catch up to the increased demand/reduced production.

Follow up Actions (intent to change plans, policies, or procedures)

The Agency COOP Plan will be revised to include the new flexible operations we created during the pandemic and the changes in personnel we have endured.

We will create a Pandemic Plan that will provide a more focused approach to continuity specifically for pandemic disease incidents.

DOL has already created a Pandemic policy and a PPE policy that would impact future pandemic responses.

We have updated and expanded our policies for safety, security, and emergencies to help with future incident response.

We are working on telework and supply policies that will enhance our abilities to perform operations in another pandemic.