

# PANDEMIC AAR AGENCY INPUT

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Agency: Utilities and Transportation Commission

Representative: Rebecca Beaton

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## Executive Summary

In March 2020, the UTC closed its doors to the public, sent most of our staff home to telework indefinitely, and have provided services virtually or by phone since. Our staff were already prepared for mobile work thanks to an effort in 2019 to have a 100% mobile-ready workforce. A small crew of staff continued working from the building to handle tasks that must be completed in person. Major efforts during the pandemic involved the utility disconnection moratorium, increasing the amount of funding for utility assistance, and regulated companies treatment of pandemic-related expenses.

## Agency Impact

Identify the impacts to the agency in these main areas:

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

- Remote work transition – moving from in person to virtual operations
- Office safety protocols – increased planning and preparation for in-office operations, including signage, providing PPE, sanitizing equipment, etc.
- Field inspector protocols/PPE – Increased planning and preparation for field inspectors, who visit regulated companies' offices and facilities and providing appropriate PPE for that work.
- Virtual hiring – Moving Human Resources into a virtual environment, adjusting to recruiting, interviewing, and onboarding in a completely mobile environment.
- Virtual community building – Finding ways for teams to connect outside of transactional meetings and hosting all-staff meetings online.

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

- Compliance with OPMA – Ensuring we were following the emergency proclamations' impact on the Open Public Meetings Act, moved our bi-monthly public meeting to a fully virtual space
- Virtual hearings and public comment meetings – Since March 2020, the commission has held all public comment hearings and proceedings via Teams and Zoom
- Transitioned all services online – Our customer-facing operations have been completely virtual since March 2020 with limited service interruptions.

### Interagency (what was the impact to interagency operations)

- Utility Disconnection Moratorium - Collaborated with DOH, Commerce, and Gov's office on utility disconnection moratorium which protected consumers from disconnection from April 2020 until October 2021.
- Safety and leave protocols – Worked with MIL, DES, LNI on emergency response and personnel issues including worker safety, sick leave, quarantine, and isolation guidelines.

- Pandemic-related furloughs – HR staff worked with ESD to address employees unemployment furloughs and assisted to resolve fraud cases.

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.

- Utility customer impacts – keeping customers connected to lights, heat, and hot water while they were being asked to stay home was vital to ensuring public safety during the initial stages of the pandemic.

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

- Addressing financial impacts of the pandemic on regulated company through deferred accounting petitions. This allows a company to incur and defer expenses related to the pandemic prior to requesting rate recovery from the Commission.

- Increasing the size of low-income utility funding – The UTC ordered regulated energy utilities to establish temporary COVID-19 bill relief programs using 1% of its Washington retail revenue among other customer protections resulting in an additional \$40 million for utility assistance.

- Pandemic federal funding distribution and rate treatment - The UTC monitored federal funding available for both home heating (LIHEAP) and water usage in conjunction with the Washington Dept of Commerce. Federal support was used in assisting customers facing difficulty in paying their utility bills. The UTC also supported state legislation that allows for the establishment of specifically discounted rates available for qualifying low-income electric, natural gas, water and solid waste customers. Previously, rates specifically designed for low-income users would run afoul of statutes that prohibited rate differentials between customers within a specific customer class (e.g. residential customer class).

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

- Utility disconnections are directly tied to rent defaults. The utility disconnection moratorium prevented tenants who may have already be struggling to pay rent from sitting in the dark. It lifted an additional burden for those facing eviction, disconnection, and uncertainty. Utility companies also suspended late fees and deposits, relieving an additional financial burden that typically impacts low-income customers disproportionately. Because utility and rent assistance is typically distributed by the same community action agency, we held workshops with utility companies, low-income advocates, and CAAs discuss ways to help reduce barriers to receiving assistance and make the application process more accessible to consumers.

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

- n/a

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

- n/a

(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.

- To visualize the extent of utility customer arrearages statewide as a result of the disconnection moratorium the UTC developed an interactive map of utility arrearages by county. This allowed the UTC and our stakeholders to identify and target areas for additional assistance outreach. <sup>1</sup>

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

- n/a

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

- n/a

## Strengths

- Ability to conduct business online with little to no service interruptions or delays
- Distributed \$96,628,951 to customers in utility assistance funds
- An 18-month utility disconnection moratorium kept consumers connected to vital utility services during public health crisis
- Consumer protection outreach effort – contacting thousands of utility customers before they are disconnected to provide customer rights education and direct them to financial resources
- Technology support/Teams/Zoom – The agency transitioned quickly to Microsoft Teams for internal meetings and collaboration and implemented Zoom for external public meetings and hearings
- Improved accessibility to commission’s work and proceedings – Virtual proceedings have resulted in increased public participation as it removes some of the barriers to attending a meeting in person.
- Employee support and resources – We continue to provide employees support and resources to effectively work in a mobile environment and also provide information on mental health and wellbeing.
- Increased workload due to pandemic-related regulatory filings (no personnel increases) – Without hiring additional FTEs, the agency responded effectively to a number of additional pandemic-related filings from regulated companies.
- Stakeholder engagement in forums/workshop– The agency continued to successfully engage with stakeholders, including hosting two workshops to discuss COVID assistance funding and ensure equitable distribution to consumers.

## Areas for Improvement

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wutc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/View/index.html?appid=59e3cd22d5584fdb8b3bf456e2bf8722>

- Employee onboarding – Bringing a new employee into an empty building for orientation is challenging. We have a small staff on site to help with their first few days of onboarding, but then transitioning into a mostly virtual world can be hard on both the new employee and the manager. It can also be difficult for the employee to build connections with their peers.
- Employee engagement/teambuilding in a virtual world – Maintaining employee connections and ensuring our teams are connecting in more than a transactional way.

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

- Continuing to update on-site building safety guidelines
- Revised mobile work agreements
- Reviewing Continuity of Operations Plan