Preparing for a Sustained Response

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in one of the longest Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activations and response systems ever seen in the United States. In the course of the last 10 months (January 2020 – October 2020) Cities, Counties, and States have continued to expand and adapt to the rapidly growing and changing response environment. However, there is no indication that there will be a quick end to this pandemic. The City of San José recognized the need to assess what has already facilitated their ability to respond while also identifying opportunities to preposition their organization for continued success during a sustained response. The completion of a San José COVID-19 Preliminary Operational Assessment Report (OAR) showed that San José's ability to pre-identify and address potential concerns before they arise supported rapid adaption and adjustment. Developing plans and support structures such as the Language Access Unit within their Incident Command System prior to the event expedited their ability to address organizational and community concerns.

Additionally, building off established staff wellness programs can provide avenues to address burnout stemming from an unexpectedly long and arduous response. To prepare for sustained response and potential increase in COVID-19 cases, leveraging successful response structures and programs while pre-emptively building up the organization's capacity to manage new challenges is key.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a lengthy and arduous response worldwide. For the City of San José, it started in January 2020 with monitoring the coronavirus outbreak in China. Within one month the County of Santa Clara, where San José is located, became the first county in the United States to declare a local health emergency due to COVID-19. By March, public protective measures were put into place, public health notifications were distributed, and work from home procedures were activated. While San José Office of Emergency

Management (OEM) staff actively worked to anticipate potential disruptions to operations, engaged in planning initiatives, and conducted community outreach to pre-emptively address potential concerns the duration of this response could not be anticipated.

Over the last eight months (until October 2020 at the time of this writing), San José EOC staff have worked continuously to support their community and the City. The EOC has undertaken numerous actions internally to support staff and maintain continuity of services while also engaging in a variety of external initiatives to facilitate public health interventions and implement COVID-19 response activities. Yet the pandemic continues with the potential for added challenges such as a rapid increase of cases and the risk of co-occurring disasters. Additionally, San José staff are not immune to the stress and exhaustion of responding to a disaster with no end in sight. The work pace set by this pandemic and the dual responsibilities of managing day-to-day job tasks with an EOC role can lead to fatigue and burnout.

In an unrelenting response environment with the potential for rapidly changing circumstances, it is important to moderate ongoing impacts on programs, staff, and the community. Just as essential, is to prepare, while in the midst of a response, for its continued impact with the ability to expand to an increase in cases or a compounding event (e.g., flu season). To do this, San José commissioned the completion of a COVID-19 Preliminary Operational Assessment Report (OAR). Stakeholder workgroups, individual interviews, a survey, and document assessments provided information necessary to identify what activities have previously expedited San José's ability to respond during this public health emergency and what may preposition them for successful continuation of efforts in the event of a sustained or elevated response need.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STEPS TO MEET CHALLENGES

With a rapidly evolving disaster, the ability to pre-identify and address potential concerns before they arise can facilitate a response agency's ability to adapt and adjust to the circumstances. The City of San José demonstrated how anticipating challenges and planning for them can reduce time implementing solutions as they recognized the need for a comprehensive Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). As early as mid-late January 2020, an interdisciplinary team of City EOC leadership began regularly meeting to monitor the rising severity of the pandemic and anticipate how it may impact San José. They also identified that the lack of a formalized COOP plan hindered the initial amount of preparedness efforts that could be undertaken. EOC leadership launched a city-wide COOP development process engaging all department heads to determine which public-facing services, core business functions, and employees would be classified as essential if the City was ordered to shut down its services to the public.

This COOP development process yielded extensive amounts of data which, under the circumstances and short time frame, was a massive and laborious undertaking. However, the push by San José to work tirelessly through the beginning of March 2020 to finalize the plans they needed proved to be a critical enabler of operational success. The weekend prior to Santa Clara County declaring a shelter in place order, San José finalized their COOP and began moving departments online. They activated their EOC to conduct emergency operations,

prepare staff to work from home, and determine San José's response to COVID-19 impacts and community needs. This 48-hour push allowed them to seamlessly shut down public-facing business functions and transition many staff to a virtual work format as soon as the shelter at home order was enacted.

Another example of proactive engagement that facilitated a successful response and positions the City to maintain activities as the pandemic wears on is uniquely established Incident Command System Branches and Units. Being identified as the most diverse city in the 100 largest metros of the United States presents San José with an exciting challenge to ensure all of its citizens are included in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. City staff have been well aware of the importance of engaging with representatives of their community and outreaching to populations traditionally underserved and underrepresented. To do so, their Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) structure used in the EOC pre-COVID-19 included a Digital Inclusion Branch and Language Access Unit. Both of these features proved to be vital in managing the City's COVID-19 response.

With the extended need for citizens and employees to stay home, life quickly transitioned into a virtual work, learning, and communication environment. However, not all community members have equal access to internet or digital devices. San José had plans to address internet access issues over the next ten years, however, COVID-19 created a heightened urgency which rapidly accelerated the timeline. The Digital Inclusion Branch was quickly activated within the EOC and partnered with the Silicon Valley Strong Campaign to develop and implement the Digital Inclusion Expenditure Plan. Not only has this plan already deployed 8,300 hotspots into households and community centers, it also has created a sustainable infrastructure that can be amplified if/when a city-wide stay at home order is reactivated

The San José EOC Language and Access Unit while designed before 2020, has not been stood up during an active response until COVID-19. This unit ensures critical health and safety messaging will reach and resonate with marginalized communities across the City, especially those with limited English proficiency. Through its continued use during the pandemic, the Language and Access Unit has led major U.S. metropolitans by translating all official messaging into five language while also having the opportunity to establish diverse methods of outreach that can be utilized for an ongoing response.

LESSONS LEARNED & GAPS

The length of the response and the potential for an increase in cases or complications due to co-occurring disasters can and has strained many jurisdictions. The City anticipated a need for sufficient staffing anticipating that 50-60 City employees may be sufficient based on past EOC activations. However, at the height of the COVID-19 response, more than 500 City staff were activated to support response operations. The sheer size of staffing needs created challenges such as sufficient training in SEMS roles, communicating to personnel a clear and common operating picture, and managing the physical and emotional strain on staff.

San José took steps to empower employees to fill new response positions, consistently disseminated flash reports to EOC staff, and expanded their human resources services for staff wellness. Building off these lessons learned, there are opportunities to continue to enhance San José employees' capacity to continue responding in this elongated response. Increased SEMS and EOC training to more staff can not only increase the number of people

available to fill positions but also increase employee's confidence in their abilities. Additionally, continued and increased attention to the potential for stress and fatigue is necessary to mitigate burnout. Enhancing and promoting opportunities for staff participation in wellness programs and identifying successful rotation schedules that encourage breaks and time off can bolster the workforce's capacity to managing the chronic stress of the COVID-19 response.

CONCLUSION

Ongoing transmission of COVID-19 unfortunately shows no signs of abating. Responding jurisdictions need to prepare for the potential of a long-enduring response. Additionally, there is a continued risk for additional hazards to impact communities while the pandemic continues. In May 2020, while managing the COVID-19 response, the City of San José additionally experienced a proclaimed local emergency due to civil unrest following the peaceful protests of the death of George Floyd. Then in August 2020, the SCU Lightning Fire Complex inundated Santa Clara County with San José establishing temporary evacuation points for evacuees and experiencing extremely poor air quality. Now, at the time of this writing, influenza season is rapidly approaching increasing the need for all jurisdictions to gear up for a sustained and potentially complex COVID- 19 response.

The City of San José demonstrated the value of identifying and building out COOP components beforehand could ease the transition into altered levels of service and an adapted work environment. The EOC activation of the Digital Inclusion Branch and the Language Access Unit showed the power of understanding community needs and developing unique ways to meet them. Yet even though the City of San José has emphasized that it is "Powered by People" and its workforce is the key to its success, with the unprecedented length of this response, there is also a need to augment existing supports. Established wellness programs may not be enough to overcome the level of stress employees continue to face. For organizations managing EOCs, leveraging successful response structures and programs while pre-emptively building up the organization's capacity to manage new challenges can be the key to a sustainable COVID-19 response.

CITY OF SAN JOSE
CAPITAL OF SILICON VALLEY

CONSTANT ASSOCIATES

COVID-19 PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (OAR)

SAN JOSÉ OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT