

Staffing Considerations for the Ongoing COVID-19 Response



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The staff of the City of San José Office of Emergency Management have been the key to the City's successful COVID-19 response. These staff have exhibited resilience and dedication for nearly eight months, and many are experiencing extreme levels of stress leading to fatigue and burnout, with no end to the response in sight. One major obstacle to mitigating staff burnout has been the availability of enough qualified employees to fill essential positions in the EOC. This, in addition to gaps in pre-event and just-in-time staff training, has made it difficult for staff to rotate out of essential roles and take leave.

Another key staff-related consideration for the department is the protection of the physical health of its employees through workplace health and safety initiatives like COVID testing for essential employees and the adoption of physical distancing protocols. The promotion of employee emotional and psychological wellbeing is another crucial element of a successful ongoing COVID response.

This White Paper will provide a brief overview of the staffing success and concerns that SJOEM has faced during the COVID-19 response. It will highlight the crucial considerations the department must account for in preparing for the department's ongoing response activities.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Since the beginning of the City's COVID-19 response in early March, the staff of SJOEM have worked long hours in demanding circumstances to protect the health of the residents of the City of San José. City employees have displayed resilience, adaptability, and dedication throughout the response. However, as the response now enters its ninth month, staff are feeling overworked and burned out. Since March 2020, in addition to the COVID-19 response, SJOEM staff have managed civil unrest, peaceful protests, and historic wildfire activity. Few have been able to take restorative leave from their response roles, and stakeholders have expressed concern that some staff will leave public service entirely once the response ends.

People are the department's most valuable resource and response asset. The ability of OEM to nurture its people and manage staffing needs will be critical to ensure a successful sustained response. The San José Powered by People Enterprise Priorities emphasize the importance of creating an equitable and inclusive work environment focused on health, safety, and wellness and should continue to serve as a guidepost for the department's continued COVID-19 response.

The major staffing considerations facing the City for the continued COVID response can be conceptualized in four broad categories: 1) maintaining adequate levels of staffing and enabling staff to take leave, 2) building staff preparedness both pre-event and during the response, 3) physical health promotion, and 4) nurturing mental health resilience.

The City EOC operated throughout the response with only two teams to rotate in to provide staffing support, which was not sufficient to provide meaningful relief for staff.¹ Despite efforts by the department to encourage personnel to take time off, staff were still hesitant to do so, and there were logistical challenges such as tracking how long people have held positions, not having staff available to fill positions, and determining the appropriate length of time for staff to be out of the EOC.²³

Many City staff (~80%) who served in the EOC during the response did not have prior training or experience with EOC duties. Some also felt there was a gap in just-in-time training availability for their roles which limited their ability to successfully execute their responsibilities early during the response.

The City took steps to protect employees' physical health by acquiring and distributing PPE to staff and implementing physical distancing protocols for those who had to report to work in-person. It also worked with the County of Santa Clara to implement COVID-19 testing for essential City workers. Continuing to provide these services and resources to employees will be essential for the ongoing response.

Finally, SJOEM will need to continue to offer guidance and resources to nurture the psychological and emotional health of staff. Some staff expressed a need for additional guidance on balancing their normal role in the department with their response role to help them better manage stress. The department will also need to find ways to provide emotional and psychological support services to staff during work hours.

¹ Small Group Workshop

² Small Group Workshop

³ Survey

Improving and sustaining staff availability, preparedness, physical health, and mental health resilience will be crucial for the City's sustained response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other concurrent disasters.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STEPS TO MEET CHALLENGES

The City of San José Office of Emergency Management has recognized many of the staffing and staff wellness challenges that have arisen during the response and has already implemented several strategies in response.

Maintaining Adequate Staffing Levels

During the early days of the response, the City of San José's EOC leaders convened a working group to monitor the global pandemic and to begin developing strategies to protect the health of the local community. This working group was "repurposed" from a group that was established to support Public Safety Power Shutoff events and consisted of staff members with diverse skillsets and with expertise from across the field of public health. The City should formalize this interdisciplinary group as part of the EOC and develop a plan to rotate staff members into the group so it may continue to benefit from diverse perspectives.

The City has been experimenting with different surge leave policies to provide employees with a clear way to step away from the response and mentally and physically recover. This briefly included "spiked time off" and then an offer of four days of "respite leave" that were separate from vacation days.

Additionally, managers in the department have been encouraging employees to exercise self-care and take time off when needed. Management is trying to create alternative work schedules to better support staff in being able to do so.

Building Staff Preparedness

The City developed COVID-19 safety training content and provided training to Safety and Environmental Services Staff who were deployed throughout the city early in the pandemic to inspect property, identify health concerns, conduct sanitization, and distribute cleaning supplies.

Physical Health Promotion

The department has done a good job at providing PPE to personnel who need it in their roles, as well as practicing necessary physical distancing. During the early response, the City successfully worked with the County of Santa Clara to establish COVID-19 testing procedures for EOC employees. Maintaining an effective staff testing program will be a crucial component of a successful continued response.

Nurturing Mental Health Resilience

To assist staff in managing stress, the City started an employee assistance program and offered self-care workshops such as yoga and meditation.⁴

⁴ Small Group Workshop

To help mitigate some of the stress staff were feeling from home responsibilities, the City partnered with licensed childcare providers to offer day care services for essential employees' children.⁵

LESSONS LEARNED & GAPS

As the City gains experience and knowledge about the COVID-19 response, it continues to implement successful strategies to manage the pandemic and better meet its staffing needs as well as the needs of its staff. The City continues to learn from suboptimal strategies and has considered the feedback of staff to identify lessons learned from and outstanding gaps in its staffing strategies.

The City offered paid administrative leave to staff who were at high risk for negative outcomes from a potential COVID-19 infection. While this was a good practice that was appropriately accompanied by the adoption of hazard pay policies, some staff were concerned about fair implementation of these policies. Employees activated in the EOC did not qualify for administrative leave or were not offered the same comp time as other employees.

One of SJOEM's most crucial needs for the continued COVID response as well as for its long-term integrity as an organization is to build the depth of its "bench". The lack of a large group of trained City personnel that could rotate in to EOC roles to relieve staff exacerbated the stress and burnout felt by those who were filling those roles.

The department needs to train current personnel to be prepared for future long-term EOC activations. This should include an expansion of pre-event training as well as development of additional just-in-time training and EOC activation orientation resources. The department also needs to recruit personnel with health emergency expertise to have a more robust staff.

Finally, leadership from SJOEM should meet with the San José City Council to discuss prioritization of services moving forward. With the COVID-19 response continuing, the start of flu season, and the inevitability of other emergencies, it will be essential for the City Council to have realistic expectations of the services the department can and should provide so as not to overload them with tasks and increase staff stress levels.

CONCLUSION

The staff of the San José Office of Emergency Management have been resilient through the challenging conditions that the COVID-19 response has imposed. They have been called upon to fulfill additional work demands, comply with more rigorous safety protocols, and work with limited resources for a long-term response.

Staff and management have risen to the challenge have supported each other through the most difficult aspects of the response, enabling the "bias towards action" philosophy of the department. This philosophy has been displayed through the implementation of several noteworthy practices that deserve additional recognition for their potential value-add to other jurisdictions. These practices include:

⁵ City of San Jose EOC Action Plans

The City of San José partnered with licensed childcare providers to offer day care services to EOC employees who had to report to work in-person.

Each EOC Section was made up of team members from different departments within the City, allowing for a mix of unique perspectives to identify solutions to problems.

The department has been exploring different “surge leave” policies to allow staff flexibility outside of vacation time to take a physical and mental break from the response.

SJOEM created an Employee Assistance Program to support employee mental health and wellness and has been offering self-care workshops to staff throughout the response.

The department is looking to engage with the San José City Council as a next step to set a mutual understanding of the prioritization of services given financial constraints and the unknown timeline of the city’s COVID-19 response.

In addition to its own staffing considerations, the City of San José should also consider how it can better support the staffing-related concerns of other essential partners in the COVID-19 response moving forward. The resilience of these partners, especially including healthcare providers, first responders, and other emergency managers, will be another important consideration in the ongoing COVID response in San José.



COVID-19 PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (OAR)

SAN JOSÉ OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT