

## **LAFAYETTE COLLEGE**

Coronavirus Survey Report  
Lehigh and Northampton County Municipalities  
April 15, 2020

The Center undertook a survey of how the 62 municipalities in the Lehigh Valley are responding to the coronavirus pandemic. In early April, the Center asked each municipality to answer 9 questions via email about how their municipality has responded to the pandemic. We received responses from 85% (53) of the municipalities. Other than Allentown, the only municipalities that did not provide information were eight boroughs or townships with very small staffs.

### Survey Results

Data collected from the municipalities show that:

- All municipalities have closed their municipal offices to access by the public.
- The elected board in 85% (45) of the municipalities is holding virtual (remote) meetings. Various software packages are being used, but 58% (26) of the municipalities conduct remote meetings with Zoom, while 27% (12) use GoToMeeting.
- In compliance with a directive from Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, all municipalities are conducting building and code inspections for emergencies only.
- Two municipalities have an employee who has tested positive for COVID-19.
- Some elected boards have discussed—either formally or informally—the possibility of layoffs. To date, only two municipalities have enacted a furlough program. Another municipality has a tentative plan to enact layoffs.
- Two municipalities reduced salaries and/or benefits of their full-time employees. One of these two municipalities enacted a furlough program that laid off 54% (81 employees) of its non-police/fire staff. Another municipality has laid off 14 employees. Five municipalities reduced or eliminated the hours worked by their part-time employees.

- Altering office hours and/or scheduling administrative (non-police/fire and non-public works/utility employees) is varied:
  - a. 11% (6) of municipalities' staffs are working completely remotely
  - b. 51% (27) of municipalities' staffs are working on alternate days or weeks to minimize physical interaction between employees
  - c. 34% (18) of municipalities' staffs have had no change to their office hours and/or scheduling
  - d. One municipality has been unaffected inasmuch as it has no employees
  - e. Two municipalities have or will enact furloughs so as to drastically alter their schedules
  
- Altering hours and/or scheduling public works/utility (streets, parks, trash, water, sewer) employees has varied:
  - a. 15% (8) municipalities have changed hours so that employees do not come to work except for an emergency
  - b. 28% (15) of municipalities have created "split crews" so that employees work alternate days or weeks in order to minimize physical interaction between employees
  - c. 50% (26) of municipalities have made little, if any, changes other than changing starting and ending times of employees
  - d. One municipality has been unaffected because it has no employees
  - e. Three municipalities have furloughed approximately 81, 14, and 7 employees
  
- Some elected boards are discussing creation of a plan if a significant number of their employees test positive for COVID-19. 38% (20) of the municipalities have a plan; 62% (33) have no plan in place.

### Survey Results and Recommendations

So far, Lehigh and Northampton municipalities are weathering the COVID-19 crisis well, maintaining near-normal services, retaining employees as much as possible, complying with the governor's directives, and not experiencing many COVID-19 infections among staff. However, the brunt of the crisis will not be felt for several months.

Many Lehigh Valley municipalities have small populations, as is typical in Pennsylvania. If one removes the three big cities, the average population of townships and boroughs in the Lehigh Valley is 7,200. If one removes the next five largest municipalities, the average population drops to 5,000. This is relevant because how a mid- or large-size municipality responds can be different from a municipality that has less than 10 employees. It has been only 4-5 weeks since municipalities have reacted to the pandemic. The main financial effect of the pandemic on Pennsylvania municipalities will be a drop in earned income tax receipts, followed by drops in building permit fees and real estate transfer taxes. Municipalities will not see the real effect of this decline in revenue until July-August.

Elected boards are beginning to discuss how to cope with drops in revenue. These discussions over the next several months might result in furloughs, depending on the financial position of the municipality. Affluent townships with substantial surpluses will be able to recover without

significant changes to their operations. Municipalities without such reserves will be forced to make difficult decisions about possible cuts to operational expenses and increases in real-estate taxes for 2021. For many municipalities, their first reaction will be to delay or cancel planned capital improvements.

Municipalities have never faced this kind of crisis; thus, there is no precedent for guidance. Although municipalities have emergency operations plans, the unique COVID-19 circumstances are not addressed in most, if not all, plans. Elected boards will face many decisions shortly, including:

- How will municipalities whose employees are working remotely transition back into their work in the office or respective department? What standards or guidelines (set by the president and/or governor) will they use to guide them?
- When, and under what conditions, will municipalities reopen public access to their buildings? When will elected boards and commissions resume traditional public meetings? Will they require the public and/or their staff and elected/appointed officials to wear masks, and if so, for how long?
- When will municipalities be able to conduct park and recreation programs and open recreation facilities? Will the municipalities provide guidance to youth sports organizations as to when/how they can begin their programs?
- How does a municipality enhance emergency operations planning to address an event that prevents employees from working normally?
- Can public meetings be held efficiently and productively through remote means? Developments in software and experience in holding remote meetings will only improve officials' confidence.
- Moving forward, what is the necessary staffing level for a municipality? If a municipality lays off employees and is able to function efficiently, will the elected board continue with the reduced staffing?
- Moving forward, can municipal staff work remotely as opposed to working only in the office?
- Should municipalities develop mutual aid agreements to address circumstances where there are too few skilled/licensed employees to carry out essential public services?
- Are municipalities effectively using social media and their website to notify residents of rapidly changing circumstances?

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