As I write this article, the state of Florida is starting to slowly reopen—what an experience the last eight weeks have been. As Gov. DeSantis issued executive orders to stay at home for all citizens and businesses, I slowly realized the impact this would have on those businesses deemed essential and how we would come to rely on our unsung heroes working on the frontline.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all of those industries working tirelessly to keep us safe during these times, but I want to highlight our “invisible” heroes during this pandemic: the operators, and the utilities that support them, keeping our water running and safe. No one really thinks about water; they just turn on the tap and expect it to come flowing out, so thank you to all of the operators for all of your hard work.

Informing the Public

As all this started, the FSAWWA Water Utility Council (WUC) began holding weekly teleconference meetings to discuss the impacts that COVID-19 would have on utilities and operators. Every week I listened in and quickly realized that the public needed to know the struggles our utilities were facing, so with the help of the WUC members, a list of questions was drawn up and they kindly answered them.

I would like to thank the following for their contribution to this column:
- Monica Autrey, Destin Water Users Inc.
- Mark Lehigh, Hillsborough County Hillsborough County Public Utilities Department
- Lisa Wilson Davis, City of Boca Raton, Utility Services Department
- William Young, St. Johns County Utility Department
- Jacqueline Torbert, Orange County Utilities
- Michael Bailey, City of Cooper City Utilities Department
- Steve Soltau, Pinellas County Utilities

1. What type of human-resource steps have you taken to address the COVID-19 social-distancing guidance? What is working for your utility staff? Any lessons learned?

Most utilities began social distancing on March 30 and implemented multiple steps, including:

a. Working from home for all staff who had the tools to make that happen. For some utilities, this included providing the tools needed (laptops, MiFis, etc.).

b. Laboratory staff members staggered their shifts (half worked in the morning and the other half in the afternoon).

c. Some plant and field staff members were transitioned into two teams (A and B) and worked staggered schedules. Some schedules were a week on, then three weeks off; another schedule was eight-hour shifts for 14 days, while the other shift stayed home. (After a month, this schedule was amended to five days due to cost).

Other utilities staff continued to work normal schedules, but all work was distributed to staff using work order software.

d. Plants and facilities maintained 24/7 operations.

2. Have you seen any impacts (positive or negative) from any media messaging pertaining to drinking water safety or concerns? A lot has been done by AWWA in terms of “messaging” and support to operators; has it made it to the communities?

The consensus is that there has been no negative impact from the media. Most of the utilities issued COVID-19-related messages to their users about what they need to know during the pandemic, which was not met with any positive or negative comments. A positive outcome has been the media helping to highlight the important issue of “what to flush” to educate customers about wipes and “fat burgs.”

An interesting idea would be to implement a public service recognition week to be able to recognize the frontline staff.

Kim Kowalski
Chair, FSAWWA
3. How will your utility incorporate what you have learned from this crisis into your existing emergency response plans (ERPs)?
   a. Destin Water Users – Intends to use what it has learned to update its ERPs as requested by the America’s Water Infrastructure Act (AWIA) legislation and the stock level of personal protective equipment (PPE).
   b. Orange County Utilities – Additions to protocols for “teleworking” and requirements associated with mainlining appropriate stock of PPE.
   c. Pinellas County Utilities – Minimum staffing levels that are maintainable and customer service representatives all working from home to successfully meet all benchmarks and goals.
   d. City of Cooper City – Stock requirements for PPE and incorporating its current scheduling into the emergency response plans for pandemics.
   e. City of Boca Raton – Will conduct “after action” team meetings and evaluate and incorporate changes based on those discussions, which will be an ongoing and evolving situation.
   f. Hillsborough County –
      1. Determine minimum staffing levels that can be maintained.
      2. Rewrite its ERP.
      3. Better equip employees to be able to work from home seamlessly.
      5. Training on apps and programs specific to working from home.
      6. Procurement of PPE, thermometers, disinfectant wipes, etc.
      7. Employee safeguards at facilities with UV-C (ultraviolet “C” frequency) bulbs in heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems, and handheld UV wands for disinfecting items, such as keyboards, counters, door handles, etc.
   g. St. Johns County – Much of the same as the other utilities and address its response during a pandemic based on the lessons learned.

4. As the state reopens, will you keep any of the guidelines that you have established thus far?
   All answered with the maintaining of the social-distancing guidelines and the continuation of sanitation practices.

5. What are your thoughts on travel for your employees, such as to conferences and workshops?
   Unfortunately, all travel has stopped, and all are relying on webinars and local teams going forward. The travel and training budgets for fiscal year (FY) 2020 and FY2021 will be looked at and amended accordingly. Some have already seen a reduction of 50 percent in these budgets.

Thanks to All of the Heroes

The impact has been great, and I am thankful for all of the hard work and sacrifice our utilities have made—and are still making—to keep our water safe during this pandemic. As always, thank you to our volunteers; the section would not be where it is today without all of your efforts.

No one knows what the future holds for our state during this pandemic, so let’s keep being safe and stay healthy!