

## Boil Water Advisory BMP Toolkit

### Introduction

The toolkit is a supplement to the Boil Water Advisory Guidance Manual published by the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) November, 2020. The purpose of the EPD Guidance is to:

- generally define types of Water Main Breaks (WMB);
- clarify when notification to EPD is required;
- clarify when a Boil Water Advisory (BWA) should be issued;
- explain the regulatory expectations regarding a sanitary repair;
- define sampling procedures that are acceptable to the EPD to assure potable drinking water quality following completion of the sanitary repair; and
- assist in determining when to lift a BWA.

The EPD Guidance provides a basic template for the public Boil Water Advisory that water purveyors can use when they issue a BWA. In many cases, additional public outreach and information may be necessary to adequately protect the public health when a BWA is warranted. The Georgia Association of Water Professionals developed a BWA Toolkit to assist with public outreach before, during, and after a Boil Water Advisory.

Protecting public health is the primary goal of a BWA. Since many local health departments lack the resources or expertise to address drinking water issues, water providers are often the only agencies responsible for communicating with institutions, such as hospitals, schools, and restaurants, and the public during a BWA. Some water providers have staff and resources available to develop the tools needed to effectively communicate with customers during a BWA, but many do not. This BWA Toolkit provides guidance on how to prepare for communication activities before, during, and after a BWA. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide water systems with some templates and ideas to communicate effectively internally, with partners, and the public in order to protect public health.

The Toolkit is not intended to be an all-inclusive outreach plan. Instead it should be used to supplement, support, and improve upon strategies already in place and successfully implemented within a service area. Water providers should review *The Drinking Water Advisory Communication Toolbox updated 2016* (USEPA, CDC, AWWA). It provides many additional resources that may be helpful.

### How to use the Toolkit

This document provides guidance on planning ahead for a BWA, implementing the strategies during an advisory, and activities to follow after the event. The Georgia Association of Water Professionals maintains a library of templates on GAWP.org where members can download templates, graphics, and other resources. This document outlines what resources are available on the website, and how and when to use them.



To issue a drinking water advisory, a water system must act quickly and in close coordination within its organization and among its partner agencies. Preparation is essential. Most of the work can be done in advance. Pre-incident planning allows a water system to design advisories and issue them through a predetermined process. Advance preparation speeds delivery of accurate and useful information to affected customers. This information can be reused for future incidents.

### **Before the Boil Water Advisory**

Water advisories can be complicated and may involve different partners depending on the type of incident taking place. Key partners as you plan for an incident are your local emergency planner and health department. Every utility in Georgia is unique and no two BWAs are exactly the same. Consider meeting with these key partners annually or biennially to update contact information, review procedures, and perform a Tabletop Exercise to practice for a boil water advisory scenario.

### **Public Education Opportunity**

Water providers should use every opportunity to educate their customers about the critical role they play in public health and other water-related topics. Clear, consistent and on-going communications is key. By building relationships, finding critical partners and consistent messaging, the water provider can build trust and be seen as a trusted community partner. A good resource on outreach/education is AWWA Public Communication's Toolkit

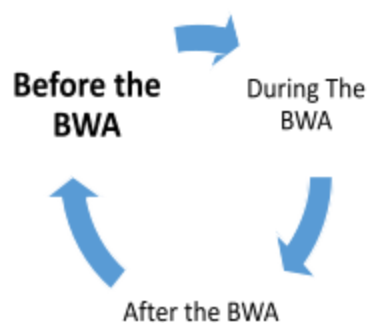
<https://www.awwa.org/Policy-Advocacy/Communications-Outreach/Public-Communications-Toolkit>.

### **Build Relationships**

The most successful outreach campaigns are built on a foundation of trust between water providers, their customers, and partners. Regular communications with customers can help build that foundation. Ideally, regular procedures include informing customers on water-related topics such as conservation, community events, drought, etc. There are a variety of methods to build and maintain communication channels:

- website
- social media
- newsletter
- bill stuffers
- local media

Reaching out to special groups annually can ensure your point of contact has not changed and the contact information is accurate. Special groups include schools, dialysis centers, restaurants, senior centers, etc. These groups will be your Critical Partners during a Boil Water Advisory.



## Find Critical Partners

Critical Partners are organizations and agencies that can help you plan, develop, and distribute messages. Having a network of agencies and organizations can help advisories to be more effective and timely. To identify partners, start with public agencies, especially those focused on local public health. Identify critical partners in advance and regularly update contact information. Meet and discuss protocols and resources for Boil Water Advisories. You might learn about resources you were unaware of or gaps in outreach opportunities. Every community is going to have a different list of Critical Partners. Below are some examples of critical partners that may apply in your community:

- Local Emergency Manager (enlist that person's immediate support to make the critical phone calls and connections that are listed below);
- Local Health Department;
- Regional Hospital Coordination Unit;
- Hospital facility managers;
- Other critical customers and wholesale customers;
- Local elected officials;
- Police chief(s);
- Fire chief(s);
- Medical examiner;
- Correctional Facilities;
- Animal control;
- Economic Development Coordinator/Chamber of Commerce;
- Environmental health;
  - Vulnerable Populations groups;
  - Assisted living facilities;
  - Nursing homes;
- Dialysis centers;
- Childcare facilities;
- Community and Faith-based organizations;
- Social Services;
- Schools/School superintendent;
- Deaf advocacy groups;
- Dept of Transportation (they may agree to put announcements on highway message boards);
- IPAWS (phone alert system coordinated by FEMA); and
- Local government public information office.

Water systems are responsible for issuing advisories. However, timely, effective, and extensive outreach usually cannot be done by one entity. If a BWA affects a very large area, other organizations may be better equipped to lead communication efforts. Water systems must work collaboratively with public health, emergency response, and other partners to get the job done effectively. If another agency is determined to be a more appropriate lead for communication, this should be clearly mapped out prior to any emergencies occurring. Some communities have an established communication network, usually

coordinated around emergency management. If there is a communication network in your community, learn how to become a part of it, what resources are needed to join, and whether it has the capacity to meet emergency needs.

### **Internal Communication Planning**

Staff needs to fully understand what causes an advisory, how it impacts their job, what it means for customers and a basic timeline. Water treatment staff, water distribution maintenance staff, customer service staff, and communications staff should fully understand the process since they will directly be impacted. Educate staff in advance so they have an understanding before an actual event. *Refer to Internal Communications for Frontline Staff in the GAWP Library Resource for details.*

### **Messaging**

The GAWP BWA Library provides templates with consistent messaging that can be customized to meet water providers' needs. Water providers should review the items in the library, download and customize before the BWA. If you have the outreach materials ready in advance, it will be easy to add the details of the specific BWA as needed.

Templates for the following resources are on the GAWP website:

1. Boil Water Physical Communications
  - a. Yard sign
  - b. Door hanger
2. Boil Water Social Media Communications
  - a. Social Media Posting Templates - provides suggested text for each social media
  - b. Images for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter
  - c. How to Boil Water
  - d. Water Uses and Treatment
  - e. Boil Water Advisory in Effect
  - f. Boil Water Advisory Lifted

It is important to know what outreach and education outlets are available before a BWA. Below is a list of possible ways to get the word out. Not all of the outlets below will be available to every water provider, but it is important to know how to access the resources and platforms that are available. Remember, many of these resources will be accessed through critical partners. If a water provider knows what works for their community before the event, outreach efforts during the BWA will be more efficient.

- Neighborhood pages (Nextdoor, Neighborhood Civic Associations, etc.)
- Media contacts
- Social media
- Email alerts
- website

Critical partners are key in helping get the word out. Table 1 can help identify which critical partners to contact to help reach a target audience. It is important to maintain up-to-date contact information for all critical partners!

Communication Target	Examples	Potential Critical Partner for reaching Target Group
Businesses	Business community, including hotels	Local: Economic development coordinator, chamber of commerce
Childcare	Licensed childcare providers	Local: Local public health department and childcare facilities
		State: Health and welfare (e.g., human services, social services)
Correctional facilities	Local or regional jail	Local: Sheriff's office, chief of police, local emergency management
		State: Department of corrections
Food facilities	Restaurants, grocery stores, catering services, event venues (e.g., fairs, sports facilities), bakeries, canneries, dairies, food production facilities, ice manufacturers, meat processing facilities, etc.	Local: Local public health department
		State: Health department, agriculture and consumer services
Healthcare facilities	Hospitals, clinics, emergency care facilities, nursing homes, physician offices, pharmacies, dialysis centers	Local: Local public health department, local emergency management
		State: List of licensed healthcare facilities
Schools	Public schools, private schools, colleges, universities	Local: School superintendent, local public health department
Susceptible populations	Elderly, infants, young children, persons with limited literacy or English skills, disabled persons, immunocompromised persons, persons with limited resources, persons with limited access to transportation	Local: Public health department, social services, community organizations, faith-based organizations

Adapted from Table 1: Drinking Water Advisory Communication Toolbox - 2016

### Assign Communication Responsibilities

Exchanging information and developing materials, such as news releases, among partners and water systems must be a coordinated effort. Liaisons should be designated staff who are the communications link for issuing an advisory and also for updating and lifting the advisory. Each organization or water system involved in an advisory should identify a liaison.

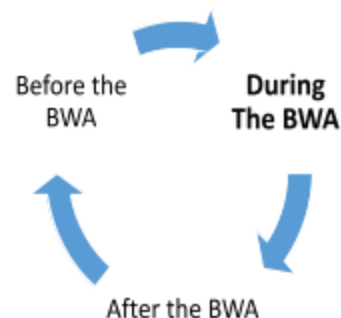
Work with partners to assign specific communication roles and responsibilities. Develop a list that identifies who (which partner) will be contacting whom (a specific audience) and when that contact will occur. The water utility does not have to take on all the communication roles. Each partner has its own key contact lists that can help spread the workload and be most efficient and successful in message distribution.

### **During a BWA**

Refer to EPD guidelines, this toolkit is supplemental to the requirements in the EPD guidelines.

#### **Know and prepare your spokesperson**

The person to serve as a spokesperson during a drinking water advisory can come from water system management or from an outside partner agency, such as a public health department. The spokesperson should be someone in authority who is honest, credible, competent, accessible, and sensitive to public concerns.



#### **Brief Elected and Public Officials**

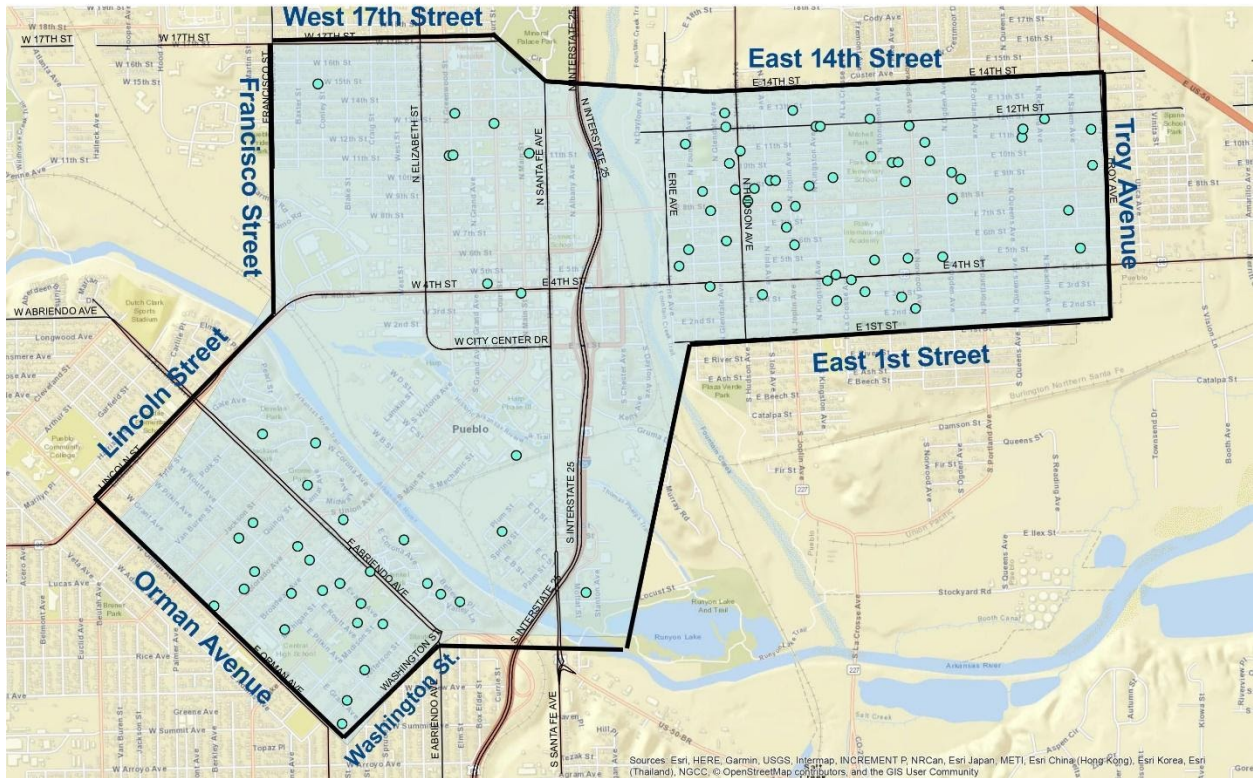
Brief the appropriate officials, partners, and stakeholders (e.g., large water users, large employers, hospitals, etc.) in existing and neighboring jurisdictions on the essential information before you notify the media. Media often will contact public officials rather than a water system for information and comments.

#### **Identify Affected Customers**

A key component of a drinking water advisory is to communicate clearly the area affected. Many customers do not know which water system provides their service and broadcast media usually reach a large audience beyond the affected area. Clearly describe the boundaries of the affected area using street names, place names, building identification information (e.g., building numbers, unit numbers, wings, etc.) and well known reference points.

Maps help illustrate the affected area. Water systems can generate maps using internal or online mapping tools such as Google Maps. These maps can be posted on agency websites, distributed electronically, and/or as printed material. Update the map as the situation changes.





Example of a Simple Map to Designate an Area Affected by a Boil Water Advisory

### Implement Your Communication Platforms

After you have determined the affected customers, notified elected officials, and prepared your spokesperson, implement the tools that have been identified in the planning process.

### Abbreviated messaging

Some channels of communication are heavily used by particular age groups that may be difficult to reach through other channels. Many of these channels only allow for brief messages because of time or space constraints, but can be disseminated widely. Abbreviated messages should include the basic messages of action to take, location, contact information, and where to get more information. Examples of abbreviated messages are included in the GAWP BWA Library.

Brief messages are appropriate for:

- On-screen scroll (e.g., local televised news, cable television, public service television channels, Emergency Broadcast System announcements, government websites)
- Text message systems (SMS)





- Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit)
- Reverse 911 phone message systems
- Opt-in message systems (e.g., CodeRED alerts)
- Highway variable message signs and portable message boards
- Etc

Implement your communication platforms and use your communication network.

*Reference the document called “Tips for Dealing with the Press During a Boil Water Advisory” provided in the toolkit.*

### **Public Notification Procedures- Updating the Advisory**

For Boil Water Advisories lasting several days or when important information has changed, an updated advisory message should be issued. The template below can be used to update customers during a boil water advisory. Consider using the same media outlets as for the original boil water advisory, including abbreviated messages as described above.

Boil Water Advisory Update (date/time)

On [date/time] [describe event that lead to Boil Water Advisory] The [name of public water system] continues to advise residents of [City, Town, System,] to only use boiled tap water or bottled water for drinking and cooking purposes. See detail below.

The affected area includes: [INSERT GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION, STREET BOUNDARIES, MAP, ETC.]

[describe actions being taken and estimate timeframe of completion]

*How to properly boil tap water.*

Customers should:

- Fill a pot with water.
- Heat the water until bubbles come quickly from the bottom of the pot to the top.
- Keep heating the water for one more minute.
- Turn off the heat source and let the water cool.
- Pour water into a clean, sanitized container with a cover for storage.

Use bottled water or boiled water that has cooled for:

- Drinking
- Brushing teeth
- Washing fruits and vegetables
- Preparing food and baby formula
- Making ice
- Giving to pets

[Water System] continues to work with [Primacy Agency/Health Department] to [describe actions under way]. We estimate that the [advisory] will end by [date or timeframe]. We will provide the next update at [date or timeframe].

## Ending the BWA

Refer to EPD Guidelines on when to end the BWA. Use the same outlets to end as you did to initiate. A sample end of BWA notice is below.

The Boil Water Advisory is lifted for [Water System] customers in [area]. It is safe for all customers in [Water System—affected area] to use tap water for all purposes. [Water System's] water quality has returned to [standard]. Before using the tap water, however, [Water System] advises customers to first [throw out ice, flush faucets, flush other appliances, etc. depending on the situation] to ensure removal of all potentially contaminated water.

The [Water System] [provide details on tests results/corrective actions]. [Water system] consulted with [Primacy Agency/Health Department] to correct the problem.

On [date] a [boil water] advisory was issued to customers in [area] because of [test, main break, etc.] and to protect public health. The [System name] appreciates its customers' patience.

For more information, please contact [name of contact] at [phone number/email] or [mailing address]

## After the BWA

### Identify Additional Communication Steps

For the public, lifting an advisory may not be the end of the incident. An advisory may disrupt the community and undermine the public's confidence in the quality of the drinking water. Continued public outreach can help water system maintain credibility and trust with customers and stakeholders following an advisory.

### Follow up with the Public

Work with partners to identify, develop, and distribute additional outreach materials and activities to engage the public. These may include:

- Revised messages
- A letter to customers
- Updates to websites, newsletters, and bill inserts
- Meetings with reporters and editors



In addition, water systems should consider surveying their customers about the advisory. Surveys can be used to determine the effectiveness of the advisory and to determine whether the advisory influenced personal actions.

Water systems can use the annual Consumer Confidence Report (CCR), newsletters, bill inserts, etc to further explain the advisory, give advice for future incidents, and provide other sources of information.

### **Debrief and Modify**

Debriefing after an advisory helps organizations and communities understand what happened and why it happened during a drinking water advisory. A debriefing offers an opportunity to voice concerns and offer potential improvements. It often is informal and may be led by a neutral facilitator.

The format and size of the debriefing is based on the scope and scale of the drinking water advisory. In general, each division or organization that participated should be involved. Debriefings may benefit from having the perspective of an organization that was not involved but was affected by the drinking water advisory.

Review what worked well and why? Can positive lessons learned be used to make further improvements? If some communication strategies did not work well, why not? Use lessons learned to change how you get ready and organized for the next BWA.