

TO: City/Town Elected Officials and Municipal Personnel

FROM: The Arkansas Municipal League Coronavirus Response Team

RE: Handling of Personnel / Potential Shifts

DATE: March 24, 2020

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Cities and towns across the state have reacted well to the Coronavirus Pandemic, and we appreciate your responses and your usage of communication mediums to share information with citizens. As many questions roll in, one of the most pervasive and worrisome is how to handle employment at a time like this.

One of the words that is often bantered around in state government is “essential employees.” Unfortunately, the applicability of this word doesn’t work across the spectrum for cities and towns. Some of our offices cannot reduce staff, for example – a police or fire department. Jailers and law enforcement officers are all essential, and the ability to work from home doesn’t exist. But for some of our offices, say city clerks, recorders, treasurers or administrative assistants—parts of the mayor’s office and city clerk’s office—don’t necessarily have singular essential personnel, but instead rely on essential shifts of staff to be able to complete all tasks in the office.

Right now, we need to be diligent about eliminating spread from the public and spread within our own city/town offices. In order to do so, many of you have taken appropriate action to minimize public interaction—but there has been little help in how to handle the spread between your team of people should one of you get it within the office.

Cities and towns have some opportunity to provide work from home. However, most employees cannot perform their regular function remotely and don’t have city or town provided resources to accomplish this. The League recommends as a first step to identify any office functions or job duties, if any, that could be completed in a teleworking scenario. Starting with this type of evaluation will help you assess personnel needs inside of the office on a daily or weekly basis to complete the functions that cannot be done from home.

We recommend now as a good time to remind your staff that during this crisis, they are likely to be asked to perform tasks outside of their typical job duties. This may include the need to cover shifts or work duties of a co-worker who has become ill or who is being quarantined, as well as new job duties that are created as a direct result of the Coronavirus outbreak and managing the spread. In addition to this general reminder to all employees, there are specific points to keep in mind as you consider implementing a teleworking policy in your office.

The key for your individual offices, should you allow some to work from home, would be to: (1) treat all similarly situated employees the same (2) keep good documentation to support your decisions if some employees are given the opportunity to work from home and others are not, (3) maintain an essential shift at your office at all times to be able to handle the functions of your office, and (4) create job duties for those who work from home and reporting mechanisms for those employees to come back to in-office duty with reporting and implementation requirements related to the work-from-home duties you are giving them, and (5) set expectations beforehand for employees who are working from home.

At the state of Arkansas, recently many departments within DHS have shifted to a rolling “in-house” shift work where an employee is to report to office duty one day a week. They have split their essential staffing to five different shifts. We recommend that should any city or town use this system that they instead split into larger shifts (2 or 3 per office max) and rotate every other week or every third week if possible. The reason we recommend longer shifts is that the weekend is a critical time for lingering Coronavirus contamination to die and it would allow for a deep-cleaning of all work-facilities each Monday, or whichever day you choose to change shifts.

This type of rolling “in-house” shift work could help tremendously with the potential spread between employees, and if you have one shift that goes down to quarantine you would have a second (or third) ready to come in immediately. Also, keep in mind that for all employees it is important to be diligent and continue the recommended safety measures to help prevent the spread of infection. Maintain six feet between employee desks when possible, wipe down high touch areas regularly, permit and encourage employees to eat at their desks and avoid common areas like the breakroom, and remind employees to wash their hands frequently with hand sanitizer or warm water and soap, and avoid touching their mouths, faces, eyes, etc.

Please know that we are helping to offer creative solutions to work situation problems. They will not work across all offices—for instance a clerk/treasurer’s or recorder/treasurer’s office with no employee except the clerk/treasurer or recorder/treasurer. But if you have enough to begin working on something like this please feel free to call any of us on the team to get further guidance.