The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly tested our capabilities. Our Risk Management department has seen increased risks for municipal employees, especially for those working in emergency services such as police, fire, EMTs, and others in high-hazard positions. Over the past several weeks, municipal operations have been beset with extraordinary challenges including working with reduced workforce, social isolation of staff and customers, dealing with reduced employee morale, and work from home developments, among others. Many of the factors that have transformed municipal operations in the short-term will have lasting impacts.

**Workforce Reductions**

Perhaps the greatest workplace safety concern during this period is the provision of essential municipal operations with a reduced workforce. Routine tasks sometimes get taken for granted that they will be completed safely. However, many of these “routine” tasks include high-hazard functions that can only be accomplished safely with appropriate employee deployment. The majority of highway and public work operations are considered high-hazard, and it remains critical that department heads evaluate whether tasks can be completed safely with a reduced staff. The same attention to safety should be applied as well to those working in less hazardous fields, such as office staff.

When staffing is reduced, the safety of workers can be compromised on multiple levels, and minute details from start to finish have to be reviewed for safety. Items like shift-staffing, driving responsibilities, custodial work, office staffing, and even housekeeping have to be reviewed to confirm safe work practices are followed. Administrators and supervisors should consider all aspects of each job function — including the intricate details — to ascertain the potential for injury and that employees assigned the tasks are fully capable of completing the work safely and completely. They should also confirm that appropriate controls for the work process are in place (including PPE, equipment operation, public safeguards, etc.).

Think also about office staff who usually work together — when the staffing is reduced and employees work alone, additional safety concerns include dealing with an anxious, fearful public or performing lifting tasks where back injuries might occur — there is no assistance available for them. A good control under these circumstances is to call into staff working alone to confirm their safety and well-being. The same is true for field staff — routine contact to confirm safety is a good practice.

**Training and Cross-Training**

Training is perhaps the most important aspect of workplace safety during these unique circumstances. The key to performing work safely with a reduced workforce is to understand the staff and their competencies. Occasionally, employees may be asked to complete tasks...
outside of their competency. Supervisors must look at each employee's ability, training and knowledge when assigning work responsibilities. Some work may require only certified employees complete tasks, but even when the worker does not require a certification, they still will need training and knowledge of the operation to complete the task safely. Make no assumptions of worker knowledge during these days of managing condensed staffs. High-hazard job functions like chain saw use, chipper operation, heavy equipment operation, confined space access, and work-zone operations, to name a few, are usually only safely completed with multiple, trained employee involvement.

If an employee or group of employees is inexperienced with a certain task, identify and provide available training so that the task can be completed in compliance with work standards. Take the time, prior to assigning work, to consider the dangers of the job and confirm that proper employee staffing and training is in place to make the job completed safely. Cross-training employees so that work can be assigned throughout or across departments can improve employee morale as well – as employees can feel empowered when additional work accountability is requested of them and they are properly training for increased work duties.

Training must focus on safety aspects of work duties for new employees and employees introduced to new assignments (i.e., working with new equipment, utilizing new PPE, working with different staff). Training can take on many forms, from in-house programs and routine Safety Culture Talks, to outside presentations from professionals (like the Comp Alliance Loss Control Representatives), and on-line programs (like the Comp Alliance Academy). Training must be encouraged for all departments, including seasonal hires, and focus on workplace safety.

**Employee Stress and Morale**

Another major concern during the unprecedented coronavirus outbreak is employee morale and stress. There are many ways in which these conditions have challenged staff and routinely affected employees in a negative manner. Working with a reduced staff can certainly contribute to decreased morale as employees might be given tasks they don’t feel confident in completing successfully, or they may be overcome by the increased amount of work to be completed, or they might not mix well with employees already completing work effortlessly due to familiarity. Concerns for personal health when interacting with co-workers and the public contributes to employee stress and can lead to injuries. Supervisors should acknowledge with staff this is likely to occur, monitor their behaviors, and provide assistance when appropriate. The physically negative impact that stress has on the body has been well studied and has shown to lead to an increase in physical injury, as stressed employees may not be completely focused on the job at hand. This puts themselves as well as co-workers at danger when high-hazard work is scheduled.

A typical best practice for employee safety is to continue to follow the ‘Strength in Numbers’ rule, where employees working together provide support in the event of an emergency, be it for a physical issue, dealing with troublesome customers, or during heavy-load work (i.e., mechanical). Co-workers have each other’s back during these conditions, so the reduction in work-force creates an increased risk during these times.

Working from home, where many employees have been taken away from their office routines, working without office equipment and supplies handy, uncomfortable work equipment, having to manage work around personal lives, and the absence of co-workers creates the feeling of isolation from others, contributing to increased anxiety as well. Employee stress from work, home, family, money issues, concerns for personal health, or dealing with additional public questions and complaints, can focus employee attentions away from the completion of tasks safely. For those that have never displayed signs of anxiety in their lives, these events can change us in ways we’re not accustomed to, and for those routinely experiencing stress, the magnitude of the current challenges can make life’s demands unmanageable! Understand that co-workers will be experiencing increased levels of anxiety and identify and manage our own levels of stress — become resilient during this crisis.

Resiliency is more than simply coping with the stressors of today, but confronting crisis and difficult situations without getting overwhelmed by them; it can help protect employees from depression, stress and anxiety. Resilience to stress can be strengthened by improved self-esteem, developing a strong employee-support system, and improving individual physical and mental health. Tips for improving resiliency in the workplace throughout these current conditions include: take a walk or rest from time-to-time at work, eat a healthy diet, get adequate sleep nightly, exercise daily, avoid/limit alcohol and caffeine, as they can increase stress levels, call a family member or friend for enjoyable conversation, and maintain a positive and hopeful outlook. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can help employees severely stricken by stress in these conditions.

Administration must take the time to communicate with staff, explain clear responsibilities and expectations, support your staff with positive feedback, support staff with IT assistance (when working from home, office equipment set-ups and virtual operations) and monitor staff for changes in personality that looks like stress-levels are increasing. Through the practice of these techniques, municipal employees can remain healthy and deal better with the emotional impacts of the viral outbreak. Maintaining these techniques after the crisis is over will also help during crisis-like moments that occur during future municipal events.

**Understand the Workplace Safety Culture**

To manage conditions that are likely to lead to workplace injuries, pay attention to and strive
to improve the safety culture around the workplace. Safety culture is the application of safety standards throughout your organization, ideally going above-and-beyond the minimum standards to develop a comprehensive, safe environment for employees and the public. Given the current emergency conditions, this includes adapting to new norms and modifying existing safety programs accordingly. New protocols such as social distancing, wearing facemasks and routine disinfecting of common areas should be incorporated into existing safety programs where applicable. A well-established safety culture will facilitate adaptation to these changes, and, in turn, adaptability to changing conditions reinforces a positive safety culture in your municipality.

As a means of safeguarding the life, safety and health of municipal employees, improvements to routine operations are necessary. This includes increased cleaning of municipal facilities, upgraded personal protective equipment for staff working in high-infection surroundings, reducing direct-contact interactions with the public, and an overall improved awareness of our work surroundings and personal behaviors. These enhancements have altered the traditional pattern of work operations but will lead to the improved well-being of the greatest municipal resource – employees. Administrators are encouraged to develop and maintain these facility improvements moving forward.

When COVID-19 begins to recede and there is a return to some form of normalcy, municipal safety culture will include a pro-active approach to safety, initiating safety training programs for equipment and job functions that may have changed due to the pandemic. Building conditions should also be evaluated, including sanitizing work places on a routine basis, improvements in personnel hygiene (like hand washing, hand sanitizing, covering ones face and mouth when coughing, and staying away from the office when feeling sick, and an overall appreciation of the health of co-workers) will all be improved as a result of this crisis. Every challenging situation can lead to the implementation of improvements — often times, changes brought about from necessity identify real areas of need and introduce upgraded safety practices and procedures into daily work functions.

The attitudes and values that employees share towards safety make up your municipal safety culture, which are promoted by senior administrators and department heads. The more positive we feel about our safety and the ability to make improvements to our work environments to make them safer, the more likely the work is to be completed on-time and in a commendable manner — employees know that safety is more than just a passing thought and is instead emphasized throughout your organization as a realistic, achievable expectation. These times can serve to reinforce our municipal safety goals and determination to continue and improve employee safety.

So while we are all going through this extraordinary situation together, consider how your municipal operations have changed, acknowledge any positives to move forward with and the negatives to make sure are not repeated. Consider training opportunities, implementing new safety practices, any employee input and benefits, and improved operations from this experience. Confirm that employee attitudes and values benefit your safety culture through commitment to realistic safety practices for continuous organizational learning and management for hazards shared across the workforce during this coronavirus experience.

The ability to adapt quickly to sudden change does not come easy for governments at any level. So don’t hesitate to rely on outside resources such as those provided by the Comp Alliance to help you through.