

What Water and Sanitation Operators Can do in the Fight Against COVID-19

COVID-19 has become a serious global health concern. **Taking action** to slow the spread of, and support recovery from, the illness **will save lives** and lessen the social and economic fallout from this pandemic.

Access to safe water and sanitation services are critical for the good hygiene required to stop the spread and lower the impact of the virus. COVID-19 is passed through respiratory droplets from infected people which are often spread from hand to mouth - so proper, regular handwashing is the most effective way to reduce transmission. Fecal-oral transmission is less common, but in areas where sanitation services are lacking, may become a significant vector. The corona virus is deactivated by typical water treatment involving filtration and disinfection but could persist in untreated water.

Water and sanitation service providers (small scale providers, utilities and local authorities) can be instrumental in stalling COVID's advance. Public utilities should work closely with local health officials and other relevant bodies to:

- **Promote and facilitate good hygiene practices**, for example by leading awareness campaigns about COVID-19 transmission and care or providing material support for handwashing in high-risk locations.
- **Maximize access to safe drinking water**, especially for vulnerable communities. Maintaining, where possible, water service continuity, proper treatment and consideration for accessibility for all, ensuring that affordability is never a barrier. For unserved areas, temporary measures may be taken to facilitate access to safe water, or to facilitate household water treatment. Remember that without access to safe drinking water, people are at higher risk for other water-borne diseases, making people much more susceptible to the virus.
- **Maximize access to safe sanitation services**. While lasting sanitation infrastructure cannot be built overnight, measures to minimize fecal contamination by residents and water and sanitation workers, particularly in vulnerable communities, should be a priority.
- **Ensure the vulnerable get priority attention**. The elderly and infirm are most at risk to succumbing to the virus so consideration should be made to ensure adequate WASH services in hospitals and elders' homes. Low income communities and informal settlements may be particularly vulnerable to spreading because of crowding and inadequate services.
- **Remember that water and sanitation workers need to be kept safe** so they can continue to play their important role in protecting others. Ensure that people who are feeling sick, or are required to tend to others who are, can stay at home without risking their livelihoods. For those working in affected areas, be sure to provide proper protective equipment.

COVID-19 does not know borders or differentiate by origin, so water and sanitation operators should **stand together with communities in other countries** where the crisis may be hitting harder. Water and sanitation operators can support affected countries, in solidarity with their peers, to maintain essential basic services where they are most needed. Operators can provide one another with technical advice and capacity support, either remotely or, where there is no reason not to travel, on site. If you are already involved in a Water Operators' Partnership (WOP), consider how you can support your partner to play their full part in curbing the spread of the virus and minimizing its impact.

Emergencies like COVID are reminders that **effective and resilient local water and sanitation service providers are critical to maintaining health and stability**, especially in poor communities. Over the medium and long term, Water Operators' Partnerships can help strengthen the resident capacity of local utilities to abate such crises and protect communities when they arise.

GWOPA is a global network of water and sanitation service providers providing peer support to one another on a not for profit basis. If you would like to help or receive support from your peer operators, **join us**. If your utility has a campaign or other good practice in preventing the spread of the COVID virus, share it with others using **#COVID19** and **#UtilitiesFightCOVID**.

GWOPA is an initiative of UN-Habitat and is supported by the Government of Germany.