

Energy Law Forum

Impacts of COVID Emergency Conditions: Actions Taken and Lessons Learned

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EPCOR Utilities Inc.



EPCOR OPERATIONS

- Headquartered in Edmonton, EPCOR operates in four provinces and four states
- Electricity operations in Edmonton and Ontario, and customer care for Alberta RRO and competitive retail customers
- 2,000,000 customers in North America in water, wastewater, drainage, electricity and natural gas
- Over 3,500 employees



EPCOR's Purpose Statement

Communities count on us.
We count on each other.



Emergency Response and Business Continuity

- What Worked
 - ✓ Utilities have an emergency response mindset
 - ✓ The right people, talking a lot
 - ✓ Trusted relationships with public health and infrastructure
 - ✓ Critical staffing dashboard
- Challenges
 - Switching leadership styles
 - The plan on paper wasn't applicable to how the pandemic unfolded





Workforce Health and Safety

- What Worked
 - ✓ Early to lock down, slow to relax
 - ✓ Reduced workplace hazards (traffic, line strikes)
 - ✓ 1,900 employees working from home
- Challenges
 - Hyper vigilance isn't a long term solution
 - Fatigue, mind on task, mental health issues
 - Evolution of what success looks like

People

- What Worked
 - ✓ Appreciation for essential service workers
 - ✓ Employee engagement in early stages, driven by connection to the importance of our work and appreciation for stability
 - ✓ Advancement of hybrid work models
- Challenges
 - Diverging engagement between office and field team members
 - Accelerating retirements and turnover in certain skilled positions
 - Vacation accruals and absenteeism





Operating Efficiency

- What Worked
 - ✓ Workforce availability at record levels
 - ✓ Tested our forecasting and modelling skills
 - ✓ Working with crews to discover different ways of delivering services (eg., home inspections by iPhone)
- Challenges
 - 2020 and 2021 are not appropriate baselines for future costs
 - Backlog of non-essential maintenance and inspections, training and vacation
 - Supply of everyday items must not be taken for granted

Serving Customers

- *Utility Payment Deferral Program*
 - Residential, farm and small commercial customers can defer bill payments for 90 days (March – June, 2020)
 - Repayment over time for deferred amounts
 - No disconnections, late payment fees or collections action
 - AUC authorized to approve a rider on the ISO tariff to recover any deferred bill payments that the utilities / RRO were unable to recover after the end of the period





Serving Customers

- What Worked
 - ✓ Speed at which the program rolled out provided immediate relief and interim support until federal funding kicked in
- Challenges
 - Cost impacts to utilities of an emergency can be hard to predict
 - Complexity of cost structure can result in under-recovery of approved revenue requirement
 - Future responses must take into account all potential cost impacts, and path to recovery must be clear

Lessons Learned

1. Make room for small innovations, and changes with low risk of failure
2. Don't take anything for granted
3. Never lose sight of your purpose

