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IMPACTS TO WELLNESS/ MENTAL HEALTH

How can public agencies evolve to address COVID-19's effect on our mental health?

Pandemics are becoming more frequent in the twenty-first century. During the twentieth century, there were three Influenza pandemics with tens of thousands of victims (1918, 1957, 1968) (CDC, 2020). In the last 20 years, four similar viral pandemics have occurred (SARS- 2003, Swine Flu- 2009, MERS- 2012, COVID- 2019) (CDC, 2020). Preparation for the current and the next pandemics are no longer a question of "if," but "when."

Civic agencies represent many of the front-line workers that respond in times of crisis. Their ability to maintain their own staff wellness and mental health allows a coordinated response that saves lives. There is a paradox of increased demand on public services while also trying to limit interaction with a public that may be infected with a communicable disease. These factors create an unending stress that can reduce the ability to respond.

Many civic agencies have been forced to do things differently. As these agencies have been tested, they have shown great resiliency and agility. When the crisis recedes, there will be a decision point for these agencies to continue to do things the way they always have, or in a new "crisis tested" way.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt nearly all aspects of life, from working and learning remotely to delivering and receiving healthcare virtually, we at HMC Architects are looking at this disruption as an opportunity to learn and grow. By discovering and generating new knowledge and insight, we are determined to help our clients amid this crisis by exploring their current pain points, streamlining their processes, and identifying solutions to improve their organizational metrics. As part of this ongoing study, we are devoted to share our results with the industry on five main areas of Technology, Adaptability and Flexibility, Regulatory/Budgetary/Institutional impact, Space Needs, Reduction, and Restructuring, and Impacts to Wellness/Mental health. In this article, we cover our findings on the impacts to wellness/ mental health with respect to civic spaces.

METHOD

A group of representatives from different public agencies, including fire, police, sheriff, city and county administration as well as architects from HMC and consultants from public safety and engineering companies were invited to attend a virtual focus group to discuss and share insight. Prior to the focus group session, a short online survey was sent to the group for their review and evaluation of short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on their current and future facility operation and design.



San Diego County North Coastal Live Well Health Center, HMC Architects

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Social Interactions

Many of the most important services that local agencies provide are in the areas of social services. “The pandemic touched a cardinal principle of public service, that of continuity (United Nations Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).” These services may become over-taxed as the pandemic continues. Social interactions are reduced and lessen the preventative effect on peoples’ well-being. While tele-health and Zoom chats can provide some level of human interaction and healthcare, it has been shown not to provide the same level of care as in-person interactions (Fetters, 2020). This is because people have different expectations for “happy hour to family time,” etc. that cannot be met with current technology. Stress reduction apps, in-home fitness, and other ways to relieve stress have become important ways to deal with strong emotional conditions.

Stress and depression within a pandemic can cause domestic violence and child abuse to increase. Unfortunately, in a pandemic with families staying at home, these incidents can be hidden from view. One way that government can respond to these added stress issues is to invest in predictive analytics. This data mining effort allows an agency to spend limited resources on families that need the services the most. Citizens can enter information into databases online or even automated sharing from an event. This allows for directed services based on the data.

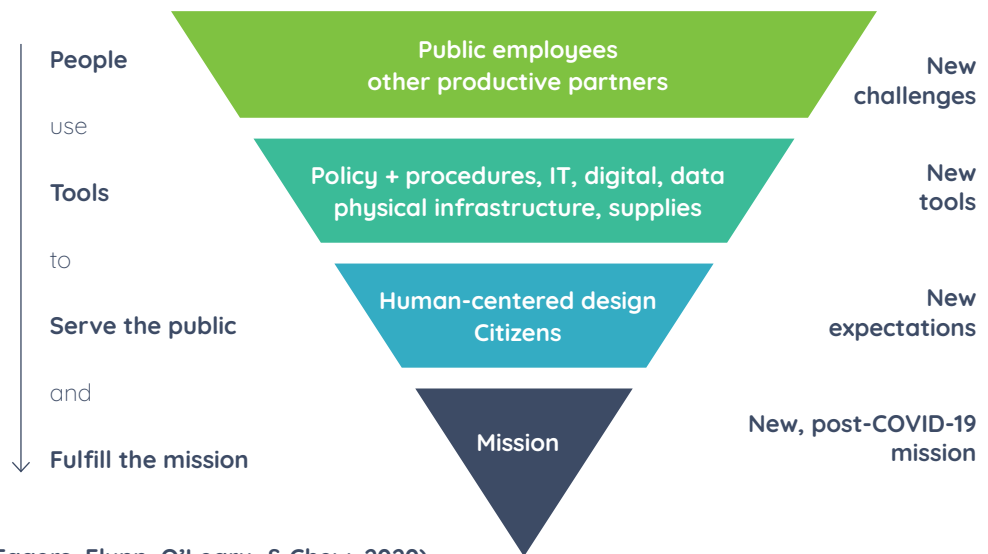
So called “no touch” data can be developed as well (Eggers, Kishnani, & Krishnamoorthy, Transforming Government Post COVID-19, 2020). For instance, a hospital could notify the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) about a childbirth, file necessary forms, and send county childcare services to someone in need. Government can become more efficient and people can avoid the lines at SSA, the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), and many other agencies where timed events could be handled in an automated way.

New Way of Doing Things

COVID-19 has created many “new ways of doing things” and eventually, some will become the “new normal.” Government agencies that are under tremendous stress now are operating in emergency mode. As things begin to enter the recovery phase, agencies will need to look at the successes and failures that COVID-19 has exposed. During the pandemic, orthodoxies have been questioned and overturned as agencies needed to do business in different ways to respond appropriately (Eggers, Flynn, O’Leary, & Chew, 2020). Public agencies have actually shown themselves to be very resilient and agile to respond to the crisis. As agencies look inward, the crisis could lead to a new more efficient way of conducting government business.

In addition to COVID-19, public safety agencies have had to deal with social unrest. COVID-19 has exposed inequity in society and many have had time on their hands to protest the current condition. Crisis is also an opportunity

A mission-centric look at the next normal



(Eggers, Flynn, O’Leary, & Chew, 2020)

to re-think how many parts of society are built. These protests have forced many agencies to re-think how they accomplish their mission and even to re-think what the mission is. Prior to 2020, public safety agencies were purchasing used military grade equipment from the federal government. While there are some needs for heavy duty equipment, many 911 calls are focused on quality of life issues (such as homeless in front of a store, or noise complaints, etc.). Some agencies are beginning to re-think if every call is a “nail” and if you send a “hammer.”

The City of San Diego, California has been treating social issues differently. The city identified 15 homeless individuals with chronic alcoholism who cost the city and county \$1,500,000 total in medical care alone (City of San Diego, CA, 2009). The city responded to the continuing social and public safety crisis by creating a Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) who’s mission is to engage with the homeless population and educate them about available options. These officers do not show up armed or in a traditional police uniform. They show up in a white van in khakis and a polo shirt. They have taken extensive de-escalation training courses. Their goal is to bring the people off the streets, but even de-escalating a situation and talking to the person about what they need is seen as a success (Zimmerman, 2019).

Public agencies have always had limited budgets. It takes a crisis to understand how things could be done differently. These opportunities are short-lived since it is easiest

to go back to doing things the way that they’ve always been done.

Hiring, Retention, Staff Amenities, and Stress

One of the long-term (post-pandemic) problems facing agencies and companies is how to attract and retain the best staff. As the marketplace becomes more competitive again, employees will look at how a workplace is organized and designed. The health and safety of staff will be critical elements as employees decide where to work. Companies and public agencies that focus on employee wellness have already shown to have a competitive advantage in hiring and retention. A survey of American workers by SHRM found that 40 percent of workers with a wellness program work harder and miss fewer days (Miller, 2020). Considering that this crisis is based on health and wellness, this could become even more important to staff in the future.

One of the outcomes of the pandemic has been increased stress and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in front-line health and public safety workers who have faced unrelenting stresses while dealing with this crisis. Some describe dealing with COVID-19 like “drinking from a poisonous fire hydrant” (Wan, 2020). This on-going stress can also lead to depression and suicide, which can unfortunately sneak up on people like a slow burn (to continue the fire hydrant analogy) with lack of restful sleep, hypertension, and other easily discounted conditions growing into larger mental and physical health problems.



Public safety agencies will be forced to evaluate if they operate in a more military model or a social services model, or a combination based on the needs of the citizens.



Workplaces that provide space for physical fitness, yoga, meditation, and other mental and physical relief may be better prepared to eliminate some of the worst long-term issues of COVID-19. This isn't necessarily going back to a WeWork model of frills like breakfast bars, coffee, and beer. This is a targeted effort to provide employees with the assistance that they need to be productive and healthy.

Tasks that are repetitive and could be handled more efficiently can also create a more fulfilling work environment for staff. Employees report more happiness when they feel that their work has meaning.

SUMMARY

Crisis allows an organization to take stock of what is important and what is not. COVID-19 has shown some of the elements of government that are essential to everyday life and some that are more optional. How these agencies respond to the future will allow them to remain relevant. Employers will continue to face competition for the best staff. Organizations that show that they care for their staff will have advantages to companies that do not or that continue to work in an outdated mode. Social services are undergoing a revision that will allow agencies to take care of more "customers" with the same or less resources. Public safety agencies will be forced to evaluate if they operate in a more military model or a social services model, or a combination based on the needs of the citizens.

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