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Division of Local Government Services (DLGS)

“The Division strives to help all local governments achieve excellence, efficiency, and long-term fiscal stability in their operations”

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Local Operational Guidance- COVID-19: Guidance to Facilitate Continuity of Operations

The Division understands the many challenges municipalities face as we all confront an unprecedented scope and character of crisis. We join you in striving to provide the highest quality public services possible under rapidly evolving medical and fiscal constraints. We recognize that the rapidly shifting operational environment has left many local units with questions. Through this guidance document, the Division aims to provide some answers, and some structure, to help each of New Jersey’s local units successfully maintain continuity of government during this time of heightened need, while keeping staff and residents safe.

Millions of Americans find themselves out of work as a result of the strict controls necessary to avoid the rapid spread of COVID-19 among our communities. Hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans are affected.

Those of us who work in government are privileged to serve our communities in times of prosperity and times of crisis. We are so fortunate to continue in steady employment during even the most tumultuous of times because our communities depend upon us to uphold the public trust, no matter the circumstances. In this time of need, we must earn their trust by continuing to provide the services, stability, and support they rightly depend upon.

Government is not closed. Due to the unknown duration of the current crisis, a government shutdown would harm our communities. Local units must continue to provide services, and access to services, in any and all manners not expressly prohibited by executive order.

Ensuring employees, to the extent possible, work from home while providing these services, and that those who come into the work place maintain appropriate social distancing and avoid unnecessary direct contact with all persons, including the public, is part of the challenge we must all rise to in shaping our government operations in the most efficient and effective manner during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, we are exhorted to employ electronic means of communication to conduct business. If employees must go to the office or be in the field, they are to employ social distancing and safe hygiene practices.

The scope of our continuing duties encompasses many municipal services such as police, fire, emergency medical services, trash collection, water and sewer, and vital statistics. It is understandable that certain municipal functions will be delayed, curtailed, or suspended due to the practical realities of our current operating environment, but core operations must be maintained throughout this crisis. In addition, revenues must be collected, as they are what allows municipalities to continue providing those vital services.

Below are a series of recommendations regarding means of continuing core operational activities within the strictures of EO107. These guidelines and suggestions may evolve as the state of emergency continues to develop.

Recommendations concerning continuing to collect tax, water, sewer and other utility payments:

Municipalities must develop and implement plans that allow people to make payments in as many ways and as easily as possible. In developing a collections strategy, it is imperative to remember that some community members do not have bank accounts, may prefer to pay in cash, or may not be comfortable engaging in business and financial transactions online.

Some common options include:

1. Online payments
 - a. Many financial software vendors and payment systems can easily be set up to collect revenue online.
2. Regular mail
 - a. Establish guidelines for determining timeliness of receipt and providing acknowledgement of payment.
 - b. Consider Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) guidance in determining how to handle, open, and distribute mail.
3. Drop box outside or inside the building – post notices about social distancing and CDC guidelines.
 - a. Designate an existing library drop box.
 - b. Designate an existing drug collection box.
 - c. Create a new drop box using a secure mailbox or cash box at police stations, which are open 24/7.
 - d. Consider CDC and DOH guidance in determining how to handle, open, and distribute submissions.
4. If necessary, provide an opportunity for the public to make cash payments. Limited personnel, and conscientious social distancing and hygiene practices must be employed. It is recommended that this method be employed in an office or space with glass partitions, if

available, and that the hours for filing be limited. Some municipalities have also adjusted its operating procedures to require appointments for in-person payment to ensure that members of the public are not waiting in proximity to one another. In all respects, any in-person sites must follow CDC and DOH guidelines.

An additional consideration when implementing any method of payment is the generation of receipts to acknowledge payment. Mailing or e-mailing receipts is recommended. Additionally, taxpayers should be reminded that cancelled checks serve as a valid receipt.

Recommendations Concerning Purchasing/Accounts Payable/Payroll and Benefits Processing:

Local units must continue maintaining purchasing records and practices, accounts payable, payroll, and benefits processing. Many of these activities are administratively intensive. The level of technology available and its adoption by staff within the local unit may dictate whether continuation of these activities can be accomplished remotely or must be completed by on-site staff.

Options:

1. Where technology allows, employees with remote access can process many of these administrative records and payments offsite. Expanding access to available technology as necessary to permit completion of administrative functions remotely is recommended.
2. Some employers have retained third party vendors to assist in performing some or all of these functions remotely. This generally reduces the need for on-site staff to accomplish these functions but may necessitate conversations with the third-party vendor about its ability to provide uninterrupted service at this time to avoid unexpected delay or suspension of key administrative processes.
3. Where necessary, on-site staff activities should be accomplished using limited staff observing social distancing. Rotation of staff on different days or different shifts to address various aspects of these activities may be beneficial to accomplishing the requisite tasks without undue contact. It is recommended that this method be employed in an office or space with glass partitions, if available, and that the hours for filing be limited. Some municipalities have also adjusted to require appointments for in-person payment to ensure that members of the public are not waiting in proximity to one another. In all respects, any in-person sites must follow CDC and DOH guidelines.

Recommendations concerning how to communicate public information and connect the public to municipal staff and resources during a primarily remote-work environment:

Ensuring that the public can avail itself of services that are being provided remotely or on-site behind closed doors is essential to overcoming a significant barrier to successful continuity of government. If the public does not know how to reach public services, the services' ostensible availability is irrelevant. There are numerous ways to connect the public to remote resources while in-person contact is limited. Some examples include:

1. Use Reverse 9-1-1 calls to community members for communicating essential information.
2. Use flashing public message boards/marquees.
3. Use robocall programs such as Everbridge to issue community updates and provide general continuity of government information.

4. Provide easy-to-find, up-to-date listings on the local unit's webpage specifying the names, phone numbers, and email addresses of the primary points of contact for each municipal function.
5. Forward office phones to private- phones or take-home work phones so that private numbers need not be given out, but the public lines are answered without needing to have the staff on-site to do so.
6. Have a staff member answer the main number for the municipality and establish a list of functions and contact information for all on-site and remote-work staff so that the assigned call center staffer can email questions or issues from the public to the appropriate staff member to address the issue. Once an inquiry is forwarded, the assigned staffer should respond directly to the request. A log of public contact inquiries and their staff source and means of resolution may be useful if inquiries prove repetitive.
7. Have one staff member in each department answer the phones and perform the same function within that department as described in item 5 above.
8. All staff should check department and individual voicemail throughout the day. The local unit should develop a policy for time, means, and documentation of response.
9. Have outgoing voicemail messages provide information regarding the best way to contact the individual staffer.
10. Post key department contact information and information resources on any local unit social media accounts.
11. Actively monitor social media and consider establishing a live-chat option for public inquiries to reduce redundancy and improve direct engagement and response time.
12. Create an email listserv for residents through the municipal website.
13. Post the contact information and community service provision procedures on the local unit's website and on the doors of the municipal buildings so that the public can avail itself of the local unit's resources and know that government continues to operate, even if the buildings themselves are not currently open to the public.

Recommendations concerning transfer of titles:

Real estate transactions are another aspect of government that has stymied many entities seeking to continue operating while maintaining social distance. Title searchers want to access on-site documents, but many local units have closed their facilities to the public to avoid undue proximity and exposure in close quarters. Some aspects of this work are undoubtedly complicated or delayed by current operating conditions, but there are some options available to ensure essential activities continue:

Options:

1. Requests for tax searches can be emailed and the municipal tax search officer can email information back. Make downloadable and printable applications available on the municipal website. Provide clear instructions on the website.
2. Divert title searchers to internet-based options on the county database.
3. Where necessary, on-site staff activities should be accomplished using limited staff observing social distancing. Rotation of staff on different days or different shifts to address various aspects of these activities may be beneficial to accomplishing the requisite tasks without undue contact. It is recommended that this method be employed

in an office or space with glass partitions, if available, and that the hours for filing be limited. Some municipalities have also adjusted to require appointments for in-person payment to ensure that members of the public are not waiting in proximity to one another. In all respects, any in-person sites must follow CDC and DOH guidelines.

Recommendations concerning the recording of vital statistics – e.g. birth, death and marriage

There are likely to be circumstances that require processing of vital statistics paperwork and information throughout the present state of emergency. Death certificates must be processed to permit spouses to receive surviving spouse benefits, children in your community will be born, requiring documentation, and marriages are unlikely to cease. Some processes may be slower or less efficient within our current operating environment, but these are core government functions that cannot cease for extended periods of time without serious consequences. Some steps can be taken to make these processes more adaptable to a remote-work or limited on-site staff environment:

1. Make downloadable and printable applications available on the municipal website. Provide clear instructions on the website.
2. Authorize e-filing and e-signature to the extent possible. Consider video conferencing rather than in-person meeting in certain appropriate circumstances.
3. Accept applications and payments by regular mail and mail certificates back.
4. Where necessary, on-site staff activities should be accomplished using limited staff observing social distancing. Rotation of staff on different days or different shifts to address various aspects of these activities may be beneficial to accomplishing the requisite tasks without undue contact. It is recommended that this method be employed in an office or space with glass partitions, if available, and that the hours for filing be limited. Some municipalities have also adjusted to require appointments for in-person payment to ensure that members of the public are not waiting in proximity to one another. In all respects, any in-person sites must follow CDC and NJ Department of Health guidelines.

Recommendations for Construction and Land Use reviews:

It is imperative that local governments avoid backlogs in building permits and land use applications in order to facilitate economic recovery as we weather and emerge from this crisis. By performing as many review functions as possible within safety constraints, state and local governments can continue to advance the local economy, add assessable improvements to the tax ratable base, and maintain a visible and important public function. As articulated more fully by the Division of Codes and Standards, inspections functions must continue, albeit with some modifications. Moreover, back-office activities can be maintained as follows:

1. Perform take-home or on-site rotating reviews of construction blueprints and land use applications.
2. Arrange for telephone calls and email exchange to communicate review comments to applicants rather than performing these functions through in-person meetings.

More questions and changing circumstances will undoubtedly continue to arise in the coming days and weeks. Please know that the Division remains your resource for information and support with these and other local government issues, we will continue to promulgate new and updated guidance through GovConnect, EGG notices, and we will be available to assist you in any way that we can.

Additional Pertinent Information Resources:

https://nj.gov/health/cd/topics/covid2019_healthcare.shtml

https://nj.gov/health/workplacehealthandsafety/documents/peosh/osha_covid19%20alert_eng.pdf

[https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2Findex.html)

[ncov/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2Findex.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2Findex.html)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/workplace-school-and-home-guidance.pdf>

https://www.nj.gov/dca/divisions/codes/alerts/pdfs/COVID_memo.pdf.

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