

Managing Waste in the Time of COVID

Kari Hodgson, Director of Solid Waste, Collier County

Most people don't think about their garbage; they put it at the curb and when they look again it is gone, like magic. In the cases when it doesn't disappear, garbage becomes *trash talk*. Solid waste is a silent essential and that's the way it should be. The magic behind the scenes is pragmatic to those in the industry and it is the essence of what drives us to serve our constituents.

Fiscal Year 2020 brought new challenges with the introduction of COVID early in the year, bringing a fearful ideology of *unknowns*, captivating well-functioning people, and disrupting polished routines. This uncertainty left our families, well-being, and essential processes vulnerable and business principles at risk. Leaders across the nation faced dynamic adaptability preparing to lead organizations with a fluid notion.

The solid waste industry has not been exempt from the COVID impact. While some counties experienced suspended operations or disruption to collection service, Collier County continued its continuity of service, with *zero* closures and disruptions, as well as *zero* work-related exposure cases.

Collier County Solid Waste (CCSW) instituted principles and altered practices to protect staff and the public, and continue essential services.

Industry and Operational Challenges

Through franchised collection contracts, CCSW indirectly manages an additional 173 employees. Implementing daily reports that

included safety measures, collection issues, staffing, waste volumes, and any other challenges encountered enabled the franchisees and county to address challenges encountered with effective communication.

Further, Collier County's curbside service is an automated system for waste, recycling and most bulk collection. The franchisees—Waste Management of Florida, Inc. (WMIF) and Waste Connections, Inc. (WC)—overcame internal Return to Work policies and cross-trained their drivers to serve on multiple collection routes. This substitute driver concept assured continuity of service.



While Collier County was served with Force Majeure notices, the only observed impact was realized when the materials collection center that processes a portion of the county's recyclable materials was forced to close for a short period of time due to a staffing shortage and the franchisee was forced to find an alternative location for recyclable material processing.

Remote work shifted waste volumes disproportionately, especially in April, where residential or curbside waste volumes increased by an additional 1,000 tons/week—that is an additional three days' worth of waste that had to be collected during the six day per

week operation. To accommodate, the landfill stayed open late on Tuesdays and commercial collection resources were reallocated to residential collection. Many residents used this opportunity to clean out their homes, setting out a substantial quantity of bulk waste (e.g. mattresses, couches, etc.).

Typically, a 2% increase is observed due to growth in Collier County, however, Graph 1, page 7, displays the effect of the remote work (beginning in April) coupled with sustained growth on residential waste volumes.

As opposed to residential volumes, commercial volumes decreased during the months of March, April and May. Engaging with our local businesses, WMIF offered commercial customers temporarily reduced services to minimize economic impact on local businesses.

Interestingly, when businesses were permitted to operate at 25% capacity, the commercial waste volume rebounded to previous observed volumes. In addition, residential volumes continued to stay elevated. COVID's requirement to discard materials, such as menus, utensils, and remove tabletop containers, resulted in a notable waste increase, even with the business operating at only a quarter of their capacity.

Similar to residential waste, curbside recycling increased from 29,000 to 36,000 tons in FY20. Considering the light weight of recyclable materials, this was quite an increase. Evidence of "ship to home" as a new norm.

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Luckily, there was demand in the paper industry, thereby creating a viable market.

Recycling Drop-off Centers and Community Events

Like most businesses and convenience centers, CCSW recycling centers experienced a decrease in guests during March and April. Expected service levels continued with the implementation of safety measures to ensure the health, safety, and wellness of staff and members of the community. Staff adapted with minor operational adjustments. Similar to the curbside bulk set-out observations, the recycling centers received a notable increase in electronics and latex paint.

Events such as Hurricane Roundups and Neighborhood Cleanups were canceled, attributing to the increase in guests that visited the recycling centers and the decrease in household hazardous waste collected. All suspended events are planned to resume in April 2021 in order to honor and celebrate Earth Day.

Employee Safety

To ensure the solid waste service facilities remained open, employee and guest safety became the first order of business. The solid waste facilities serve mission-critical functions for waste to *disappear*. Adding to the pandemic theme, without someone to operate the collection vehicles, the waste cannot be collected; without a scale house, the waste cannot be landfilled; without proper hazardous

waste disposal means, the risk of fire potential and increased environmental liability are highly probable.

When someone is sick, typically a diagnosis is sought. It is the lack of a named diagnosis that invokes fear, consuming productivity. *“I have bronchitis, the doctor says I should feel better soon”* versus *“I have been to the doctor three times for this annoying cough and they still don’t know what it is”*. This implores fear, alters perspective, consumes productivity, and drives the need for closure. Therefore, it was crucial to limit this anxiety and provide closure through timeframes. Terms like “indefinitely” or “until further notice” were avoided and operations were assessed on a weekly basis.

Solid waste services are essential. Even in a pandemic, waste is produced, and waste must be collected. Losing sight of this critical need, would leave COVID as only *one* human health concern. Mechanisms were employed as preparation to adapt while providing essential services with employee safeguard in the forefront. As public service provides, *obligations to the public* displaced any other *core value*.

Priorities to safeguard employees by maintaining a 45-day stock of PPE, adjusting workflows and schedules to limit exposure, and employing tactics to avoid workplace hysteria were daily discussions. Albeit, there were struggles; the many *unknowns* and *chances* interfered with the purpose of employing clear protocols. While

change can be met with peril, anxiety can not only cloud the ability to recognize alternative solutions, but also interfere with communication. Nonetheless, the commitment to public service stood profound.

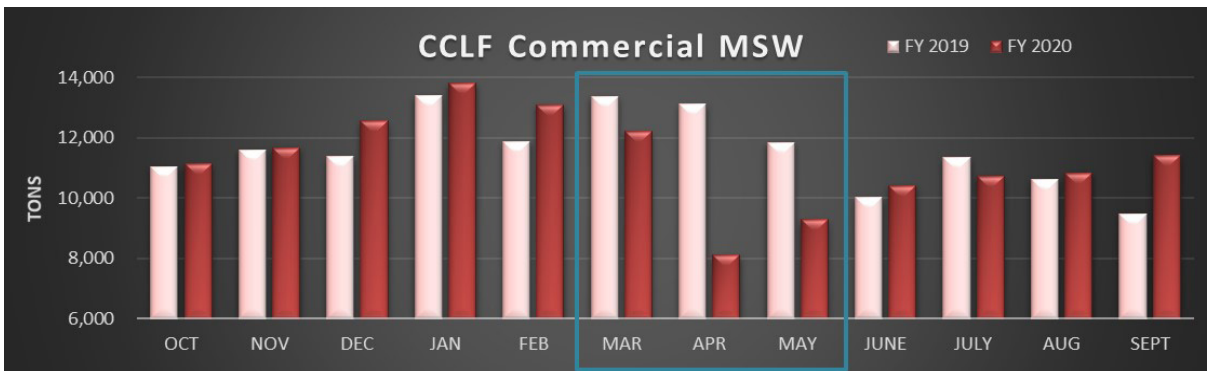
Just as crucial was support from leadership. With this support, time was dedicated to reinforcing cultural values surrounding our mission as essential service providers. Engagement with staff to develop and implement policies to address the health and safety of the public and staff was just as critical as listening to concerns from staff. COVID didn’t discriminate. It was crucial to inquire how staff felt working during COVID, how families were coping and how the public was treating them.

Other measures included restricting access to solid waste buildings. Supply tracking and communication flows were established to ensure metrics for safeguarding staff. Other policies included additional cleaning measures, such as contact points (e.g. door handles, cash and/or card handling), requiring gloves, hand sanitizing, and/or disinfectant wiping, and a new welcome message incorporating safeguard measures to assist new team members to feel safe and welcomed to the Solid Waste Division.

Cross -Training

Cross-training allows other staff members to meet the public need, should one critical function be compromised. Job functions for cross training were prioritized by risk assessment. If an outbreak was





Graph 1

experienced what service was affected? Realizing intangible benefits, Qualtrics, the county's survey program, was used to seek employee feedback on the cross-training program. Cross-training served to create a cohesive, engaging work environment, offering employees an opportunity to learn about other sections of the division. Some found aspects in one operation directly correlated to their job duties, offering a holistic approach to the division's purpose and mission. Qualtrics also offered recommendations for process

improvements and highlighted mentoring opportunities.

Benchmarking

To gauge the level of service impact, CCSW surveyed Florida counties. Of those that responded, 42% experienced some type of service disruption. Mostly, disruptions in collection were due to staff shortages or suspension of point of contact services, such as yard waste collection, to limit employee risk and exposure. Many counties closed their drop-off facilities, and most were served with Force Majeures.

Conclusion

While Collier County was notified of Force Majeure potential, it was never acted upon. Collier County *did not experience any service level disruptions or closures* and continues to operate with zero work-related COVID cases. During the major COVID months, March through July, Collier County continued to remain in operation with altered protocols.

Kari Hodgson is Director of Solid Waste for Collier County.

EMPLOYEE SAFETY

Good afternoon NAME

New Welcome Message

Welcome to the Solid Waste Team! We are so happy to have you join our dynamic team. I think you will find that we have a great group of people working in Solid Waste. We all work together to achieve our shared goals; we are looking forward to having you start on DATE

Please report to WORK LOCATION & ADDRESS by 8:00AM on your first day of work listed above. The dress

Additionally, we have put in place precautionary measures outlined below that we would like everyone to follow:

- Take your temperature before you leave the house each day.
- Follow all CDC social distancing guidelines and ensure any other CDC regulations are adhered to.
- Always wear a mask, except when at your workstation or in your vehicle **alone**, even if a shield is present.
- Gloves are optional.
- All Solid Waste facilities are to maintain stock of essential PPE items and hand cleaner (IE: soap, hand sanitizer).
- Stocks of hand sanitizer and Lysol wipes are available.
- We encourage the use of the side entrance of Building H to avoid contact with the public entrances to the building.

You should be receiving an email from Human Resources on what to expect during your first week with Collier County Government. If you do not receive an email, please let me know.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask.

SHWMD COVID-19 Guidelines

- Should you feel sick or have a temperature **DO NOT** come to work.
- **Notify your Supervisor ASAP.**
- Adhere to all CDC guidelines, including but not limiting to, social distancing, and hand washing.
- Masks are **REQUIRED in common areas** such as hallways, and also when interacting with the Public.
- Gloves are readily available and are required when handling cash or credit card.
- All Solid Waste facilities maintain a stock of essential PPE items and hand cleaner (IE: soap, hand sanitizer). Use them frequently.
- Stocks of hand sanitizer and Lysol wipes are available for your use.
- The front entrance of Building H is used by the Public and has a screening process to enter; therefore, use of the side/employee entrance when entering Building H is encouraged.
- Gatherings of 10 or more people are not permitted.

Updated on 6/30/20