



No Masking the Efforts of NDRW and Partners Amid Pandemic

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Water and wastewater are critical infrastructure, and the pipes and pumps had no way of knowing that our planet was coping with a pandemic. North Dakota Rural Water (NDRW) staff are used to being road-warriors who travel the state while providing technical assistance to community water and wastewater utilities. While assisting in keeping the water flowing, our technical advisors were undertaking a feat that was above and beyond their normal duties: distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) to water operators across the state.

As the pandemic progressed, and cloth face coverings were recommended, the National Water/Wastewater Response Network (WARN) partnered with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Hanes Corporation to provide cloth masks for essential personnel in the industry. NDRW set out to provide a package of five reusable cloth masks to as many water utility personnel in North Dakota as possible. These masks were intended to provide a means to slow the transmission between co-workers and anyone they had interactions with during the course of performing their duties.

While NDRW field staff are used to traveling around the state, a massive distribution in a cost-effective manner was a new challenge for the association. NDRW collaborated with other WARN groups around the country and decided to offer a series of mask distribution events in seven locations across the state. Locations were identified based on ease of access. The events were promoted through email, social media and a mailing.

There was a smaller-than-anticipated response to the distribution events – with 1,685 masks being delivered to 45 of the state's 399 water and wastewater utilities.

The NDRW field staff decided an onsite delivery method would be the best way to reach the remaining utilities and began distributing masks to communities throughout North Dakota on their travels. Between May and September, 16,835 cloth masks were distributed to 373 utilities.

Water Operations staff has been very receptive and grateful to receive the masks. We would like to extend our thanks to the systems that responded to our efforts. Some utilities were especially grateful for the masks, because they served a large



NDRW Staff Member Ward Heidbreder distributing masks at a distribution event in Lakota, ND.

number of elderly and at-risk populations, and even requested more.

Other utilities did not have access to PPE through their normal suppliers. The NDRW mask distribution allowed them the opportunity to interact with their customers.

As an association, we are proud of our staff and members' ability to adapt and step up in the face of adversity to continue providing quality service to their customers, even amidst the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also very grateful to the North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality for providing the information needed to effectively distribute masks and the city of Bismarck's Water Department for its assistance in receiving a massive shipment of masks on behalf of NDRW.