

Workers essential to Clark County government adjust to virus restrictions

By [Jack Heffernan](#), Columbian county government and small cities reporter
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Clark County Treasurer Alishia Topper shows one of the signs Friday that will be installed above a new wipe dispenser in a lobby at the Clark County Public Service Center. (Alisha Jucevic/The Columbian) [Photo Gallery](#)

Carmen Canada is an office manager for the Clark County Treasurer, whose department typically has more than 20 employees in the office. But for the past several weeks, at least physically, she has led an army of two or three at a time.

“We’re still getting the work done,” Canada said. “It’s just (a matter of) missing people.”

As Clark County continues to adjust services in response to COVID-19, essential government workers have made significant tweaks to their daily work routines. Those who are not working from home have been conducting office and field work with distancing conditions.

“Everything is kind of a work in progress, and we’re constantly reviewing and checking to make sure we do the work we need to do while keeping staff safe,” Clark County Public Works Director Ahmad Qayoumi said.

Many of the essential services listed in the statewide stay-at-home order cover work typically conducted by public works departments. Those include road repairs, road debris removal, brush cutting, mowing, environmental repairs, sign repairs, public outreach and janitorial services.

More than 300 people work in the Clark County Public Works Department. A few employees have been working from home, but many continue to physically commute given the nature of their work.

“We had to make some really quick and really drastic changes,” said Magan Reed, spokeswoman for the county Public Works Department.

Building inspectors in the county Community Development Department have also made adjustments. Inspectors are not allowed to enter homes when residents are still inside, and they must maintain 24 feet of separation, Community Development Director Dan Young said. Some inspections have been conducted through video, including re-inspections and less complex inspections.

All conversations between inspectors and residents are required to take place over the phone.

“Everyone is getting used to the system, and there are challenges in the implementation, and everyone is incrementally getting better,” Young wrote in an email.

Inspectors have been instructed to make their own risk management decisions, Young said. “If they are not comfortable, they will attempt to make it known but can decide to not proceed or to suspend an inspection.



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Office workers

While distancing guidelines have become a major component of field work, technical adjustments have been a point of focus for office-oriented workers.

A smooth transition was especially key for the Treasurer’s office. The office is tasked with collecting taxes and funneling revenue to other departments to maintain county services.

Thursday was the original deadline for individual property tax payments this year. The deadline was extended to June 3 due to COVID-19.

By the end of the day Thursday, the office had collected over \$325 million in property taxes, according to Clark County Treasurer Alishia Topper. The office annually collects over \$700 million.

Overall, Topper said she has been “pleasantly pleased” with the office’s transition.

“I was really nervous,” Topper said. “We didn’t want to be the reason real estate stopped in Clark County.”

By the end of March, most employees had started working from home. Among the several technical considerations was remote desktop access, which had previously only been available to a handful of employees in some departments. Employees also have access to county-issued flip phones that connect with their desk phones.

“We were wondering if people would be as productive telecommuting as they are in the office. That has proven to be a non-issue,” Clark County Auditor Greg Kimsey said. “Do we have enough work for people to stay busy?” That’s kind of the big question. To this point, we have.”

Those still commuting in to the Treasurer’s office have performed services that can’t be completed virtually, such as collecting cash deposits — from a dropbox in a separate area of the Public Service Center — and overseeing file systems.

Employees are working in spaces several feet apart from each other, and commonly used areas of the office are expected to be cleaned several times each day.

Clark County Assessor Peter Van Nortwick said that employees have been required to seek approval from managers before entering the office.

Employees also have the option to wear face masks at work. They can either bring them from home or collect them from those who have volunteered, like Canada, to make some.

“Were kind of creating a nice little bond between the three of us,” Canada said. “The communication has actually become stronger with the team.”

With the statewide stay-at-home order in effect through at least May 31, how long will some of these practices last, or how many of them may continue beyond the COVID-19 period?

“That’s the big question isn’t it?” Kimsey said. “I believe this physical distancing thing is going to be with us for a long time, so we’re going to have to incorporate that into our plans.”

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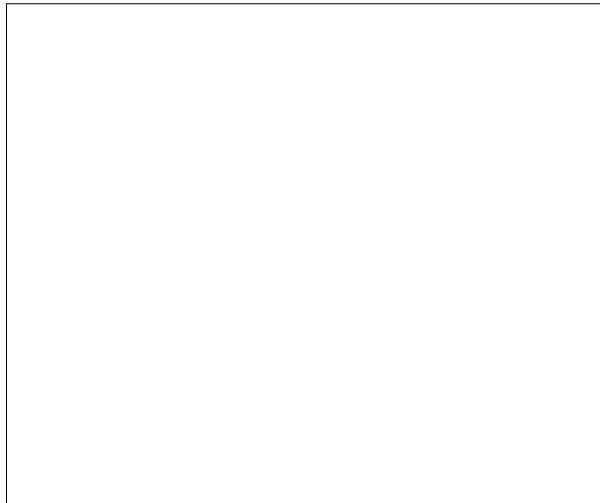
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