Navigating Uncertainty

Helping special districts adapt to change and prepare for the future.
Contributors

Thank you to leaders from the following special districts for their contributions to this year’s Annual Publication.

★ Atlanta Housing Authority
Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission
★ Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library
Columbus Regional Airport Authority
★ Contra Costa Transportation Authority
Cordova Recreation & Park District
Deerfield Park District
★ Emerald Coast Utilities Authority
Houston Airport System
Lake Apopka Gas District
Lancaster Area Sewer Authority
★ Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority
Mason County Public Utility District No. 1
Meridian Library District
★ Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission
Orange County Transportation Authority
Port Houston
San Antonio Water System
WSSC Water
Wilmington Public Library District

★ Special District Advisory Board Member
The fourth year of the Special Districts program was unlike any other. Special district leaders confronted a global pandemic in 2020 that required unprecedented agility and innovation to navigate. It’s a testament to their commitment and ingenuity that special districts delivered uninterrupted essential services—power, water, transportation, sanitation, emergency response and more—throughout one of the most disruptive events in recent history.

We didn’t anticipate COVID-19 when our Special Districts Program launched in 2017, but we did envision a community tailored specifically to the needs of the nation’s 38,000 special-purpose government districts. This national initiative, an AT&T program with Government Technology, was built to help special district leaders share ideas, expertise and best practices to make their organizations more efficient, effective and resilient. Giving special districts a forum to connect with their peers on these issues was important then; it’s mission critical now.

The 2020 program evolved rapidly to share vital information in a new environment shaped by the pandemic. Previously in-person Special District Summits shifted to a virtual format and content was refocused to address COVID-driven changes in internal operations, service delivery and leadership strategies. We added new webcasts to tackle specific issues such as securely supporting remote workforces and using federal CARES Act funds to modernize technology systems. And through monthly virtual advisory board meetings, we held a running conversation with special district leaders to understand how their challenges were evolving, which guided the program’s content efforts throughout this unprecedented year.

These activities tracked the crisis as it unfolded, exposing common challenges and revealing innovative solutions. As an initiative designed by special districts for special districts, the program quickly remade itself to meet the needs of this moment.

THE BIG SHIFT

The initial challenge for most districts involved shifting employees—sometimes numbering in the thousands—to remote work almost overnight as states issued lockdown orders that emptied offices of non-essential staff.

The move put immediate pressure on networks and VPNs to securely connect the new virtual workforce. For districts that weren’t already using them, the pandemic...
dove urgent adoption of video collaboration platforms and other cloud-based tools built to work in the newly distributed work environment. It also highlighted the need to modernize and mobilize end-user technology. Many districts scrambled to procure laptops and other mobile devices, which suddenly were in short supply, to support remote workers. The experience will permanently alter IT purchasing patterns.

On the policy side, the move was eye-opening for leadership that had long resisted work-from-home policies. It turned out that employees were just as productive—if not more so—working remotely.

“Our CEO wasn’t a fan of remote work, but he is now,” said one member of our Special District Program Advisory Board in April. “Remote work was outside the concept for many of our management team. That’s not the case anymore,” said another board member. “When we phase back in, our employees will ask to continue working remotely for part of the week, which will drive changes in equipment and personnel policies going forward.”

As it became clear the pandemic would last longer than anyone initially expected, special district leaders focused on making remote work sustainable. One key concern was the physical and mental wellbeing of staff members, many of whom faced bigger workloads plus new responsibilities such as homeschooling young children who no longer attend traditional classes. In response, district leaders ramped up efforts to communicate and engage with employees. Districts began holding virtual town hall meetings and conducting polls to understand staff challenges and opinions. Many increased training efforts to help management and staff adjust to the remote environment. Remote employees also were urged to take breaks and vacation days.

“We’re really learning the importance of leading with empathy,” said one district CIO as the pandemic stretched past its sixth month. “It’s hard to stare at a monitor for 10 hours a day without getting up and having some sort of physical engagement.”

At the same time, district leaders began reassessing how they evaluate staff performance. With many employees no longer in the office, old-school management by attendance became less viable, pushing districts toward results- or outcomes-based performance measurement.

All these changes helped prepare special districts to operate in an environment where...
the workplace is permanently altered. Polling conducted during the program’s virtual events during the summer and fall of 2020 consistently showed that special district leaders expect to manage hybrid workforces—where significant portions of their staffs continue to work remotely—for the foreseeable future.

“Members of our board of directors are starting to ask whether we’ll need as much office space when we come back,” said one advisory board member.

**REIMAGINING SERVICES**

The pandemic’s impact on how special districts deliver services was just as sweeping—and likely just as permanent.

Districts moved everything from public meetings, to client intake processes, to recreational programs onto digital platforms. Mobile video became the new way to conduct inspections for public housing, new natural gas hookups and more. Even family story time sessions, an in-person staple for many library districts, were virtualized.

In many cases, these new digital offerings didn’t just respond to the need for social distancing, they actually increased citizen engagement. District leaders often saw greater attendance at public board meetings, community planning sessions and other civic events. The enthusiastic reception means once digital services are turned on, it’s unlikely they’ll be turned off.

“We’re never going back to the old way,” said one of our board members in late April, shortly after his district conducted its first public board of directors’ meeting. “More people are watching us virtually than ever attended the in-person meeting. Board members will eventually start meeting in person again, but it’s unlikely that we’ll stop streaming them to the public.”

Results from our annual Special Districts Survey, conducted in October, reflect COVID-driven pressures and challenges that continue to reshape management and technology priorities for special districts.

Delivering services during the pandemic remains the biggest concern—one which was cited by nearly 50 percent of survey respondents. Underneath that are a host of related issues around leadership, human resources and IT modernization.

Many district leaders remain focused on transitioning employees and business processes into a future where more work is done outside of traditional offices. Survey respondents
ranked creating new workforce policies and procedures as their top operational challenge, while maintaining or adapting workplace culture to hybrid or remote environments was their top leadership priority.

The need to support employees and serve citizens digitally also drove a range of new technology deployments during the pandemic as districts sought to enhance user experience. Almost 70 percent of survey respondents said they had upgraded their websites. Another 43 percent said they had beefed up online services by offering digital payments and forms. And 42 percent said they put new resources into communicating with citizens, employees and other stakeholders through social media channels.

Many districts say they’ll continue their modernization efforts in 2021. The top priority—cited by almost 39 percent of respondents—is cybersecurity, reflecting the need to address new risks created by the move toward virtual work and service delivery. But the next two priorities indicate special districts will keep their focus on improving digital experience for internal and external users. Slightly more than 32 percent say they’ll deploy new tools to improve citizen engagement and experience, while 29 percent expect to roll out new mobile capabilities for staff.

**Navigating Disruption**

All of these activities will be critical as special districts look toward the future. One clear takeaway from 2020 is that modernization increases agility, which strengthens resilience.

One component of agility proved to be the adoption of modern technology tools. Districts that had implemented cloud-based services, upgraded networks, prioritized mobility and invested in data-driven capabilities prior to the pandemic often fared better once the crisis hit. For these districts, the shift to widespread remote work, virtual collaboration and digital service delivery came easier than for districts handcuffed to aging systems and devices.

Another component is enlightened leadership and management. Along with having the right technology foundation, successful districts relied on strong communication and trust between leaders and staff.

The CEO for one large California transportation authority put it this way: “I’ve tried to be very transparent. I don’t have all the answers, but I try to explain how I’m approaching issues. As we keep pushing back the start date for return to work, I’m telling employees, ‘I don’t know what will happen, but I’ll keep in touch with you every step of the way.’”

As districts continue to navigate toward an uncertain future, the lessons learned during 2020 can guide these efforts. The following pages contain insights, best practices and innovative ideas gleaned from a year like no other. Collectively, they show how special districts rose to the occasion and coped with unprecedented disruption. They also offer a roadmap for future resiliency and success.
The 2020 annual survey of special district leaders found the pandemic presented new and unique challenges for these districts, but technology is giving them a path forward.

Top 5 Challenges of 2020

1. Delivering services during a pandemic
2. Navigating new state and federal regulations
3. Managing a remote workforce
4. Having insufficient budget/property tax redistribution
5. Understanding new state-mandated responsibilities
Special districts are looking to build resiliency.

Remedies for Resilience

Special districts are focusing on technologies and initiatives to help them build resilience and prepare for the future.

- 43% are deploying more online services for citizens
- 24% are experimenting with smart technologies/loT
- 39% are prioritizing cybersecurity
- 29% are mobilizing capabilities for their staff and field force
The pandemic triggered massive changes in how special districts interact with customers and stakeholders.

One obvious impact is greater reliance on digital channels for service delivery and citizen engagement. Special districts across the nation adopted new technologies and practices to cope with the impact of statewide lockdown orders and social distancing requirements. These efforts enabled districts to continue providing essential services—ranging from social safety net programs, to safety inspections, to civic meetings—without meeting customers and constituents face to face.

But COVID’s impact on services went beyond virtual. In many cases physical service delivery is being reshaped, too. Districts are implementing new processes and tools, often incorporating advanced analytics-driven technologies to make in-person interactions safer, as well as more convenient and secure.

Cumulatively, these efforts transformed service delivery at an unprecedented pace. Movement toward digital service delivery and the adoption of intelligent technologies to improve experience were underway before COVID hit the U.S. But the pandemic condensed what would have been years of transformation into the span of a few months. Here are some of the implications for special district leaders.

Once new digital services are deployed, there’s no turning back.

Virtual programs, events and meetings, and public hearings in some cases are reaching larger audiences than the in-person activities they are replacing.

For example, the Cordova Recreation & Park District in Sacramento, Calif., shifted traditional community planning events to virtual with impressive results. The district typically holds these meetings in person, where citizens can review park plans, choose various playground options and give other input.

When COVID hit, the district developed digital versions featuring videos of architects and planners describing park features and showing design options. Citizens submitted their preferences online.

“We actually received the most input we have ever received,” says Cady Nagy-Chow, Marketing Communications Specialist for the district.

The Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library in Ohio is seeing similar results. When COVID forced closure of physical library locations, the district experienced double-digit increases in demand for e-books and other digital content, says Paula Brehm-Heeger, Director of the Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Library.

The library also shifted in-person events to digital platforms—a move
that has proven surprisingly popular and may drive lasting changes in library programming. For example, in-person family story time sessions which typically drew 10 to 20 families began reaching thousands of people when the library started offering them on-demand via video.

“I think that’s a real indication that people are interested but their lives dictate when and how they can actively engage with the library or other civic institutions,” says Brehm-Heeger. “Acknowledging that is really important.”

Even though some of these new offerings were considered temporary when launched, their popularity with citizens make them hard to discontinue.

That was the case at the Deerfield Park District in Illinois, where Executive Director Jeff Nehila launched online tennis reservations to keep players from congregating at recreation facilities while waiting for an open court. Later, when the state relaxed rules around citizens gathering in groups, Nehila moved to shut down the online system.

“I tried to dump the tennis reservation system and people went nuts,” he says. “So that’s something we’ll continue to do. I never anticipated it to happen, but people loved it and they grew to expect it.”

Physical services are becoming smart and touchless. COVID-driven concerns are prompting special districts to rethink how employees, customers and stakeholders interact with their technology systems.

At the Houston Airport System, for example, these concerns are accelerating the adoption of biometric identity systems. The district fast-tracked the deployment of facial recognition technology for passengers entering and exiting international terminals at Houston’s George W. Bush Intercontinental Airport, says CIO Tanya Acevedo, adding the technology also could be used to securely and safely identify employees, flight crews and other stakeholders.

“It’s really about providing a touchless experience for passengers and employees,” she says. “We’re looking at technology that eliminates the need to touch a screen or keypad for identity. We’re trying to use your facial image for that.”

The Columbus Regional Airport Authority (CRAA) will explore how similar technology can help reduce health concerns for nervous travelers, as well as improve security and efficiency.

“We’re definitely looking at how we can establish technologies and programs that will build up confidence in air travel. That’s our No. 1 priority right now,” says Jodie Bare, Chief Innovation Officer for CRAA, which operates John Glenn Columbus International Airport and two other airports in the area.

CRAA is finalizing an agreement with AT&T to support a series of video analytics pilot projects to test use cases for the technology. For instance, the initiative will investigate how video analytics can be used to enforce rules on social distancing and mask wearing. CRAA also will use the technology to give travelers a best estimate for expected wait times for security screening.

“Even though our passenger volumes are still pretty low, those security lines can look very intimidating because of social
distancing,” says Bare. “We can allay passenger concerns by putting estimated wait times on digital message boards or perhaps by pushing those kinds of notifications to their mobile phones.”

Other potential use cases for the technology include spotting suspicious passenger behavior—using machine learning to continually improve accuracy—and automating operational processes to boost internal efficiency.

“We think there are all kinds of opportunities to leverage video analytics to make the travel experience better and safer,” Bare says.

**Savvy district leaders are meeting immediate needs while making long-term investments in innovation.** “What’s really interesting is the solutions districts are creating often will become mainstream solutions,” says AT&T Principal Architect Michael Harrod. “They’ll be built upon and expanded even further.”

For example, video analytics platforms deployed now to monitor mask wearing and social distancing can be repurposed for other uses once the pandemic recedes.

“With video intelligence, you can often use existing camera feeds, machine learning and secure connectivity to deliver new insights,” says Ariel Brassil, Director of Strategy, Smart Cities and Communities for AT&T.

Video intelligence resources can be easily pointed toward new requirements such as strengthening security or automating work processes. New analytics algorithms can be added and tested in a matter of days or weeks with minimal deployment of new hardware, Brassil says, ensuring the long-term value of these technology investments.

Another innovative example comes from the Wilmington Public Library District in Illinois. The district now uses smart lockers—like those used by Amazon for package delivery—to safely distribute library materials to patrons. The lockers are housed in a climate controlled, security monitored structure on the main library grounds. The new facility is open 24 hours a day and eventually will include printing and scanning technology, which library patrons lost access to when the library shut down physical locations in March.

For library Director Maria Meachum, the new facility is a way to continue serving citizens as the pandemic stretches on. “I always believed COVID would be an issue well into 2021, so I began planning for the winter,” says Meachum.

Compared to curbside service, she says, the facility will be safer for staff and more convenient for patrons during snowy or icy weather. And, although it was driven by the pandemic, Meachum says she always viewed the facility as a long-term enhancement to library services.

“I wanted this to be something that could go on, not just for COVID, but for any other situation we come up against in the future,” she says. “And I wanted it to be something that was useful even if nothing came up in the future. It will still be there 24/7 for third-shift workers and others who want services from us after normal business hours.”
This year, our annual awards program recognized special districts and their leadership for their effective COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The citizens category focused on special districts that have utilized technology to improve service delivery to citizens during the pandemic. Here are our 2020 award recipients in the citizens category.

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**Award Winners**

**Citizens**
The widespread shift to remote work in response to the pandemic will have long-lasting impacts on how special districts manage employees, measure performance, recruit talent and more.

In many instances, changes implemented to cope with the immediate impact of COVID-19 lockdown orders will make special districts better places to work, as well as more effective and resilient organizations. After years of reluctance on telecommuting, leaders overwhelmingly learned that remote workforces are productive—and that the ability to quickly implement remote work is a vital component of business continuity. Many districts now intend to develop permanent policies that provide more flexibility for employees to work from home.

This evolution already is impacting internal operations, and it will continue to influence management and technology strategies for special districts going forward. The experiences of 2020 offer lessons for managing remote workforces—both during the current crisis and long term.

**You may need to adjust your leadership style.** The pandemic highlighted the need to lead with empathy. Managers learned the importance of being sensitive to new pressures facing remote workers—everything from relentless workloads and economic worries to new homeschooling and childcare responsibilities.

Brian Benn, CIO for the Atlanta Housing Authority, recommends managers be results-oriented and flexible about employee schedules. “We’re simply asking staff to be available, do your job and overcommunicate,” he says. “As a manager, I need to understand that employees may be busy with kids in the afternoon, so they may need to work later. As long as we’re doing our job as necessary, we’re ok.”

This shift is likely to drive healthy changes in how districts evaluate employees. For example, the San Antonio Water System in Texas is developing new employee performance metrics that focus on work outcomes instead of in-person attendance, says Sree Pulapaka, CIO for the water system.

Districts also began paying greater attention to staff wellbeing. For example, the Meridian Library District in Idaho increased outreach to employees and began offering new resources to help them cope with isolation, stress, finances, childcare issues and other hardships. “We’re in a place today where we’re really needing to focus on healthcare and mental health because of the issues we know our staff are experiencing,” says Library Director Gretchen Caserotti.
“Our approach was we’re in this together. It’s uncharted territory for everyone. Now, six or eight months later, people click on the VPN and it’s normal.”

John Daane, IT Director, Emerald Coast Utilities Authority

“We’ve been regularly surveying employees and giving them an opportunity to connect with HR or their supervisors confidentially if they need help.”

In addition, avoiding employee burnout and maintaining a sense of connection were significant concerns as remote work extended past the half-year mark.

“We’re making sure that the team gets a break. I tell them to take a day off or take a few hours off to make sure they revitalize themselves every now and again,” says Randall Iwasaki, Executive Director of the Contra Costa Transportation Authority. “We’re polling our team on what they like or don’t like about the new environment. Your staff is the most valuable asset you have.”

Remote workers will need more IT support. Technology teams discovered newly remote staff had different—and often more fundamental—support needs than they did in the office.

“There were all these low-level support needs we didn’t anticipate,” says John Daane, IT Director for the Emerald Coast Utilities Authority in Florida. “They needed help connecting to their network and configuring printers—the stuff we always took care of in the office.”

In response, Daane’s support team learned to ask users basic questions, such as “Where are you working?” and “What type of computer are you using?” They also created a series of how-to documents to help users work through simple problems.

Of course, these new user requirements hit IT teams at the same time they were scrambling to increase network capacity, expand VPNs and other secure connectivity tools, and distribute needed applications and hardware. Competing demands often stretched small IT organizations to the brink.

“We were brainstorming and whiteboarding. Meanwhile people are knocking on our door asking for a computer,” Daane says. Weathering the storm required understanding and perspective from IT staff and users.

“Our approach was we’re in this together. It’s uncharted territory for everyone,” he says. “Now, six or eight months later, people click on the VPN and it’s normal.”

Flexibility attracts talent.

Like many special districts, the Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission did not let employees work from home prior to the COVID pandemic. Now, commission leaders are starting to view remote work as an important recruiting tool, says Chief Technology Officer Bryan Kelley.

“We realized enabling some degree of work-from-home where it makes sense may let us attract people we wouldn’t normally be able to because of distance,” he says. “Another thing is we realized that individuals with disabilities could perform functions from home that they can’t in the office—so we may be able to tap into a whole new workforce.”

Kelley says technological improvements make a long-term shift toward remote work practical.
“After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, there was a lot of talk about remote work, but we didn’t see it take off like we thought,” he says. “Now we have much better collaboration platforms, and it’s working out quite well. There always will be a need for some face-to-face interaction. But we’ll see greater flexibility on remote work and it will improve quality of life for our teams.”

Connectivity technologies are evolving, as well, providing better scalability and resilience than older approaches. For instance, software-defined wide area networks can quickly respond to changing requirements.

“They’ve evolved to where you can increase and decrease your bandwidth on demand through a portal,” says Donald Hartry, Client Solutions Executive, AT&T. “Gone are the days where it took two to three months to make a change. Now you’re making software changes instead of hardware changes, so they take place within minutes.”

**Modern technology is a workforce enabler.** New technologies implemented to meet immediate remote work or virtual service requirements ultimately will support lasting changes in the way special districts run internal operations and serve customers.

For example, WSSC Water—which provides water and wastewater services to nearly two million residents of Maryland’s Montgomery and Prince George’s counties—now performs almost half of its plumbing and gas-fitting inspections virtually.

“Using collaboration technologies, inspectors from our regulatory services division can work from their homes,” says Yvonne Carney, Director of the Strategic Performance Office at WSSC Water. “They instruct the plumber where to point the camera so they can visibly confirm things are done correctly. They also came up with a way to create a virtual sticker to indicate the inspection took place.”

Carney says the utility expects to continue conducting virtual inspections when the public health crisis is over.

“It’s just another tool we didn’t have before,” she says. “We might not use it as broadly after the pandemic as we do now, but virtual inspections will continue to play a role in the future.”

In addition, WSSC Water quickly rolled out digital signature technology, putting those tools in place within a week after going remote.

“Now we have something like 225,000 pages that have been signed electronically,” Carney says. “That’s paper we would have been producing and routing for physical signatures.”
Award Winners

Operations

This year, our annual awards program recognized special districts and their leadership for their effective COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The operations category focused on special districts that have utilized technology to improve internal operations with employees during the pandemic. Here are our 2020 award recipients in the operations category.

**WEST REGION**

- **Bremerton Housing Authority**
  - Telecommuting Implementation

- **Mason County Public Utility District No. 1**
  - Pandemic Response Plan

- **Placentia Library District**
  - Virtual Programs and Staff-made Masks

**MIDWEST REGION**

- **Metropolitan Airports Commission**
  - EOC Data Visualization and the Lunch and Learn Series

- **Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission**
  - Strategy Execution Program

- **Rockford Public Library**
  - Laser-cut Face Shields and 3D Printed Ear Guards

**SOUTHWEST REGION**

- **Central Arkansas Library System**
  - Meal Site Assistance

- **Housing Authority of the City of El Paso**
  - Rent Cafe

- **North Central Texas Council of Governments**
  - Texas Unemployment Insurance Claims Assistance

**SOUTHEAST REGION**

- **Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission**
  - Electronic Onboarding Project

- **ECUA Information Technology Department**
  - Remote Workers and COVID-19 Operations
Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic was, at heart, a leadership challenge. Special district executives and managers faced the task of steering their organizations through a novel and highly disruptive event with no clear end and few definite answers.

Throughout 2020, our running conversations with special district leaders highlighted the importance of clear and consistent engagement between leaders and staff, and among districts and their constituents, as the pandemic unfolded. Leaders emphasized the importance of transparency as they developed new policies and procedures on the fly.

These experiences offer important insights on crisis leadership, as well as building trust and strengthening shared culture during everyday operations.

Communication is key. Across the board, special district leaders agreed the pandemic amplified the need for clear and consistent messaging around office closings, response plans, virus hotspots and any number of other issues. The fact that employees often were negotiating their own transition to remote work at the same time made the task even more complex.

“It was a period of fast change and uncertainty and confusion,” says Caserotti from the Meridian Library District. “We really looked for ways to be an anchor for supervisors and staff. They were instrumental in deploying new programs and services, so we tried to communicate clearly and regularly before new initiatives were launched so our people really knew what was going on.”

These efforts helped reinforce staff engagement during the crisis. “I’m proud of the fact that they were so committed to our organizational culture, mission and service philosophy,” Caserotti says.

At the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro), communication efforts were led by a handful of senior executives to provide uniform information about virus outbreaks, cleaning regimens and other issues impacting the massive transit network.

“It was imperative for us to provide information that was consistent, current and pretty much from one source,” says LA Metro CIO Bryan Sastokas. “We needed to do that for our staff and citizens who want to use the system and know it’s safe.”

Bruce Moeller, a former fire chief and city manager who now consults with local governments on public safety issues, adds that crisis communications must happen at a new pace.

Governments have to communicate with citizens and staff about disruptive events at the speed of social media, he says.
“There's no longer a 24-hour news cycle; today it's second-by-second.”

**Bold moves are important.** “I think our employees appreciated that we made some swift decisions,” says Kristin Masteller, General Manager for the Mason County Public Utility District No. 1 in rural Washington State. Masteller recalls seeing the number of COVID cases steadily rising across her state in early 2020. She waited to see how other public agencies would react, but their offices remained open. Increasingly worried about the safety of her staff, Masteller closed physical offices at the utility before Washington Gov. Jay Inslee issued his March 16 statewide shutdown order.

“No one had thought about working from home in a public utility district,” she says. “We told them we'd probably change things a few times before we got it right, but we were going to take action instead of sitting on our hands.”

Although physical offices were closed, phone lines remained open during normal business hours. Customers also could pay bills and manage their accounts online. And the district provides a physical kiosk that accepts cash payments 24 hours a day.

“We communicated to customers that we were still providing the services we've always had—just doing it a little differently,” says Masteller.

The organization’s small size and supportive Board of Commissioners helped the district move faster than larger public entities. Still, she says it wasn't easy being in front of the pack.

“These uncharted waters require higher risk tolerance,” says Masteller. “That was hard for me. I didn't want to seem overly dramatic, but I didn't want my employees to get sick.”

**Showing commitment builds trust.** Although administrative and professional staff could work from home when the pandemic hit, employees in the field often could not. Transit drivers, plant operators, repair crews and others needed to stay on the job. Special district leaders moved decisively to safeguard these vital workers.

“We installed hand sanitizer in 500 buses over a weekend. We installed barriers and changed our boarding procedures,” says Darrell Johnson, CEO of the Orange County Transportation Authority in California.

Those improvements were vital business continuity measures for the authority, which employs 900 frontline transit workers, along with 500 professional staff.

“We needed to protect our drivers and operators—while keeping them out there to provide essential services,” Johnson says.

“**The true measure of an organization is being able to maintain its culture in spite of disruption.**”

Charles Thompson, CIO, Port Houston
Another California transportation authority, LA Metro, began exploring how sensor networks could be repurposed to improve safety for operators and riders on the organization’s rail transit system. Onboard sensors designed to alert riders when a rail car is full before they board—initially intended to improve passenger convenience—could now be used to support social distancing requirements.

“We can tell when certain rail cars are full or not full, and direct passengers to cars that are open,” says LA Metro CIO Sastokas. Swift actions like these ultimately built trust between management and staff, which was invaluable during COVID-driven disruption.

“The true measure of an organization is being able to maintain its culture in spite of disruption,” says Charles Thompson, CIO for Port Houston, one of the world’s largest seaports. “Can you extend the culture of trust no matter where that distributed workforce might be? I believe we’ve done that.”

Follow the data. The pandemic magnified the importance of data to support decision-making. For example, leaders at WSSC Water used a mix of operational data and public health data to monitor virus activity, which shapes policies on when and how employees may return to the office.

“With COVID there are so many unknowns and we look to data wherever we can to help us understand what’s happening,” says Carney. “We have a structure that allows us to come together weekly, and that starts with a review of the data.”

WSSC Water also tracks call center metrics to ensure customer inquiries get a quick response. And data on accounts past due helps the utility direct clients into appropriate affordability programs and understand how these offerings can be improved.

“We know our customers are being impacted financially by the pandemic and some of them are struggling to pay their bills,” Carney says. “So looking at financial data is important for us to focus our customer strategies.”
This year, our annual awards program recognized special districts and their leadership for their effective COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. The leadership category focused on special district leaders who have led innovative technology initiatives to help their teams navigate the pandemic. Here are our 2020 award recipients in the leadership category.

**WEST REGION**

- **Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority**
  Bryan M. Sastokas, Chief Information and Technology Officer

- **Meridian Library District**
  Book Service Delivery

- **Southern Nevada Health District**
  Jason Frame, Chief Information Officer

**MIDWEST REGION**

- **Great Lakes Water Authority**
  Jeffrey E. Small, Chief Information Officer

- **Naperville Park District**
  Omar Sandoval, Information Technology Director

- **Schaumburg Township District Library**
  Anita Forte-Scott, President, Board of Trustees

**SOUTHWEST REGION**

- **El Paso County Water Improvement District No. 1**
  Jesus Reyes, General Manager

- **Houston Airport System**
  Touchless Flight-Boarding Development Team

- **Lower Colorado River Authority**
  Jayson “JP” Penton, Director of Platform and Cloud Services

**SOUTHEAST REGION**

- **Anastasia Mosquito Control District**
  Dr. Rui-De Xue, Executive Director

- **Atlanta Housing**
  Brian Benn, Chief Information Officer

- **The Preserve at Wilderness Lake CDD**
  Laetitia “Tish” Dobson, District Lodge Manager
1. HAVE A PLAN AND PRACTICE IT. At the Orange County Transportation Authority in southern California, an emergency operations plan developed and practiced well before the virus arrived proved invaluable when offices were shut down.

“We had spent a significant amount of time over the past five or six years really strengthening our continuity of operations and crisis planning,” says Johnson, CEO for the authority. “We really thought at some point we’d have to use it for a flood, a fire or an earthquake. We didn’t think we’d use the plan for a public health crisis.”

Johnson says drills conducted around operating without accessing the authority’s headquarters—as well as a work-from-home pilot launched last year—positioned the organization to transition 500 staff members to remote work.

“A big part of that shift was technology, of course,” says Johnson, noting that about 100 staff members were issued tablet computers to support the move. “But the bigger part of that was the drills and exercises that forced our people to do their jobs and interactions from a remote location.”

2. LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITY DURING CRISIS. The Contra Costa Transportation Authority in California’s San Francisco Bay Area took advantage of lighter traffic on a critical stretch of freeway to shave time and cost from an important construction project. The authority recently opened a new 25-mile express lane on Interstate 680, a busy north/south stretch of highway east of San Francisco, a full year earlier than planned.

“When a project is done early, you save taxpayers a lot of money,” says Randell Iwasaki, Executive Director of the authority. “This means our contractor doesn’t need to be out there another year, and the taxpayers get the benefit of the lane a year earlier, which means your rate of return is that much greater. We were able to leverage a bad situation to our advantage.”

3. REPURPOSE EXISTING SYSTEMS AND ASSETS. The Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission in South Carolina implemented a virtual hiring process for summer job applicants without purchasing new hardware or software. The commission, which relies heavily on temporary employees to staff up for the summer season, leveraged its existing financial system to let job seekers apply and upload documents online.

“We had to operate without face-to-face contact and we had to use existing systems because we had no budget,” says Gina Ellis-Strother, the commission’s Chief Administrative Officer.

4. BEWARE OF NEW SECURITY RISKS. In response to COVID, special districts rapidly shifted employees to remote work, expanded digital services, adopted new cloud services and more. These moves enabled districts to maintain vital services—but they also created new security vulnerabilities. Districts must guard against potentially debilitating cyberattacks as they deal with disruption.

For example, a ransomware attack struck the Lancaster Area Sewer Authority (LASA) in Pennsylvania just as the authority was shutting down its public office and sending administrative staff to work from home. Malware infiltrated certain aspects of the authority’s network, locking up systems at perhaps the worst possible time.

“It was hurt on top of hurt,” says Mike Kyle, Executive Director for the authority. Fortunately, LASA had cyber insurance and was able to work with a team offered through the insurance provider to recover from the attack. It took about a month to return to normal operations.

The experience turned Kyle into an evangelist for cybersecurity awareness.
“I’m an advocate now and a preacher for comprehensive cybersecurity plans, because it’s not a question of if you’ll be attacked, but when,” he says.

Districts also will need strong identity and access controls to ensure only authorized users can access critical functions and information, says AT&T Principal Architect David Leach, as well as sophisticated monitoring systems to detect suspicious activities. Leach recommends adopting a “zero-trust” approach that requires users and devices to authenticate themselves every time they perform an action or transaction.

MODERNIZE FOR RESILIENCY.

Districts that adopted cloud, mobility, digital collaboration platforms and other modern technologies before the pandemic hit had an easier time pivoting to remote work and digital citizen services. For example, the Lake Apopka Gas District in Florida had already migrated systems to the cloud to improve resilience during hurricane season.

“I’m proud to say during the last hurricane we had we didn’t have a minute of downtime for our back office,” says Scott Minter, Director of Information Systems for the utility district. Those upgrades made implementing remote work for the bulk of the district’s staff in March a relatively smooth transition, he says.

Modern connectivity strategies create a vital foundation for these expanded digital operations. Sophisticated new network technologies can make districts both more resilient and more efficient, says AT&T’s Michael Harrod.

Software-defined networks (SD-WAN) enable districts to replace existing network infrastructure with flexible and intelligent network services. SD-WAN services delivered via the internet help districts reduce the amount of network hardware they own and maintain, lowering IT expenses. In addition, these new services are smart enough to automatically choose from multiple connectivity options to provide the most reliable and cost-effective connection.

“That’s really where you get the ability to be agile and flexible,” Harrod says. “The network has the intelligence to look at multiple paths to see what’s available. That’s a huge benefit for redundancy and business continuity.”

When SD-WAN is combined with 5G wireless, these benefits are magnified.

“What 5G brings to the table is massive device connectivity, low latency and ultra reliability,” he says. “You can integrate 5G into SD-WAN to give yourself even more connectivity options and backup capacity.”

DOCUMENT YOUR RESPONSE.

District leaders should not waste the current crisis. Panelists at our virtual summits throughout the year pointed out the importance of reflecting on lessons learned during the pandemic. They recommended documenting actions taken during the COVID response—and noting what worked and what didn’t—to inform decision-making during future disruption.

“Make sure you’re documenting the challenges you encountered and how you responded,” says Moeller, a former fire chief and city manager who now consults with local governments on public safety issues. “Use this experience as a planning resource for the future.”

Conclusion

For special district leaders, 2020 was a year unlike any other. The pandemic proved the value of innovation and modernization across workforce policies, technologies and customer service strategies. Working from home—one considered an employee perk—became a vital means of keeping district workforces safe and productive. Digital technologies—secure connectivity, self-service web portals, video collaboration platforms, paperless document systems—became the new foundation for conducting business. And data and analytics helped drive decision-making as events unfolded.

The COVID crisis also highlighted the need for strong and visionary leadership. Communication, transparency and empathy took on new significance as senior management led their organizations through uncharted territory.

Throughout the year, the Special Districts Program gave leaders a forum to connect and share insights around all of these issues. Our virtual events created a running conversation among special district leaders to understand both how challenges were evolving and how to address them. Written briefs and case studies captured and shared bright ideas and successful solutions. The results of these activities are captured in this report and archived in even greater detail on our Special Districts Program microsite (www.govtech.com/districts).

We’ll continue this vital work in 2021 as districts work to revive local economies, reopen public offices, rethink workplace policies and reimagine digital strategies. We remain committed to helping special districts collaborate around issues that matter most to them—and that’s never been more important as districts and their constituents recover from this crisis. Here’s to a brighter future, starting now.
Our first name has always been American, but today you know us as AT&T. We’re investing billions into the economy, providing quality jobs to over 200,000 people in the U.S. alone. We’re supporting the veterans who make our country stronger and providing disaster relief support to those who need it the most. By bringing together solutions that help protect, serve and connect—committed AT&T professionals are working with the public sector to transform the business of government.

For more information about the Special Districts Program, visit: govtech.com/districts

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