



# Accelerating Change

**Pandemic response drives long-term transformation at WSSC Water.**

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating digital transformation at WSSC Water, one of the nation's largest water and wastewater utilities.

WSSC Water, which serves nearly two million customers in Maryland's Montgomery and Prince George's counties, moved about half of its 1,700-member workforce to remote work when the pandemic hit. The utility also rapidly digitized manual processes and launched new data dashboards to guide decision making on workplace safety, use financial-assistance programs and budgeting.

These experiences are now shaping WSSC Water's future.

"While many of these concepts were things we considered nice to have before, as an organization, we needed to quickly adopt technologies like video collaboration and digital documents," says Yvonne Carney, Director of the Strategic Performance Office at WSSC Water. "I think it showed us that we have more opportunities for modernization."

For example, WSSC Water rolled out digital signature technology within a week of shifting to remote work.

"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."

Based on that initial success, WSSC Water intends to automate and digitize more paper-based processes. Employee onboarding and supplier payments are two possibilities, she says. "There's so much opportunity there—not just to digitally sign documents, but to establish formal electronic workflows and automation."

The push toward paperless will support long-term changes in how WSSC Water employees work. The utility offered some telework options to staff prior to the pandemic. Now, an employee subcommittee is developing new recommendations that are expected to expand remote work options permanently.

Virtual inspections implemented during the pandemic will stick around, too. WSSC Water, which enforces plumbing and gas-fitting codes in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, currently performs almost half of these inspections via video.

"Using collaboration technologies, inspectors from our regulatory services division can work from their homes," says Carney. "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."

Once the public health crisis subsides, WSSC Water expects to continue conducting virtual inspections when bad weather, traffic congestion or other factors make it difficult for inspectors to work on site.

"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."

## Thinking Mobile First

Organizations everywhere are reconsidering how they work and the technologies they will need to support these new approaches. "Ultimately, the pandemic erased the distinction between digital strategy and mobile strategy," says Alanna Volatile, a Client Solutions Executive with AT&T.

Today's special districts need to think mobile-first across their entire enterprise.

"The pandemic opened everyone's eyes," she says. "Organizations are realizing mobility isn't just for specific groups, such as senior executives who could telework on occasion or crews who work in the field. Entire workforces can function this way. They can work remotely and get their jobs done."

The new approach will alter technology strategy for special districts. Employees largely will work on laptops, tablets and phones instead of desktop computers. Adoption of cloud-based platforms and applications will expand to support remote and mobile access to corporate resources. Network capacity, reliability and security also will take on added importance.

Along with new technology tools, districts will need to rethink business processes, Volatile adds.

“The first thing you need to do is take a look at the overall workflows that are in place today,” she says. “Once organizations start to peel back how they actually operate on a daily basis, they realize many job functions can be automated—not to eliminate peoples’ jobs, but to make them more effective and efficient.”

Finally, she says, districts should look for ways to use data effectively. Technological advances are making it easier for organizations to gather new types of information, and sophisticated analytics—increasingly delivered as a service—can help them operationalize it.

“There are a growing number of ways we can work with clients to deliver actionable results,” Volatile says.

## Data-Driven Future

Data has helped WSSC Water navigate a range of important issues during the pandemic. For instance, the utility uses a mix of operational and public health data to monitor virus activity, which shapes policies on when and how employees may return to the office. In addition, the utility tracks changing water consumption patterns and river water temperatures and their potential impact on the organization’s budget.

“With COVID there are so many unknowns and we look to data wherever we can to help us understand what’s happening,” Carney

## Market Overview:

# Water and Wastewater Districts

**WATER AND WASTEWATER DISTRICTS ARE SOME** of the most common types of special districts in the United States. There are about 3,600 single-purpose water supply districts serving communities throughout the nation, according to the latest statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, there are more than 1,800 single-function sewerage districts and another 1,400 multi-function districts providing both drinking water and sewer services.

These districts face a somewhat unique set of pressures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Business closures, office shutdowns and work-from-home initiatives are changing historic water consumption patterns. And, in the current economic climate,

many customers are struggling to pay utility bills, which threatens the primary revenue source for these districts. Instead of cutting off service to these customers, many districts are trying to move them into assistance programs.

Data analytics is becoming more important to these districts as they navigate these changing conditions—both in the immediate pandemic environment and going forward into the “next normal.” Special district leaders will need data-driven insights as they work to safely reopen offices and resume traditional services. And these insights will be crucial to help them understand the financial and customer services environment for the future.

says. “We have a structure that allows us to come together weekly, and that starts with a review of the data.”

These efforts also impact customer experience. WSSC Water 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.”

In the future, Carney intends to make data more accessible—both for WSSC Water staff and external stakeholders.

She envisions new management dashboards that break data out of existing business units, as well as self-service analytic tools that let analysts in WSSC Water’s business offices

create their own reports. And, although the utility already offers a significant amount of data on its public website, Carney wants to expand that information to enhance transparency and make it easier for the public to locate and use.

“I think we can build stronger relationships with our customers, community partners and other government agencies through transparency of the data,” she says. “They may be advocating for some of the same things we are—ensuring water quality and affordability, protecting the environment, fighting climate change. There are so many opportunities.”

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