Baguio Water District: Stepping up as frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The year 2020 will forever be etched to people living in this generation. No matter where we are and no matter what we do, the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic is and will be a common experience we all share. And yet during this time of crisis, we are seeing our communities come closer together unlike any other time. We discover an even deeper respect for our front liners, those who put their own health and needs at considerable risk ahead of their own to continue serving our fellow men.

As public servants, we are bound to ensure our roles will be sufficient to carry on with our commitment to attend to the people – to their needs and concerns. That is why the Baguio Water District stepped up in managing its daily operations and beyond to ensure that every section of the society is served and attended to well enough during these trying times.

On March 15, 2020, a state of public health emergency forced our national government to declare a 30-day Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) over Luzon, and eventually prolonging the initial declaration with another two (2) weeks extension. The BWD, being the lone water utility in the Summer Capital, has its own crucial role in preventing the spread of the corona virus within the locality. From the first few days of ECQ up to the present, the District, apart from observing the health and sanitation protocols required by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for New and Emerging Diseases, has been in close communication and coordination with other government offices in containing or even better, helping flatten the curve.

What BWD did during the first weeks of the COVID-19 scare?

To ensure that the community strictly follow the “stay-at-home” policy of the national government, the BWD management headed by General Manager Engr. Salvador M. Royeca, immediately suspended its non-essential works and maintained skeleton force of its frontline services. On March 19, a few days after the declaration of the ECQ, collection of water bills payment, new water service connection applications including the scheduled mandatory orientation seminar, implementation of a skeleton workforce, and suspension of projects. Advisories informing the general public of the temporary closure of the BWD main office were disseminated through available platforms like radio, social media and through the District’s official website.

To relieve the concerns of some 45,000 active connections, the BWD Management decided to suspend all water service disconnection activities and waived the imposition of the surcharges on late payment of water bills while under the ECQ.

Despite the BWD Main Office’s temporary closure to the public, GM Royeca assured that its operations will not be hampered and will be kept fully running. Equitable water supply is still assured; pipeline repairs and maintenance were still prioritized; and water delivery services were enhanced.
The BWD Management set an almost day-to-day virtual meeting and/or conversation with the management team to discuss immediate and critical concerns to guarantee that all BWD operations run smoothly and that the District will not fall short of the performance expected from them especially during the ECQ period. Along this note is the implementation of skeleton workforce in all its departments and the non-technical employees adopted the work-from-home scheme. Technical field personnel whose functions are essential in the operations of the district reported daily subject to strict observance of COVID19 health and sanitation protocols.

On April 14, 2020, as the BWD re-opened its doors to the public for bills payment collection, it made sure that health and sanitation protocols were strictly followed and observed both by the customers and BWD employees alike.

Physical distancing and other health protocols are being followed and observed both by BWD customers and BWD employees. As early as March 11, 2020, the District already imposed precautionary measures including thermal scanning and use of alcohol prior to entry to the BWD office.
The first line of defense: **Sanitation and Hygiene**

COVID-19 disease, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is caused by a corona virus, SARS-CoV2 and is transmitted through close contact or through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks thus, proper hygiene and sanitation are amongst the immediate concerns the District prioritized.

On March 23, 2020 the BWD, in partnership with the City Government of Baguio, the Baguio Fire Department (BFD), and the Rehabilitation Action Baguio-Volunteers (RAB-V) conducted flushing activities at the Central Business District of the City. The District provided water for BFD fire trucks to complete the flushing of some 20-kilometer main roads and street pavements at the Baguio City Public Market, Abanao Road, Magsaysay Road, Harrison Road and Session Road.

From March 23 to May 10, 2020, the district’s Commercial Division managed to transport more than 275 drums of water deliveries charged to BWD’s Corporate Social Responsibility and used for sanitation and disinfection activities throughout the City. To ensure households have adequate supply while residents stay in their homes, water supply schedules are extended in some barangays specifically Areas 1 and 3, including Bonifacio Street (Upper and Lower), Caguioa Compound, Kennon slide, Doña Bueno Elementary School, Upper Camp 8 Barangay and neighboring areas, Poliwes, Claudio Street, Cuesta Building 1, Harrison Road, Legarda Road, Mabini Street (Upper and Lower), Session Road, Assumption Road and General Luna Street. BWD water delivery services similarly took off on a daily operation to bring water to customers particularly those located in highly elevated areas.
In a bid to stop the local transmission of COVID-19 disease, Baguio Water District joins volunteers from the City Mayor’s Office, Baguio Fire Department and the Baguio City Sunshine Fire Volunteer Brigade during the cleaning and flushing activities held at the Central Business District on March 23, 2020. BWD provided assistance and supplied water for the cleaning of the main City thoroughfares including Abanao Road, Harrison Road, Session Road, Magsaysay Road and the streets of the City Public Market.

The District partnered with the Health Services Office (HSO) of the City Government of Baguio in the installation of hand washing facilities in strategic areas. A total of Php109,179.68 were allocated for the construction of twenty-five (25) handwashing facilities from April 3, 2020 to April 15, 2020 to benefit various barangay district health centers and government offices such as Atab Health Center, Loakan Health Center, Atok Trail Health Center, Engineers Hill Health Center, Slaughter House Covered Facility, Pacdal Health Center, Quirino Hill Health Center, Pinsao Health Center, Asin Health Center, Quezon Hill Health Center, Irisan Health Center, Mines View Health Center, Aurora Hill Health Center, Scout Barrio Health Center, City Camp Health Center, and Lucban Health Center.

Hand washing facility installed by the Baguio Water District at the Baguio City Hall. Apart from these hygiene and sanitation amenity, more than twenty (20) other areas particularly Barangay District Health Centers were subsidized by the BWD.

–Photo courtesy of Philippine Information Agency-Baguio
The Baguio City Hall, Baguio City Police Office, and the HSO at T. Alonzo were similarly installed and provided with additional hand washing amenities not to mention those that were set-up within the BWD compound. This activity was also in consonance with the Local Water Utilities Administration’s (LWUA) MC No. 06.20 on the Efficient Water Supply Services Related to Management/Control of the COVID-19 Disease, particularly item 3 to “extend all available means possible to provide water, in support of the operation of hospitals and similar medical or quarantine facilities”.

Regular hand washing is still the best way to prevent the spread of any kind of virus. In this photo, a customer is washing his hands before paying his water bill at the BWD Office. At least 25 hand washing stations were installed by the District all over the City, photos below show hand washing areas installed at Atab Health Center in Brgy. Donsogan and Pacdal Health Center in Liteng, Pacdal.
Observing health guidelines for both BWD office and field personnel

With COVID-19 positive cases reported in various areas of Baguio, the District imposed strict protocols for its employees to ensure their safety and protection within and outside office premises as frontline workers during the ECQ. Temperature check, rubbing with alcohol or handwashing, stepping on a footbath and walking through a misting/sanitation tent are mandatory activities prior to entry to BWD offices. BWD field vehicles pass through a “disinfecting lane” where parallel lanes of cloth soaked with diluted chlorine solution are laid to disinfect the tires.

*Disinfecting lanes are set up at the Baguio Water District’s parking entrance. All BWD service vehicles used by field personnel pass through this improvised disinfection tire mats which act as a precautionary measure in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 disease.*
Field personnel are provided with complete Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to include hazmat suits, face masks, safety goggles, shower caps and face shields. BWD office sanitation protocols are strictly implemented and observed such as the proper wearing of face masks, social/physical distancing, use of foot/shoe baths which are installed at the entrance and exit points of the office, and daily clean-up and disinfection of all service vehicles to ensure the safety of the employees. The office building is likewise thoroughly cleaned and sanitized at the close of office hours. Employees showing symptoms of upper respiratory infections like cough, colds, fever, and sore throat are no longer permitted to report for work and advised to undergo self-quarantine.

BWD field employees are provided with complete set of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to protect them from acquiring the virus causing COVID-19 disease. Office protocols are also strictly observed and implemented particularly the proper wearing of face mask and physical distancing. Field employees are fully geared up before leaving the BWD premises.
In compliance with occasional lockdown of some barangays imposed by the local government when a positive case arises, BWD employees residing within these locked down areas are given notices to observe the 14-day quarantine period as a precautionary measure and thus, not permitted to report for work.

**Giving more than what is expected**

In support of the City’s COVID 19 programs, BWD donated Php1,000,000.00 to the Local Government Unit last May 6, 2020. The donation was approved through a resolution unanimously approved by the BWD Board, to help cover some of the LGU’s expenses for its various COVID-19 operations. In a similar act of goodwill, the District through its employees managed to raise a total of Php111,430.00 voluntary cash contribution which was also handed over on the same day.

To cap the small but noteworthy arrangements to serve every section of the society, the BWD also extended immediate assistance for its fellow front liners in the health care sector. The District, upon the request of the Department of Public Works and Highways-Baguio City District Engineering Office (DPWH-BCDEO) and the University of the Philippines-Baguio City Campus, immediately acted upon on the application for water service connection for the UP-Baguio International House Phase II which was identified as one of the temporary quarantine areas for Baguio-based health workers. The completed project amounting to Php22,617.42 is expected to
provide adequate water supply for the facility as a temporary residential quarters throughout the duration of the ECQ, or longer as deemed necessary.

Photo above shows the University of Philippines-Baguio International House Phase II, UP Drive, Governor Pack Road installed with 1” water service connection last May 1, 2020. The structure is identified as a temporary quarantine area for Baguio-based health workers.

Water Quality staff of the Baguio Water District deliver pails of powder chlorine to other government offices for their COVID-19 disinfection activities.
Other assistance extended were the donation of 151 bottles of alcohol to the Municipality of Tuba, Benguet and a temperature scanner to the LGU; 80 pieces N95 masks to the frontline health workers of the Notre Dame de Chartres Hospital; and powder chlorine to the following agencies for their disinfection activities: General Services Office, six (6) pails; Health Services Office, one (1) pail; Department of Transportation-CAR, twenty-one (21) kilos; BCPO-Tourist Police Unit, five (5) kilos; and to the Bureau of Fire Department, one (1) gallon of bleach, all amounting to a total of Php60,228.08.

Way beyond the BWD Vision and Mission, BWD’s commitment to continue its service during these trying times prioritizes the safety and well-being of the customers, the employees, and the community it is serving, as it is one with the City’s program to end COVID19 guided by the slogan, “We Work As One, We Heal As One”.

*Turnover of 151 bottles of alcohol to the Municipality of Tuba, Benguet represented by Vice Mayor Maria L. Carrantes (wearing blue jacket) and Councilor Roger M. Kitma (in red t-shirt) last March 5, 2020. According to the local government officials the donations will be distributed to public elementary and high schools within their municipality.*