

# COVID-19 Winter Maintenance Plan

## WHY DO YOU WANT A COVID-19 WINTER MAINTENANCE PLAN?

COVID-19 has brought about a series of unique challenges to the entire highway community. While it is hoped that operations for winter maintenance can continue as normal, it is very likely that at least a few highway agencies will have to deal with COVID-19 disruptions to normal winter maintenance operations. This *Tech Tip* will provide a series of questions and ideas that every agency should examine as we start the 2020-21 winter season.



Agencies should look at their own winter maintenance plans, emergency action plans, and pandemic operations plans and use the information in this Tech Tip to update those plans for this winter. There is a draft emergency action plan and pandemic plan available at the CLRP/NYLTAP website. If you develop any of these plans and are willing to share them, please send them so we can post them and share with others.

- Emergency Action Plan Tech Tip - <https://cornell.app.box.com/v/clrp-tt-eap>
- Pandemic Plan Example from Hamburg, NY - <https://cornell.app.box.com/v/HHS-Infectious-Plan>

This is a dynamic document, and it will change as the Cornell Local Roads Program – NYS LTAP Center obtains new information. We all work better when we work together.



Department of  
Transportation

Local Technical  
Assistance Program

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## BACKGROUND:

Several highway agencies including representatives from the NYSDSOT plus several counties and towns met via Zoom to discuss how we, as a highway community, can be better prepared for the 2020-2021 winter season. Discussion points included:

- What happens if an agency, NYSDOT residency, or even just a single crew needs to be quarantined due to COVID? Can other agencies step in to help? How do we coordinate this work between agencies?
- Shared services agreements are needed, but how do we make sure they have the proper flexibility to deal with issues regarding payments for fuel, sand/salt, insurance ....?
- If a municipality or agency has to plow another agency's system, but the highway official is not available due to illness, who sets the level of service?
- How do we set the level of service if there is a major outbreak and a significant reduction in the forces available to plow the roads?
- How do we communicate this information to the public? What is the liability?

## DISCUSSION:

The group discussed how the highway community responded to the initial Covid-19 outbreak, and how they might respond to the ongoing pandemic this winter. This section provides some thoughts and information gathered during and after the meeting. Please review these items as you develop your 2020-21 Winter Maintenance / Pandemic Response Plan.

- **Declaring an Emergency**  
Your agency may need to declare an emergency if too many of your crew are sick with COVID-19. Your emergency action plan should have the protocol used for your agency. Who declares the emergency could be the Town Supervisor, the County Legislative Chair, the Mayor or, in some cases, a public safety office such as the Sheriff or the New York State Troopers. Make sure you have at least two options in your plan in case your primary option is unavailable. This could be due to COVID-19 or it could be due to something else.
- **Deputy Highway Official**  
Just like declaring an emergency, each highway agency needs to have someone designated as backup in case the primary highway official is unavailable. For counties and towns this is usually a deputy and even if your municipality does not have a deputy currently, you should assign one, especially this year. For villages and cities, it may be the Assistant Commissioner of Public Works or someone designated by the Mayor. The key is to have a clear line of communication and know who makes the decisions when something changes.

▪ **Backup Plow Operators**

If your crew is unavailable due to COVID-19, what is your plan? NYSDOT is looking at standby operators or contractors, but this is not going to be an option for every single agency.

There are lots of questions that each agency should ask. Below is a list of the ones that probably should be discussed as you develop your winter maintenance plan.



- *How do we train operators who might just be substitutes?*  
Most municipalities do not have extra personnel available to plow in the winter. Across New York State the most common method for handling this is to hire extra staff during the winter. But if you are only hiring someone who works part time, how do you train them? Do you have them come in and do some plow routes ahead of time? While training these folks may be difficult, it may be vital so that they can get up to speed and be ready to go and safe when an incident occurs.
- *What about unfamiliar routes and vehicles?*  
(especially when dealing with different-level agencies such as states and towns)?

One of the biggest challenges in bringing in extra personnel for doing winter maintenance work is unfamiliarity with the routes. It's also important to understand and know the vehicle that you're using; a 6-wheel truck with a dual direction plow behaves very differently than a 10-wheel truck with a wing. A pick-up behaves differently than a large truck.

One suggestion is to have a snow plow rodeo to get folks familiar with the equipment and have them do some dry runs ahead of any storm or actual snow plow or winter maintenance operation. But that leads to the next question which is critical.

- *How do you pay these operators who might just be substitutes?*  
Options that could be used by an agency include hiring folks as part time employees, hiring companies or individuals as contractors, or having a shared services agreement with another agency to come in on your own system if you are not available.

▪ **Shared Services Agreements**

Shared services agreements have been used for many decades to allow agencies to cooperate during the winter. The state hires many local municipalities to plow and maintain state highways during the winter. Counties do the same with towns and even villages. The key is to have an agreement that is something both parties can agree to. It is important to understand that it is the elected boards, or the administrative agency heads that sign these agreements.. Links to example shared services agreements are included with this *Tech Tip*.

• *Whose equipment is used and whose insurance provides coverage?*

In a normal winter this is not a question we have to ask since it is typically the other agency that provides the equipment, insurance, and the operators, and the agreements can be relatively simple. But with COVID-19 there is the possibility that you may have other individuals using your equipment. At the minimum you may want to ask if this is even feasible. If someone from another agency is running your equipment, whose insurance provides the coverage? You should ask your insurance carrier what is allowed and include this information in the shared services agreement.

▪ **Level of Service**

Every agency should have a level of service set for all their roadways. Main roads should be plowed more often and kept clear of snow and ice so they are ready to handle the extra traffic that typically uses those main highways. Lower volume roads are typically treated less often, and they may not even be cleared until well after the storm is over. If you do not have a level of service for your highways now is the time to set one.

This winter there may be the need to change the level of service due to COVID-19. If you have fewer operators available, you may have to reduce the level of service on your highway system. Or if you have decided to help out another agency and they have a higher priority road, you may need to reduce the level of service on your system so the other system can be maintained at the same level of *service*.

• *Who sets the Level of Service?*

In most local agencies it is the highway official who sets the level of service, hopefully with input and consent from the elected board. If this needs to be changed it is usually the Highway Superintendent or primary highway official who makes this call. You probably should write down under what circumstances the level of service may get lowered. You may want to include this in any shared services agreements you have with other agencies, especially if the agreement participants are comprised of different agency levels, such as a town and county or county and state.

• *Are some roads not done during a storm?*

There may even be circumstances where a particular road or street is not done during a snowstorm or is the lowest priority in the system. This is a hard call to make but may have to be made if there are many operators unavailable due to COVID-19. It may be advisable to assign a snowplow crew to work with Emergency Management to help keep minor roads open or respond to emergencies.

▪ **COVID-19 and Your Employees**

All agencies should have a COVID-19 response plan by now. This plan should include how your employees are screened for COVID-19, how contact tracing is done, if there are daily checks and if so, what is recorded.

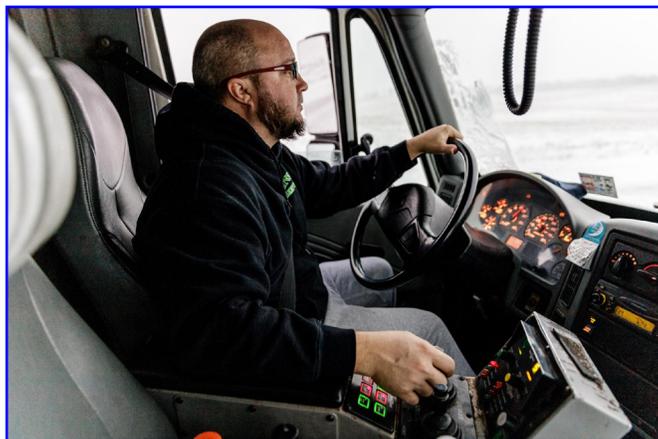
Some of the items that should be in your COVID-19 response plan include:

- What is the sick time policy for COVID-19?
- Do you split your crews, and do you pay them if they're home?
- Is there a different rate if they are at home versus in the field or at the highway facility?
- What about office staff? A sample presentation of what is done in Wyoming County is included as a resource.

▪ **Public Relations**

It is important to communicate the changes in your winter maintenance operations, especially if they are due to COVID-19. Do you have communication tools such as Facebook, Reverse 911, or a website? If so, plan on using them to communicate changes. Also, communicate when things are staying the same! A three-month-old notice on your Facebook page saying that you have switched to a different plowing protocol, could seem a bit out of date. Be sure to update and even repost these notices both to remind the public that a change is still in effect and to demonstrate that your social media page is a relevant, up-to-date recourse that they can depend upon.

Realize that the public may not pay attention. All your information may get lost in the glare of everything else going on. It is important to provide this information and to cultivate relationships with the press to help get the word out. If possible, try to have a unified approach for all the agencies in a particular area. A series of unified messages for an entire county will be more effective than every agency putting out its own message. The public does not care who owns the roads, they just want to be able to drive them safely and efficiently. Keep this in mind!



## BEST PRACTICES AND OPTIONS FOR THIS WINTER

Here are some best practices and options we have gathered that you may want to include in your winter maintenance plan. Some of these things may only be needed during the COVID-19 crisis, but some should be incorporated into your emergency action plans or your overall winter maintenance plans.

### Shared Services Agreements

Every agency should have a shared services agreement with every other agency with whom it may work. This must be approved by the local elected board. It is OK to put into the plan that changes can be approved by the highway official, but those changes should be communicated to the board as soon as possible. The shared services agreement should have information about cost sharing, who would be in charge, and who sets policy when treating another agency's highways. If possible, indemnification should be included for both agencies, but this is not always feasible. Sample shared services agreements are linked at the bottom of this Tech Tip and additional shared services agreements will be added as they are received by the Cornell Local Roads Program – NYS LTAP Center.

### Contingency Plans:

Make a list of contingency plans in case something happens. The easiest thing to do is to make a list of possible incidents and make a list of what you would do if that incident were to occur. You should be doing this for winter operations anyway. Here are some examples.

#### Plow Breaks Down

This is one that can occur in any year, and one which should be included in everyone's contingency plan. If you've got five trucks and one breaks down, what are you going to do about winter maintenance activities? Are you going to have four trucks plow five routes or are you going to have one or two trucks pick up the slack and take a little bit longer; thereby reducing the level of service on part or all of your system? Does it make a difference which truck or which route is not being covered? Do you have a backup truck that you could use in a pinch? Or is now the time to talk to your neighbor and activate your shared services agreement?

#### Loss of Crew due to COVID-19

If you suddenly find yourself down two or three workers due to COVID or another illness, what is your plan? Could you bring in those part time workers discussed earlier or ask another agency to send over an operator or the plow and operator to maintain the routes which are suddenly vacated? Do you want to set up your plow routes with one extra spare truck and crew ready to jump in to plow in case one crew is lost due to illness? If you pull one truck off active duty as a backup you probably need to think about lowering your level of service or changing your operations for your entire municipality. Do you have other tasks that crew could do around the shop when not plowing?

### Loss of the Entire Department due to COVID-19

This sounds like an unrealistic scenario to some people, but it is something you should be thinking about. A version of this has occurred to many agencies across the state when their highway facility has burned down and suddenly, they have no snowplow equipment. This scenario is just the opposite side of that issue. If the crew is lost due to illness but the equipment is still available, what is your plan? Do you decide to hire people and have them come in and work or do you drop your level of service and activate a shared services agreement? And who is in charge if you and your deputy are unavailable?

There are other scenarios that you may wish to examine and if we learn of other examples, we will add them to this *Tech Tip*.

### **Shared Operations Plans**

The concept of a shared operations plan is for when two or more agencies work together this winter. The goal is to provide support to each other and back each other up. Each agency in the plan should still keep to itself to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The agencies should work together to manage this winter's snow and ice control. This will not work for every agency but could be very effective for a couple of small towns or even part of a county. The main challenge is who is in charge and how the coordination is done. A sit-down meeting, socially distanced, may be needed to work out the details. If your agency decides to try this technique, please let us know so we can share any lessons learned with other agencies around New York State.

### **Set Level of Service**

The easiest way we know of to set the level of service is to obtain a map of your system and mark up which roads are going to have what level of service. More details on setting levels of service and what different level of services could be included are available in the Cornell Local Roads Program - NYS LTAP Center workbook Snow and Ice Control.

### **Communication**

Review your emergency action plan and confirm your lines of communication. Who calls who when something happens? Make sure you have a current list of cell phone, home phone, and work phone numbers. Make sure you also have email and other communication tools available. Do you have a backup plan in case the power goes out? These items should all be in your emergency action plan and now is a great time to review the communication portions of those plans.

### **Other Best Practices and Ideas due to COVID-19**

Below are some best practices and ideas which we have collected in the development of this Tech Tip. We will add additional best practices and ideas as they are received. Please send them to us so we can share your ideas with the rest of New York State.

## **Loading Trucks**

Most agencies have the snowplow operator load their own truck. This year it is recommended that a separate loader operator load the trucks to reduce the chances of spreading COVID-19. This person could be a Crew Supervisor, the Deputy Highway Official or someone else who may not be able to do a snowplow route but could operate the loader safely and efficiently and thereby keep snow and ice control operations moving.

## **Split crews**

Just like this past spring, it may be advantageous to split crews. There are several ways this has been done and some of those ideas are included in the resources listed at the bottom of this *Tech Tip*. Here are the most common methods we saw this past spring.

- Split the crew into two or three or more different pods that worked together during the day
- Stagger which crews are working so that no one overlaps during a particular day
- Have crews report to different base stations so that there is no cross contamination between the different facilities. This is probably not feasible for small towns and villages, but it might be possible to do this especially if several departments are working together.

## **Staggered times**

Even if the entire crew is working, it may be useful to stagger when they start. If the normal start time is 7:30 AM, half the crew could start at 7:00 AM and the other half could start at 8:00 AM. Ending times would be adjusted accordingly. After the first crew gets out working on the road is a good time for a quick cleaning of any common area such as the clock-in station. This kind of change needs to be done in accordance with municipal policy and contracts.

## **Take Plows Home**

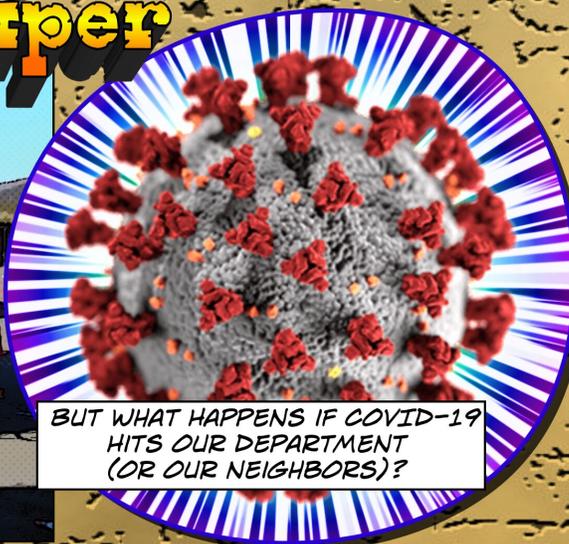
A lot of agencies allow Crew Supervisors or Highway Officials to take pickups or small equipment home. While it may not be feasible for every agency, it might be worth examining to see if operators could take snowplow equipment home or at least park it at a location close to where they live. This would allow them to start immediately near their house and to reduce social interaction and possible infection.

## **Good Practices at Work and Home**

Having good practices of mask wearing, social distancing, and limiting exposure are vital to reducing the spread of COVID-19. The other lesson learned over the entire pandemic is that workers who have good practices during the day while working and keep up those practices while at home have a lower rate of getting the disease. It is important to emphasize with your staff that the practices you use at work should be used at home. There have been too many cases where workers have gotten sick while failing to follow the same guidance at home that they follow at work. At the end of the day we are not likely to stop COVID-19, but we are trying to reduce spread and keep public health systems and hospitals from being overwhelmed.

# The Highway Super

Time to get ready for the winter!



BUT WHAT HAPPENS IF COVID-19 HITS OUR DEPARTMENT (OR OUR NEIGHBORS)?

MEANWHILE; AT THE HIGHWAY GARAGE....

**THE POT HOLE POTENTATE SAYS!**

The time to get ready is NOW!

## GETTING READY FOR WINTER

**AG** **SHARED SERVICES AGREEMENTS**

WITH THOSE WHO CAN HELP

**Written Snow and Ice Control Plan and CONTINGENCY PLANS**

WHO IS IN CHARGE IF YOU ARE UNAVAILABLE

**SHARE OPERATIONS PLANS**

LEARN EACH OTHERS ROUTES AND EQUIPMENT

**SET LEVEL OF SERVICE**

IF SOMEONE ELSE IS DOING THE PLOWING OR SERVICE HAS TO BE REDUCED

**COMMUNICATE**

WITH THE PUBLIC AND EACH OTHER

**SLOW DOWN**

or this may be the last thing you see!

We are all better when we work together!



**Cornell Local Roads Program**  
New York LTAP Center

[www.clrp.cornell.edu](http://www.clrp.cornell.edu)

## RESOURCES

Information Highway – Resources for COVID-19

[https://www.clrp.cornell.edu/trainingevents/New Online Training/Online Training Resources.htm](https://www.clrp.cornell.edu/trainingevents/New%20Online%20Training/Online%20Training%20Resources.htm)

Emergency Action Plan Tech Tip - <https://cornell.app.box.com/v/clrp-tt-eap>

Pandemic Plan Example from Hamburg, NY - <https://cornell.app.box.com/v/HHS-Infectious-Plan>

Highway Operations and COVID-19 - <https://cornell.box.com/v/COVID-19-Highway-Depts>

Staying Connected Remotely - <https://cornell.box.com/v/Staying-Connected-Remotely>

COVID-19 and Essential Highway Work - <https://cornell.box.com/v/tt-essential-worker>

Snow and Ice Control - <https://cornell.box.com/clrp-ws-sic>

Winter Maintenance Operator Fatigue - <https://cornell.app.box.com/v/SnowFatigueFullSeries>

COVID-19 Winter Maintenance Silde Deck - <https://cornell.box.com/v/COVID-Winter-Maintenance>