Changing Work and COVID-19: Intragovernmental Response Best Practices
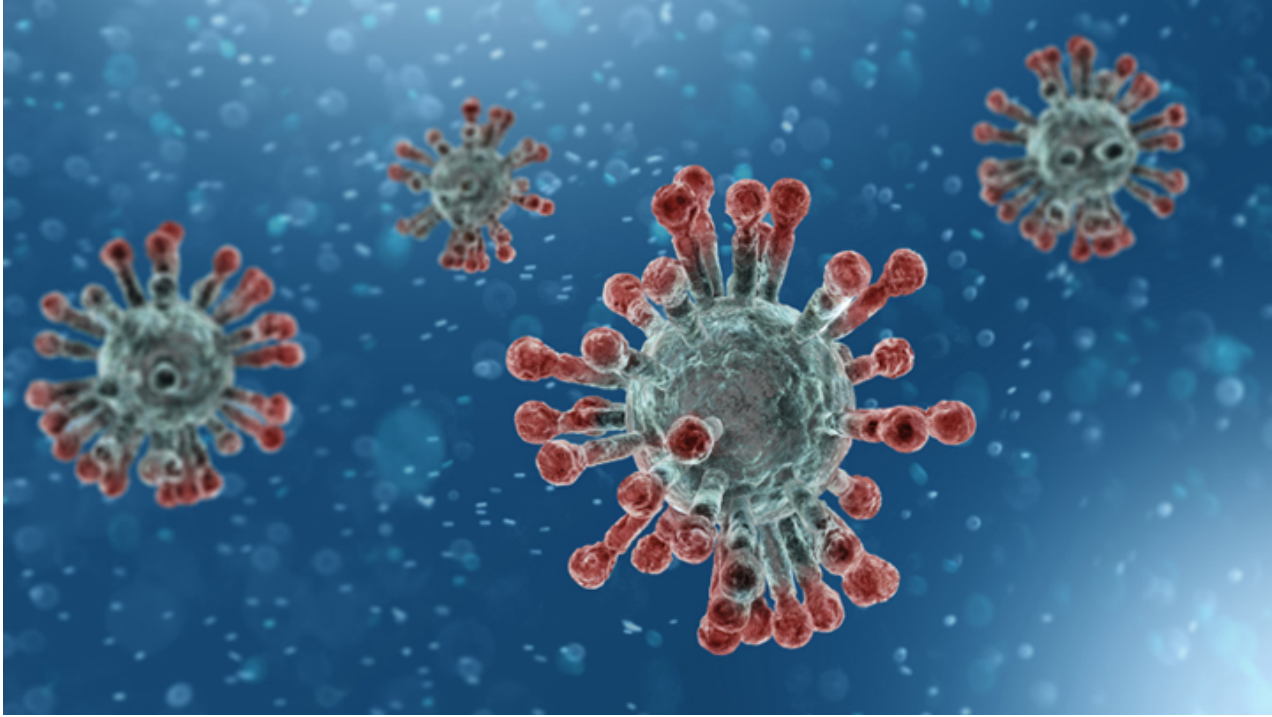
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Oregon Policy Lab
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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON | Institute for Policy Research and Engagement

About the Institute for Policy Research and Engagement

The Institute for Policy Research and Engagement (IPRE) is a research center affiliated with the School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management at the University of Oregon. It is an interdisciplinary organization that assists Oregon communities by providing planning and technical assistance to help solve local issues and improve the quality of life for Oregon residents. The role of IPRE is to link the skills, expertise, and innovation of higher education with the transportation, economic development, and environmental needs of communities and regions in the State of Oregon, thereby providing service to Oregon and learning opportunities to the students involved.

About the UO – Lane County Policy Lab

The University of Oregon's School of Planning, Public Policy and Management and the government of Lane County started a partnership in 2018 to provide applied learning experiences for students, applied research settings for faculty and staff, and technical assistance to the Lane County government.

This project was funded in part by the UO – Lane County Policy Lab.

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their indigenous homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, descendants are citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians of Oregon, and continue to make important contributions in their communities, at UO, and across the land we now refer to as Oregon.

IPRE operations and projects take place at various locations in Oregon, and wishes to acknowledge and express our respect for the traditional homelands of all of the indigenous people of Oregon. This includes the Burns Paiute Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Coquille Indian Tribe, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, and the Klamath Tribes. We also express our respect for all other displaced Indigenous peoples who call Oregon home.

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Executive Summary

This report looks to examine the question: *How has work changed for Lane County departments since the outbreak of COVID-19?* Our report contains a literature review, evaluative framework, example survey, and a set of workforce best practices for managers during a pandemic.

We begin with a review of the most current literature pertaining to worker and managerial challenges caused by the coronavirus. The literature review outlines unique problems caused by work from home mandates and highlights difficulties faced by essential employees working on the frontlines. The review culminates with a list of best practices that managers can implement to ensure their employees have safe and effective working conditions during the pandemic.

We present an evaluative framework describing how the County can create a survey tool to gauge employee perception of changes in work during COVID-19. Using *Lean Data* methodology and *Ecosystem Strategy* by Alnoor Ebrahim et al (Stanford Center for Social Innovation), we describe how to gather and operationalize data effectively to create positive organizational change. Then we use the tenets of *Lean Data* to suggest an online survey tool and a set of potential questions culled from the literature. A quantitative, easy to complete survey is presented for employees, with a more qualitative interview style survey example presented to gather manager perspectives. Finally, the report concludes with recommendations and best practices that Lane County's managers can utilize to maintain employee wellness during this pandemic and in future emergencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the county looks to understand the impact that the pandemic is having on its workforce, the literature points to several important considerations - Focusing on wellness, not efficiency; recognizing the specific challenges and needs of diverse populations – (such as women, men with HIV, and others), experiencing extra challenges while working at home; The importance of IT security, and access to technology so that all workers can contribute securely and effectively while working remotely; the importance of understanding and responding to the needs of frontline workers - ensuring they have the equipment, direction, and support necessary to complete their jobs; and finally, collecting lessons learned from County managers today. We recommend that the County employ a Lean Data methodology to monitor the evolving needs of their workforce.

Introduction

This report examines the question "How has work changed for Lane County departments since the outbreak of COVID-19?" To answer this question, Lane County will need input from department managers who must ask insightful and relevant questions of their team members to gauge their wellbeing and needs. The following report will outline a workforce wellness evaluation framework, an accompanying monitoring tool, and survey question bank the County can use to monitor employee and manager needs, concerns and suggestions. This tool will provide an overview as to how work has changed, and how successful the County is in supporting their employees during quarantine.

Beginning with a review, the report shares the most current literature related to worker needs and manager responses to the pandemic from around the globe. Next, the report describes the "Ecosystem Strategy" and "Lean Data" methodology developed Alnoor Ebrahim et al- frameworks for how to gather and implement data to create organizational change quickly and efficiently. Leveraging Lean Data methodology, the report then recommends an online survey tool, featuring a series of example questions drawn from best practices, to monitor and address workforce needs over the duration of an emergency.

Finally, the report concludes with recommendations and managerial best practices that Lane's managers can use to maintain the stability of their workforce going forward.

Organizational COVID-19 Response Literature Review

The year 2020 is experiencing the greatest public health crisis in modern times. Private and public sectors alike are facing critical challenges with the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, the third such outbreak in the last 18 years, with SARS in 2002, 2003, and MERS since 2012 (Fauci, A., 2020). This literature review assesses intragovernmental best practices in COVID-19 response in terms of assessing equipment needs and the changing conditions of a diverse workforce.

Assessment of Equipment Needs for Workers

A recent report from Hong Kong indicated that there were several deficiencies in workplace policy related to pandemic response. Specifically related to COVID-19, the inadequate supply of workplace personal protective equipment [PPE] significantly led to an increase in employee stress (Wong, et al, 2020). Managing employee stress should be a concern when implementing best practices, and providing adequate protective gear is an important stress management method.

Under the shelter-in-place orders, employees working remotely face additional risks including minimal access to cybersecurity resources. Best practices include enabling multi-factor authentication whenever possible, encouraging a VPN solution with an encrypted network connection, and using organizationally provided IT equipment (Ahmad, T., 2020). These practices should help organizations in addressing the cybersecurity risks from working remotely.

Equitably Addressing the Needs of a Diverse Workforce

The current outbreak of COVID-19 and shelter-in-place policies have punctuated the unequal effects on the workforce. Accordingly, jobs where working remotely is not possible have lower annual median incomes than comparable occupations, increasing the vulnerability of these workers (Baker, M.G., 2020). Of concern is how this outbreak is impacting different gender identities, specifically how unemployment is impacting sectors with high female employment and how home childcare is shifting the division of labor within the household (Alon et al., 2020). Women and female-identifying workers are disproportionately performing at-home care work in addition to their professional duties. Best practices also need to address increases in domestic violence related to working at home during lockdown (Khan, R., 2020).

Additionally, other vulnerable groups are at risk due to the pandemic, including elderly workers and people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA). Senior citizens are at high risk to experience loneliness and its negative effects with or without the COVID-19 pandemic. One in three elderly workers experience loneliness, which has a myriad of negative physical and mental effects. Methods to address elderly isolation include video conferences, daily check-in calls, disease prevention education, and news updates (Berg-Weger, M., & Morley, J. E., 2020). Another study found that PLWHA reported difficulties in accessing testing, prevention, and treatment services (Sanchez, T. H., Zlotorzynska, M., Rai, M., & Baral, S. D., 2020). By better identifying the different effects across sectors and demographic groups, policymakers can improve emergency response for higher-risk populations.

Workforce Wellness Impacts

The literature also indicates that best practices should include mitigating the negative mental health impact of the emerging situation and needs of staff during and after an event such as COVID-19 (Greenberg, N., et, al., 2020; Emanuel, E. J., et al., 2020; Wu 2020). Precautionary measures that may help reduce psychiatric symptoms include shorter working hours, regular rest periods, rotating shifts for those working in high-risk areas (if possible), and receiving support from colleagues or supervisors (Ho, C. S., Chee, C. Y., & Ho, R. C., 2020).

Frontline workers, such as health professionals, correctional workers, emergency services personnel, and custodians, are at higher risk during outbreaks similar to COVID-19. To preserve these essential workers, recommendations include employing social distancing, supporting mental health, planning for staff absences by cross-training coworkers, and extending leave options available for those quarantined (Montoya-Barthelemy, A., Lee, C. D., Cundiff, D., & Smith, E., 2020).

Best practices related to hospitals and surgical teams include increased sanitation practices, educating surgical staff on personal protective equipment, and self-isolating at home when they are not needed (Elizabeth Brindle, M., & Gawande, A. 2020).

Conclusion and Best Practices

This literature review covers general pandemic response best practices which can be utilized by public managers. Best practices include assessing equipment needs and addressing the changing conditions for workers. By doing so, public managers can minimize worker stress, reduce cybersecurity threats, ensure equitable outcomes for diverse workers, and protect those on the frontlines.

Workforce Wellness Evaluation Methods

This project is an application of workforce wellness best practices, as revealed by the literature review. The information above leads to the following workforce wellness evaluation framework and subsequent performance measurement tool, the workforce and manager surveys[1]. This work will complement prior workforce assessments conducted by the County.

The investigation into pandemic best practices for employers concludes maintaining a workforce that is mentally well, physically fit, emotionally sound, and technologically well-equipped is paramount to the continued success of an organization. To that end, this evaluation seeks to collect information on the self-assessed wellbeing of the workforce, employees' views on management's response, and overall day to day safety. Additionally, we are using this evaluation as an opportunity to collect insights from Lane County's managers to providethe organization with a record of lessons learned from the pandemic.

This evaluation is designed according to performance measurement (for social enterprises) best practices set forth by Alnoor Ebrahim et. al at the Stanford Center for Social Innovation.

Environmental Scan

Lane County's 1,400 employees provide services through 13 distinct departments. County managers are tasked with coordinating the activities across each area, while maintaining safe and healthy working conditions.

The challenge posed by the novel coronavirus is thus: how do administrators gain real-time feedback from their residents, their workforce, so they may be held "downwardly accountable" to the staff who are performing county functions?

Matching this evaluation to County priorities

Maintaining a workforce that is well both in body and mind is crucial to the success of the County's four priorities:

1) Safe, Healthy County

2) Vibrant Communities

3) Robust Infrastructure

4) Our People and Partnerships

This assessment will focus on the fourth priority, *People and Partnerships.* Without a workforce that is physically capable, mentally fit, and well-equipped to face the challenges of COVID-19, county administrators will not be able to maintain the same quality of service to their constituents. Assessing the wellbeing of the people who keep the County functioning is critical to the mission success of the organization.

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[1] See appendices B and C respectively.

Key Stakeholders

The key stakeholders in this evaluation are:

- Workers

- Managers

- Department leads

- Union representatives

- Human resources facilitators

- County Commissioners

The evaluation will need to be administered in consultation with this group, and its outcomes should be mutually beneficial.

Evaluation Proposal

We propose the County evaluate the wellbeing of its workers through a "Lean Data" data collection methodology within an "ecosystem" framework. Combined, these concepts will create a tool that is minimally intrusive to workers, useful to managers, and set in a context that understands the full scope of Lane County's activities.

What is Lean Data?

Social enterprises and government organizations struggle to obtain the kind of self-knowledge that keeps them accountable to their staff and constituents. The Lean Data tool, developed by the Stanford Center for Social Innovation by Sasha Dichter, Tom Adams[2], and Alnoor Ebrahim (2019), seeks to address this knowledge gap. In Lean Data, the focus is on creating a human-centric tool that is minimally invasive and collects actionable real-time information.

To accomplish this, the creators are guided by the acronym BUILD:

- **B**ottom-up – observing "on the ground" personnel

- **U**seful – centering on actionable information

- **I**terative – monitoring through multiple rounds of sampling

- **L**ight-touch – easy and cheap to implement and complete

- **D**ynamic – agile, malleable, and responsive

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[2] Dichter and Adams both are part of Acumen, acclaimed international aid organization that seeks to address global poverty through rigorous, cost-effective programming.
See https://acumen.org/about/ for more information.

How Lean Data Works

1	2	3	4	5
IMPACT QUESTION Establish what you hope to discover through your lean data project ■ Clarify thesis ■ Assess risk	**ENABLING TECHNOLOGY** Determine which technology can help you communicate with customers quickly and efficiently **ENABLING INSTRUMENT** Determine which instrument can help you gather high-quality data from customers	**EXECUTION** Devise and implement a plan that uses your enabling technology and your enabling instrument to gather data from people in your target market. In designing your project, consider these issues: ■ How long will it take? ■ How much will it cost? ■ Are there existing customer contact points that you can use?	**LEARNING** Use the data that you gather to arrive at answers to your impact question ■ What have you learned about your product or service? ■ What have you learned about your customers?	**ACTION** Decide on steps that you will take in response to the results of your project

Applying this philosophy of agile and light, bottom-up measurement tools, this evaluation proposes the creation of a Lean Data[3] tool that is centered on the wellbeing of the people who serve Lane County.

See the proposed surveys in appendices B and C for a demonstration of this tool.

What is an Ecosystem Strategy?

An ecosystem strategy, as defined by Ebrahim in his performance measurement handbook for social institutions *Measuring Social Change* (2019), is appropriate for organizations that have *high control* over their activities and *high uncertainty* about the cause and effect of their programs. Governments and large nongovernmental organizations commonly fall into this category, as they tackle wicked and complex problems that span across many sectors and populations, making it difficult to observe the impacts of any one program. In this framework, ecosystem-oriented organizations must coordinate their activities with and through other organizations (in this case, departments) to affect change.

In an ecosystem framework, organizations set short term goals, knowing that the situation they work in is dynamic. They understand strategies will need to be adjusted and goals changed to meet shifting objectives. These ecosystem leaders standardize key performance indicators across their partner organizations, taking measurements frequently to monitor progress toward shared goals.

In summary, organizations following an ecosystem strategy are:

- Leading collaboration across different entities (or in this case, departments)

- Setting short-term goals and adjusting as the situation evolves

- Assessing progress through frequent observation, through a tool such as Lean Data

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[3] Diagram courtesy of *The Power of Lean Data,* SCSI 2019

Primary Research Objective: Monitoring Worker Wellness

Research question: How has the novel coronavirus changed worker wellbeing?

To answer this question the evaluation's goals are to:

- Assess the wellbeing and needs of the workforce
- Collect lessons learned and observations from managers
- Standardize wellness measures across departments

Key Wellness Performance Indicators

This evaluation will understand workforce wellness needs by measuring and monitoring the following:

- Employee self-assessment of mood and safety
- Whether IT and PPE needs are being met
- Recording managerial observations of structural problems, as well as the quality of the overall response by the workforce, their superiors, and fellow managers.

Data Collection Approach

- Actively monitoring the workforce by taking quantitative measurements, at a suggested frequency of once per week
- A survey that is completable within five minutes
    - Designed to be adaptable as the situation evolves
- Aggregating data to show evolving needs and trends over time, through a survey platform like Qualtrics (paid—UO faculty and staff have access and could administer a survey on Lane's behalf) or Google Surveys (free)
- Voluntarily collect anonymized demographic information
- Qualitative data collection through the manager interviews, which follows the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats [SWOT] strategic planning framework

See appendices B and C for proposed surveys and appendix A for a discussion of the limitations of this proposed study.

Ethical Considerations

It is important to consider the impact this wellness study will have on the people who work for Lane County.

Distracting from critical work

Being asked to fill out weekly surveys, and giving extended answers in manager interviews, could be a distraction from the mission of the organization, causing delays in the delivery of critical county services and functions.

Exacerbating anxiety over job security

Employees may feel that any inquiry into their wellbeing or their work during this extraordinary time signals their output is being scrutinized, which reasonably causes one to question their job security. Although worker performance is not part of the proposed evaluation, and it will be administered collaboratively with critical stakeholders (crucially, worker representatives), this is an understandable anxiety. This could lead to people refusing to take the survey or feeling pressured to misrepresent their experience[4].

Applying the Workforce Wellness Evaluation

This evaluation provides crucial information for Lane County administrator's by:

1. Focusing on workforce needs

   This evaluation will provide a wealth of information on workforce needs in the specific areas most relevant to maintaining a high-performing organization and will provide demographic context for how employees are handling the crisis. Specifically, IT access and security, employee morale, access to PPE, and effects of COVID-19, as described by its impacts on different demographics within the workforce and across departments.

2. Highlighting and addressing gaps in service

   The evaluation gives the workforce and managers an outlet to ask for what they need and to share what they know, so Lane County administrators may respond appropriately by providing the requested care, oversight, policies, and equipment. Administrators can then evaluate how well their workforce is responding to the County's actions through continued monitoring.

3. Creating a model for future emergencies

   This evaluation creates a record of the 2020 pandemic and will be useful in planning for future emergencies. This monitoring framework can be reused for such events.

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[4] See Appendix A for a full list of the threats this evaluation faces to validity.

Conclusion

As the County looks to understand the impact the pandemic is having on its workforce, the literature points to several important considerations. Best practices direct administrators and managers to understand and meet the needs, both physical needs including access to appropriate technology and emotional needs including schedule flexibility and supervisor support, of their employees. Particular care should be taken by management to ensure the unique needs of diverse populations are being heard and addressed equitably across the workforce. In investigating how work has changed for Lane County departments, we recommend Lean Data and Ecosystem strategies. The application of efficient and dynamic lenses in gathering actionable information allows for a rapid response to new hazards as they arise. This report recommends that the County implement a survey tool that is easily adjusted, simple to build and distribute, and is easy for employees to use. This tool should aggregate responses which could be utilized to identify trends and needs over time. By using this tool within the proposed evaluative framework, Lane County administrators can respond to the current pandemic, while learning in real time what the organization can do to prepare for the next emergency.

Thank you to Lane County for allowing us to be a part of the governing process. We hope this tool is useful as you move forward through the pandemic. Please follow up with Dr. Clark if you have questions about the survey tool, the report or if you wish for the team's help in deploying such an evaluation.

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Appendix A: Research Limitations and Threats to Validity

This section briefly describes possible threats to the validity of this work that must be considered whenever decisions are being made based on the results of the evaluation (Government Accountability Office Training Institute, n.d.).

Construct Validity: Does the data collected accurately reflect reality?

Inappropriate Operationalization

If evaluators have insufficient knowledge about the concept of interest or the target population (in this case, mental health and wellness), they may not be familiar with the best methods and metrics for collecting information within the area of concern, resulting in inaccurate data collection.

Internal Validity: Are there other explanations for outcomes?

Intervening events

Factors outside of the control of the County may impact the survey population, making it difficult to isolate what measures County administrators can take to better their workforce's wellbeing.

Regressing to the mean and maturation

The population being surveyed may become used to the pandemic over time and adapt their behavior accordingly. This would be reflected in their wellness measures, regardless of any actions the County takes, making it difficult to trace what interventions were most effective.

Social and economic pressures

The people being surveyed may feel pressured to misrepresent their experience due to social pressures (not wanting to show weakness, the stigma against discussing mental health, etc.) and economic pressures (not wanting to give the impression that they are giving any less than 100% of their effort, for fear of losing their income).

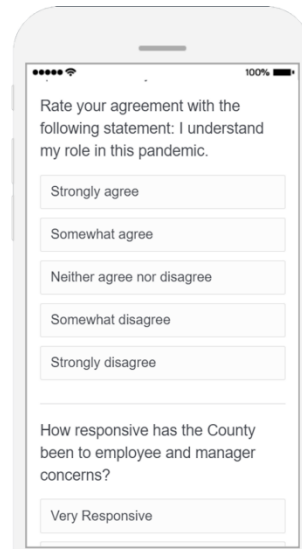## External Validity: Is this study generalizable?

Situational and geographic considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic may be peculiar and unique in its challenges, making it difficult to generalize learning. Additionally, other organizations looking to Lane County's response may be materially different in their organizational structure, workforce or in the

population/geography they serve, meaning that lessons learned by Lane County may not apply to other communities or at other points in time.

Appendix B: Workforce Wellness Survey and Question Bank

Note: These surveys were informed by two interviews – one with Vince Vu: Government Strategic Industry Advisor for Qualtrics; and the other with Rich Saalsaa, Emergency Medical Response Systems Designer and Benton County COVID Incident Commander. This phone is an example of a mobile version of this survey from Qualtrics.

For all Staff at Lane County – Note: this survey was designed to be done independently and completed within five minutes.

1. Rate your mood about your current work situation:

   a.   Extremely satisfied

   b.   Somewhat satisfied

   c.   Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied

   d.   Somewhat dissatisfied

   e.   Extremely dissatisfied

2. Has your position remained active or been deemed "essential" during this emergency?

   a.   Yes - I'm continuing to work as normal

   b.   No - I am working remotely during the emergency

   c.   I am temporarily furloughed or have lost my position due to the emergency

3. Are your manager's expectations for your work reasonable?

   a.   Extremely reasonable

   b.   Somewhat reasonable

   c.   Neither reasonable nor unreasonable

   d.   Somewhat unreasonable

   e.   Extremely unreasonable

4. Are you receiving fair compensation for the hours you've been asked to work during the emergency?

    a. Definitely yes

    b. Probably yes

    c. Unsure

    d. Probably not

    e. Definitely not

5. Is your current workload sustainable: Could you imagine having a similar work routine for 3+ months?

    a. Definitely yes

    b. Probably yes

    c. Unsure

    d. Probably not

    e. Definitely not

6. My supervisor communicated clearly with me during this emergency

    a. Strongly agree

    b. Somewhat agree

    c. Neither agree nor disagree

    d. Somewhat disagree

    e. Strongly disagree

7. My supervisor used the appropriate tone in their communication with me during this emergency

    a. Strongly agree

    b. Somewhat agree

    c. Neither agree nor disagree

    d. Somewhat disagree

    e. Strongly disagree

8. The frequency of communication from my supervisor was appropriate in order to complete my work during this emergency

    a. Strongly agree

    b. Somewhat agree

c.   Neither agree nor disagree

d.   Somewhat disagree

e.   Strongly disagree

9. Do you feel safe at work?

a.   Clearly describes my feelings

b.   Mostly describes my feelings

c.   Moderately describes my feelings

d.   Slightly describes my feelings

10. Do you feel that safety guidelines set by the County have been clear?

a.   Extremely clear

b.   Somewhat clear

c.   Neither clear nor unclear

d.   Somewhat unclear

e.   Extremely unclear

11. Do you have the necessary equipment/technology to complete work expected of you?

a.   Definitely yes

b.   Probably yes

c.   Might or might not

d.   Probably not

e.   Definitely not

12. Do you feel that you and your fellow employees have been able to follow the safety guidelines that have been set?

a.   Always

b.   Most of the time

c.   About half the time

d.   Sometimes

e.   Never

13. Do you observe adequate social distancing protocols being practiced at county facilities?

a.   Definitely yes

b. Most of the time

c. Unsure

d. Sometimes

e. Definitely not

Appendix C: Manager Interview Survey and Questionnaire

For Lane County Managers - Note: this survey was designed to be quantitative as well as qualitative and to be administered by a survey taker (interviewer).

Quantitative (Multiple Choice) Questions

1. Rate your agreement with the following statement: I understand my role in this pandemic.

   a. Strongly agree

   b. Somewhat agree

   c. Neither agree nor disagree

   d. Somewhat disagree

   e. Strongly disagree

2. How responsive has the County been to employee and manager concerns?

   a. Very responsive

   b. Somewhat responsive

   c. Unsure

   d. Somewhat unresponsive

   e. Very unresponsive

3. Have you had adequate connection with stakeholders to respond effectively to this emergency?

   a. Definitely yes

   b. Probably yes

   c. Unsure

   d. Probably not

   e. Definitely Not

4. Rate your agreement with the following statement: I have received adequate training in emergency response.

    a. Strongly agree

    b. Somewhat agree

    c. Neither agree nor disagree

    d. Somewhat disagree

    e. Strongly disagree

5. Do you believe that employees have the necessary knowledge and technology to ensure their data and projects are digitally secure during this emergency?

    a. Definitely yes

    b. Probably yes

    c. Unsure

    d. Probably not

    e. Definitely Not

Begin interview section

Qualitative Questions

6. What roles do you see the county playing in these situations - filling in gaps, providing services etc?

7. What would you change about the internal response to the pandemic?

8. What are some lessons to share with your colleagues about your department's successes during the emergency?

9. What tools could be put into place to assist you in a future emergency situation?

SWOT Analysis

10. Strengths: What are some current things going well?

11. Weaknesses: What are some areas where things are currently being done poorly?

12. Opportunities: What are some ways the County can grow if changes are made now?

13. Threats: What are some problems you foresee happening in the future if changes
    are not made now?