



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

APRIL 3, 2023

Follow-up on King County's Pandemic Response

The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) worked with the Procurement and Payables section (Procurement) to take initial steps to improve emergency procurement processes. However, until the County Executive takes further action to implement recommendations, gaps will continue to hamper county emergency response and resilience. OEM and Procurement conducted an after-action review of logistics and supply purchasing during the pandemic. Their findings, which have not yet been published, mirrored what we found in our 2021 audit. Executive staff mentioned that agencies experienced the same problems getting materials during the 2021 snowstorms as they did during the pandemic, indicating that challenges and specific circumstances were not limited to the pandemic.

The County Executive has not yet taken recommended steps to center employee safety in emergencies, meaning that safety risks remain for the next emergency. An overarching finding of our audit was that planning for future emergencies should include a complete safety framework across all agencies and branches of government and include a focus on equity. While King County has made improvements in documenting expectations for embedding equity in standard work, the County Executive has not instituted a framework of communication, monitoring, and accountability that would protect employees at work during the next emergency. Particular risk remains for employees working across branches or in shared spaces. The County has an opportunity to set the stage for better outcomes in the next emergency by following the example set by Public Health — Seattle & King County and developing an improvement plan based on lessons learned.

Of the six audit recommendations:

	0 DONE		3 PROGRESS		1 OPEN		2 CLOSED
Fully implemented Auditor will no longer monitor.		Partially implemented Auditor will continue to monitor.		Remain unresolved Auditor will continue to monitor.		Closed Auditor will no longer monitor.	

Please see details below for implementation status of each recommendation.



Recommendation 1

PROGRESS



The County Executive should work with the Department of Human Resources to establish a clear framework for employee safety that includes specific roles and responsibilities during emergencies and mechanisms to monitor the development and implementation of safety protocols.

STATUS UPDATE: The Department of Human Resources (DHR) indicated that there has been some initial thinking about roles and responsibilities but neither has completed developing a framework nor addressed mechanisms to monitor the development and implementation of safety protocols. Executive staff stated that there is a COVID policies work group that is working on safety protocols, and the work group is negotiating with labor unions to plan for represented employee safety.

In August 2021, the County Executive joined the State of Washington and City of Seattle to require proof of COVID-19 vaccination as a condition of employment for all staff. While this is not a safety framework, verifying vaccination and firing employees who refused to get vaccinated is an example of a mechanism to monitor the implementation of a key safety protocol.

WHAT REMAINS: The County Executive and DHR should develop, document, and communicate a clear framework for employee safety.

Recommendation 2

OPEN



The County Executive should work with leadership in other branches of government and separately elected officials across King County to develop and document mechanisms to clarify roles and responsibilities and enhance cross-branch collaboration on employee safety during emergencies.

STATUS UPDATE: The County Executive has not provided evidence of action to implement this recommendation. The challenge of cross-branch collaboration is not specific to this audit; it is a systemic issue.

The County Executive began holding frequent meetings with his senior leadership team and separately elected officials at the start of the pandemic. At these meetings, executive staff provided information on the safety protocols applied in executive branch agencies. Recent meetings (which have been on a monthly schedule since November 2020) have included cross-branch discussions about collaboration on employee safety in non-emergency situations like at the downtown campus and King County Courthouse. It may be possible to build on these discussions to take steps toward collaboration on emergency employee safety in instances where employees are working in shared spaces or across branches of government.

WHAT REMAINS: The County Executive should continue to reach out to other branches to further collaboration on employee safety issues in emergencies with the goals of documenting clear roles and responsibilities and enhancing cross-branch collaboration on employee safety during emergencies.

Recommendation 3

CLOSED



The County Executive should develop and document explicit procedures for analyzing, monitoring, and mitigating disproportionate impacts on employees' safety during emergencies.

STATUS UPDATE: The County Executive updated management maturity expectations for agencies in 2021 to explicitly emphasize a pro-equity and anti-racist approach. The County Executive indicated that identifying disparate impacts and prioritizing resources to mitigate them is part of standard work and will be a part of agency emergency responses in the future.

Recommendation 4

CLOSED



The County Executive should work with agency directors, leadership in all government branches, and separately elected officials across King County to ensure that executive agencies are enforcing mask-wearing requirements for employees, branches of government that use shared spaces are collaborating on safety, and implement a mechanism to ensure enforcement processes are effective.

STATUS UPDATE: Governor Jay Inslee repealed the mask mandate on March 12, 2022. We will continue to monitor the second portion of this recommendation—that branches of government that use shared spaces should collaborate on safety—in the context of Recommendation 2.

Recommendation 5

PROGRESS



The County Executive should conduct and document a timely lessons learned analysis on procurement during the COVID-19 pandemic including purchasing conducted by individual agencies and develop and implement a plan to address any issues identified.

STATUS UPDATE: OEM conducted an after-action report of emergency procurement during the pandemic and presented its findings to the County Executive's senior leadership team in July 2022. The findings mirrored our audit, namely:

- Roles and responsibilities were unclear, leading to creation of multiple logistical elements and resulting in duplication of efforts.
- The resource requesting system used by the Emergency Operations Center was not generally understood and not used by many staff members.
- Agencies hoarded resources to ensure access to supplies.

Public Health — Seattle & King County published a COVID-19 after-action report in September 2022, which related similar findings about unclear processes.¹ OEM's recommendations to address these findings include establishing a single, easy to use, logistical structure to support emergency

¹ See [Public Health - Seattle and King County COVID-19 After Action Report](#), p. 82

operations, training on the resource management system, and policies to instruct staff to use the single structure during emergencies. As of February 2023, OEM had not published the report.

WHAT REMAINS: The County Executive should finalize and publish the after-action report and develop and implement a plan to address its recommendations.

Recommendation 6

PROGRESS



The County Executive should work with the Office of Emergency Management and the Finance and Business Operations Division to update emergency plans to develop and document efficient and effective procurement processes that leverage procurement expertise during supply shortages.

STATUS UPDATE: In 2022, Procurement analyzed the current system for emergency purchases, communication, and collaboration with county agencies. It noted that the system has grown organically by reacting to challenges rather than through a proactive and strategic manner. Managers stated that in 2023, they will develop a comprehensive, strategic plan for emergencies that will reflect a culture of supply chain risk mitigation.

In the interim, Procurement staff have begun inventorying current contracts for personal protective equipment (PPE) to ensure the contracts can accommodate both regular operations and emergency needs. Procurement maintains an up-to-date list on the County's website of emergency needs contracts. In addition, Procurement leads a "Purchasing Council" with members from all county agencies. Members are responsible for buying PPE for their agencies. The Purchasing Council meets regularly and provides a forum for conveying processes and expectations for effective procurement. Finally, Procurement's Supply Chain Steering Committee plans to review emergency preparedness protocols and p-card use during emergencies.

WHAT REMAINS: The County Executive should implement the recommendations in OEM's after-action report and support Procurement in completing and implementing its strategic plan for emergencies.

Brian Crist and Luc Poon conducted this review. If you have any questions or would like more information, please email KCAO@kingcounty.gov or call 206-477-1033.