

## **Jamaica Customs Agency (JCA)**

**18 June 2020**

### **Measures to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19 pandemic**

The Jamaica Customs Agency has a comprehensive Emergency Preparedness & Response System which is guided by established procedures that sets out steps to respond to both natural and manmade events. These procedures were formulated within a regional, national and local context looking at hazards/risk within the region, within Jamaica and within the Agency's operations. Emergencies can happen at any time. Whilst emergency preparedness & response is everybody's business, emergency preparedness is coordinated through the Agency's Occupational Health & Safety Branch of the Human Resource Management & Development Division. By having it as a central function of a Unit, ensures that appropriate coordination between both internal and external stakeholders are formulated and maintained and that the Agency is able to respond to an event and is able to mitigate the disruption caused and ensures business continuity. The Emergency Preparedness & Response Plan covers events such as fires, hurricanes, earthquakes. A subset of this plan is the Disaster Recovery Plan for the automated system ASYCUDA World. The plan includes employee training, conduct of simulation exercises, procurement of emergency supplies etc.

The Emergency Preparedness & Response system involves the establishment of an Emergency Management Team which is activated during an emergency situation. The main role of this team is to review an event and ensure appropriate response measures are implemented to mitigate the impacts of the event.

One of the events included in the procedure document is Preparedness and Response to Public Health Emergencies of International Concerns. The response to COVID-19 was a true test of our procedures, as we have been in constant review and revision of this procedure as the information changes. As a people, as a nation, as an organization, we have never experienced a Pandemic in our lifetime, and so the Agency has been learning and maneuvering the new space we have found ourselves.

The Agency's response to the pandemic started about a month before the disease was detected 'in country' on March 10, 2020. Preparedness activities involved intense sensitization of employees, starting with frontline officers as they were deemed to be more at risk due to their exposure to international travellers. Sensitization sessions were conducted by internal and external personnel (external being the Ministry of Health & Wellness). Sensitization at the inception was based on available information about the virus at the time, its mode of transmission and prevention guidelines as issued by the World Health Organization, the Centre for Disease Control and our local health authority. As one would appreciate, being a new virus there has been much new information since it was declared a public health emergency. Updated information is disseminated to employees via email and posted on the Agency's intranet site.

At a time when economies of countries are coming to a halt, the ability for the Agency to stand and function in such a time as this is critical to the survival of the nation. Jamaica depends on imports as inputs to the local manufacturing industry and in general for local businesses. The Emergency Management Team met at an early stage and reviewed the risks associated with the disease. Risks as it relates to employees, Agency operations, trade, border security. The Agency had to take a look at its' processes to see where adjustments could be made to reduce

employee exposure whilst maintaining business operations. In order to fulfill our mandate ensuring business continuity in this time is critical.

Mitigating measures were then identified to be implemented.

### **What have we been doing as an Agency to mitigate the impacts of the Pandemic?**

1. Employee sensitization and awareness. This is done via face to face, emails, posting on the intranet, placing of signage in strategic locations.
2. Instituting telework/telecommuting arrangements (new to the Agency's operations). This was important to reduce the exposure levels to the entire staff population and also to maintain the social distancing guidelines being promoted. This was then gazetted by the Prime Minister under the Disaster Management Act.
3. Employees involved in telework/telecommute measures, who are unable to perform core functions from home participate in online training provided through the World Customs Organization CLiKC platform.
4. Issuing of guidelines to employees regarding cough and sneeze etiquette, social distancing, staying home if exhibiting flu like symptoms.
5. Meetings are held virtually via our Microsoft Teams Platforms.
6. Increasing the sanitization processes throughout the office spaces. This involved increasing the janitorial staff complement to effect new cleaning regime. This new cleaning regime involved hourly sanitization of contact surfaces such as counter tops, door knobs etc
7. Meeting with our janitorial company to highlight the new measures and to discuss expectations as it relates to ill employees, cleaning procedures etc
8. Communication with Port & Warehouse Operators regarding their response plan and the Agency's expectations as it relates to safeguarding employees conducting duties in their space. Port and Warehouse operators instituted various measures to combat the spread of the Pandemic. This included telework/telecommute measures, establishment of hand sanitizing stations, temperature checks before entering the space, online applications for goods clearance, limiting the number of persons permitted to enter the space etc
9. Increasing inventory levels of personal protective equipment and sanitation supplies. This however became very challenging as the Pandemic worsened.
10. Development of an Infection Prevention & Control Protocol – to guide enhanced cleaning and sanitization processes
11. The Agency has a number of infrastructure development projects being implemented. It therefore became important to develop Contractor Protocols to guide contractors working on behalf of the Agency during this time.
12. Majority of the processes of the Agency are automated through the ASYCUDA World. Customers were encouraged to do online transactions. Automation of processes that were manual were expedited. For visits to the Office, clients had to make online appointments.
13. Advertisements were placed in the media encouraging customers to practice prevention measures and to encourage them to utilize the online platforms.
14. Everyone is affected by the Pandemic. Whether emotionally, financially. The Agency was not blinded to the fact, that the new regimes and the regimes of social distancing can impact the mental health of individuals. The Agency still offers its Employee Assistance Programme that offers confidential counselling to employees and their

immediate family needing this type of intervention. Through this programme, a mental health e-forum was held, which focused on coping mechanisms during this time. The title of the seminar was “JCA-Coping in COVID-19: Preserving My Mental Health”. More of these sessions will be held in the future.

15. Moving our “#customsmoves” activity online to Microsoft Teams so staff can continue to participate
16. Other measures included creating a special email where employees could submit their questions, suggestions, concerns, etc regarding the Pandemic ([icacares@jca.gov.im](mailto:icacares@jca.gov.im))
17. Monitoring of employees who would have been deemed high risk based on guidelines given and of employees who are in quarantine.
18. Temperature scans for new recruits and persons entering the office spaces

The response the Pandemic has not been without challenges.

As new information on this virus emerged, the Agency has had to ensure that the measures being employed were able to mitigate the spread of the virus.

One mentioned earlier was the accessibility of personal protective equipment and sanitation supplies. Procurement process now involves constant phone calls to suppliers to secure items needed for use.

**Lessons learned and practices that can be retained:**

1. Working from home for specified categories of staff;
2. The continued use of automation in service delivery and meetings;
3. Review of HRM & D Strategy to create a better and healthier work environment;
4. The use of automation has resulted in a reduction of operating costs and increased efficiency.