

Establishing Health Protocols During the COVID-19 Pandemic at Laredo International Airport

A Threat to Public Health

When the COVID-19 pandemic began affecting the airline industry in early 2020, many airports needed to reevaluate their daily operations to accommodate the pandemic's changing conditions. With customer and employee safety a top concern, airport operators had to figure out the best plans and practices for keeping airports open.

Laredo International Airport (LRD) in Laredo, Texas, was one of the airports hit early in the pandemic. Providing a mix of passenger, cargo, military, and general aviation services, LRD is accustomed to balancing complex operations every day. But when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, LRD realized it would need to drastically alter these operations to stay open.

While LRD had a communicable disease response plan as part of its

broader Airport Emergency Plan, it was looking to expand the plan and include more detailed guidance for operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. When LRD's Assistant Director Elsy Borgstedte heard of an ACRP webinar on transmissible diseases, she decided to attend the webinar and use the information discussed in it to develop LRD's expanded communicable disease response plan.

Using ACRP Research to Establish COVID-19 Protocols

ACRP's communicable diseases webinar gave LRD the tools to develop a strong COVID-19 response plan during the beginning of the pandemic, which allowed them to resume operations and keep their customers and employees safe. In particular, the ACRP webinar provided guidance on how to train employees on new safety protocols and procedures and tailor this training to specific employees, such as first responders and airport police.

ACRP shared copies of the webinar presentation with attendees so they could refer to the webinar when



ACRP's communicable diseases webinar.

updating their emergency plans and operations. Additionally, ACRP provided attendees with a network of other airports that could share lessons learned and best practices based on their own efforts to implement COVID-19 safety protocols.

At LRD, the webinar and networking opportunities proved invaluable. "We were able to take the information from ACRP and develop employee training early on while other agencies in our community didn't have trainings yet," Borgstedte said.

Once LRD had created the training presentations and trained its employees on new COVID-19 protocols, it was time to implement these procedures during daily airport operations.

"ACRP's webinar was extremely well done and timely."

— Elsy Borgstedte,
LRD Assistant Director

Ensuring Safety During a Health Emergency

LRD drastically changed its operations to ensure safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, it increased daily sanitation practices. Masks and touchless hand sanitizer stations were placed throughout the airport, and all terminal and office spaces were regularly misted and disinfected.

In addition to areas within the airport, all vehicles used by airport employees and emergency personnel were cleaned between shifts. LRD limited the number of shifts for which a vehicle could be used and the number of employees who could share each vehicle.

The ACRP communicable diseases webinar also revealed ways to accommodate the increased amount of space required due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “We need to remain open with minimal impact to operations,” Borgstedte said. LRD came up with new plans on where to bring emergency vehicles, how to best access these vehicles, and where to set up locations for employee and passenger health assessments.

Lastly, LRD implemented further health measures, including requiring masks in accordance with federal guidelines and using UV lighting to sanitize escalator handrails.

Building Relationships

A key part of LRD’s success was the relationships it built to increase communication and brainstorming during the COVID-19 pandemic. After developing the updated employee training presentation, LRD mined ACRP’s webinar for ideas on how to best communicate the new emergency response plan to key stakeholders.

LRD decided to hold a tabletop discussion with stakeholders and local community leaders to efficiently distribute their new plan. The City of Laredo Fire Department, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and members from airlines served by LRD attended the discussion on how to best operate the airport under these unprecedented circumstances.

“The tabletop discussion was excellent and something I attribute directly to the training we received from ACRP,” Borgstedte said.

LRD also worked with Laredo’s health department to increase employee relations and set up an emergency group with the Transportation Security Administration and airport tenants—including airlines, car rentals, and vendors—to provide resources and information related to the pandemic.



LRD’s COVID-19 public health messaging (Source: LRD).

Looking to the Future

By implementing the safety protocols outlined in ACRP’s communicable diseases webinar, LRD has successfully navigated the COVID-19 pandemic while staying open for business. When the public health situation improves, LRD plans to continue applying many of the increased sanitation practices being used during the pandemic. LRD is currently expanding its communicable disease response plan to prepare for any future public health scenarios.

“We will absolutely use ACRP research in the future,” Borgstedte said. “I love going back and watching past meetings and webinars, and I encourage all of our personnel to do the same.”

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