

## COVID-19 Impacts to Local Transportation Agency Operations: Survey Results

*This document summarizes an effort led by the Louisiana Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP). The summary was prepared by Mr. Christopher Melson ([Christopher.Melson@la.gov](mailto:Christopher.Melson@la.gov)) for inclusion in the Fall 2021 Technology Exchange newsletter (Sep. 2021).*

### PURPOSE

This informal study collected and identified common challenges that local public works and transportation agencies faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. The effort included: (1) a review of existing literature, (2) dissemination of an electronic survey to local Louisiana agencies, and (3) one-on-one interviews with select local Louisiana agencies.

### COMMON CHALLENGES

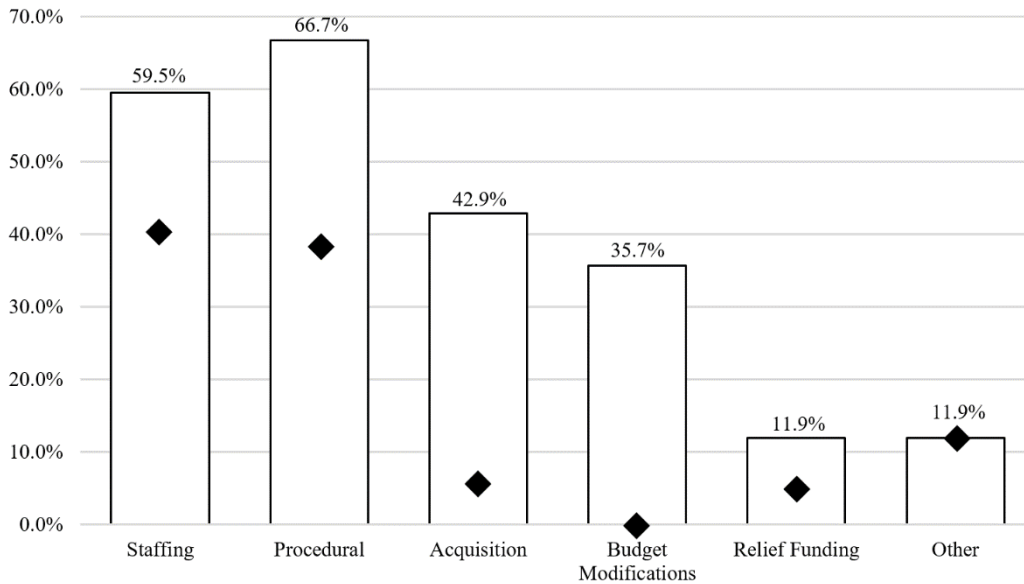
Based upon a national literature review, Table 1 lists the most common COVID-19-related challenges faced by local public works and transportation agencies.

**Table 1. Common COVID-19-related challenges faced by local agencies.**

ID	Challenge	Main Difficulties
1	<b>STAFFING:</b> maintaining a consistent, sizeable workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determining which staff were “essential”;</li> <li>• Modifying schedules to limit in-person interaction;</li> <li>• Overcoming periods of staff absences due to quarantines, sickness, or caring for family; and</li> <li>• Inability to hire staff (due to hiring freezes, competition with unemployment benefits, etc.).</li> </ul>
2	<b>PROCEDURAL:</b> implementing new safety (or other) protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing new safety protocols;</li> <li>• Understanding constantly changing protocols;</li> <li>• Effectively communicating protocols to staff (and providing appropriate training); and</li> <li>• Ensuring protocols were followed.</li> </ul>
3	<b>ACQUISITION:</b> obtaining personal protective equipment (PPE) or other materials required for operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding what PPE was necessary to protect staff;</li> <li>• Understanding how to (and the responsible party to) acquire PPE;</li> <li>• Having available funds to purchase PPE; and</li> <li>• Acquiring other material required for typical operation.</li> </ul>
4	<b>BUDGET MODIFICATIONS:</b> eliminating or modifying services due to anticipated (or actual) budget cuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imposing a hiring freeze;</li> <li>• Suspending salary increases;</li> <li>• Eliminating staff positions;</li> <li>• Deferring routine recurring work;</li> <li>• Eliminating (or significantly reducing) provided services;</li> <li>• Suspending services; and</li> <li>• Delaying planned contracts/projects.</li> </ul>
5	<b>RELIEF FUNDING:</b> acquiring relief funding.	-

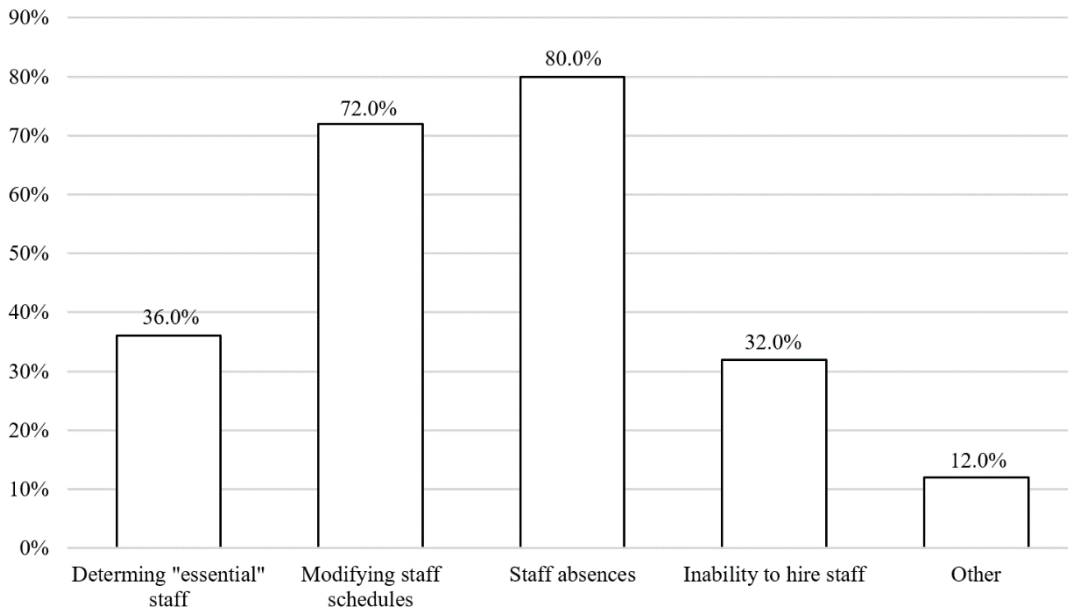
## SURVEY RESULTS

An electronic survey was developed and disseminated to local agencies across Louisiana. Survey questions were based off of Table 1: (a) asking participants what significant “Challenge”(s) their agency faced, (b) for each “Challenge” selected, the “Main Difficulties” incurred, and (c) the *most* significant “Challenge” faced. In total, 42 distinct local agencies completed the survey. Figure 1 shows the percentage of surveyed agencies that faced common “Challenge”(s).

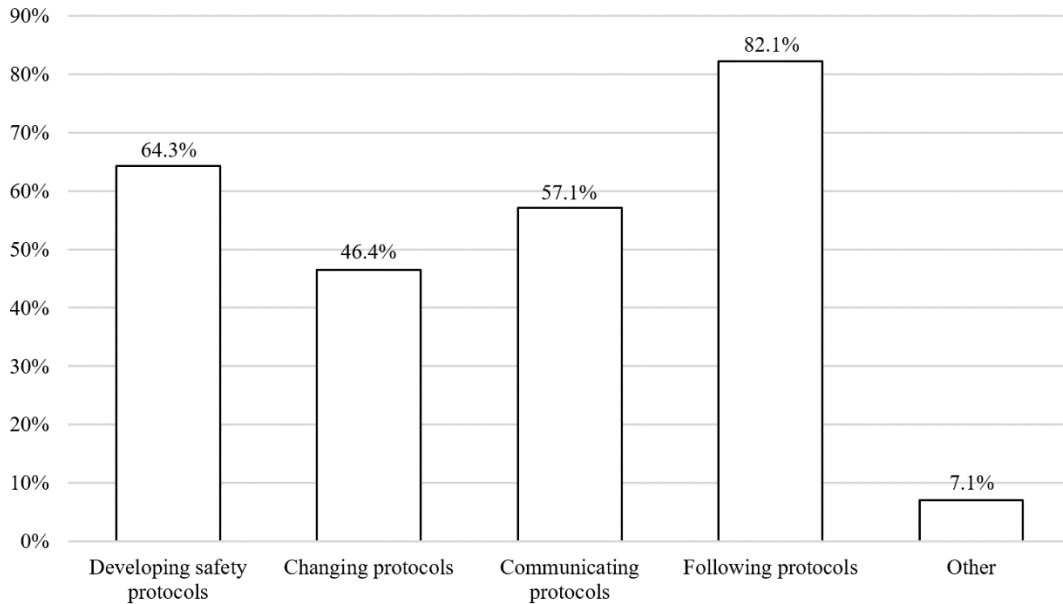


**Figure 1. Percent of surveyed agencies that faced common COVID-19-related challenges – including their most significant challenge (diamonds).**

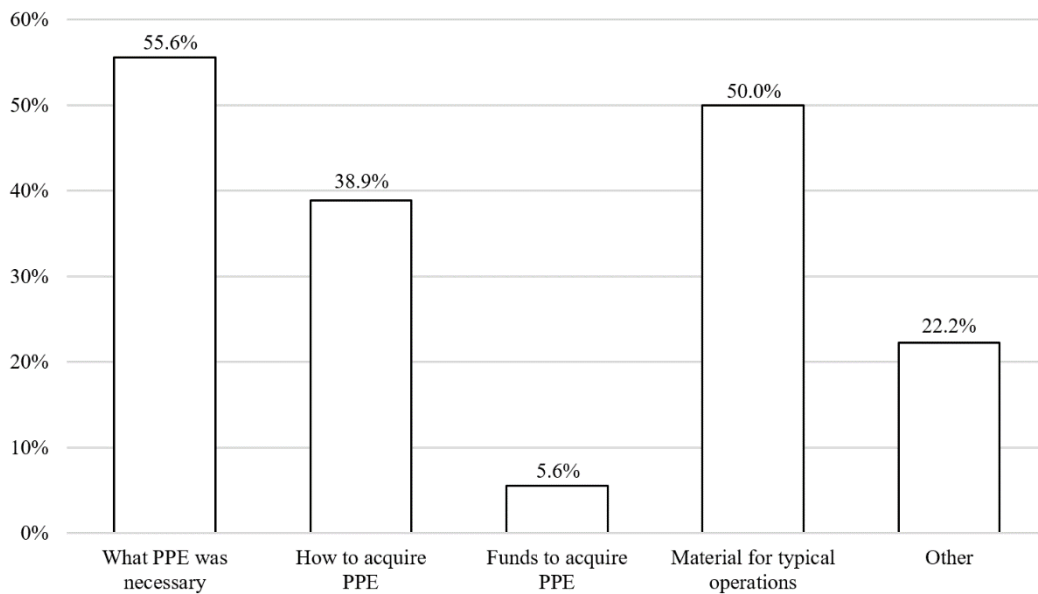
Figures 2 – 4 show the “Main Difficulties” incurred for each respective “Challenge”.



**Figure 2. Shows the distribution of staffing-related difficulties incurred at surveyed agencies.**

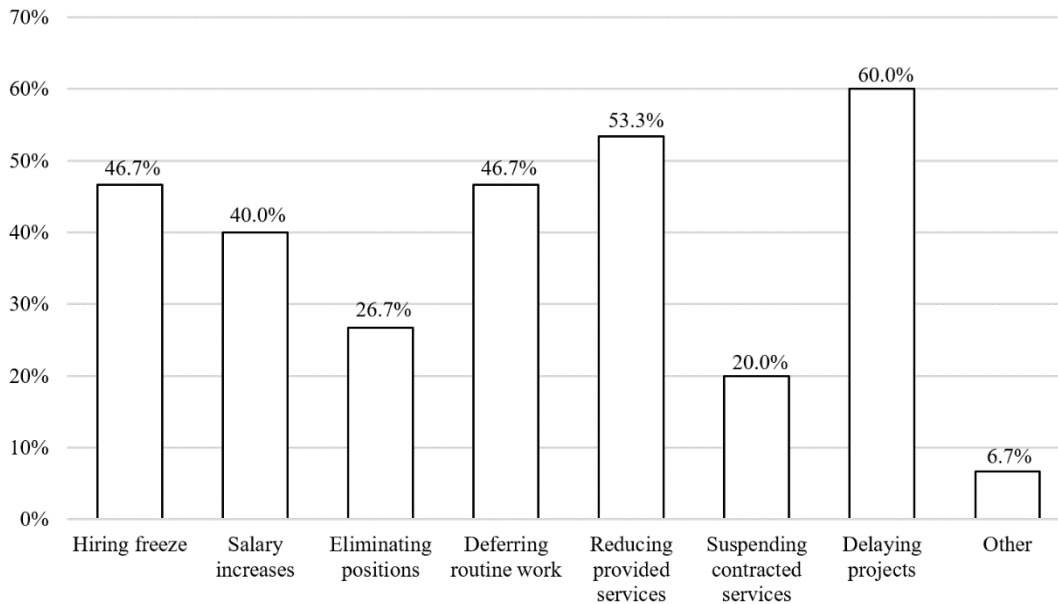


**Figure 3. Shows the distribution of procedural-related difficulties incurred at surveyed agencies.**



**Figure 4. Shows the distribution of acquisition-related difficulties incurred at surveyed agencies.**

Figure 5 indicates what actions were taken at the agency in response to anticipated (or actual) budget cuts.



**Figure 5. Distribution of actions taken by surveyed agencies in response to actual (or anticipated) budget cuts.**

## FINDINGS

Table 2 lists the main findings from the conducted survey and interviews.

**Table 2. Main findings from the conducted survey and interviews.**

ID	Findings
<b>OVERALL</b>	
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The most significant and common challenges faced by surveyed agencies were (a) maintaining a consistent, sizeable workforce and (b) implementing new protocols.</li> </ul>
<b>STAFFING: maintaining a consistent, sizeable workforce</b>	
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Throughout the pandemic, Louisiana consistently had one of the highest COVID-19 infection rates per capita. This coupled with weeks-long quarantine protocols caused difficulties in staffing – especially field personnel.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agencies did not anticipate the high usage of emergency sick leave and FMLA.</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some agencies relied upon temporary workers for certain tasks (e.g., from prison work or community service programs). This workforce was not available during the pandemic.</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some agencies had difficulty filling positions during the pandemic – especially lower paying, field positions. Competition with unemployment benefits (and other new opportunities) may have been a factor.</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All surveyed agencies had to modify schedules – for and specific to a diverse range of staff: professional, administrative, field, and temporary.</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Field work continued throughout the pandemic, requiring innovative working schedules (e.g., splitting crews in half and working alternating weeks, rearranging work to keep crews separated, etc.).</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For some agencies, it was difficult to split crews due to equipment limitations (i.e., number of trucks, shared working equipment, shared traffic control devices, etc.).</li> </ul>
<b>PROCEDURAL: implementing new safety (or other) protocols</b>	
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agencies had to quickly develop new safety and social distancing protocols – often with limited information and lack of guidance.</li> </ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emergency management experience was a great asset in protocol development.</li> </ul>
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was difficulty communicating protocols agency-wide – especially to field personnel (who do not have agency e-mail access and whose typical, in-person briefings were not possible).</li> </ul>

<b>ID Findings</b>	
<b>ACQUISITION:</b> obtaining personal protective equipment (PPE) or other materials required for operation	
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveyed agencies did not anticipate the difficulty of finding PPE to purchase – especially at the start of the pandemic.</li> </ul>
13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was also difficulty obtaining non-PPE material for typical operations (e.g., parts for equipment repair). This caused project delays in some cases. Biggest impacts were felt at the beginning of the pandemic.</li> </ul>
<b>BUDGET MODIFICATIONS:</b> eliminating or modifying services due to anticipated (or actual) budget cuts	
14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budget impacts varied widely across surveyed agencies – from minimal impacts to eliminating full-time positions to cutting budgets by 20%.</li> </ul>
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agencies utilized a variety of strategies to address budget shortfalls: imposing hiring freezes, suspending salary increases, eliminating positions, deferring recurring work, reducing provided services, suspending contracted services, and delaying planned projects.</li> </ul>
16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delaying major (or large) projects, not starting new planned projects, and agency-wide hiring freezes were common.</li> </ul>
17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delayed projects and deferred routine work/maintenance may have a “carry over” impact past the pandemic.</li> </ul>

## **FUTURE WORK**

Future extensions of this work will include summarizing how the above challenges were overcome, the main lessons learned, and recommendations (specific to local public works and transportation agencies) for better preparedness in the future.