

Braga response to Covid-19

Braga is acting decisively against Covid-19 and was of one the first Portuguese cities to implement measures, is several cases even before the national government.

The first case reported in Portugal was on 2 March and besides the warnings to the public and the preparing to tackle this pandemic, the city of Braga put in place the Contingency Plan of the Municipality of Braga, following all the rules and suggestions of national and international authorities. Then the city of Braga took action.

First Measures

The first measure was to cancel all leisure and sports activities. This was particularly important for older people and people with special needs. Next day, the municipality closed all public facilities open to the public, like libraries, museums, sports facilities, cultural venues and public services. On the same date, were canceled all events until the end of April, like the biggest agriculture fair in the north of Portugal, musical concerts and several cultural activities.

When the spreading of the virus began to develop fast, the municipality took more extreme measures before the national government acted and imposed the National Emergency State. Non-essential personal working for the city sent to work from home with full salary and closed all public buildings within the city. As all schools in the country were closed, parents could ask for a leave of absence to take care of their kids in school age until 12 years. For the professionals still working and to serve meals to kids for needed families, the city maintained some schools open.

Three day before the National Emergency State and with the support of Braga Chamber of Commerce, the municipality also imposed an executive order to close all non-essential shops across the city. The restaurants were ordered to close and only sever in take-away mode. The city exempted several taxes for all business.

Package help the business community

- The city is applying a total exemption of city taxes for occupation of public space, terraces and advertising for all local business closed to public;
- The municipal company of water and waste management, AGERE, announced to exempt the small business the entire fixed component of the urban waste tariff and a reduction of 25% for all commercial clients;

- InvestBraga, the municipal agency to foster the economic development, is helping the business community about the extraordinary measures for companies and workers, specifically about Social Security, technical guidance on business incentives and the special assistance to tourism companies. This is intended to be a practical guide to support citizens, families and businesses in combating the effects caused by the new coronavirus and COVID-19. ~
- Startup Braga, with the cooperation of Chamber of Commerce, organized a webinar to help small businesses foster ability to go online, regarding different aspects like e-commerce; work remote and videoconference. In addition, is helping business giving free consultancy on this subjects.

Measures to citizens

- All procedures related to Urban Planning can be done electronically, as well as all type of procedures related to the city hall;
- The city created a public hot line by email and phone to attend questions related to Covid-19 and is working 24/7;
- To not penalize the domestic consumers by the more than likely increase in water consumption, AGERE will reschedule in terms of tariffs so this additional consumption will not be charged. AGERE also decided to put a temporarily suspension to water cuts to customers in debt;
- The municipal company of Public Transportation (TUB) will not charge anyone during this period and reduced the number of buses circulating, preventing people to use the public transportation.
- Thinking of health professionals and citizens infected with COVID-19 and in order to prevent the abandonment of pets, the Municipality established a partnership with private companies and NGO to receive animals during this period;
- Considered the restrictions imposed by the Portuguese Government to the circulation of the people in the public spaces, the Municipality of Braga did also several measures to enforce this:
 - Suspend access the free access to Wi-Fi in public spaces;
 - Closed all parks and recreation public spaces;
 - The Municipal Police is patrolling the streets and parks to prevent people from circulating in closed spaces and in the streets;
 - The Municipal Police is also patrolling some entries of the city to impose order;
 - There are Civil Protection vehicles patrolling the streets and equipped with a sound system to inform and alert the population about the warnings and recommendations of national authorities to stay home;

Social measures to help older people and low income families

- The city created a free hot line called +60 to support senior citizens in isolation or in a vulnerable situation. This line is to help seniors in tasks like buy goods in supermarket or urgent medicines. The older people can call the line and then the goods are delivered in their homes by a municipality team;

Provide assistance to the social sector

- Regarding the problems in several nursing homes, the city announced will pay for tests of Covid-19 for all professionals and for the elderly in its Screening Center.
- The city is receiving several donations, particularly with masks and other protective material. And now is donating this material to nursing homes to help the professionals to work protected
- The city is also preparing a buy to some protective material from abroad to internal use, but also to help the nursing homes and other organizations from the social sector;

Help for the hospitals and health community

- The Youth Hostel (managed by the city) is available for free use by the medical staff during this period of crisis. All professionals working in the local hospitals can ask to sleep in one of the bedrooms of this municipal hostel if they do not want to go home. The city also contacted all local hotels to provide the same assistance to the health community and several are doing the same.
- On the 19 of March and responding to increasing demands for the public and the insufficient response from the national authorities, the city of Braga announced will open a Screening Center for Covid-19, in cooperation with the Northern Health Administration and a private Labs company. This Screening Center started to operate preferably aimed to citizens' suspect of infection and previously referred by the National Health Service. Is a complement the existing hospital services in comfort and safety. Tests are carried out in a "drive thru" model, in which the citizens do not need to leave their vehicle to make the test.

Cooperation at international level

- Braga are in close contact with the Chinese friendly city of Shenyang to learn more from them how to fight this virus and we are now establishing a connection with their response team to COVID-19. They surpassed with success the crisis of COVID-19 and are with one month without any new infected. Shenyang made a generous donation with medical protection kits to Braga. Moreover, we are now working together to buy some goods from Chinese companies;
- Braga is also communicating with several cities and networks to share experiences and to learn also from other cities.