



COVID Lessons: 2. Many had no plan B 3. Crisis is not the time for silos

This project began with inquiries to numerous contacts at Eagle County about adaptations made within the organization during the first months of the COVID response. These conversations resulted in a long story about governance during a pandemic. That piece has been serialized into these enumerated COVID Lessons newsletters being shared as a series. The intent is to gather comments, reflections and stories from readers. At the end of each is an opportunity for you to share your story, or you can just email me directly at jstavney@nwccog.org. Note that the project focus is on organizational lessons which are likely long-term best practices for our member jurisdictions. The project does not attempt to dive into the nuances of science or public health policy.

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LESSON #2:

Lessons #2: In a culture famous for “ski-bums” just getting by, a vast number of workers and families had no financial Plan-B.

Nationally, [Forbes reported](#) in 2016, prior to COVID, that 63% of Americans don't have enough savings to cover a \$500 emergency. In 2018, The Fed released a “Report on the Economic Well-being of U.S. Households for 2018” that revealed [according to CNBC](#) that “an unexpected expense of \$400 can force more than 1/3 of American adults in to a difficult financial situation.” So, perhaps it was no surprise that the valley that supported a luxury vacation ski and summer destination was quickly thrust into an economic crisis that was very personal. Many businesses and local governments were just returning to revenue streams and employment levels preceding the 2008 financial crisis as COVID hit. The ski area shut down and supporting businesses, many of which were on record breaking trajectories for revenues as they entered the last weeks of ski season were poised for profit, and then suddenly the ski areas closed. The rug was pulled, especially for those workers living paycheck to paycheck.

“We opened the assistance program up and got pummeled with over 3000 requests,” said Kris Widlack, Eagle County Director of Communications. The idea had been to provide a central call center for the many non-profits in the valley “to help people enroll in other programs to get help first, but then 3000 people needed immediate help with rent, food and other basic needs.” Widlack praised county employees trained and re-deployed to do intake, screen and qualify callers for aid. They “started calling these people back who were already at the end of their

ropes. It was heart wrenching.”

LESSON #3:

Lesson #3: In a Crisis response, there are roles, but there cannot be Silos.

Within days of the emergency declaration and public health restrictions that followed, the handful of Health and Human Services employees trained to qualify residents for public assistance in Eagle County were overwhelmed. County Commissioners authorized monies for direct assistance with the disaster declaration. Those monies were intended as a “backstop” after directing citizens to partner with charitable agencies according to County Manager, Jeff Shroll. By the end of March, a massive internal shift of human resources was required. More than 80 of the County’s 500+ employees would go through a 4-hour training to assist Health and Human Services so that the direct assistance could be distributed accurately and quickly for those in need. These local responses occurred concurrently with the March 25th passage of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, though local dollars were pouring out well before CARES act dollars. The local assistance provided a bridge to a bridge, and after CARES act dollars were expended in later summer, provided yet another bridge.

In mid-March, at Eagle County, employees drawn from departments such as the clerks’ office to community development department would be out of their comfort zones, serving as intake techs for direct assistance programs. They were told hundreds of heart-wrenching stories while performing intake to process that would qualify over 3,000 requests from citizens requesting direct aid before the end of April. The safety net for many Eagle County residents, for being home to Vail and a lot of second homeowners, was surprisingly thin for the many service workers who support the mountain resort economy. It shouldn’t have been a surprise. There are a lot of sole proprietor businesses, and a handful of large employers. The backbone of the tourist economy in the rural resort region is small businesses such as main street retail and restaurants with fewer than 50 employees.

In a phone interview, Eagle County Manager, Jeff Shroll said of how county employees pitched in from the start of this COVID crisis, that it was “all hands-on-deck.” He noted that coming from outside the organization (recently), “there were always rumors about the county, when you come from the town, part of that was the silos, and lack of collaboration.” He continued, “that was changing even before COVID. We saw that at Lake Christine: it was truly all-hands-on-deck. From office employees setting up tents and chairs, that event pulled people into roles they were not typically used to. When this one ramped up this time it caught us off guard for a bit, like the country, then we got to business.”

Today, most power and influence in local government is relational rather than hierarchical or positional. Those who understand this thrive. In 2018, Jeff Shroll was a new manager at Eagle County. Though he had 24 years of experience as a Town Manager 7 miles down the road in Gypsum, his April start date was followed by literal summer trial by fire. In April 2018 he took the job which one long-time mentor recommended against accepting, noting that “40 percent of the organization does not answer to you. It is not like a town. You will hate it.” Shroll remembers that advice with a smile. The comment refers to the many employees who work for the other elected officials in County Government structure in Colorado who are not “under” the Board of County Commissioners who hire the Manager. Being a County Manager isn’t fully about positional leadership. It is more about influential and relational leadership. That group of elected officials is as diverse as the Sheriff, the assessor, surveyor, clerk, treasurer, and coroner and they each have their own departmental fiefdoms. Power battles between elected officials and public administrators hired by other elected officials are legendary. Town Managers, by contrast, though stuck between a board and the staff, are granted broad authority over the organization. They really are “in charge” at least until they try to exercise that authority.

“Rather than lay people off,” said Shroll, county employees “went to work. Public Health needed investigative teams to confirm claims for assistance. Health and Human Services needed to man phones. The County Commissioners immediately authorized \$900,000 in rent, food, and shelter assistance.” By filling out a single page form on-line, residents could request assistance for just about anything, and it took nearly 100 employees to answer the calls, assess the requests and disperse the funds. Shroll emphasized that it was not only county employees. Those helping coordinate assistance included “partners” including banks and non-profits. For employees and partners, retraining was quick. They watched a two-hour training on how to respond. There were other roles to fill. Shroll credits “Innovation and Technology employees distributing PPE, Community Development employees who suddenly had no land use files being “in charge of rebuilding the economy,” in part by leveraging their skills through “shepherding public meetings” on reopening. The county’s MIRA bus which travels to Latino communities to deliver services was repurposed for COVID testing. Those who didn’t have an essential role were given one.

When asked if the County was considering laying off employees, Eagle County Commissioner Kathy Chandler Henry in a televised Community Conversation event on May 14th noted “83 employees, including an elected treasurer, road & bridge workers and animal services employees” shifted from their regular roles to helping disperse the County’s emergency public assistance village. That kind of cooperation would have been difficult to imagine in an old-school county culture. That willingness to adapt may not only help revive the community, but also preserve jobs. There have been crises when those who “keep their heads down” disappear into the bureaucratic “not-my-job” mentality until the storm passes. This is not one of those situations.

We'd love to hear your stories about "No Plan B" or "Silos" --

To review Lesson 1 [click here](#)
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