



## COVID Lesson #1 - Communication through the structures

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](mailto: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 #1:

**Addressing a Crisis across distributed structures of governance inside and outside an organization is not the same as it would be in a Command and Control structure.**

Ski season was in full swing when the first COVID Cases were identified in Eagle County, Colorado during the first week of March 2020. Though stories of the virus came out of China in the first weeks of 2020, it did not arise widely to the consciousness of the American public until it spread to Europe in February, and even then it wasn't taken seriously by most. The virus quietly raced around the globe while Colorado high country resorts continued to draw private jets and commercial flights full of "world class" visitors whose premium trips are the backbone of the tourist economy. Neighboring Counties each had international visitors who brought the virus in the weeks prior. Unseen were the converging microbes mingling among visitors and Coloradoans that would make neighboring Pitkin, Eagle and Summit Counties one of the first hotspots for the COVID-19 outbreak in the nation. A visitor to Summit County was one of the first two cases announced in Colorado.

If there is a study in fragmented governance, Eagle County may be the poster child. There are 107 tax districts, 7 municipalities all directed by more than 100 elected officials, nine of which are at the County. When it comes to a span of control, each of those entities, and each of those electeds think of themselves as independent. For the most part, it is easier to let each have their own realm. With 500

employees at Eagle County, that makes for a lot of internal siloes as well. With a crisis, the most obviously effective management strategy is to have a clear line of command. This is not how anything was structured. Within the County organization, efforts over many years resulted in unseen organizational roots developed across the typically calcified department structures.

As is typical to Colorado Counties, “the county” was actually an accumulation of different elected officers from Coroner to Surveyor to Clerk to Sheriff, each managing their own staff. These included nearly ten elected officials, including a Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) who are three elected officials charged with hiring a County Manager and overseeing the policy and budget for the entire organization (unless you asked one of those other officials). As is the case in most counties, the BOCC usually had two direct reports, a County manager and County attorney. Counties in Colorado each host both a public health department and by statute, an Emergency Manager, usually a one-person “department” who only has real influence across an organization only if it is bestowed and supported from above. Both departments are not often the focus of elected leaders unless there is an incident.

The extent of distributed governance also extends outside of the County organization to the many other entities which the public may see unified as “local government” which are not in any way structurally aligned. Not only do the County Commissioners or the County manager not necessarily have control over the internal silos, they definitely have no managerial control over these many external entities. Within the geography of the county are municipalities; cities and towns, and special tax districts which manage an array of government services from rural fire districts, electric co-ops, water & wastewater utilities to schools, water conservation, recreation or libraries, and in some cases districts that provide many of those services to a specific neighborhood. The overlapping configuration of various taxing authorities is dizzying. For all that, because of hosting the public health agencies, during COVID, counties across the rural resort region of Colorado became the lead jurisdiction in the COVID disasters declared. Eagle County was no exception.

As would come to be appreciated, County officials drew upon roots that had been intentionally developed over time which connected their organizations with other public entities such as those municipalities and special districts. They also drew upon rooted relationships, perhaps less established, with the local private and non-profit sectors outside of the organization. Upon those roots, local governments would draw strength and fortitude for a growing response to a public health crisis of unprecedented scale and duration in modern times. It would not be hyperbolic to say that many of these roots were developed by fire as much as by tackling the perennial challenges that included meeting workforce needs, regional transportation or the affordable housing deficit –these were slow moving issues; “ice” if you will. By fire; it is meant that these communities learned through coordinated interagency responses to a number of life-threatening wildfires in the years leading up to COVID. During those fires, many relationships were strengthened, some were discovered. All of these would be drawn upon in 2020.

As March 2020 began, leaders at Eagle County government in Colorado had no idea they would be asking the majority of residents to stay home for an extended period; weeks that turned into months, in order to avert a public health crisis that threatened to overwhelm local health care facilities. In the very places where the primary local currency, arguably, was social fabric, leaders would be instructing citizens on practices for “social distancing” to prevent any community transmission that could not be traced. Nor did they have any inkling how COVID-19 and the public health restrictions put in place would impact the community, and when writ large in a patchwork of similar decisions across the nation, would lead to public confusion and to an economic crisis that rolled into a mental health crisis, and be magnified through the intensity of other social crises in the summer of 2020. Within a week of the first case in March, the 55,000 residents of Eagle were declared an emergency due to the COVID 19 outbreak locally. This would prove to be no two-week wildfire.

*“COVID is a public health crisis quickly turning into a long-haul public communications crisis. We are doing public health messaging while we have a breakdown in mental health as this also becomes an economic crisis... This is a marathon.”*

--Jeff Shroll, Eagle County Manager, reflecting in late April, 2020, just 7 weeks after first county COVID case

Do you have additional information you'd like to share with us relative to Lesson 1?

**Yes, I'll send Jon an email**

Select

**No, but love the information.**

Select