



## COVID Lesson #5: Having coffee and doughnuts regularly, matters. Know your professional peers before a crisis.

### LESSON #5:

Hosting a major event is like planning for a disaster.

There is a saying among emergency managers that during an incident is no time for introductions, meaning you should know people you will need to know in a crisis well before a disaster is declared.

Build your relationships before an incident. The accumulation of deliberate connections, finding common ground and mutual interest, “breaking bread” or whatever you choose to call it can look like a waste of time to some. It is not.

That is something I did not understand as a new elected official at Eagle County in 2009. I remember approving the funding, but I didn't really understand why we were clearing out space in the basement of the county building for a very expensive room with a bunch of desks, tv monitors and phones. I was told that it was to be an Emergency Operations Center. At the time I was a little incredulous at the cost. “When was our last natural disaster?” No one could remember. So, I had been surprised to learn that the Town of Vail had “stood-up” an incident management center, and staffed it with a team in a mobile incident command center for World Alpine Ski Championships, and that it also had been doing so for such events as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade or a summer concert series for years. Every event managed as an incident helped prepare the community for when they hosted the next Teva Mountain Games, or international bicycle or ski race, snowstorm that closed the Interstate, or pandemic.

In fact, events were so frequent in the small mountain communities with big names, each with relatively small public works, transit, communications, fire and police departments, that in the decade or two before COVID, specific sub-groups with the same specialties (FEMA through the National Response Framework calls them ESF “Emergency Support Function Annexes”) began making a practice of meeting regularly whether they had anything specific to talk about or not. That too was something I didn't value enough.

To a penny-pinching elected official elected after one of the worst economic crises since the Great Depression, it looked like local governments paying for a lot of coffee and doughnuts for people to get together and tell stories. Most of the boards I was on stopped paying for dinner before meetings and



snacks at other meetings. We cut the coffee budget for the county by over \$14,000. I was proud of that. It seemed to me in the context of a downturn that there were a lot of unproductive good-old-boy gatherings, and a lot more doughnuts than necessary purchased by local governments.

Boy was I wrong. If the world was coming to visit, and if a community wanted an international event to go smoothly, and safely—and not screw up an expensive, reputation-building opportunity, it would take years of thought, meetings and yes, food. There are teams of people who are paid to plan to organize and manage the complex logistics of such events which is a logistical artform in itself; and then there are those, usually those with “day jobs” in other roles who spend much of their time planning for things to not go as planned. Most people think that this is just something that off-duty cops and those security firms that hire sketchy people with lots of tattoos to manage concert perimeters do. Maybe the fire department is involved.

In the Eagle River Valley, it was learned years ago that to host a successful community party, it takes more than one village, more than one or two agencies -- and it took a lot of coffee and doughnuts. These would prove critical many years later.

Decades before the COVID Crisis of 2020, the Public Information Officers (PIO) group in Eagle County decided that meeting regularly was as important as anything each of them did in their “day-jobs.” Mostly, the communications departments across the Eagle River Valley’s town, county, water district, fire, police, and other districts who were in charge of managing communications for the organization were one-person departments. Their day work of packaging good-news press releases was something each could do alone. When things got more complicated, they needed more capacity. That sub-group decided years ago they each had enough going on with event planning or the occasional incident individually that they should meet monthly to swap stories, coordinate and figure out how they could help each other. Some of the discussion was shop-talk.

Some of their discussions were more deliberate. For instance, scenario planning, surmising just about everything that could possibly go wrong, running that scenario to ground, and then making a plan for how to handle it, establishing roles, protocols and systems ahead of time. At some of those meetings which seemed wasted time to a new elected official looking for government waste, I wasn’t so impressed. Didn’t all this talking take them away from their desks, and away from their core work? I was told it takes years to plan for events, and that it had other benefits. For the really big events, that is how it’s done.

The Eagle County PIO group was made up of those with similar roles from entities as diverse as 3 fire and 1 EMS districts, two recreation districts, water & sewer district, a school district, representatives from a handful of municipalities and two agencies from Eagle County and sometimes those from neighboring counties. They convened for their March 2020 meeting as scheduled, the day before the first COVID-19 positive case was reported. It is unclear who brought the doughnuts and who was responsible for the coffee that day. The previous meeting in February had been cancelled due to a major snowstorm, but all were in attendance for the March meeting.

Asked about the origins of the PIO group, taking a moment for an interview eight weeks into her career eye-of-the-storm moment, Kris Widlack, Eagle County Director of Communications, said, “I can’t remember if it was the 1989 or the 1999 ski event that originated the PIO group. The need for coming together has been understood for a long time. In the modern history of the PIO group, the years of planning leading up to the 2015 World Alpine Ski Championships re-coalesced the group because we knew that all eyes would be on us internationally.” Lots of things could go right. Some things could go wrong. We took all those lessons, from 9/11 to Atlanta” and the group scenario planned, established protocols and tactics, who would lead in which case and who would support and how.

It was just a group of public agency communications professionals who talked shop over how to communicate an email/message blast about an accident on I-70 through EC Alert, talked about the other communications tools and tactics at their disposal, revisited responses monthly and sought to improve how they did business, each for their agency and together when an incident ramped up beyond a single jurisdiction’s capabilities. They planned for very bad things to happen at each other’s events and talked about what to do. These were not police officers or federal agents, these were communications experts, some of whom had been relegated to “marketing” roles in their organizations on most days. For years there were not many such incidents, and then starting in 2018 until COVID, there were a lot of opportunities for practice.

The exercises the PIO group ran in the years leading up to the International Ski events came to a head during two whole weeks of a full-blown joint information center (JIC) operations to coordinate all the messaging for all entities involved. The point was to coordinate messaging from all entities, so “we are speaking with the same voice,” said Widlack. That way the lead agency has had capacity far beyond their own staff. The group ran suspicious package at a gate check scenario, multiple structure fires during the event scenarios, domestic terror scenarios down to much more mundane scenarios that made one think they really could predict how many porta-potties were needed and where. After each meeting, they would write up what was learned and document what was agreed to, including who communicates which pieces, what scenarios became the purview of national law enforcement or of international organizations who were running the event. The culmination of all the planning was an entire joint information center plan with protocols. That plan and the relationships formed as it was developed lived on far beyond the event. And there were similar coordination efforts among first responders across the region, fire, EMS

and law enforcement which led to an incident management team similar scenario planning and protocols which would result in similar values added.

All that meant that when COVID hit in March and created a communications crisis for the rest of the year, the PIOs knew each other, and knew how to support each other. They also helped Eagle County keep it's head above water in the early days so it could begin to be proactive with messaging long before some of their peers.

For elected officials and municipal and county upper management similar collaboration was occurring before COVID. It was even more ad hoc, certainly less tactical, but it existed, building the sinews that would later hold. In Eagle, Summit and Grand Counties there were "Mayor/Manager" groups which met regularly to discuss mutual interests, share ideas, strategize on big issues such as affordable housing, forest health, forest management, health care and community planning. These groups were much more fluid in their membership, focus and urgency, but they were often enough to provide a certain relational "glue" that readied leaders for a crisis.

There are 14 or more ESF Functions identified in the emergency response framework. With the complexity involved with planning and responding for emergencies, the relationships need to be established well in advance. Coffee and doughnuts could be the most under-rated of all tools in the toolkit.

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.

**Jon Stavney**  
Executive Director  
[JStavney@nwccog.org](mailto:JStavney@nwccog.org)



**We'd love to hear your experiences about social behavior and the impact of communications.**

**Please send your thoughts [email to Jon here](mailto:jstavney@nwccog.org)**