



From the Director's Desk: COVID Civics Lessons

I'm disappointed that the 5-year milestone of COVID flew by. Why? Because we are once again experimenting a different type of pandemic together and we could use some of those lessons to guide us today. This is a long narrative, so I thought I'd provide a summary and a warning.

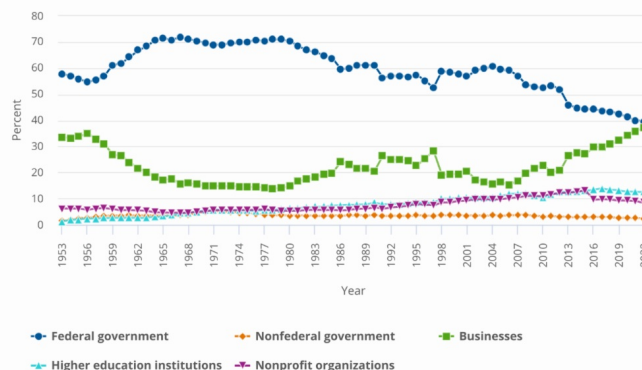
Here is the abstract: *we should have learned the benefits of active government and investment in research from COVID, but the lesson was squandered by government resulting in loss of faith in foundational institutions and public activities. Local governments were central actors during COVID, as was Congress—one built upon lessons, the other didn't. Our individual experiences of COVID were conflicted by a Hamiltonian-Jeffersonian dichotomy we still can't untangle. We should have learned the importance of trust, norms and public structures from COVID, instead we opened ourselves to an abuse of power that wouldn't be tolerated at a local level, but happening under our compliant noses.*

First, government restrictions recommended by agencies now being dismantled did protect us from an even greater outbreak that would have exceeded the final totals of [103,802,702 cases and 1,123,836 deaths in the U.S. \(Johns Hopkins\)](#). While federal leadership waned, state leaders continued to "protect" us a little too well for too many months. The antagonism between the White House and many State Governors undercut the public's image of both. The CDC and NIH updated scientific findings in real time as they evolved. The public is not accustomed to that much change and took it as "truth" changing from day to day. Emerging data was absorbed by many as science itself being wishy-washy, when it was really policymakers adapting.

Nearly everyone submitted quietly in a situation that could have prompted looting and a violent uprising. We didn't. Even the George Floyd protests very rarely devolved to that level, though that is not what half the country heard from their news sources. COVID heightened the fear of chaos which was leveraged by some for their own agendas of fear. For a situation we had not experienced since the Great Influenza of the 1920's, years of research funded by the federal government proved essential to accelerating the race to create a vaccine for this specific strain. How many people were remotely aware of that research that saves lives? We are allowing those experts and that knowledge to be hacked away now, weakening us for [The Coming Plague](#), a fantastic history of the evolution of epidemiology through scientists chasing virulent strains around the globe to keep us safe. The Trump administration's Project Warp Speed [drew](#)

National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics | NSF 24-332

Figure 1
U.S. basic research expenditures, by source of funds: 1953-2022



[from 30 years of NIH and CDC research](#) providing a launch pad to empower big Pharma with a head start to a vaccine. It was among our greatest national accomplishments. Three vaccines were developed and deployed faster than ever before. Why don't we see Operation Warp Speed that way? It is an unfortunate result of liberals not wanting to give credit to Trump and conservatives not wanting to take credit and reinforce the idea that "big" active government is useful.

One way we can conceptualize the federal government is that funded by our taxes, it then does big things we can't do for ourselves as individuals, for instance, recover a city from a natural disaster, provide for a common defense, invest in innovation, build infrastructure and uphold a system of law that protects us from abuses from entities much larger than ourselves – corporations, for example, or from the government itself. More on that later. Another way to conceptualize the federal government is that it is ["an insurance conglomerate protected by a large standing army \(Ezra Klein\)."](#) in round terms, ["forty percent of federal spending is in some form of social insurance...another 25%...goes to fund the military. 6.5% funds the debt and less than 30% goes to anything else."](#) Of that remaining funding, a considerable amount goes into research, the largest proportion of which is for HHS which in 2023 accounted for 49% of federal obligations for federal basic research. Who among us doesn't want a cure for some disease or ailment to be discovered next?

American innovation often begins with this work, when leveraged by companies it has fueled our economy through for decades in the medical, defense, energy, and agricultural sectors. "Nearly a third of US patents rely directly on government funded research," [a Professor at Harvard](#) asks, "is that too much or arguably not enough?" That report finds that corporations are direct beneficiaries of most of those patents. The anti-science movement seemed to reach a peak after the pandemic; now adopted as federal policy that sentiment that experts are no smarter than the average person, and data is no more valuable than intuition, and that we shouldn't support institutions of higher learning, or research has the potential to cripple our economy more dramatically than COVID did. Government research has a fantastic ROI.

Second, government is nimbler and more adaptive than we believe. Janky as it looked to the public with different restrictions enforced in neighboring jurisdictions, most decision-making about COVID policy happened at the County level in close collaboration with State officials. Counties for the most part effectively mobilized existing resources—staff and reserved funds with exceptional results. At least that is what I saw across NWCCOG!

I remain deeply proud of the way local governments across the NWCCOG region re-shuffled individual and departmental roles, in many cases transforming regulations and practices overnight and for months during the pandemic (I wrote [5 COVID Lessons Learned](#) stories at the bottom of this webpage). It put many public servants out of their comfort zones, exposing life-long public servants to public vitriol they had never seen. County Health Departments, Emergency Managers and Public Information Officers tapped on their extended networks, municipalities and counties collaborated on the emergency. Without [prohibitions on evictions enacted by the State of Colorado](#), thousands of renters temporarily without work would have been homeless. It was fascinating to be on regular calls from the Emergency Operations Centers in Grand, Eagle and Summit Counties. I believe that local governments have applied some of that adaptive energy to "the housing crisis" and, though they cannot operate in the fever-dream of a pandemic all the time, hopefully they embrace that lesson that when necessary, they can step up and do big things well and quickly. One outcome following the COVID experience was a paradigm shift to being proactive with a can-do spirit at the local level.

COVID was the last time we experienced a briefly operational Congress. As irrelevant as Congress has made itself today, we forget that "a flurry of bipartisan economic relief bills...unleash(ed) massive deficit spending unprecedented in peacetime" ensuring that "American's material standard of living remained steady through 2020 thanks primarily to Congress' bipartisan resolve," to quote Philip Wallach from his 2023 book [Why Congress?](#) Lingering inflation through 2024, and a debt on future taxpayers was the price of that spending. For all the lessons learned, Congress hasn't adapted to solve things together.

COVID changed us individually too. I remember the anxiety of possible infection, the strange serenity and precious time spent at home making meals, working and studying with the entire family. In the long run that time was very disruptive to my daughter's transition from high school to college, and COVID triggered two genetic conditions that persisted for three years requiring multiple surgeries for my son. It strained our mental and emotional health even though our financial health wasn't much impacted. My wife and I were fortunate to continue our work from home knowing how many others we knew were either working exposed or completely out of work. Since our suffering came from within, we didn't get angry at the system, though I don't blame others for doing so. Ask people who worked the phones at Eagle County for a year about public vitriol. It was off the charts. We failed to understand that as deriving from anything larger than COVID. That was a lesson lost, from which we all are now suffering.

Regionally, NWCCOG played a part in distributing emergency funding to businesses, and I was amazed at how quickly towns like Frisco, Aspen and Vail acted to support local businesses by changing their regulations, providing monetary support. Business and government were briefly conscious of their interconnectedness, at least on Main Streets across Colorado.

What most of us remember is our own impatience with the closures, the inconvenience of social distancing and the eventual "mask mandate revolt," which was strident in Utah and Idaho I noticed driving through. In more than a few gas stations I was the only one wearing a mask in June of 2020. The anger

was latent, but it is true that “the government” at any levels was too slow to shift the balance away from top-down protecting. As Marc Dunkelman would say about federal, state and local governments they leaned-into a Hamiltonian preference for “centralized power” at the onset of the COVID crisis response (to close institutions, create and distribute a vaccine, provide economic relief), while then failing to defer back to our Jeffersonian preference for ceding power to the people. Government robust response became government overreach (preventing schools, events, businesses to open, and dropping mask requirements). The citizens certainly made clear their preference to get back to work and move on. The public was making very different risk calculations as their economic situations deteriorated than the epidemiologists were.

This dichotomy of government power / restraint has played out for generations in our system. It is a central thesis of Dunkelman’s book [Why Nothing Works](#). He believes that giving voice to the people to stop things has rendered government incapable of doing big things that it once did for tremendous public benefit. COVID was an experience of pure Hamiltonian governance. Most of us didn’t like it. Because many governments failed to adapt back to status quo in as timely a manner as they ramped up to respond, unfortunate losers include a generation of kids ([NIH](#)) where it has been found that those in Republican districts that returned to school sooner are having better academic outcomes and fewer mental health issues than those whose schools stayed closed longer in predominantly Democrat districts ([NYT](#)). The public perception of science “having a mostly positive effect on society” is down 16% from a peak at the start of the outbreak ([Pew Research](#)) and a decline in trust in government during an unprecedented time “including a pandemic, a policing crisis, and concerns about the integrity of the election,” saw confidence decline ([NIH funded academic study](#)). Interestingly that decline in confidence was greater among whites than other races; given the concurrence of the George Floyd incident, that fact is amazing. Bottom line is that somehow the current narrative on the government’s role in COVID was that it was mostly a failure resulting in inflation and eventually the high price of eggs.

A “pandemic” is defined as ‘a widespread occurrence over a whole country or the world at a particular time’ targeting citizens and corporations. The current pandemic is prompted mostly by “simple malice” and one powerful man’s insatiable hunger for retribution. Just about everything that has occurred may be written in Project 2025 but has been enacted in a manner far beyond the most robust Hamiltonian vision of executive power. The public has not pushed back on that power grab.

By the way, “simple malice” is an unconstitutional abuse of power confirmed by SCOTUS (decision written by Chief Justice Roberts) in a case that condemned [“arbitrary government decision-making.”](#) That case came from capricious actions—wait for this—by a local government—for arbitrary imposition of an easement for public utilities which was found to violate the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. Yup. Accountability pertains to all levels. Zoning enforcement without a “rational nexus,” may be a mini version of someone in power using it wrongfully, but not if you are on the other side of it. Municipalities get taken to court often for overreach when it is proven to be an act of abuse of power. Ask the folks at CIRSA.

A sensitivity against an abuse of power at any level, whether from a person, a government body or a corporation is very much a Jeffersonian sentiment that Americans hold as sacred; in fact, we fought a Revolution over it, and the entire Bill of Rights [was written to protect citizens specifically from government overreach](#). In an intriguing Washington Post story, law professor, Aziz Huq says “Under our Constitution, the government must be motivated by law, not hatred or caprice.” Whether that caprice is not-malicious, such as keeping mask mandates too long, or overtly malicious matters—[“consider the range of actions legible in terms of ‘hatreds’: stripping former aids of security details, rescinding security clearances of perceived enemies, blacklisting law firms with Democratic connections; demanding \\$400 million from a university that once refused to pay the president...\\$400 million; and even denying Maine residents the ability to register their children with Social Security numbers...because...was ticked at the governor of Maine for not being real cordial to the president;”](#) such malicious use of power is blatantly illegal. To translate to local government, imagine if the County clerk decided to not issue license plates to you because of how you voted in the last election and reported you to the Sheriff for driving without valid registration? You could hand them some cash if you had enough to resolve the situation (like a Mexican police officer). Or you could pay the Sheriff “for protection” like a mafia. If you didn’t imagine a Judge ignoring due process, what if he issued a sentence upon you without a day in court? What if you didn’t even get as far as a judge and were [imprisoned indefinitely, or suddenly deported](#), without recourse to the law. In another country due process of American law does not extend to you. That is occurring at scale presently, causing a self-inflicted pandemic on the American people and apparently driving foreign policy. Why is it we have not understood that our system worked for us during the most significant crisis (yet) of our lifetimes?

To end on a good note, enjoy some comic relief from Keenan Thompson playing Cornell West asking, [“was it an act of malice?”](#) and Maya Rudolph playing Maya Angelou, responding, “no Dr. West, it was an act of whimsey.” You be the judge. Watch the video. The difference matters in morality and in the law.

Jon Stavney

Executive Director - NWCCOG

JStavney@nwccog.org

[Removing I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#) from the United States Naval Academy Library-that’s an act

2025 NWCCOG Regional Economic Summit



**Thursday, May 1 | 8:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. | Silverthorne Pavilion
Registration Now Open!**

[Register here](#)

Join us for a day of engaging speakers, information sharing, collaboration and networking. This event will offer sessions on key topics including economic trends in the region, initiatives to support our workforce including housing and childcare solutions, economic planning in uncertain times, trends/challenges/opportunities in our tourism-based economy, and more.

Thank you to our sponsors & supporters:



Vintage Awarded CDPHE Grant



Congratulations to Ceci Peterson, Vintage's bi-lingual Program Specialist, for receiving a mini grant! Ceci applied for the Enhancing Education on Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias (ADRD) for Populations Who Experience High ADRD Burden Mini-Grant, and was granted \$2,500 from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

The grant will to towards filming and translating Vintage's annual caregiver conference in Steamboat Springs on June 11th. This year's conference keynote speaker is Kay Adams and she will present on Alzheimer's and associated dementia, early detection and diagnosis, treatment, care, and services. As this in-person presentation will be in English, Vintage knows this will create a language barrier for some individuals. Vintage requested \$2,500.00 to film and translate Kay Adam's presentation into Spanish and make the recording accessible with captioning in English for individuals with hearing deficits.

After the presentation is recorded, translated, and captioned, Vintage (in partnership with aging providers across the six-county region) commits to providing at least two hybrid (in-person and virtual) Spanish language presentations. These presentations will make dementia education accessible to those geographically or culturally isolated.

Additionally, at the events, Vintage will promote dementia flyers and educational collateral for ADRD emphasizing early detection and diagnosis information, myths, and linkages and resources to local community agencies.

Changes to Administration on Community Living

On March 27th, the Trump Administration dismantled the Administration on Community Living (ACL), which was created in 2012 and supports and governs Area Agencies on Aging under the Older Americans Act. The functions and programs under ACL are being moved to other existing agencies within HHS, such as the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

All ACL regional field office staff members' jobs were eliminated, as well as DC-based workers in the offices that support ACL's policy, communications, budget, evaluation and other departments. There are many questions about how these changes may affect Vintage's funding and the services Vintage provides internally and through provider contracts.

Vintage Caregiver Conference

Caregiver Conference

June 11, 2025

FREE

10am-2pm

Colorado Mountain College
Steamboat Springs

RSVP by 5/28

For additional details,
to register & agenda:

QR Code



Phone: 970-531-4087

Website:

<https://2025CareConference.eventbrite.com>

Join our **free** caregiver conference to learn about the emotional challenges of dementia caregiving and accepting help for the journey as well as tips and tricks to safely move your loved one without injury.



Comment on the Draft Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)

The **Draft FY2026 - FY2029 STIP** has been released for public review and comment. You can find the Draft STIP here: <https://www.codot.gov/programs/planning/transportation-plans-and-studies/stip>

Each State is required to develop a Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) document per 23 U.S.C. 135. This plan provides a snapshot of transportation projects that Colorado plans to execute, continue work on, or complete during a four-year timeframe. All transportation projects that are funded with Federal transportation dollars must be included in this document.



Please take a moment to review the STIP and forward any comments or questions you have to jamie.collins@state.co.us on or before May 9, 2025.

In addition, the Colorado Transportation Commission held a public hearing for the Draft STIP at their regular meeting in April. You can watch the recording [here](#).

Upcoming Board Meetings

Thursday, June 5, 2025 – NWCCOG Energy Warehouse in Gypsum

Full Council & EDD Board Meeting

Primary Agenda Items: Approve March meeting minutes, approve Q1 Financials; EDD Board meeting

Northwest Colorado Council of Governments | P.O. Box 2308 249 Warren Ave. |
Silverthorne, CO 80498 US

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