

The COVID-19 pandemic this past year proved how unprepared local towns were in case of a disaster. As the pandemic hit, small rural towns in Wisconsin were caught off guard. Through determination, hard work and dedication, we worked through it. With a wealth of information and misinformation on the television, most towns looked to the CDC for direction in times of need. This past year exposed the gaps in the current systems of local towns and villages. We put a “band-aid” on the issues at hand but now towns are working on future plans. It appears this will only be more challenging. “Some of the largest cities in the U.S. have reported large numbers of people moving away for more rural portions of the country in 2020” (Roper). This could cause future pandemics to spread through small towns quicker as populations increase.

Now that we have been in this pandemic for over a year, the CDC has learned there was a lack of communication on emergency health plans in rural areas. They have many ideas of how to assist these individuals in the future. Community volunteers can make and distribute masks, assist older adults, or people with disabilities, and create a phone tree system with family, friends, and neighbors (CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). These ideas are a great start, but it still doesn’t address how we make sure all individuals are aware of the community issues at hand and to understand where they can get assistance.

My idea is to expand further on a county level on the Rural Communities and Emergency Preparedness booklet made by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy’s. If this could be indoctrinated on a local level, amendments could be made for that specific area of the state and then it would be mailed to everyone in that county. It would list specific key volunteers the community has already partnered with help guide others when we face adversity. Who to contact, where to pick up supplies, how to get to a doctor’s appointment would be highlighted topics. Community organizations could partner together so it would already be identified where

to get assistance. As an example, if you need food or water, the booklet could say to contact the local feed mill in town. This location would already have supplies in storage as a back-up for the community. Since supplies cost money, fundraising or donations would have to happen throughout the year.

Some money generating ideas could come from thinking outside of the box. In the summer, if farmers and local growers donate a percentage of their crops, volunteers could sell them at community farmer's markets. The profits could go towards future purchases or if there is a pandemic in the summer, these farmers could donate items to families in need. The farmers could also donate meat if they are able to ship and process extra cattle. The farmers would receive tax breaks for their assistance during a difficult time.

When local stores have rebates, those could be donated to a community fund. Since our Wisconsin area has a Menards, the 11% rebate slips could be turned in to an organization who would be in charge of sending in the rebates and getting the checks. Those could be cashed in to buy food, water, clothing, and non-perishable items for the community depending on what hardships they face. Many of the rebate slips that are not worth the cost of a stamp are thrown out. Collectively this is a lot of money each week that goes unclaimed. My family had suggested to Menards to have a collection bin for rebate receipts to donate to a charity instead of sending them in. Personally, I would donate my slips even if they were for \$10 or more if I know it's going to a good cause. I think other families would do the same. Menards could revise their rebate form to donate to local charities instead with a write in collection site for your local town – i.e., Oconto Falls, Shawano, Bonduel.

Rural communities could have town hall meetings bi-monthly to create and discuss action plans in case of emergencies, so most people know what to do. The ones that are able to attend

can be key points of contact to help others that aren't aware of where to get assistance. These town hall meetings should establish an emergency phone line, emergency Wi-Fi, and emergency all call to the registered phone numbers in the county. The all-call phone numbers are already set up for Amber Alerts, so they just need to utilize them in case of another pandemic or other natural disasters.

If there were better tax breaks set up for solar power, it would incentivize more homeowners to install it in their homes. Any excess power created and stored over a certain amount would be sold back to the power company. That profit would go into a community fund. This account could be used for purchases such as generators, free internet, use of computers or iPad, etc. It would also provide relief to those in need of paying their electric bills. If the Wisconsin solar payback program had better federal or state tax incentives and rebates, more people would have interest. Currently the payback is not equal to the initial investment. "In Wisconsin, the average solar payback period is 11.96 years" (Energy Sage).

Another fundraising idea is to eliminate the state lottery tax credit and collect the extra money in an emergency relief fund. This would provide support for families in need at a local level. Supplies could be bought such as canned goods, bottled water, baby formula and food, clothing, etc.

The COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on many rural Americans. We have learned that we need to better prepare as a community to work through issues together. By looking at some creative solutions, we can come up with strategies to help one another and plan for a better tomorrow.