

"What lessons can town governments take from the COVID-19 pandemic to improve their emergency management systems and prepare for and respond to future disasters?"

Panic and hysteria arose when COVID-19 struck; it was a time of chaos and confusion, as well as fear. Everyone across the globe felt the impacts of the virus, which left a lasting impression on everyday life. Town governments scrambled to aid their citizens, taken off guard by the unexpected pandemic. The town officials worked tirelessly to protect, support, and lead their communities. Lessons were learned and there were many things that could have been improved upon. Emergencies are a part of life, and the COVID-19 pandemic only highlighted areas in which town governments can improve and grow.

Town governments are responsible for a lot when it comes to the community. When COVID-19 hit, many people lost their jobs and their primary sources of income; this led to poverty, and many people struggled to just make it through the day. Small businesses also felt the significant impact of the pandemic, which left many of them struggling to stay open and survive. Town governments had to move to assist these people in any way they could, but not a whole lot could be done to aid these struggling individuals. Many towns didn't have a communication plan in place and these governments needed help informing these businesses and citizens of resources that could help them. Most town governments in Wisconsin were used to the brick and mortar mode of communication which was not feasible in a pandemic, and they had to rush to find communication solutions for their residents. While most localities had Internet access, smaller towns and rural areas were more likely to either not have Internet access or to have slow connections. For those with Internet access, e-mail was seen as an effective mode of communication given its speed, flexibility, and record-keeping capabilities (Yeh 2009). Many

towns do not hold a database of active email accounts for their residents; this was a major hit when it came to the pandemic, due to the difficulty of communicating with citizens. Town governments can easily work to have email addresses on file to timely send information and updates out to the community. COVID-19 emphasized the need for these simple but effective solutions for communication.

The Covid 19 pandemic taught us that the biggest component in a Town's preparedness for any emergency or disaster is the ability to communicate and reach those in the community who need help. Local governments can respond better to their community's needs when they have a clearer picture of what those needs are. Learning how to better reach the local community, and how to improve communication with them was an essential lesson taken from the COVID-19 pandemic. One important element to improving communication is incorporating technology and improving access to technology to help streamline processes. One way of doing that is offering centralized information sources online or through a helpline. Many of the towns had not advanced their technology infrastructure, and many of the towns had to adapt rapidly to respond to the community needs and often fell short. Towns should be required to have a comprehensive communication and technology plan for emergency response moving forward based on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Wisconsin takes an all-hazards approach to emergency planning and preparedness by developing a comprehensive function-based emergency response framework that can be activated across a spectrum of types of emergencies (Williams 2020). The goal of all emergency planning is to create systems to ensure that responders from multiple services, sectors, jurisdictions, and levels of government can effectively communicate, coordinate, and integrate their efforts.

Technology is now a crucial component of life and having a comprehensive plan in place could have allowed town governments to assess the needs of citizens through things like online surveys and forms. If the government agency can properly assess the needs of its constituents, it can formulate response plans to help residents. Surveys help local governments with engagement with their communities; they also help better adapt and respond based on local community needs that are dynamic and evolving. Many Wisconsin towns do not have access to high-speed internet; there are major gaps in broadband access that plague rural areas of Wisconsin (Kaeding 2021). Hundreds of thousands of people are going without high-speed internet. Yet, local governments might play a unique role in identifying underserved areas and connecting internet providers to programs that can help pay for broadband infrastructure. Small governments can work to support better internet access for their residents. Especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, internet access has become essential for everyday life. Knapp from Wisconsin Public Radio even says, "it's the pandemic, the work from home, the schooling from home that made that 10 megabyte (speeds) now inadequate," referring to the low internet speed most Wisconsin residents deal with. The virus forced everyone to stay at home, which therefore required internet use for essential things like working from home and schooling from home. Many grants have started to become available to help speed up this process for rural Wisconsin areas. Towns should be encouraged to recognize the need to improve access to their communities. This can help to improve their response when it comes to emergency situations such as COVID-19 and making sure every citizen has the same access to resources like internet.

COVID-19 hit the world by surprise, but Wisconsin Towns can learn from this experience and improve their communication and emergency plans. The pandemic forced town officials to understand the importance of technology and access to the internet, as well as

communication and engaging with their community. Emergencies happen, but now these small governments can be more prepared next time; lessons were learned through the COVID-19 pandemic, some that now will shape everyday life. Towns can now move forward together to tackle problems utilizing planning and by learning from past mistakes.

Work Cited

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