

“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” “The only thing certain is uncertainty.”

While many are familiar with these mottos, they really sum up a core piece of American culture and thinking. As a society, we have been conditioned to expect the unexpected, so much so that thousands of people today make their living trying to predict the unpredictable. However, very few would have guessed that in 2020, our world would face a global pandemic. COVID-19 ushered in a wave of countless business closures, public health mandates, and disruptions to public sector operations, putting greater pressure on town and other local governments. As society begins to emerge from the pandemic, all levels of government have an important opportunity to learn from this crisis and improve their emergency responses. Two of the greatest takeaways from this pandemic are the need to develop and maintain strong community communication systems, and to incorporate disease management into emergency planning. Town governments should also recognize that the pandemic has shown the willingness of community members and local businesses to step up and support the overall economic and social health of the community.

As a member of the Sun Prairie Sustainability Task Force, I experienced firsthand how the pandemic not only affected my community, but also local government. As a subcommittee of the Sun Prairie City Council, the task force worked to create a list of recommendations on how our community could be more sustainable, which were then forwarded to the city council. As the sole student representative, I worked to share my classmates' views on sustainability and promote their goals for our community. As the effects of the pandemic continued to present challenges, it became increasingly difficult to evaluate and effectively relay these views to the task force. I relied heavily on video conferencing to communicate with my environmentally-focused classmates, but I knew that I was still missing some valuable viewpoints. With meetings being held virtually and with restrictions on in-person community events, these challenges were certainly experienced by local government elected leaders. This should signal to officials that a

more efficient and equitable form of communication with their constituents should be implemented for emergency management. Of course information, especially evacuation or safety information, should be distributed at a rapid rate and should be available to all residents. Cities and towns should also work to develop more easily accessible ways for community members to, in turn, communicate with their officials. In disaster situations, information from community members can be just as important as information from safety officials, so two-way communication should be a priority. In this way, residents can provide creative ideas that can benefit the community as a whole.

In addition to the form of communication, government officials must focus on providing clear and consistent messages to the community. Throughout the pandemic, constant changes to public health guidelines led to great confusion among the general public as to the current state of regulations. Clarity in communications is necessary in fostering the public's trust in their local leaders.

The Sustainability Task Force worked to create solutions to environmental problems in our community before they became an emergency. I believe that is the key to creating a strong and adaptable community. It is never too early to begin planning for future or uncertain events, and conversely, it is never too late to create a plan either. I believe our task force best defined it in the vision statement we created: "Our mission is to promote and enable our community to embrace a culture that is inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable."<sup>1</sup> An important strategy to achieve resilience is to have a disaster plan created in advance. According to EHS Today, "Communities need to stress the all-hazards approach" to emergency management systems<sup>2</sup>. While many towns and other communities focus solely on natural disasters, it is also important to update plans for newer threats as they emerge. Emergency management systems should not only focus on physical damage or threats, but also economic threats. The pandemic imposed

recession-level economic consequences and necessitated immediate distancing and masking regulations. By having economic recovery plans and potential regulations at the ready, and by coordinating these plans with surrounding communities, emergency management officials can ensure that responses will be as effective as possible. In times of crisis, officials will no longer have to scramble to find solutions. Instead, solution guidelines will already be available, and officials can begin implementing them, decreasing response time and quickening recovery.

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought many negative consequences, it also highlighted the strength and communal spirit of local businesses and residents. Community members rallied around their local businesses, who in turn held countless charitable events. This relationship of mutual support should signal to local government officials that their residents are willing and ready to help their community. Emergency management officials should, therefore, incorporate outreach into their disaster plans. If a crisis strikes one segment of the community, officials should plan to appeal to the rest of the community for aid, whether it be for funds, volunteers, or material donations. A small number of officials can only do so much, but when you bring the entire community together, you can move mountains.

Emergency management systems are essential to mitigating the effects of a disaster. While having a response plan in place is critical, it is important to continue updating these plans in order to have the most effective and efficient response possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered up many opportunities for improving these plans. Emergency management officials should now look to creating more effective and equitable ways to communicate with residents, as well as incorporating disease management into response plans. Officials should also recognize the willingness of the community to help each other and should incorporate this into their planning in a manner that reflects the unique characteristics of their community.

## Bibliography:

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