

Lessons Town Governments Learned as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic

No one can predict a pandemic. This is why town governments must be prepared at all times for any emergency or disaster—having a set response system in place allows town governments to ensure the safety and effectiveness of their decisions. Their decisions significantly impact how the town functions during an emergency and how easily they can recover afterwards. For this essay, I have decided to focus on a specific town's response in Brown County and their lessons learned.

I contacted Michelle Wallerius, the town clerk for the Town of New Denmark. New Denmark is a smaller populated township in southeastern Brown County, with an estimated population of 1,561. This had a smaller effect on the regular functions of the town, and allowed them to continue without much disruption. There were, however, two main aspects that were affected. Starting with the meetings, the town closely followed safety precautions, including social distancing, requiring face masks, and providing hand sanitizer to reduce the spread of the disease (Wallerius). The town also set up virtual access to the meetings, allowing residents to participate and stay involved during the pandemic.

In addition, Wallerius stated, “the real challenge of Covid-19 was the remaining three elections for 2020.” Many of the trained election officials for the Town of New Denmark were not able or willing to serve as the election officials for the April 7th Spring General election due to their age or other health concerns. Wallerius stated that she “took advantage of the National Guard volunteers that were called up by the State of Wisconsin to assist with election administration.” These volunteers underwent over six hours of training to become fully certified, so they were able to ensure a smooth and safe election. Another factor that came into play during the elections was the presence of mail-in/absentee ballots. Approximately 5-7% of the residents in New Denmark voted absentee before the pandemic. For the April 7th election, this percentage increased to 65-70% of all eligible voters (Wallerius). This was a significant change and required more time to be spent counting and ensuring the safety of the ballots. In-person voting still went on. The town took several safety measures as a precaution to reduce the spread of the virus. They installed plexiglass barriers to protect election officials, provided masks and hand sanitizer to all that entered, cleaned the voting booths in-between all voters, and followed social distancing guidelines (Wallerius). These preventive measures most likely prevented the spread of the virus and helped to ensure the safety of the residents.

I tried contacting a larger populated township and two villages in Brown County to see if their responses were any different. Although none of these other towns responded, my assumption is they followed similar protocols as the Town of New Denmark. At the beginning of the pandemic, no one knew the actual effects of the virus. Still, today, we don't fully understand what the long-term effects could be. Not knowing the important initial details of the virus made it extremely difficult for town governments to put safety measures in place, as many didn't know the extent of the symptoms or how the virus could spread. Without knowing these important details, many town governments had to take measures to prevent all possible aspects of spreading the virus. Many town governments across Wisconsin followed the guidelines from the state of Wisconsin as well as the CDC. Listening to and taking these precautions from the

experts and implementing them into their own responses allowed towns to most likely slow the spread of the virus and reduce the total number of infections.

This was a learning experience for all towns, no matter their population size, as they had to be vigilant. In all situations, looking back, you can realize what different measures you could have taken, which makes it a learning experience. The most important thing to recognize as a town government during an emergency is to make sure that you can carry out the essential functions that a town government must provide to ensure freedom and democracy. It is vital to have an emergency operation plan in place that would accommodate a wide range of emergencies and unplanned events (Wallerius). Residents look to local governments for guidance and basic services, especially during times of distress. In my opinion, the most critical lessons town governments should have taken away from the pandemic is that they should be constantly prepared and flexible. By being flexible, it will be easier to continue to function during times of emergency. It is also vital for town governments to follow state and national guidelines. Change starts in smaller communities. By starting locally and in less populated regions, such as towns, you can tackle the virus more quickly, mainly if everyone follows similar guidelines. Town governments have the responsibility of making ethical choices that promote the well-being of the residents. By following an emergency management plan, town governments can continue to function without risk of harming their residents.

It is impossible to predict when an emergency will hit. No one expected that the coronavirus would have as big of an impact on our lives as it did. Still, even through times of distress and uncertainty, many town governments continued providing for their residents. They are in charge of allowing residents to safely attend meetings and protect their freedom to vote, even during a pandemic. Every disaster is a learning tool, and the pandemic has prepared many town governments for the future if such emergencies or disasters were to hit again.

Works Cited

Wallerius, Michelle. Interview. Conducted by Milena Gaworek, 20 May 2021