

Lessons of Preparedness Learned by Town Governments Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the past unprecedented year, our society has gone through ups and downs while combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us were constantly wondering what was going to happen next, how we should react, and then what the impacts of current events would be on our lives. To attempt to find answers to these questions, members of society looked to those of higher knowledge and authority, specifically those in governmental positions of all levels. The individuals in these positions were tasked with challenges beyond what they imagined and from these challenges lessons were learned. Specifically on the local level, town governments learned essential lessons of ensuring emergency management systems were up to date, integrating virtual communication methods, and maintaining communication with the public. These lessons will allow our town governments to have improved emergency management systems that are better prepared for responding to future disasters of all types.

When the pandemic first hit, town governments had to reference their emergency management systems. According to the “2012 Wisconsin Statutes & Annotations 323. Emergency management. 323.14 Local government; duties and powers.” page on *Justia*, “The governing body of each city, village, or town shall develop and adopt an emergency management plan and program that is compatible with the state plan of emergency management adopted under s. 323.13 (1) (b).” This power and ability to create these plans is only part of the role of town governments as they must ensure the plans are in fact realistic as any disaster may occur at any point in time. To understand the importance of an emergency management plan, I conversed with my father, Dean Anhalt, who is the Town Supervisor of the Town of Mishicot. He further emphasized to me the significance of an annual review of emergency plans. Within these reviews, updates should be made regarding new technologies and resources available as well as proper contacts to individuals who can aid in alleviating the effects of disasters. Among these contacts, important people to include are those in higher-up positions such as the Emergency Services Director. In Manitowoc County, Travis Waack is in this position and his department works closely with local governments to protect lives during all stages of disasters (“Emergency Management”). People from other areas are also needed to combat disasters whether they be natural disasters, pandemics, or man-made disasters. Contacts of people such as excavators and food banks should be updated and clearly stated within all town government emergency management systems. The COVID-19 pandemic taught our town governments this lesson of preparedness because of the scrambling many endured at the beginning of the pandemic. Now, with town governments experiencing challenges of knowing what their next steps should be or who to contact, they are better equipped to take action faster in future disasters.

Beyond updating and strengthening an emergency management system, town governments learned the power of technology and virtual communication. In a way, town governments were forced to find new ways to maintain communication with their board members because of the pandemic. The usual in-person meetings and appointments were canceled due to protective measures set in place to limit the spread of COVID-19. However, these cancellations could not mean the end of a functioning town government. Emergency management systems had to be put

in place and other duties still had to be performed, so many boards learned how to use virtual communication platforms. Robbie Sequeira's *The Times* article explains the use of virtual communication that Georgia's Hall County's local governments implemented at the beginning of the pandemic, the article reads, "...officials' decision to move to a virtual live streaming presentation has made it a consistent communication vehicle throughout the pandemic, and that is expected to continue following the pandemic..." The article went on to mention that other services such as payments were now offered as services online rather than only in person. By experiencing the inability to meet in person, town governments became more knowledgeable on the connectivity that online communication platforms can offer them. This lesson of problem-solving will allow for emergency management systems in the future to continue to be implemented successfully by town governments even if in-person communication is unavailable.

Linked to town government virtual communication is the overall lesson of expanding communication reach. Town governments and other levels of government have seen this past year through the pandemic the importance of factual information and proper coordination to share information with the public. In Matt Ward's *ICMA* article, he presents a simple infographic that local government officials should take into account. One of his tips is to, "Distribute handouts to local businesses, non-profit groups, and other local interests to outline available federal and state resources." By taking this step of educating and increasing awareness of the resources available whether they may be relief funds or vaccines in the case of the pandemic or food bank supplies in other disaster cases, the public will be more trusting and connected to their local governments. Uncertainty does not sit well with anyone, so when accurate information is available on the current state of the emergency management system, updates should be provided to the public. All in all, town governments have learned their responsibility of being a communication line between emergency management systems plans and the public.

As we have all seen growth in areas of problem solving and perseverance this year by living through the COVID-19 pandemic, town governments have learned valuable lessons as well. Initially, the lesson of having a usable, realistic, and updated emergency management system plan was learned. With the same importance, lessons of adapting to virtual communication methods and communicating often and honestly with the public were ingrained into the minds of town government officials. Ultimately, this past year has been a learning process and through it our town governments have become better prepared to combat and respond properly to any future disaster with their improved emergency management systems.