

The United States Local Government Response to
COVID:
Resilience in the Face of Adversity

The Essence of Resiliency

- Organizational behavior scholars who study positive employee attitudes and state-like capacities have defined human resiliency as:
 - Positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk (Masten and Reed 2002)
 - The capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure (Luthans 2007)
 - Accepting reality, strongly holding onto values and beliefs, and effectively adapting to unexpected situations (Coutu 2002)
- Organization theorists have defined resilient organizations as those that have (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, and Lengnick-Hall 2011):
 - The ability to rebound from unexpected, stressful, and adverse situations to pick up where they left behind, and
 - The ability to develop new capabilities and create opportunities in the face of adversity

The United States and COVID: The Unenviable Center of a Global Pandemic

- US federal government has bungled its response to COVID:
 - President minimizes health risks of COVID infection and the magnitude and spread of the virus
 - Politicization of mask wearing and business and school closings/re-openings by president (and many governors)
 - Marginalization and undermining of scientists and experts
 - Severe early shortages of personal protection equipment, ventilators, and medicines and other medical supplies
 - Failure to establish a national testing system and contact tracing system
 - Lack of cooperation with World Health Organization, cancellation of funding, formal withdrawal
 - United States has 20% of world cases with just 5% of world's population
 - ~120,000 new infections per day for the past week
- US local governments have borne the brunt of COVID outbreaks:
 - Education, health, law enforcement, and housing are largely local functions
 - Local governments rely extensively on sales tax and state income tax revenue, both of which have plummeted
- The decentralized US federal system, which grants significant autonomy and authority to state and local governments, has created opportunities for local governments to demonstrate resiliency in their response to COVID

How US Local Governments Have Bounced Back

- Issuance of mask-wearing orders
 - Local mask wearing orders issued prior to state orders and in some cases in defiance of state orders recommending but not requiring mask wearing
- Closing of schools
 - Early action by mayors and school superintendents to close schools and move curriculum online, in many instances without prior state approval
- Leveraging IT and social media
 - Creation of dashboards to inform public of COVID infections and hospitalizations, local policy changes, and access to new services;
 - Development of new apps to track symptomatic individuals and undertake contact tracing
- Expansion of testing
 - Expansion of testing for high-risk populations, including the elderly in retirement homes, food industry workers, and the homeless
- Increase in hospital capacity
 - Innovative use of empty college dorms, schools, and recreational facilities and creation of temporary field hospitals for infected individuals

Resilient Local Governments in the United States

- Reductions in jail populations
 - Significant and rapid reductions in overcrowded jails to prevent COVID outbreaks
- Small business support
 - Creative repurposing of local revenue to fund grants, loans, and wage subsidies for struggling local businesses
- Individual and family support
 - New grants and subsidies established to cover housing and utility costs
 - Moratorium on evictions and utilities service cancellations
 - Expanded childcare provision for first responders
- Housing for homeless
 - Innovative use of hotels, schools ,and other public facilities to provide shelter and social distancing for homeless individuals and families
- Food security
 - Establishment of food pantries
 - Ongoing provision of free school meals for students and families (pick-up and along school bus routes);
 - New food deliveries for elderly and disabled individuals

Conclusion

- Despite the failed US federal government response to COVID, local governments stepped into the breach, finding innovative ways to mount effective responses to COVID outbreaks and contain the spread of the virus.
- Resilient local governments operating within a highly decentralized federal system prevented a terrible situation from becoming catastrophic.
- Incoming presidential administration seems committed to using federal authority, influence, and resources to support state and local efforts to combat the virus and limit its spread. This will be critical to future mitigation efforts and the success of a large-scale immunization campaign.