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The Role of Elected Executives in Pandemic Response: Reflections from Salt Lake County

By David Schuld



Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic rages on across the country, with many areas feeling pressure due to the length of the virus' wrath and the associated fatigue of response for all members of the community. As communities look to winter months, where their residents and businesses begin to move indoors, and the threat of influenza sets in, elected leaders need to reinvigorate themselves and their crisis leadership strategy. Elected executives are going to have to exert crisis leadership using the role of navigator as communities yearn for a new normal yet the virus' rampage continues.

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Introduction

Policy-level stakeholders, such as mayors, play a critical role in leading their communities through disaster response and recovery. COVID-19 thrust county and municipal executives throughout the country into positions of crisis leadership, where residents and businesses looked (and continue to look) for understanding and decisions.

Over the past decade, I have worked with leaders of communities and organizations that include the European Parliament in Brussels, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, the Head of the British Army, the British Ambassador to the United States, and now with the Mayor of Salt Lake County. Through each of these experiences, I have had an opportunity to observe and interact with leaders and gain an understanding of what skills and qualities are essential to successfully leading during intense circumstances – whether it be planning a military operation, politics, participating in international diplomacy, responding to an active shooter incident, or maintaining pressure on a virus during a worldwide pandemic.

The intention of this essay is to offer my reflections on crisis leadership here in Salt Lake County and provide elected executives across the country with an understanding of concepts and considerations to incorporate into their own leadership styles. At the time of submitting this essay to *Homeland Security Affairs*, there is no known treatment for COVID-19, nor is there a vaccine. Salt Lake County, like the State of Utah and the rest of the country, faces a surge (the one currently occurring here in Utah is over an 80% increase from its previous surge). The challenge is clear: crisis leadership from chief elected executives is necessary for communities to manage the spread of COVID-19 and find a pathway for its residents, businesses, and community organizations to gain a sense of a new normal where a pandemic is still persistent.

Situation Overview

To understand the efforts taking place in Salt Lake County, I want to provide the reader context of Salt Lake County's place in the world and as part of the pandemic. Salt Lake County is a metropolitan jurisdiction sitting between the Wasatch and Oquirrh Mountains in Utah. Forty percent of Utah's population resides in Salt Lake County¹, which is the heart of a diverse economy and of the state's health system. Salt Lake County marked its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 4, 2020. Unified Command – based off of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS) – was formed a few days prior between the County Mayor, the Director of Salt Lake County Health Department, and the Director of Salt Lake County Division of Emergency Management. Lockdowns began on March 16, 2020,² and over the eight-plus months since then, the state has implemented two systems of transmission mitigation.³

Over the initial 100 days of COVID-19 in Salt Lake County, response efforts provided an opportunity to keep case count levels low and steady. The county was able to maintain pressure on the virus, and the hospital systems of Utah (anchored in Salt Lake County) were spared from being overwhelmed. As reactivation of the economy began, there was an understanding that risk levels of spread would increase. Memorial Day weekend proved to be a turning point for case increases in Utah. On June 27, Salt Lake County mandated face coverings to be worn when social distancing cannot take place. Salt Lake County has also increased its testing significantly, with over 20,000 tests per week being completed in the county alone every week (the federal government recommended 9,000 per week for the entire state.)

Reflections from Salt Lake City

Like other jurisdictions across the country, Salt Lake County's leadership faced the realization that COVID-19 will need to be combated over a long period of time, and that returning to normal life is not likely to happen in the near future. As of October, Salt Lake County's surge continues to increase, and this is the first time since the beginning of the pandemic that its healthcare system is threatened with being overwhelmed. As a result, this is the time to reflect on the crisis leadership strategy implemented here and offer lessons to be incorporated by others.

The crisis leadership style embraced in Salt Lake County can be summarized into three key findings that any elected executive should consider:

- Use science and analysis to inform decisions.
- Keep the public involved.
- Align operational response at all levels, and train for that.

The remaining part of this essay will explore and detail these three key findings and how they have been implemented here in Salt Lake County.

Use science and analysis to inform decisions. From the beginning, Salt Lake County's leadership clamored for a complete understanding of a virus that was relatively new to the world. Very little was known about COVID-19, and new information was coming in every day. Despite the challenge of leading a community with little understanding, the County Mayor embraced the subject matter expertise of those around her to help her navigate uncharted waters of the COVID pandemic. In the first week of March 2020, the County Mayor convened leaders of the county's public health and emergency

management organizations and made a compact: Salt Lake County would make decisions based on scientific evidence and data. Trusting the experts, the county created Unified Command⁴ to ensure that the full spectrum of Salt Lake County's government was in the fight together.

Keys to the ongoing progress of this decision-making strategy here in Salt Lake County included leaders trusting subject matter experts and knowing how to read the data they received, leaning forward and investing in operations that helped develop an understanding of the virus, and using science as a basis for planning and policy decisions.

- **Know how to read data and stay informed.** Like other leaders, the County Mayor looked to the experts to help her understand the trends in data. The County Mayor acted as a sponge of information and analysis and mastered concepts such as case rate increase, doubling rates, and positivity rates. Experts in pandemics, both internal to Salt Lake County Health Department and external consultants and educators, allowed her to appreciate quickly the scale of preparations and the decision-making processes needed during the emergent and sustained responses. To ensure that her knowledge of the virus remained up to date, the County Mayor worked with Unified Command to establish the Intelligence Section of Salt Lake County's COVID-19 Response (I was appointed Section Chief and thus was in a position to observe her leadership directly). Every day, a team of epidemiologists, public safety personnel, and consultants worked together to collect and analyze data that would ultimately end up on the desks of Unified Command. The Mayor and this team of experts were in frequent communication. This kept her well-briefed on the state of Salt Lake County's response efforts, allowing for the development of a strategy and public messaging campaign regarding how residents and businesses could help maintain pressure on the virus and prevent the medical system from collapsing. This campaign continues as cases and hospitalization demands mount.
- **Develop an understanding of the virus in your community.** I learned in my days working alongside the military that to overcome a threat, a comprehensive understanding of the threat is needed. Unlike other disasters elected executives may have planned for, trained on, or participated in previously, COVID-19 did not physically destroy anything. The scale of COVID-19's health impact on the community was invisible until symptoms, hospitalizations, and fatalities appeared. To appreciate the scope of the issue, Unified Command invested in robust response operations, including testing, contact tracing, supporting communities and public safety agencies, and preparing for vaccination. A comprehensive response strategy coordinated by the County Mayor and Health Response continues, and as Salt Lake County continues its difficult battle with the virus, the strategy will need to adapt.
- **Prioritize and plan using science.** In every community, the need to strike a balance between stakeholders and perspectives is part of a leader's role and responsibilities. In late March/early April 2020, jurisdictions began thinking through how to reactivate communities and non-essential businesses. Salt Lake County Government personnel drafted *Salt Lake Together*, a planning tool that identified parameters to reactivate while reducing risk. Understanding that the pandemic does not respect territorial boundaries between jurisdictions, the County Mayor Unified Command deferred to the state's *Utah Leads Together*, which identified four phases of risk and mitigation efforts: Red, Orange, Yellow, and Green. As Salt Lake County and the entire state were directed to transition between phases (moving from Red to Orange and to date, Yellow), popular acceptance of risk increased. Following the weekend of May 25, 2020 (Memorial Day), Salt Lake County saw an increased amount of cases being reported per day. Looking back from the time of writing this essay, the last day where there were fewer than 100

cases being reported in Salt Lake County was June 1, 2020. Action needed to be taken. On June 23, The Mayor wrote a letter to the governor requesting a face covering mandate in Salt Lake County. In the letter, the argument made was built on scientific evidence: face coverings reduce the risk of transmission. Mandating face coverings would allow for economic reactivation to be maintained. This fact-based effort worked, and the governor agreed with the Mayor's request. The science behind face coverings carried the day in Salt Lake County. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in every locality facing the COVID pandemic. Leaders who fail to follow this science may risk their residents' lives as well as the ability of businesses to function. It is also important to note that face coverings are not the sole solution to managing the virus, but are a vital tool in an arsenal that needs to be well calibrated and able to overcome the fatigue that this pandemic is evoking across communities. Face coverings continue to be mandated in Salt Lake County, and a reenergized program of strategic communications and public information continues to focus on limiting social interactions outside of the household, social distancing, good hygiene, self-isolation when ill, and face coverings.

Keep the Public Involved. COVID-19 is not going to go away with a simple flick of a magic wand. Maintaining pressure on the virus will require communities and all the stakeholders within them to dedicate time and resources to the cause. The virus has had impacts that resonate with everyone, to include missing out on school, not being able to go to work, loved ones getting sick, and even fatalities. In Salt Lake County, the public is seen as active participants in the ongoing efforts, not just recipients of information coming from the top down. This mindset is critical – without the public's buy-in regarding the consequences of prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts, entire communities can reverse any progress that is made in the fight against the virus. Key concepts that chief elected executives need to apply in pandemic response include:

- **Be real.** In times of uncertainty, members of the community are looking for real information. There is no place for false hope or inaccurate news during a pandemic. A leader needs to be honest with herself and with constituents, then manage expectations and devise and implement policies that will have a real effect on the virus. These decisions may not be easy or comfortable ones to make, but at the end of the day will ultimately save lives. Fatigue has set in and will continue to need to be dealt with. Salt Lake County residents, like those across the United States, hoped that COVID-19 would be on a decreasing trendline in time for the summer months due to the hope that COVID-19 may be seasonal in nature. As the world is seeing, that is not the case. Informed by data and science, Salt Lake County's Mayor took an approach of being honest and frank with residents: COVID-19 was not going to take the summer off, and everyone needed to do their part and remain vigilant.
- **Provide opportunities to engage.** The direct and honest nature of the messaging was buttressed by a call to arms: help your loved ones by doing your part to maintain pressure against the virus. For some, it would be as simple as practicing social distancing, maintaining good health etiquette, and wearing a face covering. For others, more bold actions like librarians volunteering to support quarantine and isolation (Q&I) facilities, or young people joining response teams to support logistics, testing, and contact tracing. The opportunity to engage in response and recovery efforts allows for the community to accept the current challenges and move forward together.

- **Keep partners informed.** As important as it is to be real with constituents, it is also as important to keep partners informed of efforts and issues. No single action implemented (like a face covering mandate) could quell COVID-19 alone, so they connected with an array of partners, to include healthcare facilities, homeless resource centers, the state, and County Council.

Align operational response at all levels, and train for that. As emergency management and public safety professionals, we learn about the importance of aligning all levels of operation: policy, strategic, operational, and tactical. For many mayors and city managers across the country, this pandemic may be the first time that they have needed to employ crisis leadership during a disaster.

- **Elected executives must take their roles in crisis leadership seriously.** During the early months of 2020, leaders in Salt Lake County knew that January and February were the calm before the storm for COVID-19. In Salt Lake County, elected and appointed leadership took training and exercise seriously. In August 2019, department heads and elected County leadership came together to learn about crisis leadership in an active threat event as part of the Greater Salt Lake Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack Exercise Series.⁵ While not pandemic-related, the training opportunity was successful as it taught how crisis leadership was applicable to any disaster situation. Further, these kinds of exercises familiarize leadership with the feel of emergency management concepts and techniques.
- **Individuals participating in a response must be thoughtful and understanding of the situation at all levels of operation.** Whether it is the Mayor, an epidemiologist, an emergency manager, a consultant planner, or a volunteer, individuals participating in a disaster response must understand they are playing a role in a larger concert of activities. For the County Mayor, there was an appreciation in knowing when she needed to lean forward and when to step back, applying her crisis leadership skills strategically. Early on, Salt Lake County leadership was heavily involved in crisis operations. The County Mayor moved her office to the Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) for her to be available to Unified Command and the section chiefs. As the emergent response transitioned to a sustained response, and other activities such as long-term recovery and reactivating County government emerged, she moved from working within the day-to-day fray of health response operations to leading in a complex environment from a comprehensive and policy-oriented standpoint.
- **Emergency managers must be patient educators and be adaptable responders.** Words like “Incident Command”, “Command and General Staff”, “Commander’s Intent”, and “ICS-213” are most likely foreign words to individuals who perform an important role in disaster response but do not live and breathe emergency management on a regular basis. While training courses exist for elected and appointed officials, a single engagement in a two- to four-hour FEMA course is not enough. Emergency managers must be patient and understanding and not treat opportunities for elected officials to participate in training and exercises as one-off events. Here in Salt Lake County, response operations have been multi-agency in nature. The response to this pandemic will significantly alter how emergency management is viewed and applied. It is important that emergency management agencies are adaptable and guide leaders as they gain familiarity with NIMS and ICS.

Conclusion

Eight months into this response, Salt Lake County has not stood on the laurels of victory or declared “mission accomplished”, in fact the battle the county is in now is the darkest it has been in. Even now at the time of submitting this article, Salt Lake County is fighting the greatest surge it has seen since the pandemic began. The battle against COVID-19 continues and will continue through and beyond vaccination. Elected executives need to continue to rely on evidence to make decisions, then communicate those decisions and work with their departments and residents in maintaining pressure on the virus. Salt Lake County leaders connected the dots early: in order for recovery to be successful, the health response needed to remain in focus. The concepts and techniques used to combat the virus and provide leadership to communities in Salt Lake County are not novel. It is my hope that elected executives and those that support the implementation of policy lean forward as they have here in Salt Lake County.

About the Author

David Schuld is Deputy Director of Preparedness at Hagerty Consulting and is serving as Mayor’s Policy Advisor and Coordinating Officer for Salt Lake County’s COVID-19 Response and Recovery. During the emergent response to COVID-19 in Salt Lake County, Mr. Schuld was Intelligence Chief, working with a multi-agency team of public health and public safety personnel, intelligence analysts, and consultants providing Unified Command with information to make evidence-based decisions. He may be reached at dschuld@slco.org.

Notes

1. Nearly 75% of the population of the state lives in the Wasatch Front, traditionally including neighboring counties of Salt Lake, including Utah, Davis, Weber, and Box Elder.
 2. School districts began to close on March 16, while Salt Lake County moved into the high restrictions level on March 19.
 3. The first system was known as the “Phased Guidelines” and used color-ranked restrictions for counties and municipalities to implement to mitigate transmission. Since October 15, Utah has moved to a metrics-based transmission index that is county based.
 4. Unified Command is an ICS concept where response operations are jointly managed between leaders, maximizing effort between agencies involved.
 5. The Greater Salt Lake Complex Coordinated Terrorist Attack Exercise Series is a DHS/FEMA-funded preparedness program that strengthens communities’ capabilities to prevent, mitigate, response, and recover from a multi-site terrorist attack.
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