

How COVID-19 Highlights That the Government Failed Strategic Planning 101

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I was 12 years old when Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States. As a young woman in San Bernardino Valley, California during the 1980's, surrounded by large groups of diverse people going about their daily lives, I felt relatively safe and secure. My friends and I rode our bikes, played outside from dawn until dusk, and drank from the hose on the side of the house. We had the life of the kids from *Stranger Things*, minus the monsters, of course. I look back today in nostalgia, longing for that feeling of security and safety in a country now threatened by groups of ten or more.

As I walk through my local grocery store, I see the strain of the latest challenge facing our great nation and I hardly recognize the country I so deeply love. How did we not see this coming with previous experience with viruses such as H1N1? Even more to the point, how were we not better prepared for it and able to deal with it in a less disruptive way?

Post H1N1, the Trust for America's Health and others looked back on the experience with an eye to the future. "H1N1 is a real-world test of our initial emergency response capabilities -- all of the planning and preparations have paid off.", said Jeff Levi, PhD, executive director of TFAH. *"However, the outbreak also revealed serious gaps in our nation's preparedness for pandemic flu and other public health emergencies."* What were some of those gaps?

- Public health departments have insufficient resources
- Clear and consistent messaging is critical to alleviate fear and engender trust
- We lack a plan to address the major ramifications of school closures
- Sick and mandatory leave must have a budgetary component established and funded
- Communication between various parties within a healthcare system is poor
- Even during a relatively mild outbreak, the healthcare system is over taxed

So if we knew what gaps needed to be addressed over 11 years ago, why weren't they fixed?

As a nation, we put our safety in the hands of our duly elected officials. Obama held office from 2009-2017, right through H1N1 and for 7.5 years after it ended. We had a window of time in which to establish contamination thresholds at which schools and businesses would close; we could have established best practice standards defining the supply of PPE's, N95's, ventilators, etc. that hospitals would be required to maintain; we could have discussed how to address financial implications of mandatory leave and a potential impact to business and begun to set aside financial aid over time. Where was the government in taking a leadership role to bring together the private sector to do that work?

Hospital preparedness for hurricanes in Florida could have served as a model for such discussions, where every year they prepare for a disaster whose scope is yet unknown but whose eventuality is guaranteed. There is a threshold of supplies kept on hand, staffing plans and communication plans are established and ready launch when the time is right. In fact, it was in part because of this work that when Florida applied for Cov-19 federal aid on March 11; within 3 days their entire request was fulfilled whereas other states got as little as 6-10%.

Sadly, however, the fact remains that we had eleven years since the last pandemic to prepare for this one and had that government taken planning measures at that time, then perhaps instead of grappling with the obscenely large bail-out numbers and the destabilization of our economy, we could have already been addressing things incrementally.

Here is what I do know: we got it backwards. During the past eleven years instead of practicing “social cohesiveness” we practiced “social distancing”. Instead of coming together and working to define a plan that could calmly and deliberately be implemented with our citizens, people distanced from each other. Why? We don’t trust politicians, government, the media and corporations, and they don’t trust each other. But now we are going from a baseline of “social distancing” to even further “physical social distancing” and at what point do people distance so far that the threads of society are no longer intact?

When I was younger, President Reagan declared “It’s morning again in America!”. It was a famous line that captivated voters with a message of hope in a time of turmoil. It is my fervent hope and prayer that when this is all over, instead of letting this social distancing drive us even further apart that we instead answer the call to cohesiveness. That when the threat is addressed, then we reunite as a country to heal. Our society depends on it.