A LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERS' PLAYBOOK FOR
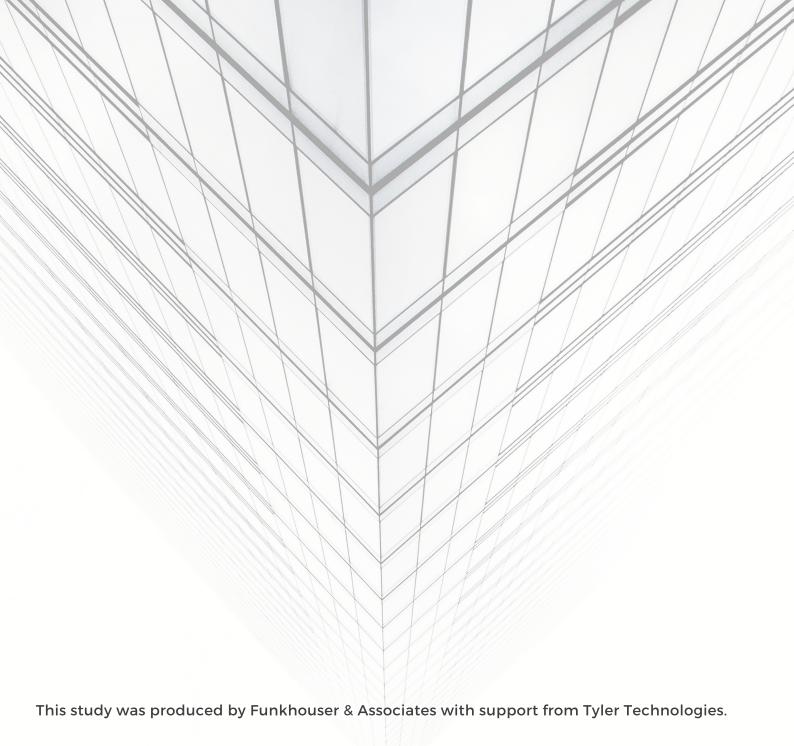# THE CARES ACT

Produced by

Funkhouser & Associates
with support from
Tyler Technologies

This study was produced by Funkhouser & Associates with support from Tyler Technologies.

Funkhouser & Associates is a consulting firm founded by Mark Funkhouser, a longtime public servant and a former publisher of Governing magazine. As mayor of Kansas City during the Great Recession, Mark has direct experience with managing government through a fiscal crisis. Funkhouser & Associates was founded on the idea that we can build a better government by building trusted relationships with each other and government partners.

Tyler Technologies helps government and schools better serve their communities with technology designed to simplify complex processes. Tyler's broad solutions and product offerings empower governments to deliver better and faster assistance to the public with greater transparency and accessibility, sustainable office practices, secure data that's easy to manage and maintain, and faster results.

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to overstate what an extraordinary and challenging time this is for local governments. The word "unprecedented" is over-used, but the situation local government leaders have faced over the past 10 months is truly unprecedented. Against the backdrop of one of the most bitterly contested elections in the nation's history, local governments were confronted with widespread social unrest and a series of fires, floods and other natural disasters that in and of themselves would have made for a particularly difficult period.

What could not have been foreseen as winter began to give way to spring was a once-in-a-century public health crisis that not only would sicken millions of Americans and take hundreds of thousands of lives but also would spark the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Those related catastrophes produced something else that was unprecedented in a $2 trillion federal economic relief package passed with startling speed: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, enacted into law on March 27.

Our intent is to provide local leaders with a playbook that details scalable, replicable uses of CARES act funds to overcome the challenges so many governments are facing. The following pages will show the ways in which communities across the nation are accessing CARES Act funds to strengthen their communities and create more resilient and responsive local government services. We sought to learn, primarily based on firsthand accounts from dozens of interviews, how local governments are responding to today's extraordinary challenges and to share what we've learned with local leaders across the country.

One of the larger things we learned about the way governments have had to respond to the pandemic is that the need for remote interactions have put a premium on technology -- both in enabling telework for governments and in interfacing with the public. Fortunately, CARES Act funds can be used to obtain the technological tools and training local governments need, and our interviews confirmed what Kirsten Wyatt, executive director of [Engaging Local Government Leaders](#), described when she told us she was "fascinated at how the technology sector has stepped up to help local governments."

The first part of the playbook is structured into five themes: the challenges local governments have faced in accessing and using CARES Act funds; their successes; uses to which they have put the money; innovative approaches; and opportunities that have been revealed. The remaining section addresses what seem to us to be winning strategies and tactics — the plays — local leaders have employed that appear to have been effective and that others may want to adopt and adapt to their own circumstances. We also include five case studies that constitute deeper dives into some of the success stories we encountered.

CHALLENGES

The most frequently mentioned challenge that local governments faced in accessing and using the CARES Act was the lack of clear guidance. While the funds were distributed in April to the states and to cities and counties with populations greater than 500,000, in late September there were still issues being sorted out regarding how the money could be spent.

The Treasury Department is not generally in the business of making awards directly to recipients, and while most of those we interviewed felt that Treasury had worked hard the situation was still filled with difficult issues subject to ongoing discussion and negotiation.

"One of the biggest challenges is just knowing what the rules are," said Matt Chase, NACo's executive director. "We give Treasury tremendous praise for ramping up, wiring the money quickly and being available at all hours. But translating the broad federal policy into actual practice with the complexities of operating a county has been a major challenge."

Julie Demuth (Pierce County, WA) told us that "determining eligibility of expenditures is challenging since there's not a lot of guidance and the guidance that exists isn't all that clear. The reporting requirements are extensive, and the fact that Treasury has released several updated versions of those requirements in the form of FAQs, supplemental memos and emails has resulted in a mix of information that makes it difficult to track the actual requirements."

The time crunch is another big issue. As Emily Brock, director at GFOA's Federal Liaison Center, told us, referring to the $150 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund that is part of the CARES Act, "December 30 is a looming deadline for governments to spend the CRF money." The money is going away, but the pandemic isn't — as of late October, cases were rising in several states to new record levels. Christopher Bigham, assistant city manager in Cincinnati, pointed out that "the contact-tracing grant funds run out in December, but we're still going to have to do this through next year, so an additional funding appropriation has been approved by the City Council. The uncertainty of additional funding adds to all the anxiety about the pandemic, so that is why the city was proactive to secure

When we asked those we interviewed who they turned to for advice on using the CARES Act, they overwhelmingly pointed to the various national professional organizations, including the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), the National League of Cities (NLC), the National Association of Counties (NACo), and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA).

The cooperation and coordination among these big associations has been significant. For example, GFOA has a weekly call that includes the other organizations. Kinney Poynter, the long-serving executive director of the National Association of State Auditors, Comptrollers and Treasurers, told us that when there's a crisis confronting the country, these organizations come together. "It's just like we saw with the ARRA [the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009]," he said. "The cooperation between the associations has just been phenomenal." And that cooperation has an impact, not only in making sure that their members get consistent and useful information but also in changing policy. A powerful letter to the U.S. Treasury Department signed by eight national associations on September 10 got clarification of the reimbursement rules in the direction they wanted by September 21.

The assistance the local leaders we interviewed cited often came through the state chapters of these organizations. Andy Welch, assistant county manager for Bulloch County, Georgia, was one of several who cited his state association of counties as a principle resource. Jason Ashmore, mayor of Sesser, Illinois, pointed to his state municipal league as a source of support and advice. And in some cases the help came directly from a national association. Julie Demuth, budget manager for Pierce County, WA, told us, for example, that the greatest resource for her and her colleagues was GFOA, which has been fielding questions between the county and the Treasury.

additional dollars since contact-tracing is critical to controlling the virus."

A final challenge is the fact that the CARES Act funds can't be used to replace lost tax revenue resulting from government-mandated business shutdowns and the fear that has kept so many people from spending money on normal activities ranging from dining out to travel for business. "It was an interesting choice to make the CRF only to be used for expenses related to COVID," said Tracy Gordon, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute. "It was legislation written for a different kind of

emergency. Even in March we knew the fiscal effects would last more than a year, so the time limit and the prohibition on using it for revenue loss never made any sense." The Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which among other things provided for paid sick leave, "did a lot," Gordon said, but it "wasn't sufficient in the timing and the magnitude. State and local governments welcomed the funds but thought it would be a down payment on future funding."

The fiscal impact on state and local governments has been significant in the current fiscal year, although not as bad as some initially expected. Virtually everyone we talked to, however, expects the negative fiscal impact to continue for at least the next fiscal year. State and local governments learned a hard lesson in the Great Recession, and it took cities almost a decade to recover. But by this March, according to Michael Pagano, director of the Government Finance Research Center, "a lot of local governments were sitting on fairly substantial reserves — some were running around 30 percent of expenditures." So it wasn't as if they were being profligate or fiscally irresponsible; they were slammed economically by a situation over which they had absolutely no control.

SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

Our interviews and the data collected by the national associations indicate that the money that went to local governments has had an overwhelmingly positive and beneficial effect. The money was well spent, and local governments showed remarkable resilience and agility in responding to the challenge and the opportunity provided by the CARES Act. What we heard in the interviews was reflected in what Marc Ott, executive director of ICMA, told us: "The bottom line is that city managers and other officials are doing what they have to do to serve the needs of their residents. That's our job and our duty. Every day." The federal government and the states are the bankers, but local governments are the implementers, turning dollars into programs with real impact on communities.

Local governments succeeded in quickly creating and staffing an array of new programs to aid the segments of the community that needed the most help. Pierce County, Washington, had to quickly figure out how to create both small-businesses assistance programs and numerous programs on the social-services side, and all without adding new staff. Stockton, California, City Manager Harry Black told a similar story as he described how the city had created a rental and mortgage relief program, a small-business relief program and essential support relief for households, and had issued a notice of funding availability for non-traditional services provided by the non-profit community. Online access to city business services was also essential for local economies. "The outdoor dining was a big thing," Black said. "In 24 hours, we developed and implemented an outdoor dining permit system [that could be executed entirely online]. Then we did the same thing for nail salons and similar businesses within 72 hours."

When the pandemic was first declared in early March, and many millions of people lost their jobs as state and local revenues appeared to be in free fall, it looked like the country was on the brink of an even greater catastrophe. Through the CARES Act, most local governments were able to avoid deep cuts to essential staff and to step in and stabilize their communities. We are still in the grip of the virus that as of late October had killed more than 220,000 Americans, but the local officials we talked to, while wary about the future, generally indicated that their governments are no longer scrambling and have established themselves. They've settled into telework, online permitting, remote inspections and virtual public meetings. They recognize now, as one told us, that this is a marathon, not a sprint, and for the most part they feel like their organizations have hit their stride.

One final indicator of the success local governments have had with the CARES Act seems to us to be that despite the size and speed of the infusion of money through the relief package and related federal grants, we have not seen even the slightest whiff of a scandal in how local governments have handled the money.

USES OF FUNDS

Nearly all the big organizations serving local government did some sort of analysis on how cities and counties were using CARES Act money, and while the methods and timing varied, the results were fairly consistent. For example, **ICMA** surveyed its members in July and found that over 70 percent had used the money for public health expenses such as personal protective equipment, compliance with public health measures such as telework, paid family leave and distance learning, and for payroll expenses for key personnel. Nearly half had used CARES Act funds to provide economic support for small businesses, and about a third provided support for vulnerable populations.

NLC did some analysis on social media to try to understand how cities have been hit by COVID and how they've used the CARES Act. A third said they used it to support small business, while a quarter used it to provide housing help, such as rent assistance and temporary housing. The league has also created an extensive Local Action Tracker, detailing policy responses by cities using CARES dollars and/or their own. NLC put a real focus on housing. "We encouraged cities to make housing stability a top priority for these funds," said Michael Wallace, the NLC's program director for community and economic development. "Economic mobility and jobs and health programs all were contingent on housing. If you didn't help with housing, you were essentially throwing money away." Our interview with Dallas City Manager T.C. Broadnax provides an example of how this focus played out. "The CARES Act plays into issues with the homeless population, primarily around how we can use those resources to manage and temporarily house those individuals according to CDC guidelines," he said. "We've used CARES funding to support our inclement-weather shelter and to acquire property during this disaster that would allow us to help the homeless using hotels that are now shuttered. It gives us an immediacy in housing or quarantining the homeless — and also quarantining our first responders."

Like many winter ski destinations, Summit County officials are concerned about the economic effects of the pandemic on their tourism-based economy. The U.S. Travel Association is predicting a 44 percent decline in total traveler spending in 2020, a 64 percent decline in international visitors to the U.S., and a 30 percent drop in domestic trips.

Home to the top-rated ski destination of Park City, Summit County was coming off a record year before the pandemic. The state had posted record performances on nearly every travel and tourism metric in 2019, and the busy winter season in early 2020 appeared set to continue that trend. But COVID-19 hit Utah's leisure and hospitality industry harder than any other sector, according to a recent state policy report. In April, hospitality jobs were down 43 percent. By August, the sector's jobs were down 17 percent — better, but far from ideal.

In addition to small-business relief programs, Summit County is investing some of its CARES dollars into initiatives that encourage local spending. Its biggest effort along those lines is on marketing the county as a safe place for visitors. Thanks to a local mask mandate, says Deputy County Manager Janna Young, the region has done a good job of keeping COVID-19 case rates down. Now, she says, the region needs to get the word out. "We are really focusing on the driving market — Colorado, Nevada, those places where we're a 10- to 11-hour drive away," she said. "We want people to know we are taking it seriously here and we have put measures in place to keep people safe."

CARES money has also gone toward a buy-local program of sorts. For example, the county purchased gift cards to local businesses to hand out at schools to students who are demonstrating responsible mask-wearing. Gift cards to grocery stores also went to low-income families. And the county also helped make up the difference in far lower livestock sales at this year's county fair for high-school students who use those proceeds to help pay for college.

CASE STUDY
Summit County, UT

NACo has an extensive online list of examples of how counties are using CARES Act funds, grouped into categories including nonprofit support, small-business support, housing/rental assistance, and economic aid and workforce development. Matt Chase, NACo's executive director, told us, "From the county lens our members have been making serious investments in their community. Counties have been using CRF to invest in community partners, creating things like small-business loan funds and grant programs, particularly for small businesses with below 30 employees and those that are women and minority owned that did not fare well with traditional banking. Counties are investing in nonprofits. And there's a huge focus on broadband. How can they get hotspots into underserved communities — those working from home and distance learning for schools? And, of course, a tremendous amount of money is being put into public health."

GFOA did a survey related to the CARES Act that produced results very similar to those found by ICMA. The largest category of spending was on public health and on compliance with guidelines requiring measures such as remote work and distance learning. GFOA also found that education was a somewhat large component with funds spent on student needs such as laptops and mobile hotspots. We came across several examples of the latter in our interviews. Jamie Hellen, CEO/administrator for Franklin, Massachusetts, said the city got $2.9 million in CARES Act funding and that the largest chunk of it, $1 million, was spent for 4,000 Chromebooks for students in K-8. "Everybody," he said, "gets a fresh computer, and if you have to go remote again we're ready."

INNOVATION

A couple of weeks before he retired at the end of September, we asked Tom Bonfield, then the city manager of Durham, North Carolina, about his experiences during the pandemic. He laughed and said, "It wasn't in the ICMA Green Book!" His reference to the association's authoritative guide to emergency services spoke volumes about the situation and the potential for innovation that arises from it. The problems associated with the pandemic, the economic downturn and the social unrest that has been occurring were unprecedented, and the size and scope of the CARES Act was unprecedented as well. That meant that there were no established procedures for how to deal with either the problems or the massive economic package meant to address some of them.

That lack of precedent provided an open field for innovation. This situation — big problems and a sudden huge infusion of cash — had plenty of potential to result in new and innovative responses by local government. Without a doubt, the pandemic is removing the mental hurdle of "this is the way we've always done it."

The disparities in deaths from COVID-19 between people of color and whites, and the massive social unrest that arose from the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, highlighted problems associated with structural racism and the criminal justice system that are also spurring innovation by local governments. You can see it in the focus on vulnerable populations in CARES Act spending, and you can see it in other ways: Broadnax, the Dallas city manager, told us, "There is a history of lack of social investment and lack of human capital investment. The framework and paradigm has shifted around how do we provide equitable service delivery and the funding and resourcing issues that drive quality of life."

Finally, the magnitude and immediacy of the problems facing local governments have tended to blunt the uncertainty with regard to the applicability of the CARES Act funding, and that has also contributed to risk-taking and innovation. Several of the officials we interviewed told us some version of what Janna Young, deputy county manager for Summit County, Utah, said: "We were doing what we needed to regardless. Then it was a matter of seeing what we could get reimbursed."

WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE PANDEMIC IS REMOVING THE MENTAL HURDLE OF "THIS IS THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT."

Reimagining government has long been a catch phrase, but the pandemic in many cases turned a lot of these innovative "what ifs" into realities for localities. Long Beach has used the opportunity to rethink traditional government roles and services. For example, when the pandemic broke out, some government staff, such as health department personnel, were overwhelmed while others, such as janitors and office support staff, had little to do. More than ever, the silos of government agencies — and even between different floors in the same agency — needed to be knocked down. Long Beach took that idea and ran with it, deploying staff with the skills to work however and wherever they were needed.

That led to Meredith Reynolds, whose Park Planning & Partnerships department was temporarily shut down in March, getting a call from the city manager asking her to help the health department stand up COVID-19 testing sites. The work involved procuring test kits and securing laboratory services using CARES dollars. Reynolds was recommended for the task because of her ability to work well with people across the city's organization and her knowledge of how to effectively navigate Long Beach's bureaucracy. Technology played a key role in the city's ability to effectively redeploy staff. The city quickly set up shared folders and passwords on the cloud, and redeployed computer equipment to new staff/locations so that team members could communicate and share information easily. Reynolds set up a shared OneDrive folder where she centralized information that everyone had access to. "This was a critical role I played so that those in the field could focus on staffing testing sites, caring for patient test results, and reporting testing information," she said.

Within the parks department itself, technology was an integral component for staff who stepped into new "community ambassador" roles to support the city's COVID response. These ambassadors record visitor data and report any field issues immediately using the "GO Long Beach" app. Ambassadors visit parks to, among other things, capture hourly usage data, celebrate visitors compliant with safety protocols and educate those who are not compliant.

The city leadership, Reynolds said, recognized that job titles shouldn't always define someone's work. "We looked at the transferable skills that people have, and it has provided a whole world of opportunity that normally they wouldn't have access to."

Reynolds' own department, which before the pandemic primarily interacted with the public in person, also pivoted to technology and some out-of-the-box thinking early on to stay connected and relevant to parks users and perhaps even gain some new fans. The department quickly developed virtual home-based activities like "Rec At Home" programming and "Recreation Reimagined" summer camps. And it used CARES dollars to develop a "Mobile RECess" program that takes physical-recreation activities into neighborhoods without access to nearby parks.

OPPORTUNITY

The pandemic has brought new urgency to long-standing problems in government, and the sudden availability of federal money has presented the opportunity to fast-track solutions that have long been on the back burner. Many of these solutions involve some aspect of technology. For example, governments had to scramble to enable their employees to work remotely. Leaders and staff kept away from their systems docked in buildings quickly realized the benefit of having government operations in the cloud. In fact, an August survey by the business technology company SAP Concur found that about three-quarters of finance and administrative officials surveyed said that the pandemic sped-up their departments' decisions to invest in cloud-based budget management technology. Cloud-based solutions such as these have inherent scalability and take the pressure off IT departments to manage servers and make it easier to connect securely with remote workers. The ability to deploy software remotely has helped governments quickly implement self-service portals, remote payroll changes, mobile apps, and new financial reporting, among other solutions that contributed to the early wins noted above.

CASE STUDY
Pierce County, WA

One of the most difficult factors for policymakers at the beginning of the pandemic was a lack of data to guide decision-making. So much was unknown earlier this year, from how the virus was transmitted to best practices for stopping the spread, making it difficult to decide how to prioritize financial resources in response. Located south of Seattle, Pierce County was in one of the first regions to deal with a coronavirus outbreak. In March, there was a lot of pressure to spend directly on the emergency health response. But what about virus containment or helping small businesses and homeowners?

The county's finance department responded by using the data platform Socrata® to build a coronavirus response dashboard that helps officials spot trends and be able to adjust and redirect resources more quickly. "We've learned that we need to adapt on a daily basis," said Budget Director Julie Demuth. "That data has come to be very critical to us, and we're constantly making decisions on allocation and policy changes."

Along with COVID-19 health data, the dashboard includes 192 measures for expenditures, economic indicators, and data on how CARES Act funds are being deployed in the areas of Public Health Emergency Response, Economic Stabilization & Recovery, Community Response & Resilience, and Essential Government Services. For example, the dashboard shows that the county has spent nearly half of its $12 million target on contact-tracing and that as of mid-October 84 percent of those testing positive for COVID and those they had been in contact with were interviewed within 24 hours.

The finance department uses the dashboard to create interactive charts, graphs and reports on the latest indicators, updating them weekly for the county council. The charts and reports are also available to the public.
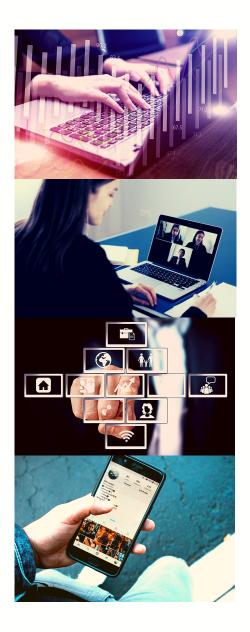
Agencies that used cloud-based technology had an easier time enabling remote work and scaling up to meet evolving public engagement needs. However, there is much more to be done in this area as the SAP survey respondents still reported issues with remote work. Nearly nine in 10, for example, said they were struggling to some degree with remotely accessing "project-related information and tools." Some of the biggest challenges in this area included difficulties with employees getting what they needed from coworkers (47 percent) and lacking remote access to project files (46 percent).

The pandemic has also turned the long-simmering conversation about broadband expansion into a hot-button issue of immediate necessity. This is particularly true for those in rural areas, where communications companies have deemed it too expensive to expand service. State and local governments are mostly in a reactive mode, but the state of Maryland has taken the availability of CARES funding as an opportunity to be a little more forward-thinking to expand service to students. The state has earmarked $15 million in COVID-19 pandemic relief funds via the CARES Act and the federal Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund to build a wireless education network covering rural areas on a spectrum of radio referred to as the 3.5 gigahertz band. This method (explained rather well here by The Baltimore Sun) was chosen because it would not need a license from the Federal Communications Commission, so can be built quickly.

Another long-standing challenge for local governments is the need to improve transparency and public engagement. The need for social distancing forced governments to quickly make the investments and the operational changes that would allow them to move to virtual meetings. At the same time, social unrest and concerns over police funding, among other issues, brought far more interest from the public about previously obscure issues. For example, budget hearings that used to have a few handfuls of the usual suspects in attendance now have thousands attending virtually. Concerns about the virus and government's response to it meshed with the desire of public officials to get the needed information to people so that they could act in ways that helped slow its spread and to calm and to assure the public by getting credible information to them. An example of this is Pierce County, Washington's online dashboard, built using Tyler Technologies' Socrata® platform, which uses interactive charts and graphs to report to the county council and the public on 192 different COVID-related measures. Another example is Bulloch County, Georgia, which uses Tyler Technologies' MyCivic® mobile app to push information out to citizens without them having to go to the county website.

Finally, given the long-term financial consequences to the pandemic that many local government leaders anticipate, using the CARES money to acquire technology that would keep operations seamless and efficient is another smart way to prepare for the lean years ahead. This angle was highlighted by Justin Marlowe, a research professor at the University of Chicago and a public-finance expert. "The governments are really leaning into the technological innovation," he said. "In many cases they had ruled out a cloud-based system before COVID, but the ones who have those systems have done well. COVID has forced the question of how to use technology to support the work. One government has been able to run their entire operation with 40 percent of the staff they used to have."

THE PLAYS

IN EVERY CRISIS THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES.

Here are summaries of some of the strategies & tactics local governments have executed to take advantage of those opportunities in responding to the crisis and tapping into the funding available through the CARES Act

1. LEAN ON YOUR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

When we asked Matt Chase, the NACo executive director, to suggest experts on the CARES Act that we should interview, he replied, "Our lobbyists have become the experts." Our research and our interviews have shown us that, yes, the professional associations are where the experts are regarding details of how to tap and use the available federal funds. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that many of them were deeply involved in the negotiations on the legislation itself. The high level of communication and coordination among the professional associations also contributes to their ability to provide expert advice to their members. Essentially, by tapping into one of one of them you are gaining access to them all. And they recognize that what is happening is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to strengthen the bond with their members in ways that will serve them long after the current crisis has morphed into whatever comes next.

2. LINK ARMS WITH COLLEAGUES IN YOUR REGION AND PRESENT A UNITED FRONT

In almost every case, local government leaders who seem to be weathering the storm well and making the best use of the opportunities available are in close contact with their nearby colleagues. As Garden Grove, California, City Manager Scott Stiles told us, "We have a robust Orange County city manager association, and we've been sharing information on a regular basis as we try to meet the challenges and make needed adjustments based on the guidance from the feds and the state. When can things open? Should you wear a mask or not? We're at the front lines trying to explain things to the public." When the answers to questions like these are potentially subject to confusion or controversy, it helps to know that you're on the same page with your colleagues in the area. Similarly, T.C. Broadnax, the Dallas city manager, told us he spent a lot of time sharing and collaborating with the city managers of Austin, San Antonio, Fort Worth and El Paso. "It gives us all a good benchmark for each other," he said. A similar practice happens in North Carolina, where the city managers of Durham, Charlotte, Raleigh and the other large cities have a weekly Zoom call.

3. RECOGNIZE COUNTIES AS STRONG PLAYERS IN CONVENING & COORDINATING A REGIONAL RESPONSE

Over the last several decades it has become clearer and clearer that many of the most difficult problems facing our communities — for example, homelessness, affordable housing or traffic congestion — are regional in scope, and thus beyond the ability of any single unit of local government to make much impact on. County governments are well suited for a central role in a regional response, and the way the CARES Act structured the distribution of funds plays

right to their strength. As Marlowe told us, "For a long time counties have been struggling to demonstrate their value-add in the ecosystem — this is their opportunity. If you're a county leader, this is a golden opportunity to demonstrate your worth to voters and to the higher levels of government." One of several examples we saw of how counties are playing this role was provided by Norton Bonaparte, city manager of Sanford, Florida. He described how in Seminole County "the chief administrator of the Office of Emergency Management, Alan Harris, has been having regular virtual meetings that include the county manager, all the city managers in the county, the county's medical director, health department director, the sheriff and the school superintendent."

CASE STUDY
Elk County, PA

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of having regional relationships and a coordinated response. After all, the COVID-19 virus doesn't stop at borders. In the northwest corner of Pennsylvania, a group of nine counties serving a population of more than 650,000 leveraged their existing emergency-response partnership to share information in real time and be able to respond more quickly and effectively on the pandemic's front lines.

Back in 2013, Elk and the other counties established a regionalized 911 system. Called the Northern Tier Regional Telecommunications Project, the idea was to employ Next Generation 911 technology, which would provide capabilities such as transferring calls between counties and give county call centers a backup service provider. Combining resources also saved the counties $2.5 million in capital costs and $500,000 in annual call-handling costs, according to MCM Consulting Group, which worked on the deal.

The consortium has since grown to 10 counties, added a records-management system, and uses Tyler Technologies' New World® public-safety computer-aided dispatch system to enhance data sharing across the region. That enabled the counties to quickly coordinate their emergency response when the pandemic hit and level up their response.

Notably, Elk County, the system's administrator, purchased mobile data terminal software for the consortium, and then CARES dollars were used to purchase iPads enabled with the corresponding technology for first responders. Instead of having to communicate over the radio, the mobile data terminals automatically and securely dispatch information across the system. "The information we're getting from that caller is also immediately available to that first responder," said Mike McAllister, director of emergency services for Elk County. "They have better situational awareness. They're getting more information than we would have said over the radio, and we don't have to say it over the radio so any scanner can pick it up."

4. BALANCE THE SHORT- AND THE LONG-TERM INTERESTS OF THE COMMUNITY

An idea that came up repeatedly in our interviews was the growing sense that while local governments still need to respond to the demands of the moment, they also need to keep a focus on using the money and the changes governments are being forced to make to build stronger, more resilient communities for the future. Matt Chase, the NACo executive director, told us, "Compared to the early months, there is a lot of thinking around balancing serving those who are unemployed with making smart long-term investments that make the community more resilient, particularly around race and equity and around broadband." You can see this idea in what Harry Black, city manager of Stockton, California, told us, "Every community is going to be smarter and stronger once this thing is over and done. The things we are doing now are going to be the new standard." Scott Stiles, Garden Grove, California's city manager, voiced a similar theme: "At the moment we're just trying to help people survive and get through it, but we're also having conversations about how we can put some of this into permanent status. We've seen a change in behavior in the public — a lot of people are now doing business online and a lot of that will continue post-COVID."

5. SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MOVE LONG-SIMMERING ISSUES TO THE FRONT BURNER

The pandemic has highlighted a broad range of issues that have been smoldering for a long time, and local governments are engaging them with renewed energy. Dallas, for example, is one of several cities focused on police reform and community cohesiveness around that. "Police reform is coming whether people like it or not," Tom Bonfield, the Durham, North Carolina, former city manager, told us. "My goal is to be responsible about it and deal with data, not emotion." To that end, Durham formed a partnership with the other large cities in North Carolina and Rock Hill, South Carolina, to develop a data-driven model to analyze calls for service and, eventually, to drill down looking at outcomes. Another example was provided by Meredith Reynolds, park planning and partnerships manager for Long Beach, California. After a period of unrest, her city developed a framework for reconciliation built on demographic data to advance racial equity by using an equity lens to evaluate, for example, how the city might be criminalizing poverty and how it might better bring services to people who do not have access to walking paths or parks. Finally, of course, the need for social distancing and remote learning highlighted long-standing issues regarding access to broadband that many local governments addressed.

6. USE TECHNOLOGY TO STREAMLINE PROCESSES, PROVIDE OPTIONS TO DO BUSINESS REMOTELY, USE DATA TO MAXIMIZE FLEXIBILITY & RESPONSIVENESS

We heard a lot about the need to use technology to improve efficiency and transparency while also allowing people to continue to have the option to do business remotely after the crisis of the pandemic is over. For example, Karen Bailey, finance director for Sikeston, Missouri, told us that one of her most important goals was transparency — keeping the public aware, through the city's communications portal, of what's going on in city government and making sure that the money the city spends is in keeping with residents' wants and needs, while adding online payments so that people don't have to get out of their house and endanger themselves around strangers. The Munis platform that the city uses, she said, "allows timely and two-way communication between the public and employees without being face-to-face." The Pierce County, Washington, case study shows it has used a dashboard of data, charts and graphs to manage public health, drive resources out into the community and report to the public and the council on the county's work and its results.

The coronavirus exposed what many already knew about our broadband connectivity: We are a nation of haves and have-nots. Roughly 30 million Americans — mostly in rural areas and lower-income urban neighborhoods — don't have high-speed internet access in their homes, according to the Federal Communications Commission. For kids, this lack of access has created a troubling homework gap that has been exacerbated by the move to distance learning. Nationally, as many as 15 percent of households with school-age children don't have internet at home, according to the Pew Research Center.

Durham has long wanted to remedy the broadband-access gap among its lower-income population and had been plotting a way to do so with public and private investments. But when the CARES Act was passed, officials saw an opportunity. Durham is home to a quarter-million people but received less than $3 million in CARES dollars. So the city put most of that money into one thing: making its broadband project a reality. This summer, Durham broke ground on a 5G internet network for nine public-housing properties that it plans to have finished by the end of the year.

The decision is an example of how governments can use federal money to further policy goals that will have a lasting effect beyond the pandemic. Studies have shown that even in times of traditional instruction children who don't have internet access at home tend not to do as well on standardized tests and don't perform as well on the SATs. Durham's ability to quickly move forward on its broadband project won't just make things easier on residents trying to attend school online this year, it will make a difference in the years to come.

"Everybody deserves education, no matter what side of town they're from or what situations they're in," Corinthia Rainey, a resident of Durham's McDougald Terrace public housing project, told a local reporter this summer. "Everybody should have some type of access to the world."

7. EMBRACE NEW ROLES & RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GOVERNMENTS AND WITH BUSINESSES & NONPROFITS

Over the last ten months all kinds of new roles and relationships have been forged by local government staff both within their respective jurisdictions and between their organizations and others. In the process they've learned a great deal about themselves, their organizations and their communities. An example is the story of how Meredith Reynolds, the Long Beach, California, park planning and partnerships manager, has been working with the health department to set up COVID testing in her city. But that is only one example of thousands in which local government staff worked with each other across disciplines and departments in ways they never had before. City and county leaders often expressed surprise and admiration at how flexible and quick their organizations were — moving, for example, to virtual meetings and remote work nearly overnight despite having very little prior experience with either. Local governments also took on new roles in their communities, helping small businesses with everything from economic assistance to procurement of personal protective equipment. They also worked with the non-profit community to get assistance into their communities and with school districts distributing laptops and setting up Wi-Fi hotspots. All this has translated into new understandings between the local governments and their communities and potentially new mutual respect and appreciation. The pandemic and its economic repercussions will be here for several years, and there may or may not be a second version of the CARES Act to help local governments cope with it on behalf of their communities. But local leaders who recognize the value of these new relationships and work to sustain them will do better in the long run than those who do not.

CONCLUSION

Local government has long been held in higher trust than governments at the state and federal levels, and the pandemic has provided local governments an opportunity to strengthen the faith their residents have in them. During the Forward Together virtual conference for local government in May, Michelle Kobayashi, a senior vice president at the National Research Center, presented data from the center's surveys of residents before and after April, with its surge of COVID-19 cases. The center found that the number who responded "excellent or good" when asked if their city or county was "generally acting in the best interest of the community" rose from 53 percent to 71 percent. The number who expressed "overall confidence" in their local government increased from 51 percent to 64 percent.

Public trust in government requires three things: good intentions, competence, and transparency. Government officials must sincerely try to devise sound public policies, and those policies must be efficiently, effectively, and equitably implemented. And when there are failures and mistakes, as are inevitable, public leaders must learn from them and performance must improve. And, crucially, the public has to see all of this.

The local-government officials we spoke to in this project were all inspiring servant leaders who impressed us with their passion and commitment to public service. They meet the first test of trust-building and - aided substantially by technology that connects data, systems and people - they are meeting the second and third tests as well. As the Pierce County example shows, they are using data to refine and improve decision-making and program implementation. And, as that and several other examples in this report show, they also are using technology to increase the insight the public has into policies, programs, and results.

We began this playbook with a description of the truly unprecedented challenges local governments are facing. The work is hard and frequently exhausting. Still, the local officials we reached out to spared time to share thoughts with us and, by extension, with their colleagues in local government across the country.

On behalf of the people at Tyler Technologies and AWS, and my team at Funkhouser & Associates, we thank them and all of you who serve the public in local government.

Mark Funkhouser

President
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