



# Wisconsin Professional Manager Response to COVID-19

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# About the Whitburn Center

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The Whitburn Center conducts practical applied research focused on evaluating and improving governance, professional management, and public policy in Wisconsin and beyond.

## Philosophy and Values

Our vision is to build local government, nonprofit, and community capacity to promote the common good. We will bring people together across ideological divides to discover nonpartisan solutions. The Whitburn Center will share innovative, research-based knowledge, equipping our partners to address their most pressing needs, while utilizing equitable, efficient, and effective strategies.

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## Executive Summary

**The Issue:** In Spring of 2020 local government managers across Wisconsin faced the difficult task of responding to a global pandemic with limited information. The successes, and failures, of their response can yield insights that improve the response to future public health crises.

**The Method:** In September 2021 we surveyed 38 City Managers and Village Administrators throughout Wisconsin. We also conducted in-depth ZOOM interviews with seven municipal managers serving Wisconsin municipalities.

**The Findings:** Respondents felt their position as professional managers facilitated their ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also found:

- Local measures were mostly limited to information sharing and maintaining service delivery.
- Local managers were often reacting to fast changing guidance as opposed to proactively responding to COVID-19.
- Who had authority for what was ambiguous, creating conflicts between state and local government. Conflict was heightened by poor intergovernmental cooperation.
- Local government leaders were very dissatisfied with state response to COVID-19.
- The legal battles between the state executive and legislative branches eroded public confidence in the government response to COVID-19.
- Cities and villages with more experienced leadership teams fared better throughout the pandemic.

**The Lesson:** Professional managers' experiences with COVID-19 illustrate a need for improved communication between governments, and between local governments and residents. There is also need to clarify the balance of state and local authority in regards to public health. Other recommendations included:

- Clarifying, in statute and ordinance, what levels of government are in charge of specific aspects of public health before the next crisis.
- Incorporating public health crisis response into public sector leadership education.
- Improving government communication systems so that they align with how residents actually consume information.
- Aligning authority to make public health decisions with public health competencies (i.e., having public health mandates come from governments with health departments).
- Address morale in the government workforce and the professional manager profession through new mentorship programming, increased professional development for staff, and fair and just compensation.

In closing, resources are noted for local government managers interested in addressing these needs. Links are provided to articles, tools, and trainings offered by the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, Wisconsin City/County Management Association, International City/County Management Association, National League of Cities, and National Association of Counties.

## Introduction

In Spring of 2020 local government managers across Wisconsin faced the difficult task of responding to a global pandemic with limited information. Just over one year later, we surveyed 38 municipal managers, and conducted seven in-depth interviews with municipal managers representing a set of diverse communities in the state, in order to better understand how professionally managed local governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our focus on professional managers, i.e., City Managers and Village Administrators, was deliberate. The presence of a professional manager hired by an elected City Council or Village Board is designed to insulate the day-to-day operations of government from politics. However, a popular critique of professional managers is that their distance from direct electoral accountability prevents the public from evaluating their performance.<sup>1</sup> As the COVID-19 pandemic became increasingly politicized, professional managers were forced to navigate a public health crisis from an apolitical position while pandemic politics raged around them. As one City Manager put it in an interview, “Everything I do is controversial.”

## The Context

The severity of the COVID-19 crisis evolved over the first few months of 2020. In late 2019 the virus was first detected in the United States. On March 12, 2020, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers declared a public health emergency for the entire state of Wisconsin under state statute 323.10. The statute states:

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1. Carr, J. B. (2015). What have we learned about the performance of council-manager government? A review and synthesis of the research. *Public Administration Review*, 75(5), 673-689.

*The governor may issue an executive order declaring a state of emergency for the state or any portion of the state if he or she determines that an emergency resulting from a disaster or the imminent threat of a disaster exists. If the governor determines that a public health emergency exists, he or she may issue an executive order declaring a state of emergency related to public health for the state or any portion of the state and may designate the department of health services as the lead state agency to respond to that emergency. If the governor determines that the emergency is related to computer or telecommunication systems, he or she may designate the department of administration as the lead agency to respond to that emergency. A state of emergency shall not exceed 60 days, unless the state of emergency is extended by joint resolution of the legislature. A copy of the executive order shall be filed with the secretary of state. The executive order may be revoked at the discretion of either the governor by executive order or the legislature by joint resolution.*

As the situation deteriorated further, Wisconsin Secretary of Health Andrea Palm issued, on March 24, 2020, emergency order #12<sup>2</sup>, which, among other things:

- Ordered most residents to stay at home with exceptions for certain essential workers.
- Closed non-essential business.
- Prohibited public gatherings.
- Closed schools, libraries and salons.
- Prohibited non-essential travel.

Secretary Palm’s order was extended on April 16, 2020, and was set to expire on May 26, 2020.<sup>3</sup> However, the new order was struck down by the

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2. <https://evers.wi.gov/Documents/COVID19/EMO12-SaferAtHome.pdf>

3. <https://www.wpr.org/gov-tony-evers-extends-safer-home-order>

Wisconsin Supreme Court on May 13, 2020.<sup>4</sup> A new COVID-19 surge in Fall 2020 prompted the September 22, 2020 issuance of Emergency Order #1, which implemented a statewide mask mandate for indoor spaces.<sup>5</sup> That mandate was repealed by the state legislature on February 4, 2021. One hour later, Governor Evers issued a new order reinstating the mask mandate.<sup>6</sup> The issuance of a new emergency order for the same public health emergency prompted a legal challenge, and on March 31, 2021, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that Governor Evers had exceeded his authority and could not issue a new emergency order related to COVID-19.<sup>7</sup>

The legal back and forth created challenges for local government officials attempting to respond to COVID-19. Because local governments exist due to the authority granted by the state, municipalities were bound by state orders when they were issued. Similarly, the local regulatory environment shifted quickly when orders were repealed and/or reinstated. Some municipalities, often larger, implemented their own public mask mandates as well as their own limits on public gatherings. Most used Wisconsin State Statute 323.11 to declare a local emergency. That statute reads as follows:

*The governing body of any local unit of government may declare, by ordinance or resolution, an emergency existing within the local unit of government whenever conditions arise by reason of a riot or civil commotion, a disaster, or an imminent threat of a disaster, that impairs transportation, food or fuel supplies, medical*

4. <https://www.wpr.org/wisconsin-supreme-court-strikes-down-safer-home-order-0>

5. <https://evers.wi.gov/Documents/COVID19/EmO01-SeptFaceCoverings.pdf>

6. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/04/politics/wisconsin-mask-mandate/index.html>

7. [https://www.wpr.org/sites/default/files/033121\\_fabick\\_scowis\\_opinion.pdf](https://www.wpr.org/sites/default/files/033121_fabick_scowis_opinion.pdf)

*care, fire, health or police protection, or other critical systems of the local unit of government. The period of the emergency shall be limited by the ordinance or resolution to the time during which the emergency conditions exist or are likely to exist.*

In summary, the context in which local government leaders have operated during the pandemic has been challenging. Guidance changed quickly, zones of discretion were often unclear, and the public was frequently divided over specific actions.

### Survey Results

We developed a 15-item survey to learn what measures Wisconsin professional managers took in response to the COVID-19 disruption. The survey instrument was piloted with two Wisconsin municipal managers before being sent digitally to 98 City Managers and Village Administrators in Wisconsin. Thirty-Eight surveys were returned for a response rate of 38.9%. The response rate was higher than other recent research targeting local government officials in Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup>

### Actions Taken

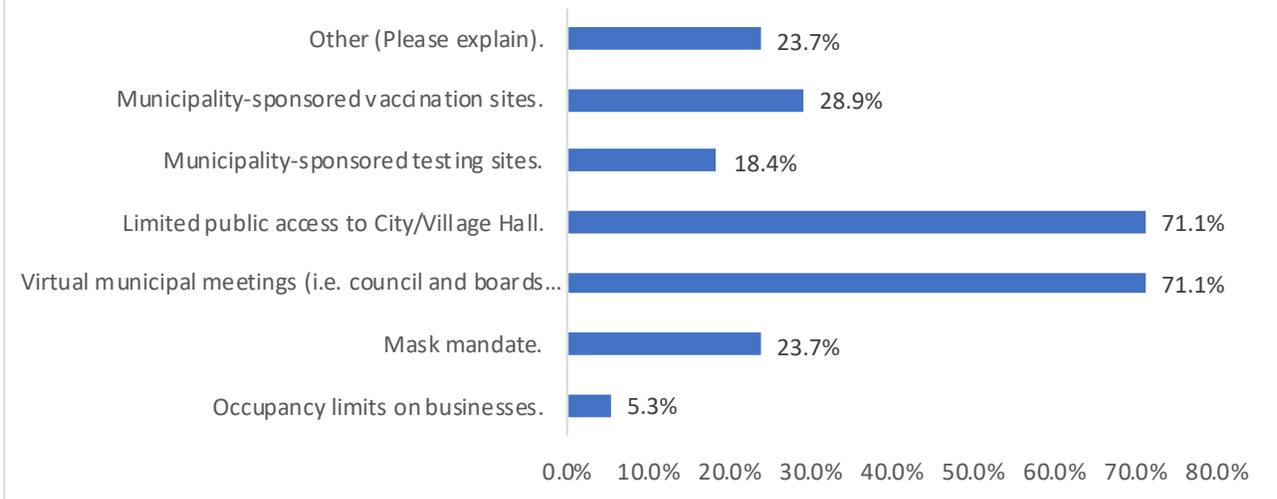
We began by asking what measures, if any, professional managers took locally in response

8. See Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2018). The impact of Wisconsin's Act 10 on municipal management in smaller municipalities: Views from local elected officials. *Public Policy and Administration*, 33(2), 170-189.

And

Ford, M. R., & Ihrke, D. M. (2016). Do school board governance best practices improve district performance? Testing the key work of school boards in Wisconsin. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 39(2), 87-94.

**Figure One: What actions did your municipality take in response to COVID-19 (Please select all that apply)?**



to COVID-19. As can be seen in Figure One, a majority of respondents limited access to public buildings and moved in-person meetings to a virtual format. A much smaller but still sizable percentage instituted public mask mandates and sponsored testing and vaccination sites. Very few municipalities instituted any type of occupancy limits on private business.

Respondents were able to share other actions taken that did not appear on our survey. Several responded they instituted a mask mandate for public buildings even though there was not a public mask mandate. Several also distributed personal protection equipment in the community, and, offered relief and/or grants to local businesses.

#### *Public Information Efforts*

A total of 39.5% of respondents indicated their municipality participated in a public information effort regarding COVID-19. Those public information efforts took many forms. The results of the open-ended responses are below:

- Yes, a Facebook page was set up to provide updated information to the public and our Library staff managed it to keep them working.
- Yes, press releases, public meetings, and virtual public interactive sessions.
- We placed signage at all highway entrances to the City reminding travelers of CDC best practices, i.e. masking, hand washing.
- Managed multi jurisdictional Emergency Operations Center with surrounding municipalities, in conjunction with County Health. Ran a heavy PR campaign relative to elections, encouraging absentee voting and assuring safe locations for voting.
- Yes, not uniformly driven. Mostly staff reposting information from CDC, DHS, or local health officials.
- Yes. We provided news blasts, government updates on openings/closings, passed information along to partners and facilitated free public wifi and free access to video/phone meeting tools.
- Masking PR efforts.
- We simply reposted on our WWW site and social media info from County, State, and Fed.

- COVID-19 Dedicated Page on Website, Facebook Messaging, COVID-19 Press Releases. This was done by all department heads and our communication specialist.
- We participated in social media, television and newspaper public information efforts on our own and in conjunction with other health departments. Our City health department led the effort.
- Shared on Facebook/website.

As can be seen, public information efforts varied in their sophistication. Many municipal managers amplified public health guidance given from other organizations, while several launched their own unique campaigns.

### Health Departments

In preliminary conversations with municipal managers, it became clear that the fragmented nature of local health departments was often a challenge during the height of the pandemic. Some municipalities had their own public health departments, while most coordinated efforts with County health departments with varying levels of success. Figure Two indicates that 80.7% of respondents did not have their own health department. Figure Three indicates that just over one-third of those without a health department feel having their own department would have made things easier to navigate.

Respondents were asked to expand on why they thought having their own health department would or would not have made their COVID-19 response easier. Those who thought it would have improved things stated:

- I am not trained in the medical field, and people wanted answers from the City Administrator. We do have a County Health Department and they were wonderful; however, there was not enough of them to serve all the needs.

Figure 2: Does your municipality have its own health department?

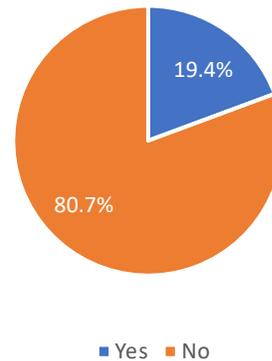
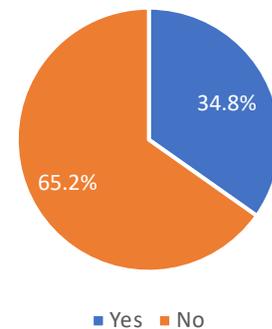


Figure 3: Would it have been easier to navigate your Covid-19 response if you had your own health department?



- County Health was beholden to a County board that did not consider the needs of a central city.
- There would have been one point of contact that we could use to evaluate and disseminate the information for officials to consider.
- Having a professional on staff to provide the Council guidance on local decisions would have been much easier. Without one our Council did not feel qualified to make local specific decisions.
- Better able to educate and make recommendations to the public.
- It would have better “customized” our

response that placed our resident's wishes at the forefront. We found that the County health department did not always have, what we believed to be, the best interests of our residents.

- The local County Health Department was ill equipped to provide leadership.

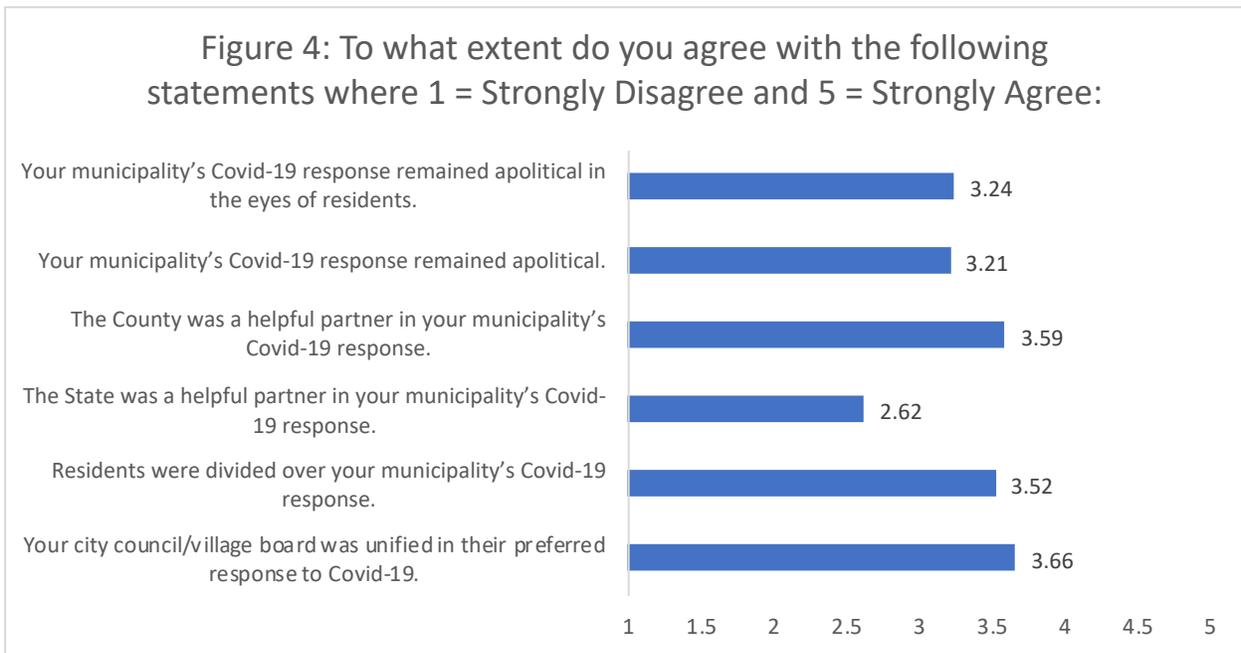
Those who thought it would not have made things easier stated:

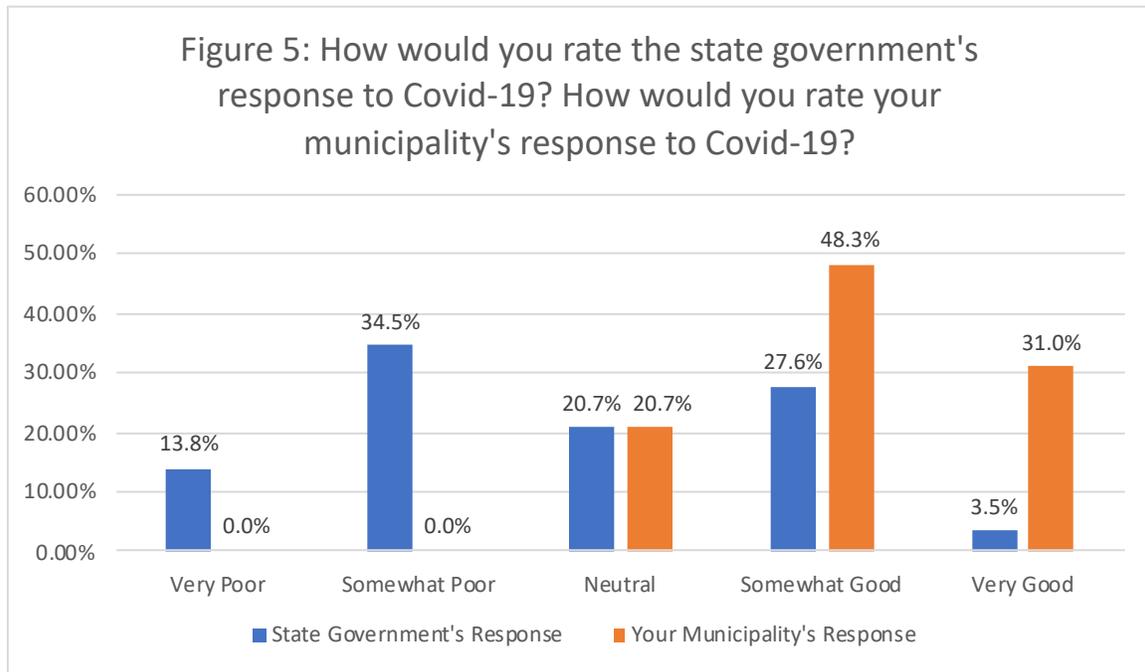
- Access to real-time data and recommendations would have been limited at the local level.
- I feel our County Health Department did an excellent job working in coordination with the City.
- A smaller community in a smaller County relies on multi-jurisdictional cooperation. many smaller health departments may not have provided the same benefit as a larger County-wide department.
- In many ways I found it easier working with the County and not having a department that may contradict the County's guidance.
- Potentially it would have been nice to have a

dedicated individual to fall back on for decisions, but reality is with our fiscal status another department without any other means of funding outside of tax dollars would be difficult. Also it was beneficial to have the County and state to utilize when explaining what other areas are doing for COVID.

- Politics.
- It was always changing and hard to keep track of, no additional staff, current staff had to handle the crisis along with their regular duties.
- Having municipal health departments would have made the COVID response even more disorganized and fragmented than it was.
- Better to have coordinated direction from County government.
- We have a good relationship with the County and they were very responsive to working with us.
- County better equipped to handle issue and take a more broad approach. Individual health departments creates greater patch-work policy.

Figure 4: To what extent do you agree with the following statements where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree:





### *Politics and Intergovernmental Relations*

As discussed in the context section, local government leaders were forced to deal with an evolving set of orders that were heavily influenced by both politics, and other levels of government. Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement with various statements where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. Respondents were strongly divided over the extent to which the municipality's response was apolitical. Respondents were also divided over the extent to which their governing boards and residents were united in their response to COVID-19. The strongest finding was the generally negative perceptions of the State as a partner.

The results displayed in Figure Five give more detail into how respondents felt the state handled COVID-19 compared to their municipality. Almost 50 percent felt the state's response was somewhat or very poor, while only 31 percent felt the response was somewhat or very good. In

contrast, no respondents thought their municipality's response was poor, while just shy of 80 percent felt their municipality's response was somewhat good or very good.

### *Government Form and Lessons Learned*

Our last two questions dealt with the specifics of professional management, and the lessons learned from professional manager responses to COVID-19. We asked "How did the structure of your government, i.e. having a professional administrator, help or hinder your municipality's COVID response?" In general, the open-ended responses were positive. Most respondents pointed to their form of government as a way to keep politics out of the day-to-day management of COVID-19 policy, and as a way in which to designate a single point of contact to guide staff. Responses included:

- Helped to keep the information circulating, and having someone who tried to supply the most up-to-date information to staff and residents. Also, was helpful in being able to

make decisions that the Council was not able to make due to meeting notice requirements.

- I think it helped keep the politics out of the day-to-day management. It did not eliminate the stress of hot button issues such as mask mandates.
- Having a professional municipal manager allowed for consistent policy application, adequate information presented to policy-makers, and policy suggestions that are well designed and anticipate the intent of the governing body.
- It helped to gather and provide unbiased information and professional recommendations when possible.
- It helped by providing guidance based on the latest science and the guidance of the CDC and WI DHS instead of just allowing politics to lead discussions.
- Provided a consistent flow of information to the public and Board.
- Staff looked to guidance from one individual who had the details and could provide an adequate and timely response and/or direction based on the known information.
- Mostly helped by having an individual spearhead response and policy changes.
- We had consistent leadership throughout the pandemic. Having a nonpartisan administrator helped to reassure residents that their best interests were being looked after.

When asked “What were the most significant barriers to an effective local COVID-19 response”, officials pointed to three main themes. First was the politicization of the pandemic and the spread of misinformation. Second was the lack of consistent messaging and goal setting from state and federal government. Third was the role of the judicial branch in being a de-facto policymaking body due to the ongoing legal battles over the state’s authority.

- Disorganized and slow State response and support network
- The actions of the State legislature and WI Supreme Court which were politically charged and confused a lot of residents.
- Lack of staff, time and resources to adequately respond to a (maybe) once in a lifetime pandemic in the face of growing political discord and public divisiveness.
- Lack of local unrestricted fund balance made it difficult to capitalize on federal/state funding. We have a smaller staff that taxed leadership and department heads.
- Politics...politics...politics and total inaction by the State Assembly and Senate to address.
- Misinformation circulating among the citizens.
- Addressing the unknown, how you could catch COVID-19 and how to protect employees. Also having to hold elections during COVID.
- 1. The fight between the state legislature and the governor. 2. The do nothing approach of the legislature. 3. The termination of safer at home with no state-wide contingency plan. The delegation of state-level interests to local governments. The absence of the definition of success.
- Lack of information from state and federal government.
- Lack of unified messaging from federal, state, County and local governments. Misinformation was a significant barrier.
- Ever changing regulations, overlapping regulations, court involvement.

Lastly, we asked respondents to reflect on their leadership during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, asking “What would you change, if anything, about your municipality’s COVID-19 response?” Responses generally indicated that municipal managers felt prepared to deal with a difficult crisis, but unprepared to deal with the

specifics of a global pandemic. Though some spoke specifically of the need for more specifics like masking and vaccination efforts, the common theme was a desire to have depoliticized the crisis through improved communication.

- From a tone standpoint, I would have tried to keep the hot button issues from being so political and divisive.
- We would have been more proactive in community notices and updates. we provided a lot of news feeds, but some businesses were not as impressed as others. the community overall appeared to support the efforts.
- Nothing really, I think we did the best we could.
- Figure out how to use social media to overcome disinformation.
- Early on I would have better communicated that this would be a long-term (12-18 months) challenge, not over in a few weeks.
- I would have provided the opportunity to vaccinate election workers and front-line city hall staff sooner.
- More public relations, explaining of our decisions.
- I would have pre-stocked PPE.
- Locally we were not able to do a lot in this political environment.

## Interviews

In addition to the survey, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews with municipal administrators who indicated a willingness to talk further about their survey results. The interviews were conducted in September 2021 over ZOOM. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. Five of the interview subjects were City Managers, while two were Village Administrators. Subjects served a range of small and medium-sized communities in geographically diverse parts of the state, including northern Wisconsin, the

Twin Cities Metro region, rural southwest Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Metro area, the Madison suburbs, and Northeast Wisconsin.

*Do you feel you were prepared for COVID-19?*

In general subjects felt unprepared to handle the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic. As one manager put it: “Things were changing so fast, I was working 12 to 16 hours a day.” Another stated, “I felt prepared on the specifics of emergency management, but did not have good information on how to deal with COVID specifically.” The general tone of all responses was summed up by a respondent who stated, “Nobody could have been prepared for this. I had capable staff, a supportive board, but I did not know what I did not know.”

*As a hired administrator, did you struggle with credibility when making COVID-19 policies?*

Most respondents indicated that their position as a hired administrator was an asset in their pandemic response. “No. If I was a mayor worried about re-election, I would have had less flexibility in my position.” Another stated “I was able to insulate my council by making decisions as a non-partisan official.” One official serving a smaller community did not feel the position mattered that much, concluding “Elected or hired, my community did not want me involved with the politics surrounding COVID-19. My role was fairly limited to keeping city services going.” Lastly, multiple respondents did indicate waning credibility in the eyes of the public as the pandemic dragged on: “I had the trust of everyone in the early months, that became harder to maintain during the second year of the pandemic.”

### *How did your council/board handle COVID-19?*

Municipal leaders gave a diverse set up responses regarding their council's/board's response to COVID-19. Multiple subjects indicated that their elected officials appreciated their manager's ability to insulate them from difficult decisions. "My board was quite happy not to take this issue on." Another stated "They appreciated that I made the most controversial decisions." Finally, another stated "They were great. They had my back every step of the way."

However, one respondent indicated board turnover had made their job difficult. "Only two of the board members who hired me are still serving, there is a coalition hell-bent on obstructing every COVID measure I take." Another reported division on their council around the issue of masks: "The board supported all of my internal efforts with my employees, but were deeply divided over our community mask mandate." Another stated that masking at board meetings was a divisive issue: "There were a lot of hard feelings about who did and did not wear a mask at our board meetings."

### *How did your staff handle COVID-19?*

In general, respondents reported a high level of initial support from their staff. However, support for COVID mitigation measures waned over time. "The first thing I did was declare all staff essential, I think that helped build unity." Another respondent stated, "Staff appreciated our move to virtual meetings and working from home, however there was disagreement about how and when to bring staff back." Finally, another respondent expressed the challenge of managing staff during COVID-19: "Our staff is a cross-section of society. Some took COVID more seriously than others. Some have little

kids. Many were out with COVID. It is a balancing act."

It was also clear that COVID-19 has taken a toll on employee morale in local government. "Our clerk was unfairly demonized during the [April 2020] election. It was totally unfair." Another stated "Our staff faced an avalanche of unwarranted criticism." Still another stated plainly "This whole thing has gutted employee morale. They are trying their best, but they are tired."

### *Was the state helpful?*

Subjects were consistent in their disappointment with the collective response of state officials. Comments included:

- The legislative branch was asleep and avoiding the issue.
- The sudden lifting of the safer at home order destroyed the credibility of the state government on COVID.
- No. The County was helpful, but I learned very quickly I could not get any assistance from the state.
- The state gave contradicting information. I had hoped for much more from them.
- Watching the inaction in the legislature made it clear to me that we were on our own.
- The state was helpful for funding, but not much else.
- I think the executive branch was trying, but in the end was not helpful.

### *What were the biggest challenges of your COVID-19 Response? What if anything would you have done differently?*

Subjects were very forthcoming about the challenges they faced during COVID-19, and the lessons they learned while meeting those challenges. Several spoke of the need for humil-

ity, for example: “I had to work to stay humble and learn. I couldn’t crush small business.” Another stated “I underestimated the severity of COVID-19. In hindsight I would have better prepared the community for a longer crisis.” Finally, another stated “What felt like the right call at the time was often not.”

Another common theme was the challenge of misinformation. “I wish I did a better job of getting ahead of the misinformation. It was hard because it was coming from so many different places.” Another stated “I faced an avalanche of criticism based on false information. I don’t think it is totally a COVID thing, I think it is where we are as a society.” Finally, another concluded “Our communication infrastructure was lacking. People had easy access to bad information, while our good information was impossible to find.

*What can the field of professional government management learn from this experience?*

We concluded our interviews by asking municipal managers what the local government management field can learn from the COVID-19 disruption. A first unexpected lesson was an overall state of low morale among professional managers. “An emerging trend is the changing nature of management. The discounting of facts and the rise of partisan politics at the local level is killing our profession. I got into this because I want to help people, but currently there is more downside than upside.” Another subject stated similarly, “Our mandate comes from trust, and there is not a lot of trust out there today.” Yet another stated “I fear an exodus from the profession.”

Other lessons include the importance of having an experienced network and staff. “I was saved by having a cohesive leadership team.” Another

manager stated “I leaned on my colleagues in other municipalities when I did not have the experience locally.” Finally, another stated “I leaned heavily on professional associations to guide me through the crisis.”

Lastly, interview subjects highlighted the challenge of intergovernmental relations in a polarized political climate. “The County was very unhelpful. They were just trying to stay out of the spotlight.” Another manager responded, “The state should have been clearer in offering guidance.” Finally, another concluded “We were on our own.”

## **Conclusions, Recommendations, and Resources**

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged professional managers throughout Wisconsin. Aside from working to keep municipal services running while dealing with persistent staffing challenges due to illness, municipal managers were attempting to craft a coherent course of action while an unprecedented societal disruption raged around them. Our analysis yields several conclusions and recommendations. Furthermore, we note a number of related resources that are available under each recommendation area.

### Conclusions

*Local measures were mostly limited to information sharing and maintaining service delivery.*

Though a few larger municipalities did institute their own public mask mandates and/or limits on private business, the majority of respondents indicated their efforts were geared at triaging information for public consumption. Those efforts, however, were made more difficult by changing state and federal guidelines, and

shortcomings in municipal communication infrastructure. To put it another way, information from non-official private channels spread more quickly than information from official government channels. Aside from sharing information, municipal managers saw their main role as continuing to provide municipal services despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to do so included more virtual services, regulatory relief, and increased flexibility with their staff.

*Local managers made it up as they went along.*

Both survey respondents and interview subjects acknowledged they underestimated the length and severity of the COVID-19 disruption. Initial measures were designed to be short-term, creating some confusion as the pandemic wore on. Both the uniqueness of the pandemic, and the fact that most municipalities were reliant on other government units for their public health response, forced local managers to be reactive, rather than proactive, the longer the pandemic continued.

*Who had authority for what was ambiguous. Communication between governments was lacking.*

At the start of the pandemic, local governments were utilizing ordinances and statutes dating back to the Spanish Flu Pandemic of 1918. Rarely used emergency declarations gave municipal managers some flexibility, but there was still confusion over what local governments could or could not do in response to COVID-19. Further complicating matters was inconsistent and changing information flowing from the state and federal government. While a few respondents reported good coordination between governments, most reported that intergovernmental cooperation was lacking.

*The legal battles over COVID-19 policies eroded public confidence.*

The confusion over the government response to COVID-19 was magnified by the ongoing legal battles between the executive and legislative branches of Wisconsin government. Local governments attempting to give consistent guidance lost credibility when legal decisions quickly made their guidance obsolete.

*Experience mattered.*

Though all respondents reported struggling with the novelty of the COVID-19 disruption, those with more experience, and those with more experience around them, felt better about their response.

### Recommendations and Resources

Our survey and interview results did identify elements of success that can be replicated in responses to future crises. Professional managers who had good preexisting systems of communication with their County health departments and state legislators reported less role confusion. Similarly, municipalities with established consistent means of communication with residents were able to get ahead of COVID misinformation. Finally, managers who deliberately shielded their governing boards from COVID politics, and those with a clear articulation of their role, i.e., minimizing service disruption, were able to act more proactively and limit community conflict. Below are several recommendations, and links to resources, to improve the local government response to the next crises.

*There is a need to understand who is charge of what before the next crisis.*

Inconsistent, fast changing information further eroded trust in government during the COVID-19 response. The scope of local government authority, and the balance between state and local authority during a public health crisis, needs to be clarified. Determining where authority lies via the courts during the midst of a pandemic simply did not work. Who is charge of what is less important than all stakeholders knowing and accepting where authority lies.

A number of entities provide trainings relevant to this issue. For instance:

- [Local Government 101](#): Important Basics: The League of Wisconsin Municipalities (LWM) hosts a 1-day workshop, providing a basic framework for governing to both new city and village officials and those who want to brush up on their knowledge of local governance. Participants learn about city and village powers including municipal home rule, hear about how to recognize and avoid conflicts of interest, go home with a quick tutorial on municipal budgeting as well as how to run a meeting and finish with an overview on managing public works projects.

*Need for authority to align with activities.*

Several municipal managers mentioned it was confusing to be in a position of implementing public health policies when their public health department was housed at the County level. Municipal leaders were put in a position where public pressure demanded action beyond their subject area expertise. It is important that municipal managers and County leaders examine the extent to which existing public health

structures facilitated and/or inhibited credibility and trust in their collective pandemic response. Pending their findings, structural changes may be warranted.

Some resources that may be useful for exploring opportunities for city/county coordination include:

- [COVID-19 Recovery Clearinghouse](#): The National Association of Counties (NACo) features critical resources for counties, including allocation estimations, examples of county programs using federal coronavirus relief funds, the latest news and more. NACo and the National League of Cities is also committed to exploring ways local governments can collaborate and address the needs of residents now and in the future.

*There is a need for experienced emergency management professionals.*

Municipal managers, particularly those serving smaller populations, often lacked the expertise, and did not have the staff, to adequately respond to the public health aspects of the COVID-19 disruption. County health departments were at times helpful in filling this gap, but more often than not managers reported a lack of experience responding to the unique aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic contributed to this lack of experience. Moving forward, it is important that emergency management response is prioritized in the training and hiring of local government leaders.

Another training program for local government managers offers two tracks that are relevant to this need:

- [Local Government 101 Online Certificate Program](#): Offered by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), this interactive online certificate program immerses participants in the special challenges that confront local government managers today. Taught by experienced managers and experts, it is designed to impart real-life experience, best practices, and sound advice in the areas most important to a manager's day-to-day role. There are two tracks to choose from: the Disaster Preparedness Track or the Equity and Inclusion Track.

*Improved communication systems.*

Non-official communication channels, like community Facebook groups, proved much more efficient than official channels, like government newsletters and social media pages, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Local governments were often using their resources to correct misinformation rather than proactively educate their residents. Local managers need to examine how they disseminate information, and adopt new modes of communication and processes that mirror the ways in which residents actually consume information.

A number of articles released by ICMA also speak to this area, such as:

- [The Coronavirus and Your Crisis and Emergency Response Communication Plan](#)
- [Getting More from Social Media for Pandemic and Disaster Management](#)
- [Getting Your Message Out: 10 Communication Practices for Changing Times](#)

*Need to address morale in the public workforce and the professional manager profession.*

The stress of the COVID-19 pandemic has taken

its toll on municipal managers and employees. On the manager side, increased mentoring of less experienced leaders is needed to prevent an exodus from the profession. On the employee side, increased attention to mental health services, the exploration of more flexible work arrangements (i.e., allowing more remote work), and municipal sponsored leadership training could help ensure the next generation of municipal leaders do not leave local government.

The Wisconsin City/County Management Association currently offers two programs to active members that can begin to address this need, such as:

- **Senior Advisor Program:** The purpose of this program is to make the counsel, experience, and support of respected, retired managers of the profession available to individual members. The program is designed to help with personal and professional issues and not to provide any form of technical assistance nor to solve substantive problems in a local government.
- **ICMA Coaching Program:** Coaches can help members chart a path in local government, find information they need, and guide them to the answers to difficult career questions. Coaching offers value for people at any stage in their careers by providing coaches with the opportunity to see their situation and opportunities from a fresh perspective.

In conclusion, there are concrete lessons to be learned from the failures and successes of the local government response to COVID-19. Calling attention to these lessons can lead to substantive changes that better prepare local government managers for future crises.