



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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CIVD-19: Communicating in a Crisis | April 3, 2020 | OAS Episode 88

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. On this podcast, we’re all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith. Thanks for joining us.

Today we’re continuing with our new series of podcasts focused on how states are taking action in response to the corona virus pandemic. These podcasts are just one of many new resources NCSL has assembled to serve and support legislators and legislative staff during this unprecedented time.

NCSL also is presenting a webinar series looking at public health responses, workplace issues, education and childcare, the economy, elections, and continuity of government. You can find links to sign up for these webinars and view archive versions, along with links to a wide range of other resources, at www.ncsl.org/coronavirus.

We’re going to focus today on communicating during the crisis. Our first guest is Kit Beyer, communications director for Wisconsin Assembly Speaker Robin Vos. Later in the show we’ll talk with the lieutenant governor of Mississippi on the importance of giving people hope in times of crisis.

Kit, welcome to “Our American States.”

Kit: Thank you.

Time Marker (TM): 01:28

Ed: So, Kit, as the magnitude of this pandemic became apparent a few weeks ago, what was the first priority in communicating with constituents in Wisconsin?

Kit: Well, since it was all new to everyone – we never even heard what a corona virus is and what Covid-19 actually would mean to the country and the world – our first priority for the Speaker and for the assembly Republicans of Wisconsin was to gather information.

It seems like such a long time ago, but Speaker Vos first attended a state briefing with our public health department back on March 4th, and that week was the first communication that we provided to our constituents. We just shared reliable sources of information where they could go in the Speaker's e-update. And then a week later, we got additional information from the White House during a briefing with state and local leaders.

And then we thought it was important to increase our communication with our constituents through social media. We did a statement to the press and we also did additional e-update communications during that time.

We really focused on sharing reliable resources with the constituents that we serve because we didn't really know anything about what we were about to face.

TM: 02:44

Ed: So, I think you've hit on a little bit of this, but what are some of the specific strategies you've used in communicating?

Kit: We made it a priority as a caucus with Assembly Republicans of Wisconsin to share the information with our constituents first about how to stay safe, share any emergency orders that our state has issued, and how to get the information that they need to have related to their businesses, their schools and their industries.

But we also took it to a different level because as representatives, it's important that they're connected to their districts. So, we asked our members to really show what they are doing in their districts to get information out and to participate in the advice that we're giving to their constituents.

So, we put together a list of restaurants and businesses who have takeout in their districts and so, they would go to the restaurant and get a takeout order and then post it on social media.

We found that the greatest success we had in our communications was through our Facebook posts that showed representatives being active in their community, homeschooling their kids, giving blood, and getting their favorite foods by delivery or takeout. And our Facebook Live also received great attention and was highly successful as well.

TM: 04:08

Ed: So, you found Facebook Live, Facebook generally to be maybe a better platform than Twitter or Instagram or something like that, at least at this juncture?

Kit: Yes. In our state, Twitter, like many communities, is not utilized by as many adults. I think the state and national percentage is 20% of adults utilize Twitter, but our Facebook pages are more developed by our representatives, so we utilize that platform more.

TM: 04:39

Ed: What have been the communication's priorities for the leadership in your chamber and in the assembly generally?

Kit: With things changing hour to hour, day to day, minute by minute, communications are key not only externally, but internally. We wanted to make sure that our members had the latest information in the morning and in the evening and that there was a constant flow of information between leadership and our caucus, because if there is any misinformation out there, it creates more of a problem and then you have so-called more fires to put out. And that's not what you would like to have.

You want to have clear communications to people in a time of crisis. So, having an added focus on internal communications I believe is key during this public health emergency.

TM: 05:29

Ed: As I've talked to a number of people doing this series of podcasts on the corona virus, the value of credible information from voices in the community that people trust has come up again and again, particularly legislators. What are your thoughts on that and observations during this period?

Kit: It is incredible how much misinformation and rumor are out there. Days before our state had a stay-at-home order, a shelter-in-place order... it's been called many different things throughout the country – there were so many different pieces of communication that just undermined each other.

We had a lot of questions about what's an essential and nonessential business days before this emergency order came out, and that lead to a lot of confusion and a lot of panic, and that is really something that was very unfortunate in our state, and there could have been a bit clearer communication from our executive branch, but understanding that it is quite an unprecedented time.

TM: 06:33

Ed: So, I'm sure no one had a specific playbook for this event, but do you generally have a crisis communication plan that you can turn to?

Kit: Well, absolutely, but I have to admit on day two or day three, it was completely out the door. Of course, state legislators have a top priority to be responsive to their constituents. So, of course, we increase the number of our normal communications, we are doing more e-updates, we are responding more rapidly to our constituent casework and any specific questions that a business has about how they can operate and what schools can and can't do. And we are, of course, opening the door for more media requests locally.

But no one would have guessed even two weeks ago that we would have to do press conferences with our leaders virtually. So, we are now doing Facebook Live streamed press conferences utilizing Facebook and our local CSPAN outlet, and the telephone. And how to operate something like that I don't think I would have thought through in advance.

Ed: I think we've all gotten a crash course in remote technology in the past few weeks.

Kit: Yeah, absolutely.

TM: 07:51

Ed: And what would your single best piece of advice be for other communication staffers and other legislatures?

Kit: Well, fortunately or unfortunately, this is not the first sort-of rodeo in crisis communications that I have had. And I think what I learned during the massive protests in 2011 when I was working for then Representative Vos when he was co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee in Wisconsin, we had hundreds of thousands of people protesting a change in the law.

We learned a lot from that time. And one thing that I have taken with me to this day is that you are literally drinking out of a firehose as a staff member and as a legislator, and our jobs are extremely demanding and stressful. Then on top of that you have the ups and downs of your family life, your concerns for your grandparents, your concerns for your kids and their education.

So, my main advice is to take care of yourself. Set priorities. Make sure you're getting enough sleep, enough to eat, so you can be 100% at work. And, of course, you have to be flexible. Your priorities change from day to day in your job, and you need to strike a balance with those priorities.

Sure, legislators can do media interviews all day long, they can call constituents for hours, but legislators have family and they may even have a business that they're having to take care of during this time. And we don't know how long this pandemic is going to last, and we need people to be healthy and safe in order for them to serve their communities in the way that they can and should.

TM: 09:31

Ed: Well, great advice for all of us, Kit. Anything else you'd like to share with our listeners?

Kit: I have been seeing this as... any crisis situation is an opportunity for people to lead, and an opportunity to be kind to one another, to be nice. We are really living the pages of our history books right now, and I think it's wonderful that we have a resource like NCSL.

I'm involved with the LINCS communications group and we've already been sharing information about what states are doing and helping their legislators. So, being able to reach out to one another and help one another and utilize the resources that NCSL has for us, I think it's important to remember. And I wish everyone the very best during these stressful times.

Ed: Well thanks, Kit. This has been a very interesting discussion. We'll be right back after this.

MUSIC

Ed: Welcome back. Now we're going to speak with Mississippi Lieutenant Governor, Delbert Hoseman, who also serves as President and Presiding Officer of the Mississippi Senate. Lieutenant Governor Hoseman, welcome to "Our American States."

LG H: Thank you. It's good to be with you.

TM: 10:52

Ed: So, we're talking today about communicating during a crisis, and I understand you have an approach that aims to share a hopeful message during times like this. Can you tell us why that's important?

LG H: Well, the first thing I think is that Mississippians, like everywhere else in the country, they all want to receive good information about the crisis. They want to make sure that they're factually accurate.

And so, try as hard as we can to be factually accurate with the information we're distributing: How long does this take? What are the supplies? How are the hospitals? ... that kind of thing. We also think that it's important for people to know that there will be a return to some normality in the future.

So, I have been saying that these issues are temporary, but our resolve is permanent, and I try to close all of our conversations with that. We use, of course, Facebook, and we do radio and we'll be on the radio here, and we've done TV spots on the TV stations, all of those kinds of things.

But a lot of that needs to be first, that what the facts are second, that we really control our own destiny. And if we use good sanitary conditions with our hands, if we social distance, if we take care of our vulnerable adults, those kinds of things, that there will be another end to this, like every other tragedy. We will get back to some type of normality shortly.

And so, we try to give a little hope, I think, to people that things will get better and that we are resolved to have them better. One of the things we did here was we talked about that we will build the cars of the future – we have Toyota and Nissan here – and we will build the ships that defend us, which we have Ingalls, most of the Navy ships here in Mississippi.

And we will grow the food for ourselves and the world. And we have some of the most productive soil on the Delta, and our people are planting now.

So, I think those are important things. Our children will get educated; we will come back to that. And the fact that we have to work really hard right now to make sure we follow our doctors' advice literally in order for us to have a brighter day. And that brighter day will come one day.

So, I think it's a combination of giving good information, good crisis information, and then some hope for the future.

TM: 13:22

Ed: And how have the folks in Mississippi responded?

LG H: Well, I think. We have limited the number of corona cases that we have here, and we're very hopeful that our people... all the restaurants are closed; the churches are not meeting, which is a big thing in Mississippi. I think we go to church more than any other state. I think something around 70% of Mississippians go to some organized religion every month.

That was a big thing for us to step from being in church in our normal pew with our normal friends and our normal things that you talk about afterwards and our normal Sunday lunches, that kind of thing, was a very big step back for Mississippi. But we seem to be responding to that. I think that we're doing well with that.

The real proof here will be in what goes forward from here, in how well we'll be able to, as they say, dampen this virus to where we don't have a spike; we have more of a gentle rollout and it will hopefully go away over a period of time.

The other thing that happens here, we're in session in Mississippi and we stopped the session. We have a 125-day session here. We stopped right in the middle on the 63rd day or so. And we passed bills out of the Senate and out of the House and now we're exchanging bills. But it's clear to me that public policy in Mississippi will be dictated and dominated by the economy going forward in the future.

There may be issues that have arisen on one topic or another, or how you address one topic or another. We're a conservative state. But in the end, I think here the economics will trump... no pun intended... just about everything, just about everything else we work on in the legislature when it comes back.

TM: 15:26

Ed: On that note, I know you're also the presiding officer in the Senate. So, how have you approached communicating with your colleagues in the Senate?

LG H: We have been doing that by email. We stopped a couple of weeks ago, closed the capitol, and sent everyone home. We've had telephone conferences. I usually divide those... we have 52 members and we divide them into three different groups, like 17 and another 17, then maybe 18 or something like that, but usually in three different groups because I want them to be able to speak when I go through this.

I literally call the roll, as we do when we sign in every day at the Senate. I'll call the roll and ask each senator what their comment or question is. I've found it to be better than trying to get 52 people on the line. We get them in three different groups. And those groups are Republicans and Democrats in the same group.

We, in Mississippi, believe you run on party, but you govern on people. So, we've had some of our bills, legislation particularly on education and some other matters be unanimous, be 52 to 0. So, we try to work together here in our state, and we try to make sure that both parties are represented on each call.

TM: 16:50

Ed: I know you've been in public office for some time, and I know Mississippi has had its share of challenges, of natural disasters. Can you talk about some of the situations you've been involved in in the past that maybe helped steel you for this experience?

LG H: I told somebody if I looked out at the walls of the capitol, out my window here at the capitol and I saw locusts on the front, I was just going to go straight to church. That would be the last thing we hadn't had here.

We've had floods, fires and just about everything else. We've had hurricanes and now pandemics. We've never had a situation like this, and the country is like this too. It's not anything just solely for Mississippi.

But what I have seen over the years, the first thing to do is to make sure that you give people good facts. When we had these tornadoes and whatnot, we need to tell how many people have been damaged and where you can go for relief or SBA loans, those kinds of things.

But I've always just gone to wherever the disaster is. That's held up well for me. I had a protocol when I was Secretary of State for 12 years. We had to sign the emergency declaration. So I would sign with the Governor and then I'd go get in my truck and I usually had two/three cases of water, a bunch of candy bars, that kind of thing, and I headed for wherever the disaster was.

Sometimes people just need to see you show up and know that somebody cares, that it's not just somebody on TV. So, I try to go where those people are. I help them haul out furniture, whatever it takes, and that's been helpful for me. I've learned a lot.

TM: 18:41

Ed: So, tell me lieutenant governor, is there anything in your own personal experience, your own background that helps you maintain a positive attitude when things are as grim as they are right now?

LG H: Well, somebody was laughing about that the other day. I'm sure I speak for all the other public officials. If they're like me, you don't sleep more than about three hours and you wake up all night using some like what abouts: What about if we did this? What about if we did that?

The other thing is we cannot afford for ourselves to get down. People who are struggling as they are in Mississippi right now and around this country don't need to see somebody tell them how bad it is. They already know how bad it is. They want to have someone with some positive attitude about it: Here's what we're going to do. Here's how long it's going to take. Here's where we are. And we're going to come out the other side.

So, I don't think that we have the luxury really of not having a positive attitude. People look at us and we need to have one. They asked me that the other day, the same kind of question: On a scale of like one to ten, you know, how worried are you about everything? I said well, it's about an 11. So, everybody has to face that, I think, the governors, lieutenant governors, secretaries of state, all the legislators and House representatives face that around Mississippi.

And I think you put on a positive attitude, you tell them the items that are currently accurate, and then how we're going to get through it. That's most difficult here because this is... no one alive, I think today, has ever been through anything like this.

TM: 20:36

Ed: So, unfortunately, we might find ourselves back in this situation down the road if we listen to what the scientists tell us. What lessons do you think Mississippi or other states can take from this experience that might help us be better prepared next time?

LG H: Well, clearly our hospitals are really straining now. You can see in New York and these other states that have such a higher incidence. We will be strained here in about two weeks in our hospitals. That preparation for alternative sites is going on now by our governor and by others to do such things as not only take care of medical, but also where do we meet as a legislature.

We have an old capitol here. We could meet in another location somewhere that we would spread around. So, you start thinking about things in the future where you'd have alternatives for healthcare, alternatives for the legislature, that kind of thing.

Clearly also the ability to stockpile a sufficient amount is going to come up a lot. How many masks do you really need, and how many do you have to have at your hands? Right now, they're correct – most states are bidding against most states and I know the federal government is having some shipments flown in today from China. But most of those will go to New York and Michigan and I don't anticipate those coming to Mississippi or other states like us.

So, how much do you need to have in your own stockpile will be an issue that we'll have to face. That's an economic issue. How much money do we want to devote to that? And then also an issue about the reality of being able to be self-sufficient when you have this kind of an event. I think we'll have some economic issues about that, and I think we'll look at our storage capacity. We'll be taking a very healthy look at that, both PPE, and also hospital structures.

TM: 22:39

Ed: Well, Lieutenant Governor Hoseman, thank you so much for taking the time. I know that you and our other public officials around the country are doing everything you can to contend with this. I thank you very much.

LG H: Oh, we're happy to share this and I know everybody sharing with us as we go through all of this... We have a common enemy here and it has the ability to take our loved ones away. And unless we follow good public health directives, it will be even worse than it already appears to be.

So, everybody say a prayer, social distance, wash your hands, and make sure you take care of your vulnerable adults.

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready.

For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of “Our American States.”

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