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Connecting with New Partners in COVID-19 Response

COVID-19 Viewpoint

Abstract: *The COVID-19 crisis has called for the mobilization of diverse resources and coordination through administrative networks. This mobilization has brought to light the challenges involved in the recruitment and retention of diverse administrative networks. This Viewpoint essay reviews the importance and difficulties of maintaining diverse administrative networks. The review is followed by concrete strategies for building and maintaining diverse networks in Norman, Oklahoma. The lessons emphasize the role of active and imaginative recruitment and a realistic assessment of the challenges facing members of the network that can interfere with their participation.*

The COVID-19 crisis reveals the complex interdependency of our social system. While the virus is a medical issue, it presents a large public health threat requiring a robust response. Such a response requires the coordination of health officials but also emergency management, local government, law enforcement, local businesses, and beyond. This is emphatically not a problem that a single organization or even an entire policy sector can tackle. The response to COVID-19 calls for a networked response engaging just about every administrative agency, along with private and nonprofit sector organizations. However, with COVID-19, there is an additional challenge requiring the engagement of networks of organizations both old and new—many of which have rarely, if ever, coordinated before.

The need for a network perspective to understand administrative activity is not new within public administration (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015; O’Toole 1997; Robinson 2007). Within the emergency management community, the importance of networks has been a particularly robust theme over the past two decades (Comfort 2007; Comfort, Waugh, and Cigler 2012; Kapucu, Arslan, and Collins 2010; Kapucu, Augustin, and Garayev 2009; Moynihan 2007, 2009). Research into network management has grown tremendously over the past several decades and contributed to our understanding of public management. One area that warrants special attention during this crisis is building and maintaining a diverse network. While much of the research on networks is between similar organizations (such as mental health providers coordinating in a mental health service network; see Provan and

Milward 1995), the COVID-19 response calls for connecting different types of organizations in a unified response—and doing so rapidly.

This Viewpoint essay discusses the challenges of building and sustaining diverse networks and presents relevant practical advice grounded in managerial experience. The essay begins with a discussion of the importance and difficulty of building and sustaining diverse networks drawing from the extensive literature in public administration, while the second section discusses general strategies based on experiences with previous disaster responses. The final section illustrates these strategies using examples from a current COVID-19 response.

Why Diversity in Networks Matters

One of the most popular justifications for networks is the complexity of wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973). Wicked problems are defined in various ways, but they include elements of causal uncertainty and consequences that cross traditional boundaries of policy areas. These elements make it difficult (often impossible) for a single agency to develop a sufficient response to the wicked problem. Because wicked problems span the boundaries of traditional policy areas, they necessitate involving multiple agencies and organizations within the response framework. The causal uncertainty associated with wicked problems is an additional justification for network diversity because these problems defy simple explanation. Having a diverse team increases the number of perspectives for confronting uncertainty (Page 2008). Specifically, including people with varied experience increases the chances that someone on

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the team will have relevant knowledge to tackle new and emerging aspects of the problem.

Building in diversity would not be problematic except that the instincts of most administrators work against diversity. Building networks generally involves finding partners who are sufficiently similar to the early network members. One of the most robust findings of social network research is that people tend to connect with network partners like themselves—a phenomenon known as homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). The tendency of people to seek similar partners is reflected in partner selection in administrative networks as well (Robinson 2011).

The tendency toward homophily affects a variety of processes involved in building policy networks. Network entrepreneurs seeking to build a network are likely to rely on preexisting contacts, especially initially. These prior contacts are also likely to be the people the network entrepreneurs turn to when trying to build out the network. These tendencies reinforce similarity and network entrepreneurs are most likely to pursue partners within their own professional networks. These processes reinforce similarity—especially within professional silos.

Homophily is problematic, however, because it can limit creativity when defining solutions if distinct groups lack relevant support networks. The challenge of homophily points to the need to develop capacity to effectively manage diverse groups and individuals. These managerial skills include managing partners who ask how they can help (sometimes, just to be doing something) as well as how to deal with the need to manage the flow of information, including copious extraneous facts and information. Having diverse network partners can assist jurisdictions in meeting such demands by assigning tasks to various groups with different reporting requirements. The data can be utilized by jurisdictions as an accomplishment in response efforts while also supporting the call for network diversity.

Care is required when engaging new partners because such engagement can result in alienating staff and internal subject matter experts. When jurisdictions are quick to identify and appoint team members without regard for their own staff, thereby ignoring subject matter experts pertinent to a response effort, conflicts between staff and team members can develop and impact efforts.

Strategies for Building and Sustaining Diverse Networks

Having identified the primary barrier to building and sustaining diverse networks, we would like to present two strategies that have proven useful in the past. We briefly discuss each strategy and in the next section discuss how each strategy can be practiced.

Strategy 1: Deliberate Recruitment

The key to building diverse networks is the deliberate effort to diversify. If a manager seeks to build a network without a clear emphasis on diversity, it is likely the case that she or he will fall back into familiar patterns and recruit previous partners (Robinson, Berrett, and Stone 2006). Returning to the same partners risks reinforcing the same silos that prevented diverse networks in the past.

It is important to note that it can be difficult to anticipate the needs of a network when facing a wicked problem. The nature of the

problem may change over time. The process of recruitment must be continuous and responsive to changing conditions related to the problem. The continuous effort to identify needs and recruit a diverse team requires constant assessment of the problem, the needs of the community, and the assets within the community. The reasons drive Moynihan's recommendation to balance the advantages of hierarchy and centralization with the advantages of flexibility in a "hierarchical network" (Moynihan 2009).

Strategy 2: Constant Support and Engagement

Putting together a diverse team is only the beginning of the struggle with homophily. Once they are part of the team, members will likely face demands pulling them in different directions. Diverse teams are pulled in diverse directions. People from different sectors and organizations will be pulled back to serve the needs of their organization. Without care, diverse networks can easily fall apart. The key to maintaining diverse networks is continuous support and engagement. Individual's work environments will likely continuously reassert the importance of their home organization. Without regular reminders, members will simply fade back into their own organizations and their respective silos. With constant support and engagement, the importance of the network, the good served by participation in the network, and members' roles within the network can support continued participation. The effective management of the network (and its diversity) contributes to the development of a shared operating vision and improved capacities to learn as the crisis evolves (Comfort 2007).

Building and Sustaining Diverse Networks in the COVID-19 Response in Norman, Oklahoma

COVID-19 presents federal, state, and local governments with unique challenges. Emergency response and hazard mitigation planning generally focus on reducing impacts to communities as a whole from natural disasters, including hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and winter weather. This is not to say that pandemics are not incorporated into the planning process, because that would be a fallacy. However, until COVID-19, standard protocols for dealing with infectious diseases were deemed enough (e.g., staying home if sick, washing hands, and small-scale social distancing at work to the extent feasible). When infection occurred, people relied on the health care system to address any remaining problems. If the local health care system had been hit with a surge, the situation would have escalated quickly, because local jurisdictions have become too dependent on the strategic national stockpile and have not considered required networks in preparedness planning. This speaks to the importance of deliberately recruiting diverse network partners to avoid roadblocks when the unexpected occurs. This section illustrates the two strategies for managing diverse networks through an example from an early COVID-19 response in Norman, Oklahoma.

The difficulties of building a response network do not stem from a failure to plan. Current strategies pertaining to incident management and command and control aid jurisdictions in meeting the demands of this new crisis. These systems assume that managers will be building networks during the event rather than assuming that all relevant parties are identified before the event and documented within the plan. What has changed is the nature of the organizations and the role they play in providing support

at the community level to fill gaps in serving communities. While existing relationships are still in place, the prominence of safety net organizations over public safety entities has become more evident during the COVID-19 crisis. A reliance on diverse networks or organizations—not-for-profit and nongovernmental organizations, as well as spontaneous community groups—have emerged to aid government entities in response and recovery efforts as common practices and networks are no longer enough. This section examines how administrative and organizational networks have evolved and expanded in Norman, Oklahoma, to help citizens weather the COVID-19 crisis.

Profile of the City

Sitting roughly 20 miles south of downtown Oklahoma City (the state capital) and home to the University of Oklahoma and the county seat of Cleveland County, Norman has a diverse population. Despite being part of the Oklahoma City metropolitan area, Norman is a big city (third largest in the state) with a small-town feel. The population was estimated to be 123,000 by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2018, although it fluctuates because of the transient nature of some of the college population. The overall poverty rate for Oklahoma is estimated at 15 percent (16th worst nationally), and for Norman it is 18.5 percent. This speaks to the potential for unmet needs among the population that would burden existing social networks during events such as COVID-19.

Building and Sustaining Administrative and Organizational Representation

The City of Norman is not operating any differently than many other jurisdictions throughout the United States in terms of trying to limit community transmission of COVID-19. The mayor actively promotes a stay-at-home mandate and requires nonessential businesses to remain closed while encouraging those remaining open to provide delivery or curbside service if feasible. Those businesses needing to remain open—such as grocery stores, pharmacies, and similar services—are encouraged to implement strict social distancing protocols while also promoting the use of masks among members of the public to protect essential workers and reducing the transmission of COVID-19. Diverse perspectives are essential for understanding the diverse needs of the private sector. The effects of

the mandates are different for bars than for fast food restaurants, for gyms than for bookstores, and so on. Having broad participation improves the capacity of the network to address the full range of effects of mandates.

Officially, the Norman Police Department stood up Incident Command on March 13, 2020, and has recurring virtual briefings. The emergency manager—Norman’s fire chief—also stood up the virtual emergency operations center (VEOC) on March 13 and holds regular briefings and follows the guidelines defined within the emergency operations plan. However, this is not a standard EOC operation in that it more closely reflects an array of network partners to facilitate fact-finding and responding to the COVID-19 crisis. It is within this context that we examine who the network players are for ensuring that both the city and the community as a whole can minimize impacts during the COVID-19 crisis.

Key network players are shown in table 1. They include state, city, county, and tribal government officials and department heads; private sector representatives for critical infrastructure (gas and electric entities) and the health care system (regional hospital); representatives of local not-for-profit social service providers; and subject matter experts.

All of the entities listed in table 1 serve as members of a diverse network of partners managing the COVID-19 crisis. These are also the core players serving the Norman community on a regular basis. It is interesting to note that the diverse array of actors represent what Moynihan (2009) refers to as a “hierarchical network” and what Robinson et al. (2013) refer to as a core and periphery structure with some actors serving as consistent, central components and others called upon as needed (though consistently involved in meetings and communication).

The functionality of some of these partners has evolved during the crisis to support larger sectors of the population as the number of households requiring support services has increased. The consistent communication between the various partners facilitated what Comfort (2007) refers to as a “shared cognitive image” of the situation. The changing situation called for an evolving response

Table 1 Organizations Coordinating the COVID-19 Response in Norman, Oklahoma

Government Entities	Private Sector	Not-for-Profit Social Service Providers
Mayor	Oklahoma Gas & Electric	United Way of Norman
City Manager	Oklahoma Natural Gas	American Red Cross
City Emergency Management (EM)	Norman Regional Health System	Salvation Army
City Clerk		Pantry Partners (food for students in need)
City Attorney		Meals on Wheels (food service for elderly)
Police Department		Food & Shelter, Inc. (homeless support resource)
Fire Department		The Virtue Center (mental health and addiction resource)
Water		Religious organizations (food, rent/utility help, etc.)
Sanitation		
Public Works		
Parks and Recreation		
County Health Department		
Regional Medical Response System (State Department of Health)		
County EM		
Tribal EM		
Norman Public Schools		
University of Oklahoma Public Health		
University of Oklahoma EM		

sometimes emphasizing law enforcement, other times emphasizing social services, for example. It was consistent communication that allowed for the network to survive the evolution of the crisis and how the crisis affected different elements of the community.

Additionally, a spontaneous volunteer organization—Norman Community Relief (NCR)—joined the array of partners with recruitment activities occurring through Facebook on local city council ward pages. Members of the wards spread the word about a way for citizens to be part of the safety net for those requiring assistance during the crisis.

Two Norman city councilors founded NCR as a volunteer grassroots group to provide the infrastructure for rapid emergency response in times of crisis including in the supplies and services sector. The goal is to prioritize providing assistance to those most vulnerable, including the LGBTQIA+ population, people with physical or mental disabilities, people of color, the elderly or homebound, and undocumented immigrants (<https://www.normancommunityrelief.org/about>). Since the organization first appeared on Facebook, more than 3,000 volunteers have expressed interest in helping those in need through NCR. The problem, however, is how to coordinate services and resources, including connecting those in need to appropriate providers. Norman emergency management took the lead in connecting NCR with other local service providers such as United Way of Norman, which works with the 211 HeartLine in Oklahoma to connect people with information about resources such as food, rent and utility assistance, and health care.

This newly formed network partner (NCR) also united with other local organizations, including Pantry Partners and Food & Shelter, to pool resources and provide a single case management entity to help struggling households (many of whom joined the ranks of the growing number of recently unemployed). This crisis has strained existing resources and existing service providers found themselves unable to meet the increasing demands placed on finite resources. NCR volunteers have stepped in to help by donating time and resources and providing logistical support by assisting with transporting goods and people. This reflects those linked through the organizations listed.

Aside from formal NCR support information and connecting resources, NCR volunteers regularly make requests for assistance or share information about unmet needs via the NCR Facebook page. This provides an easy and continual flow of information to respond to unmet needs throughout the community. Numerous individuals continue to share their needs and members of the community respond through the Facebook page, providing access to homemade face masks, face shields, and meals to aid those on the front lines as issues emerged because of limited access to critical supplies during the early days of the crisis. These individuals and groups—network partners—have become integral to the existing network of partners while diversifying the base from which the City of Norman can draw upon as needs arise. The centrality of building a diverse network is consistent with our strategy 1.

Returning to a discussion of the more formal network partners and administrative structure, it is important to emphasize that jurisdictions are often quick to identify and appoint team members

without regard for their own staff, and this can promote conflict between staff and team members important to a response effort. Norman is no exception in this regard. Appointees from various organizations have faced tremendous demands on their time from their home organizations, alongside the substantial commitment required by participation in the COVID-19 response network. While the network sought solutions, member organizations faced their own challenges that often limited their capacity to pursue their core missions—even existential threats to their organization in the cases of some nonprofit organizations. Managing the network required the active consideration of not only the contributions of its members but also an understanding of the pressures facing each organization.

To combat the centrifugal forces pulling all of the participants back to their home organizations, it is essential to provide a steady presence for the network. This has been accomplished through regularly scheduled online meetings of a wide range of members of the COVID-19 response network. The prohibition on in-person meetings has certainly complicated the process of meeting. The online meetings provide members an opportunity to hear about conditions across the city, hear about what other organizations are doing, and better understand how each member connects into the larger, networked response. These forces illustrate the importance of the active monitoring discussed in our strategy 2.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has brought an unprecedented series of challenges to public officials. The crisis touches every aspect of our communities and presents complex risks in a rapidly changing environment. Community responses must be similarly complex and networked. While networks have been a popular recommendation for tackling large or wicked problems, the challenges of building and sustaining diverse networks have been underappreciated. While the argument for networks is strong, building and sustaining them is challenging.

Based on our experiences, there are important strategies for supporting diverse networks. The process begins with the active recruitment of diverse participants with the varied expertise needed to advise the network. Building the diverse network is not the end. Diverse networks are all the more difficult to sustain because of the various forces pulling participants back to their traditional concerns and silos. Continuous engagement is needed to combat the pull of traditional concerns and the temptation to neglect the network while the home organization is, likely, under pressure. We hope that these strategies and the illustrations within the context of our local response to COVID-19 provide some useful inspiration for public managers.

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