

An Interview with Punam Mathur

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas  
The Lincy Institute  
2024

Principal Researchers:

Magdalena Martinez, Ph.D. and Kelliann Beavers, Ph.D.

The following interview was a part of the “Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada” research project. The recorded interview and transcript were made possible through the generosity of The Lincy Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The goal of the project was to understand and document how Nevada organizations and leaders responded to the myriad challenges that the pandemic engendered. The interviewees thank The Lincy Institute and their supporters for the opportunity to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of the project: Dr. John Hudak, Dr. Makada Henry-Nickie, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Taylor Cummings, Peter Grema, Kristian Thymianos, Saha Salahi, Madison Frazee, and Katie Lim.

Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Punam Mathur, Executive Director for Elaine Wynn Foundation, and was conducted on 10/6/22 by Kelliann Beavers and Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

## **Interview with Punam Mathur**

**Date: 10-06-2022**

**SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Punam Mathur**

**Kelliann Beavers [00:03]**

Okay. So to confirm, you are comfortable with us recording the interview to create a transcript. And then, after you review it, and possibly refine it, we can use your name if we were to quote you.

**Punam Mathur [00:15]**

Yes and yes.

**Kelliann Beavers [00:17]**

Okay. I'm going to pass it on to Carmen to start the questions, and then I'll step in partway through.

**Punam Mathur [00:22]**

Great.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [00:23]**

Thank you, Kelliann. And Punam, thank you for being here with us. If you could please introduce yourself, and describe your positions, and your goals in your organizations.

**Punam Mathur [00:35]**

Well, it's a treat to be here. Let me just say that. And it's actually going to be wonderful to ground back in a memory that becomes more distant every day and shouldn't be. And so, I'm grateful for that opportunity as well.

Positions – so, I wear several hats. Not a one on my head right now. But I think the epicenter, the main hat, the big cap is my part-time role as Executive Director of the Elaine P. Wynn and Family Foundation. And so that is a purely philanthropic role. I have a part-time business, where I do a little bit of consulting, mostly with government agencies, so that builds lots of connective tissue within our elected leaders.

And then, because Elaine is also pre-engaged in policy stuff, it gives me – but I'm only working part-time for her. I have the gift of free agency to be able to advocate, primarily on things related to at-risk youths, poor babies, black-brown babies, and babies that don't get a fair shake, in all things public education.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio [01:41]**

*Wow* is all I have to say to that. And since you do wear many hats, Punam, can you walk us through a timeline of the pandemic as you remember it, right? If you could specify certain points throughout 2020-21; what happened, what did you do, and how did you observe those groups?

**Punam Mathur** [02:01]

Yeah, interesting. So, I've had a foster son – I have one – who aged out at 18. And shortly after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was given an opportunity to go to Dubai. And so, in November of 2019, he and I – he has just turned 18 – he's on his own. His employer offered him an opportunity to go to the Nobu, his employer's location in Dubai, and it was a big decision for him. So that was really, he made the decision to go. It was three months development program. Worked really hard. Stretch your wings. Learn as much as – you'll be back in three months. Won't this be great?

In January, he called, as we were all hearing this "thing," this COVID-19, coronavirus. It heightened sort of – I didn't understand it. It still felt quite far away, and quite – it's going to affect some, but probably not me. But then Devon called from Dubai because they shut down early. It was January. And so that made it differently real for me, and I started to pay different attention, started to Google a bit more to understand what this coronavirus thing was.

And then in our local community, in February, it started to feel fairly prominent as a thing – that it was going to be a "thing." And then, you know, walked into March, with the impending shutdown, and it was hard to even comprehend what impending shutdown meant, like what does that even mean, right?

And then it was late February, and Commissioner Marilyn Kirkpatrick, who's someone I'm close to. And so, elected leaders were head of all of the rest of us, in their understanding, in their bracing, in their thinking about it. And so, as we were talking, she was really fearful about one particular segment that she felt was going to be inordinately vulnerable. And that was – she said, "You know if we shut down, or when we shut down, all of the services will go into hyper – they'll go into some hyper mode." And so, food – something as basic as food, will kick up and become differently accessible and available to people. And sure enough, we saw that, with Three Square, with the Just One Project. There was drive-by "get your groceries," and there were grab-and-go meals. The school district kicked into high gear for kids that were eligible for their free meals, to get them in different ways.

And what she was losing sleep about is, that there are some people who ought never to leave their homes, even to go get drive-by groceries or grab-and-go meals. And so, she didn't know how big a group that was, but she felt like it was big enough to lose sleep over. She was losing sleep. So, she would call, and she was like, "I need to figure out some way to help these people." Start to think about it was the challenge.

So I reach out to Julie Murray, who is someone who I would jump into any ditch with. And we then started to think about restaurants, and what shutdown might mean to restaurants, and then we reached out to Elizabeth Blau. And so the three of us started to have conversations around, what could we build, as some emergency response, to what Marilyn was thinking about. And that led to some discussion around this notion of "Delivering with Dignity." The name came later, but the concept was one that started to emerge through early March.

And I would sort of check-in, talk to Marilyn, and she'd check in every couple of days. And I'd say, "Hey, we're having these conversations, and we're thinking that we can maybe save some restaurant jobs – we're going to save some restaurant jobs by having them be the places where

food can be prepared. Because the kitchens are small, and they can be managed safely by the people that know them best. And so that's probably the safest place to produce food. And if we can pay them, we'll keep some of them alive. We can employ volunteer drivers to deliver meals directly to doors. We can knock on doorbells to – step back six feet, be masked, and make it very safe. And so we thought, okay. So, check; we know the origin of food. Check: we know the delivery of food. The third big question was, how do we know who is in desperate need, without building a big-old, you know, evaluation of criteria bureaucracy, which made no sense.

So I said, you know what? The people who have a trusting relationship are nonprofits. They have a really trusting and loving relationship with people, and so there's no reason to try to recreate trusting, loving relationships. They take time. So let's just turn to our nonprofit partners and say look. You're going to be case managing, or already are case managing lots of folks. And if you come across someone who ultimately would develop the idea called "triple threat," threat as in physical vulnerability, shouldn't be leaving the house ever. A secondary threat, poverty. Don't have resources. Solve it other ways. A third threat, social poverty. The lack of connection; the lack of family; the lack of support. We have a lot of people who are just soloing it through this life.

And so, if those three things were true, then we would deem you a "triple threat." So we turned to our nonprofit partners and said – a couple of them, and said, "Hey, we're thinking we can create food in restaurants. We can deliver safely with volunteers. Would you have a clear knowledge of who these people are? So that we build a system where you apprised us, we could like, in 48 hours, deliver a meal. Would that work for you?" And they were like, "Hell, yes." So that was the third thing, is now we where we could source people without creating a big bureaucracy.

The thing that was the most elusive was how to manage all the logistics. Because I couldn't figure out enough different colors of Post-it notes to try to figure out – and to make it timely, right? To not wait a week, from the time that you were notified as someone in need, to the time you fed them.

And so, the thing that sort of snapped it all into place was a technology company based out of Silicon Valley, where the founder happened to be in Las Vegas because she's from here. And then, when the shutdown happened, she was stuck here. And so, they did a B to B platform, reclaiming food from restaurants, and delivering it to nonprofits. We challenged them to add to their infrastructure, to go B through B, and finally, to C. So they went from restaurant, through nonprofit, to individual person. And when that piece fit, with Marilyn just drumming her fingers, saying, "Where are you? Where are you?" By the third week in March, we launched the thing.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [08:33]

Wow.

**Punam Mathur** [08:34]

Yeah. So shutdown happened, what, like the 18<sup>th</sup> of March? And I think by the 23<sup>rd</sup>, something like that, we said, you know, it's going to be noisy. It's going to be a hot mess at the beginning. But the spirit of everybody when the shutdown happened was this – I guess, maybe, it was the

intensity of fear and uncertainty that somehow, simultaneously and magically, magnified the intensity of compassion and innovation. It was just ridiculous to me how intense both became.

And so we had spent time living in the fear part. But man, we sure benefitted and were buoyed by the depth of compassion, and the intensity of innovation. And so, everything that came up, that was a problem, a challenge, it just became – behave like water. Keep flowing. How can we do it?

So by the end of March, we had this system that stood up, and to date, is still operating. Because part of what COVID did reveal was a magnification that was so stark was, what was wrong already. And it just drew some really stark lines around vulnerabilities, social isolation, poverty, and social justice. I mean there were so many clear lines that were drawn.

And so, our thought originally was, let's get this thing launched. Get the commissioner off our backs, you know. It'll be a few months. We'll do the thing. We'll unplug the thing. Won't it be a wonderful celebration about what community can do, when forced to, when compelled to, when compassionately inspired to "Look what we can do?" We will punctuate it and close it up. It's still going on as we speak. And to date, we've served over 700,000 meals. It's crazy.

So that for me was – the shutdown was a bit of a blur because I was so focused on this "Delivering With Dignity" thing. It happened, still focused – and then I was sort of the operational leader of it, working literally 14-16 hours a day, 7 days a week for the first four months. And so, all I saw, from a vantage point, I did take time, for example, to go to the Strip, right, and just drive. And it was eerie, it was eerie to see everything closed, and lights off, and fences where people were – and just nothing.

I knew the weight of the pain that was being felt by so many among us. And I had people I was really close to, who had had deaths of family members due to COVID in the early days. All of that craziness I knew was here. But where I spent the majority of my time and energy through the first four or five months was on witnessing the majestic nature of the human spirit.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [11:30]

Wow, Punam, you ladies are really a group of forward-thinkers. And the words that are popping out to me as you're speaking are dignity, compassion, innovation, and leadership. All of those words are so significant.

You talked about a very specific group of people, which were those that were kind of lone wolves, right? They were riding this thing out alone. Were there any other groups that you would consider the most vulnerable?

**Punam Mathur** [11:55]

I mean certainly – so part of the honor that we felt was that these nonprofits – we had over 50 of them as partners. They were the champions and the warriors doing the hard work, day in and day out, to case management, and to support families and individuals who had such complicated needs, right? And so I think of one of the partners, the first one actually. The first one who sort of beta tested and worked out all the kinks with us was in an organization called "Foster Kinship."

So this is an organization that serves kinship care providers, many of whom are grandparents or great-grands. So they're stepping up because they love their little person, but they're doing it outside the system, so they don't have the benefit of-

**Kelliann Beavers** [12:41]

Oh, I've never heard that phrase. That's very important for me to be aware of because I know someone who's in that position. And Julie actually made me aware of something similar when I interviewed her, but she used a different phrase. So I'm eager to hear about this.

**Punam Mathur** [12:56]

Yeah, "Foster Kinship." So what we discovered from the founder of Foster Kinship, Ali Caliendo was that she had grandmothers raising babies. So that grandma is physically vulnerable, right? Was getting the car every day to get groceries because they needed them to eat. She then had to get in the car, potentially at different times, to go to the schools where the babies were eligible for their elementary free lunch, then had to go to the high school to get the high school lunch. She was spending way too much time outside. And in the early days, we didn't know how awful this thing [COVID] was going to be. We just knew it was highly contagious. And so, at some point, for that grandma to be leaving her house at all, was a risk that was just unacceptable, not just for her, but for the family that relied exclusively on her. And if she falls, the community has to catch her, right?

And so that's an example. They were vulnerable on so many different levels. We partnered in the early days with the Nathan Adelson Hospice, because they have, often, hospice care provided by caretakers at home. And there's no one in that household that should be leaving the door, ever, right, to go grab and go groceries, grab and go meals, for any reason. We've just got to bubble-wrap that entire family because there's a person who's so vulnerable that they're going to die. Let's give them an extra week if we can. That was an example.

We worked with breast cancer organizations, right, that were case-managing women who had just gone through or were in the midst of treatments and therapies. So with the vulnerability of that person, no one in her family should be taking on the risk of bringing that virus home, and so we had to bubble wrap them. So if you're going to bubble-wrap them, you have to take care of a myriad of different needs.

And so, those were the organizations who were their frontline, the warriors. They were wrapping whatever the need was for that grandma in that Foster Kinship household. She needed a lot of things. She needed clothing, she needed – so they were whipping on every front and delivering whatever they could. Our joy was that they trusted us on the food part, right? Because it's one thing to provide a month's worth of groceries. We had lots of senior grocery delivery things going on. We worked with Catholic Charities because they had this massive tsunami of demand for Meals on Wheels. But they can only grow when they buy a bus or a refrigerated vehicle and hire a driver, and then they can get 400 people in.

But when they had 2,600 on the waiting list, there was nothing that was going to happen quickly to get 2,600 seniors taken care of. But they had vulnerability because the case managers at Catholic Charities can qualify them as eligible for Meals on Wheels. So we just said to them,

'look, give those names to us. And the system that we've got built is, if the nonprofit sends a name today, 48 hours later, three days' worth of prepared meals will be delivered.' That's what we did, and it was three days' worth of meals 48 hours after you submit them. So we said, 'submit them because you know them best. We trust you. You submit their names; in 48 hours we will have three days' worth of prepared meals.

And then the restaurants, it was fascinating. Because the restaurants were literally keeping themselves alive, right? They had to immediately lay off all the front-of-the-house staff because there was no in-room dining. They did everything they could to kickstart it, to go – and Postmates, and Uber, and all of that, they did everything. But that wasn't enough.

And so, what I've come to really appreciate is that the heart and soul of a restaurant is its kitchen staff. It is the chef, and it is the people that prepare the meals. So, if you lose that, it is game over. And so we said to the restaurants, we're going to pay you six dollars a meal, which was not even quite to break even for them. But then we had donations of food, meat, and the "Green Our Planet" kids. When all of those school gardens were shut down, all of that stuff was harvested by the farmers at Green Our Planet and the volunteers at Green Our Planet. They delivered them to our restaurants so that they were used to create the food.

And because the – we have saved 57 jobs for now, over two years, in those restaurants. The gratitude and the love that was poured into every single meal by those restaurants' employees was palpable, and those recipients who received it, right? These volunteers who delivered, we call them "Food Heroes," because they truly are. They go through big training to make sure they're safe. And what we said to them is, 'you may be the only face that this person sees this week. So we want you to be six feet away; you're going to be masked – so you've just got eyes, but you can make a profound connection to another soul through your eyes. So take the time to do that, right?

We had Food Heroes – we had cards and letters that would pour in from the clients to say, "I love my Food Hero." We had cards, and letters, and emails that flooded in from Food Heroes, saying, "This was life-sustaining." We had restaurant employees that were writing us like, "You saved my family." It was incredible, and that ripple has just extended.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [18:21]

Wow, Punam. I asked you a question about vulnerable communities, and you showed me how they turned that vulnerability into strength. And so, thank you for taking care of our community – which leads me to my next question. You were a conglomerate of nonprofits, and I use that word purposefully because I want to know what you think the government could have done better – at any level – whether that was local government, state government, or federal, could have done differently, better, in order to maybe empower nonprofits, or fill the spaces that they couldn't, that they shouldn't. What are your thoughts?

**Punam Mathur** [18:59]

Yeah. I actually think, given what was going on, that I give props to all our governments. I mean from the Delivering with Dignity perspective; they poured money into Delivering with Dignity. We went private with fundraising because, to lift and launch something, the government can't



fund stuff that's in beta test, right? It can't. So the first million dollars, we just said we're going to raise it, and we raised it privately. But the second – not the second – once it was clearly established, they bent rules and they found ways to put gas in our tank. That's exactly what that "tsunami of money" was intended to do. The flexibility – I mean, I've not seen the kind of agility and nimbleness in government that I saw through COVID.

Another example: we had the Foster Kinship organization that I just told you a bit about. They were able to get grants because they were three years in business. We were not. And so we had nonprofit partners that said, 'listen, I've got an opportunity to seek this grant. I'm going to seek it for food, and I'm going to then give you that money.' We were transparent, and the USDA did not – we didn't hide that from the USDA. But those kinds of different ways of solving problems are not something that the government's known for.

But through the pandemic with the money that was flowing down, they felt the pressure to get rid of it and to spend it. They knew – no one wanted to do that more than government folks. They are bound by bureaucracy; we know that too. But to a person, to the grant evaluation people, to the top of departments at the state, county, and local level, everybody was literally, I think doing their level best, to find agility and nimbleness amidst a bureaucracy, and I think they did it. I think they did it. I mean, could we do better? Of course. We can always do better. But on balance, I think they – I give them props.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [21:04]

Thank you. I completely agree with you. Kelliann is this a good turning point for you on our list of questions?

**Kelliann Beavers** [21:12]

Yes.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [21:14]

Okay, great.

**Kelliann Beavers** [21:16]

You've talked some about this with a specific perspective on the programs you've been a part of. I know that due to the nature of your role in the community, you've also seen a lot unfold throughout the community. So I'm curious what you think you saw that was the most innovative way that organizations, citizens, and the government came together to deal with the challenges of the pandemic and/or the economic downturn afterward. Just examples of collaborations, programs, or anything that came to mind that you observed unfolding.

**Punam Mathur** [21:50]

Yeah. So, after Delivering with Dignity was – the reason that I stopped the operational, sort of, daily living it, as an operator was because my boss, Elaine Wynn, was about to step down after a decade at the helm of the President's State Board of Education, she called Jim [M-22:12], who was running that COVID-19 taskforce. And remember, that gubernatorial-appointed task force of private sector people, they were doing their "Game of Thrones" game, competing with every state in the union, to try to get PPE, testing, and contact tracing, and they were amazing. And we

had planes because our industry had footprints in the manufacturing capital, China, right, in Asia. And so we were able, as a state, thanks to the leadership out of that COVID-19 task force to get a little bit of a competitive edge in identifying PPE and testing, which they did really well.

Elaine called in the summer – well when it was clear that the upcoming school year was going to be primarily hybrid or virtual. She called Jim and said, "Hey, I'm going to make a case that you have third priority to your key COVID – a reason that is "Connecting Kids."

**Kelliann Beavers** [23:10]

You cut out a little bit. Do you mind saying the sentence you just said again? I don't know what happened.

**Punam Mathur** [23:14]

Sure. So, Elaine called Jim Murren and made a plea, and that plea was, "Look. You've been focused on PPE, and testing, and contact tracing. Thank you, and good for you. I want to submit that there's a third priority that belongs on the state's COVID imperative list, and that is connecting our children to reliable internet so that they can participate in virtual education." Within seconds he said, "Absolutely." And our COVID-19 task force in this state took on that third priority, which turned into an effort called "Connecting Kids Nevada." And it literally was, I think probably the most elegant and effective collaboration across the broadest cross-section of state government; from the State Department of Education, the State Office of Technology, the governor and his team, down to 18 different school districts that include the Charter Authority to – so I got deployed.

So, Elaine – "Jim said yes." And they were meeting once a week. And so that then becomes a very transparent, highly accountable – there's this group that you've got to speak to every week, saying, "Here's the progress we've made." And their mission was super simple. They just said, every child in the State of Nevada that cannot afford it, and must be engaged in virtual education, must have reliable connectivity and a device, period, full-stop. Nothing short of that is going to [dropout @24:39] And so that's not an insignificant commitment. And this happened in late May, early June in there – is when it was going to be clear that we're going to be virtual in Clark County. As soon as Clark County made that decision, that 75% of our babies – so we knew that that was game day.

And so that then led into the next six months of my life, which was "Connecting Kids Nevada." And here's what we discovered is, at the outset, we didn't know how many belly buttons, how many babies, did not have connectivity. We didn't know. So that's a problem. You can't solve this thing you can't measure. And so, it began with something as simple as, "Let's get clear about the problem." In Clark County, for instance, they hadn't heard from 100,000 kids, a full third of the kids who were sent home in March and were being expected to come back to school in August. We just heard nothing. Nothing. So we didn't know if they were connected, if they'd moved, had no idea.

And so the first order of business was to get clear – we had to find every kid. We called that getting them on the roll call. So you first have to get every kid on a roll call, so that once on the roll call, you could say, "Where are you in terms of connectivity," right? And so that was it, and

we worked with Clark County and every other superintendent to say, "We need real-time belly button level data. And if you want to reach out to your kids – so for the smallest district with 1,000 kids, it took them like two days, right? Because they could phone-tree and get word on – but in Clark County, it was a mammoth deal.

**Kelliann Beavers [26:10]**

So, you went through the schools essentially, to have them assess – and when I spoke to the city manager in the City of North Las Vegas, this was a huge deal for them at the moment, that they proposed the potential of not returning to school because some significant portion of the population there didn't have adequate internet access. So I didn't know about what you just described, "Connecting Kids Nevada."

**Punam Mathur [26:35]**

With the smaller districts in the states, it was possible to say to the districts, "Can you please just figure out your own student body." They were small enough and nimble enough that they could do that. In Clark County, that was just not possible. There was just no way to do that. So in Clark County, we stood up a virtual call center, and we presented it to Elaine and the COVID taskforce. And we said, "This is what we want to do is, within 48 hours, we can lift out a 150-person virtual call center so that it can be staffed by people safely at home. But we will – and it was communities and schools actually that stood up as the third party that ran that whole thing. Because bureaucracy doesn't move that fast. Nonprofits can-

**Kelliann Beavers [27:18]**

Is "Communities in Schools" a nonprofit?

**Punam Mathur [27:21]**

It's a nonprofit.

**Kelliann Beavers [27:23]**

Okay. I didn't know whether you were saying those nouns or the name of a thing.

**Punam Mathur [27:27]**

Nonprofit. It's a nonprofit. And so, they were sort of the boss of it, and the Vice Chair of the Board. Elaine is the National Chair of the Communities in Schools board, and so, we have a close relationship with them. And we stood up on a 150-person virtual call center. We didn't have anybody to staff it, and so we went to the school district and said, "You've got a whole bunch of people you're paying right now, who are not working from home. Deploy them."

And so they gave us the staffing. They gave us guest teachers so that they could get paid, so we could keep getting people paid. And then the Communities in Schools team – I was a part of that team – we then trained them up. We worked with Cox – because hardwired broadband into your wall is the most reliable, and that's the majority of what's possible in southern Nevada. But not everyone could get that. I couldn't get it if I was outside the Cox area. I couldn't get it if I was housing insecure. There are a lot of reasons why broadband didn't work.

And so we had to first, get the roll call complete; 100,000 babies. Who's got it? We turned to the business community. We turned to parent groups. We turned to churches. We turned to all of the community organizations that know folks, and it was a big, all-out media push, that included some of our grassroots organizations. We had over half a million flyers built, in English and Spanish, that simply said, "Need Connectivity? Need a Device? Call this number." That was the Family Support Center. That was this number.

So all roads led there because schools were overburdened, and we didn't want to put the burden on schools to do all of this. So we took the burden, and we went to the – people called. We were there. We were staffing it seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Multilingual. I mean it was – in the private sector, that's what you do, right? And so in the private sector, we could do that. CCSD never would have been able to do that. But their employees came through in a big way because we were training them. We were holding pre-shifts six times a day. They were reporting to somebody else. And they came through in amazing ways.

Once a day, early on, I was doing daily reports to the COVID-19 task force, to the school board, to the governor's office, to everybody to say, "Here's the belly button-level data around every school district in Nevada. Here's how many kids are on the roll call. Here's how many we have confirmed have reliable connectivity, and/or a device. Here's how many we have confirmed do not have reliable connectivity and/or a device."

And then it was just an all-out "get it done." We worked with Cox in the South. We had 20,000 hotspots, that through AT&T and a relationship – or an agreement that Aaron Ford, Attorney General Ford had negotiated. There were 20,000 hotspots that descended down on the state. So we had those, and we allocated them out, based on need, to the various districts around the state. And then in Southern Nevada, Cox is a big deal. Because normally, a company would *never* delegate to a third person the ability to sign up a customer. Like you just wouldn't do it.

But we said to them, "Look. If this is truly a family support center, then it is not family support to say, 'Here's the number to call' to wait on hold for three days. Like that is not going to work." For the first time in their company's history, they allowed the Family Support Center, these basically, education support staff that we had trained, they allowed them to enroll customers into their "Connect to Compete" – it's a specific product, right? And so within three days, that family would receive a box to their home. It had the stuff in it, with user-friendly "A-B-C" color-coded instructions. You plug it in; you should now have reliable connectivity. If you don't, you call the number. You call the Family Support Center back.

And then Cox made special arrangements, that if it didn't work the first time, within 24 hours they were going to dispatch someone. The idea was to get kids connected. If we deemed in the Family Support Center that you were housing insecure; that is, if you'd had more than two addresses in a year, then we don't want to plug it into the wall. Because chances are, during COVID, you're going to be more vulnerable and more mobile. And so then we just got a hotspot and a device to the schools that were closest to you. We just deployed it to the school the next day. That family could show up and pick up their stuff at school.

And so we are, I believe, the only state in the union, and we had about 300 – by that time that we got down, I think there were about 300 on our community email list, that included organizations big and small, and all stripes, sizes, missions. And we just kept turning to them every week and we'd say, "Here's the head count. Belly button count, roll call. Belly button count, how many have need? How many have needs we've met." And keep going. Keep going.

And then in the final phase, after we sort of had blanketed communities. We had media partners that were delivering the message like daily. They had sort of thermometers in newscasts saying, "Here's how much more to go." It was quite remarkable.

But we then realized that there was going to be the last group that we couldn't reach. So then we deployed teams to doorsteps, and we just knocked on doors. Because the only way to keep that promise that Jim Murren, Elaine Wynn, and the COVID-19 task force had made was, "If you need connectivity, and you cannot afford it, you will have it, and you'll have a device." And so if families were too overwhelmed to call us, which happened, ultimately, we ended up going door-to-door.

And so, for example, in the North Las Vegas instance, Ryan, that City Manager, was a complete rockstar. I mean he was someone I'd talked to very regularly. When it came time to send people out and go door-to-door, he, the City of Las Vegas, Clark County, actually hired temps that they deployed expressly for this purpose.

**Kelliann Beavers** [33:28]

Yeah.

**Punam Mathur** [33:31]

And so we and the Communities in Schools team trained them. They were accountable to us. And those were acts – when we talked about collaboration, what we meant in the nonprofit sector, or even the government sector – what I think it meant before COVID was, we met for lunch a couple of times a year.

**Kelliann Beavers** [33:45]

Mm-hmm.

**Punam Mathur** [33:47]

I'll tell you what I do. You tell me what you do.

**Kelliann Beavers** [33:48]

Mm-hmm.

**Punam Mathur** [33:50]

Worked with an awareness of what the other does, and maybe we mentioned it in another conversation. That was what collaboration mostly looked like. You know, what I've learned in life is that I am not in a real relationship unless there is deep trust and completely honest communication. And in the case of that Connecting Kids effort, that's what it felt like. I mean, I'll give you a specific example that had to do with Ryan. There's one mobile home park [??34:18]

that we discovered is just carved out of Cox. Can't get Cox. So we're like, great. We had AT&T hotspots. We deployed hotspots to those families.

Well, it turns out, that one little thing is a blind spot for AT&T. And in communication with Ryan, we deployed people with various cell services. Find someone who's got AT&T. Find someone who's got Verizon. Find someone with T-Mobile. And have them just walk around and try to make calls. And let's figure out who's got reliable – any kind of service. None of them did. Because of the inconvenience it doesn't change the promise that we've made. It doesn't change the accountability of getting it done.

Through – I forgot who it even was – but someone said there's a satellite internet provider in town. I call them and I'm like, "I know this is lame, but here's what it is." We went out there, and there was a way that they could get their satellite to get the service, and with a dongle, that service could be caught by these kids that lived in this mobile home park. And then they had a higher price for that than what we were paying for Cox. They said, "We will give you the same price, and eat it." They deployed people all – the City of North Las Vegas sort of made exceptions to whatever their normal rules were. Also, we could get those babies who lived in that one trailer park; there were five of them. But that's what it took, right?

And that's the kind of collaboration – that takes such trust. It takes such honest communication. And those were the two things that I witnessed through that experience. And with the 300 community partners, we would email them and say, "This weekend, come and pick up – we've got half a million flyers," or postcards. And you know, some of the Spanish language stations with special pushes. Because we realized that we weren't getting the same kind of penetration into our Hispanic families, into the Black community. We partnered with organizations and built trust in those communities, right? It wasn't going to be good enough for the district or the governor. They needed hands-on people that they believed in.

And so, we mobilized, and those organizations showed up in a massive way. But when they had special needs, they called us and said, "Hey, here's the truth," and we were like, "Thank you for the truth. What do we need to solve this? I trust you. You trust me. Let's get it done."

We were the only state in the union that, by the fall, it was actually January 12<sup>th</sup>, I think if I look up the day. It was January 12<sup>th</sup> that we could tick off the last kid. The *last* kid, by name, in the State of Nevada, who needed connectivity. We were the only state in the union to deliver that.

**Kelliann Beavers** [37:03]

Thank you so much. That was clarifying and beautiful. I really appreciate you sharing it. And I really appreciate your dedication to the work.

There are two things I want to ask, that are just kind of tangent questions that come out of what you just said. One of which has to do with the beautiful way that you articulated the difference in the nature of collaboration that you felt existed pre-pandemic, and then peak pandemic, and then now. And I wonder if you can just speak more about that. Because what I was – the wheels in my mind were turning and thinking about, as you shared the rest of the story, was that there were – because first I was thinking like, well, you know. You wouldn't just call someone up on a normal

day for something you needed because you might be interrupting them. And you might want to be professional, and not bug them for whatever it is you need.

And then I was thinking, how much during this time period we needed each other really bad, and everybody knew that. So there was an attitude of a different kind of service, maybe, that emerged. But anything that comes to mind for you, as I say, those things are in relationship to what you said. I would love to hear more about it.

**Punam Mathur** [38:20]

Yeah. I mean, I think for me, one of the takeaways through the experience, both personally and my family, and by extension in my community. That's actually who we are, right? We are, as mammals, hardwired for connection. We are, by mammals, hardwired to be in a tribe, to be in a group, to be in connection, right?

And so, nothing like mandated isolation to deepen the craving for connection. Because we're also mammals, you tell us we can't, and we're like, "Well, watch." And so that's who we are, right? And so, I hope we don't just revert back. Because the noise is so distracting that we lose the pristine sound of what is so pure in us.

**Kelliann Beavers** [39:17]

That is really beautiful.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [39:19]

That has to do with our next question, Kelliann. I apologize for interrupting you. But she said, "I hope we don't." And everything that Punam has said so far has been so hopeful, right? So beautiful, so positive. But you make a really good point, Punam. "I hope we don't revert to how we were before." Are you hopeful that that's not what's happening?

**Punam Mathur** [39:40]

I am hopeful. And I think part of what makes me hopeful is that we can challenge each other to continue to be the best of who we were during COVID, right? It's about permissions. I mean the whole notion of "I don't call you because think I might bug you" is a protocol thing." It's just made up and we honor it. But we don't need to honor it. That's a choice we make, right? And what I know is, the best – it was such a privilege to be part of these things that I got to be a part of. That was beautiful. I want that feeling again, and the only way to get that feeling is to choose to trust. To choose to be honest. To choose to say it out loud. And let's keep doing that. So, if we just keep reminding each other of the rules and permissions that are self-granted, not sought, right, then there's no reason to revert. I don't want to be who I was before the pandemic. Because I know personally, it also was a time, as it was for many of us, a deep introspection. A clarification of what is most important to me in life. I want not to get fuzzy with that clarity either. I mean COVID brought into magnified clarity a lot of things, right?

And so now that we've seen them, we can't unsee them, so that's true, but we certainly can get distracted. And it's nothing like the din of the routine a day; it just goes back onto distracted mode. And so, I am hopeful. I am hopeful. Because I'm having this conversation; we are having this conversation, right? And so that was beautiful.

**Kelliann Beavers** [41:18]

Yes. And there's much to be hopeful about. As far as, I guess, practical recommendations or ideas that you have about something you mentioned earlier in the interview, that other interviewees have also mentioned, of course. That during this period, there was a necessary response that was much more nimble, much more fast-paced, and much more agile than government agencies often are capable of being because of the crisis. And also, plenty of people who've said, "I really hope that we are able to maintain some of that ability to respond more quickly," which was a product of the crisis. And I find myself thinking, as I look over the transcripts, this is a crisis all the time. People are unable to eat. People are unhoused. These crises are crises every morning.

And so, you know, when someone explains to me that, outside of the pandemic, it would take them six months to propose a particular program to address human services needs or something like that, where they were able to stand it up quickly, I find myself going, "Well, let's change that as quickly as we can because these emergencies are still emergencies." But I don't doubt that that also arises within you. But are there any recommendations you have, or thoughts about how that might be able to be maintained? Because I feel like it was really impactful and could continue to be.

**Punam Mathur** [42:50]

Yeah. I think part of the nimbleness with the government was a byproduct of the transparency that they couldn't avoid. I think the government is filled with awesome people. Who, over time, there is kind of a lobotomy that gets performed, whether they know it or not, because of the inertia of the culture in which they've got to operate.

And so I felt that in the school district, I felt it at the county, I felt it in terms of municipalities. It's not the people that don't want to move quickly. It's that they have adjusted to the culture in which they exist, which is calcified with bureaucratic nonsense. And at some level, they know it. But you stop fighting it after you've been there a bunch of years because that's a waste of time. And so they just sort of say, "Well, let me try to be as agile and nimble as I can, given the constraints.

**Kelliann Beavers** [43:37]

Yes, within the framework. I really do get it. But it is dangerous for us to continue to be that way.

**Punam Mathur** [43:44]

It is. But I think part of what helped them during the emergency was this sort of, "we react now because we have to" kind of notion. I saw it with CCSD. At the beginning of "Connecting Kids," all I got were the reasons that they couldn't tally, that this system didn't talk to that system. I couldn't get daily reports. Belly button level, forget it. It was going to take six months. I'm like, "Terrific. Glad we exhausted all that can't be done. Now, I'm going to re-pose the question: what do you need in order to do it? And don't worry about the answer. If you tell me that we need a congressional exception, I'm going to tell Jim Murren and Elaine Wynn that, right? Don't worry about what it is. Just tell me what you need."



And it was the shift that I witnessed. It took them like two weeks at CCSD. They were a bit shell-shocked in that first two weeks because I was all up in their grill. And every conversation began with "here's how we must manage whatever the risks they were focused on to zero," right? And I was like, "Wow, that's really awesome that you're managing that irrelevant risk to zero." But here was my question, what do we really need to say yes?

So, maybe there's a lesson; not just for the government, but for the rest of us as well. Because otherwise, if I keep making it their fault, then I'm not owning it, right? And that's not cool.

And so I think that there's an onus on the business community, on the funder community, on the rest of us, to keep saying, "Thank you for explaining why it will take six months. What do you need to have it happen in three." Because we expect the government to do it on its own, and I don't know where you look today that that's going to happen because it's a calcified, bureaucratic culture. They can't help it. But when posed the question from the outside, you know, free enterprise doesn't operate like that.

**Kelliann Beavers** [45:52]

Yeah.

**Punam Mathur** [45:53]

[45:54] of a private sector, and the question always is, "What do you need? Tell me what you need."

**Kelliann Beavers** [45:55]

Right.

**Punam Mathur** [45:57]

"If I can't get it for you, I'll tell you."

**Kelliann Beavers** [45:58]

Right.

**Punam Mathur** [45:59]

"Tell me what you need to get this thing done." We don't have that conversation with the government a lot.

**Kelliann Beavers** [46:03]

Mm-hmm.

**Punam Mathur** [46:06]

But they did a lot. And I think partly, inspired by, compelled by, supported by the other voices that were now in it in that same moment, and the other voices said, "Got it. What do you need?"

**Kelliann Beavers** [46:20]

Yes. You're reminding me of something that I had forgotten at the height of the pandemic, which is my own compassion I had for government leaders, who were on TV and myself, going, "Oh,

my God. How can I help them? They can't possibly have enough money or time to deal with all of this."

**Punam Mathur** [46:35]

Right.

**Kelliann Beavers** [46:38]

So thank you for rearticulating that and the other beautiful things you said.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [46:44]

Punam, you have a very unique perspective in terms of being able to offer what public service life is like, what private enterprise is like, and where those things merge with nonprofits. And I want to be just like you, Punam. I want to do that someday. And I read what you said, about just being better than yourself, from yesterday. And definitely, I try to put that into practice every day.

So, I want to finish up with two things because these are all concepts that we would love to keep talking to you about. This is for our research study, which we are trying to build into more deliverables, namely, a podcast. It's a podcast series that is being born right now, and we'd like to invite you to be one of our first guests, actually.

**Punam Mathur** [47:33]

I'm honored. Anytime.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [47:34]

Great! We were hoping you would say that. If you could just give us dates, we could get you scheduled to come down to Greenspan before the end of October.

**Punam Mathur** [47:46]

Are you pulling out your calendar right now?

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [47:47]

Yes, ma'am.

**Punam Mathur** [47:50]

Let's do it.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [47:51]

Okay.

**Kelliann Beavers**

Also, Punam, so much of what we have imagined for this podcast has to do with compassion and many of the keywords that you stated. So I just really do feel like, even though it was just an idea, you will be an excellent person to sort of kick us off. And then we're also going to speak to Julie, so.

**Punam Mathur** [48:07]

I'd love it. So, morning? Afternoons? What time – what's best for podcasters? I don't even know.

**Kelliann Beavers** [48:14]

I'm supposed to chat with a gentleman tomorrow about what might work. But what we're hoping is that – the gentleman who's helping us with the recording and such. I mean what we're hoping is that maybe in the last two weeks of October, he might have some time. Is that something that might be possible for you, or do we need to look further ahead? At this point, we're at your service.

**Punam Mathur** [48:34]

So the last two weeks – the week of the 23<sup>rd</sup> – I'm out of town Monday-Tuesday.

**Kelliann Beavers** [48:37]

Okay.

**Punam Mathur** [48:40]

But the end of the week, Thursday or Friday are wide open right now.

**Kelliann Beavers** [48:43]

Okay. So that's very helpful. Perhaps I can have him suggest a block of time that might work on one of those days and then share it with you.

**Punam Mathur** [48:53]

If you want to jump to the next week, the 31<sup>st</sup>, November 1<sup>st</sup>, and 2<sup>nd</sup>, those are both pretty open.

**Kelliann Beavers** [48:59]

Okay.

**Punam Mathur** [49:02]

Does that give you enough?

[cross-talking @49:03 – everyone affirms]

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [49:06]

Yes, that's exciting. Thank you, Punam. And you have a great voice for it too. So that will lead us to the second thing I wanted to bring up. First, thank you for agreeing to be on our podcast. This is going to be so amazing. We're academics. But to have a creative project come out of all of this, and I think is what's really going to make it accessible for all the people you've been talking about this whole time.

So, you mentioned that you have a foster son. And that raised a little flag for me because I just co-authored – one of our jobs here is to create fact sheets and put the data out there, right? You were talking about belly button-level data, and we just put out a fact sheet called, "Foster Youth in the Mountain West," and we have desegregated demographic data on those kids that have experienced maltreatment in the foster system. We understand it's a difficult system. But we just

thought it's something you might be interested in. It's a way to keep a connection alive with our organization. So, I'm going to pop it in the chat, to link it to the fact sheet. Anything – if you want to read it before the podcast, anything you have questions about.

**Punam Mathur** [50:08]

I will.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [50:12]

Or if you want to say to me, "Hey, Carmen. You should be researching this." I will produce something for you, and we'll put it out there.

**Punam Mathur** [50:20]

Isn't there some – what is the name of the group? "Raise our Future." Have you heard of "Raise our Future?"

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [50:25]

I haven't.

**Punam Mathur** [50:29]

So the group within the foster care system – foster care is a mess in our country, that we have not even begun to deal with properly. But the group that just hurts me the most is the group that aged out.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [50:40]

The group that – what? I'm sorry. The other groups that age out?

**Punam Mathur** [50:45]

Yeah. Because *everything*, every trendline for those babies is just abysmal. But there's a nonprofit organization called "Raise our Future."

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [50:51]

Mm-hmm.

**Punam Mathur** [50:52]

Born in Colorado. Had great success there. Then slowly, Councilman, Brian Knudsen, who's also an adoptive parent himself, he has been, I think their superhero, or their "Shaggy," or whatever – their "Scooby-Doo." But he has championed them, and their state of action is very simple; you look at that child who has aged out. Somewhere in that child's life, there's someone that that child has loved and was loved by. And it may not have been a formal relationship but may have been – and then so, they do a deep probe into every experience that child has had. Was there a coach? Was there a teacher? Was there a lunch lady? Was there a neighbor? Was there a friend's – family? And they just explored all, and their hope is to find permanence. And they've got story after story, after story; where that high school counselor or that elementary school counselor from 12 years ago says, "Of course, I remember that kid. Always had a little, special spot in our hearts." Then they say, "Is there any more room, and would you like to make that spot bigger?"

And if so, they completely wrap the partnership, the pairing, with whatever it's going to take to create permanency.

**Kelliann Beavers** [52:10]

Oh, that's so beautiful. If the person feels that maybe they don't have the support, or a spare bedroom, or whatever it is, then maybe work with them to create it.

**Punam Mathur** [52:17]

Because the rest of this stuff is easy. We can get a bedroom. We just need a heart.

[cross-talking @52:22]

**Kelliann Beavers** [52:23]

I love that.

**Punam Mathur** [52:24]

Isn't that beautiful?

**Kelliann Beavers** [52:25]

Yes.

**Punam Mathur** [52:26]

And so it is painstaking work, but man, as inconvenient as it may be, it is the *only* thing that's going to transform the possibility for for lives like that. So "Raise our Future," they've given me a ton of hope. But I've got three adopted children out of the foster system. And then the one that I still claim, but he aged out, so I couldn't buy him. (laughter) I call them "bonus kids" were never officially placed but they hung out here a lot.

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio** [52:54]

I think about that in my future, often – if we could stop the recording here, Kelliann, that would be great.

**Kelliann Beavers** [53:01]

Oh, yeah, sure. And also, Punam, we want to respect your time, so we'll let Carmen share and then we'll go.

**End of audio: 53:05**