

An Interview with Assemblyman Edgar Flores

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 Assemblyman Edgar Flores, Assemblyman, State of Nevada for Nevada Legislature, and was conducted on 7/12/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Facundo Bentancourt. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Assemblyman Edgar Flores

Date: 7-12-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Facundo Bentancourt (UNLV), Assemblyman Edgar Flores

Magdalena Martinez [00:02]

All right. Today is Tuesday, July 12th. We're here with Assemblyman Edgar Flores and Facundo, who is working with me. And Edgar, I just wanted to ask you again, do you consent to be a part of this interview?

Edgar Flores [00:16]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:18]

And do you consent to be recorded and attribute any quotes to our conversation?

Edgar Flores [00:22]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:24]

All right. Thank you so much. So, again, I'm really interested in your perspectives and your recollections. As a legal professional, you're an attorney and a state policymaker. How did you see your role during the pandemic?

Edgar Flores [00:42]

So I'll start with my lawyer's perspective. And it's difficult for me to pretend that I'm not always wearing both hats at the same time, so I have to kind of throw that caveat in there.

As a legislator, I need to work at a small, but very large table, where I can't do anything by myself. And that's really important because while we were in the middle of the pandemic, instinctively, I think most folks, in any leadership position, want to immediately act. I think that's instinctive, and you want to immediately provide solutions and immediately seem as if you're part of something that's purpose-driven, but, at the same time, based on something, right? Either research, doctors, or whatever it may be.

Well, our hands were tied, for a very long time, early on because it was a lot of sit-and-wait. It was during a – we weren't in the legislature at the time, right? So right when it occurred, in 2020, we were all in the process of getting ready to run a campaign. So that side of me felt that there was very little I can genuinely, meaningfully, do. And my hat, as an attorney, and as part of the small business community, that side felt like I could do something immediately.

And so, we were looking at certain things. First, we needed to make sure that we can feed all the folks that worked for us. And collectively, like any other employer, we had to sit down and come

up with a short-term and long-term plan because we weren't sure how long this was going to impact us, and how we were going to make sure that our folks were going to be fed. So we collectively made that decision, like many other small businesses, saying we're never going to allow ourselves to be in a position where we're not feeding our folks.

The second thing, after we said, "All right. We're going to keep paying everybody," the second question was "Well, are we essential or not?" because that also determined whether or not we should continue to operate the business. We had a lot of families who were in the middle of becoming residents. Citizens were fighting deportations. We had families who had huge car accidents and were waiting on settlement checks so they could pay doctors and try to restore their lives a little bit. We were representing families who were in the middle of very horrible and heavily-disputed divorces and custody battles, and the pandemic wasn't going to stop the fact that – we were representing some particular folks who were victims of domestic violence and needed to make sure both her and the child were out of that household.

And so, there were so many things happening through the legal mind frame that we said, "We have to continue working." We reached out to the governor's office and ensuring that we were not out of compliance. So what we ended up doing is, we went 50/50 – half of the staff remained in the building, and half of the staff worked from home. And we just kind of operated based on who needed to have physical files in their hand. We went completely virtual in meeting with clients, which was a challenge because our clients, unfortunately, are not very comfortable with technology. So Zoom today sounds like any other – it's like saying "television" now. But at that time, it was very frustrating for people to navigate through teaching them how to download that to their phones. There were a whole host of things happening. So we were going through all of those challenges just like everybody else.

And then, once we kind of – because I think those were the immediate knee-jerk – how do we take care of the folks that work here? How do we take care of our clients? Then came the other challenges of nobody's working. So in our immigration department and family law department, they make monthly payments. So we realized we were going to be working for free, and we weren't sure for how long. And we had to make a conscious decision at that time to say, "We're going keep working because we're kind of all in this together, as a country, as a rural – so I said, "It is what it is. We'll take the hit, and we'll see how long we can survive."

The other issue is we had just opened our building that we're in now. We had only been open for about three months, and prior to that, we were in a small office, renting. But now, all of a sudden, you have a \$30,000 overhead per month, and we were trying to figure out how we were going to make that work.

After we did that came what I most admire about the people that I work with in this building, which is, how can this building become something to everybody in need, that goes beyond our immediate needs of a business: surviving, paying bills, taking care of our clients, our reputation, etc. And that's where we did three things that I'm incredibly proud of. One, we realized that a lot of our high schools were not going to have graduation pictures and were not going to be able to do prom, "X, Y, and Z." So we partnered up with a local photographer, Christina – and we opened up the bottom portion of our building, which was shut down, to local high schools that

are in the area. Rancho high school, Desert Pines, Global Community High School, El Dorado – some El Dorado. But all of Rancho, Desert Pines, and all of Global, and we did their senior pictures for free. They would come in, one at a time, in 30-minute slots. And we did this every day for about a month and a half, and every student that signed up got their photographs taken for free. And then we couldn't print them because we didn't want to put our hands on anything. But they were all digitally given to those students.

The second thing we did as a business is, we were having a lot of folks who were calling to say, "Because a lot of these other small businesses aren't opening up, we're having issues with notary services," or "We're having issues with translation services. We're having issues with certain things like that." So we started then, also, created a mini-program where we were doing that for free in the community.

And then, the third component is, now putting on both my legislative hat and my lawyer/small business hat. As legislators, we knew immediately that we didn't know necessarily how this was going to impact all of us, and how to go about it, right? Because we needed to work with the governor, and we needed to make sure that the Senate and the Assembly were working together. But we also needed to make sure that the experts were consistently providing feedback, and then also, input, and then that the major industries – gaming, mining – and then, not industries but just partners, which is anybody in health and anybody in education. We needed to make sure that we were all kind of, in an orchestrated and very purposeful manner, kind of moving in the same direction. Which sounds like an impossible task because really, it is, and we found out it is.

We realized that we, maybe, could be a little bit more effective if we could have a little bit more of a micro approach to some of these conversations. Because the macro approach was happening already; the governor was doing that; they were having these huge, large, table conversations. So the Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus decided that we realized that the immigrant migrant communities and non-English-speaking communities were being most impacted by COVID. And the reason is, every single time a directive would come out, it would come out in English. It would take several days for that directive to make its way into any other language, and by the time it made it out, there were already 45 other directives coming out.

And so, there was absolute chaos, in my opinion, when we talk about – in general, there was chaos in misinformation. But when we talk about non-English-speaking communities, it was 10,000 times worse, right? And we can go on and on to explain why.

So the Hispanic Caucus, what we did is, we created small tables comprised of leaders in different areas. So we identified health, education, small business – I can't remember – there were five tables that we created, and they were meeting regularly, virtually. And explaining how COVID was having disproportional impacts, particularly in the Latina-Latino community, or immigrant-migrant community, in each one of those subjects. Which led us to some phenomenal human beings like Corona-Partida – Dr. Partida, excuse me – to the La Bonita Supermarket, the UNLV School of Medicine, and then all of the various nonprofits in the community. Because we realized that a lot of folks were doing foodbanks, which is great, and that was the correct first step, in my opinion.

In hindsight, in 2020, we needed to immediately set up food banks because we realized that a lot of folks weren't working. We realized that we were asking people to stay home. And so we needed to make sure that folks were going to eat. But one of the things we realized in talking with community partners, like Dr. Corona-Partida, is that what do we do in the scenarios where folks have COVID, and they can't access resources because food banks involve you leaving your home? And touching – and assuming you did it because, out of desperation, you had to, now you're exposing all of those to it. The moment one individual with COVID showed up to a food bank was incredibly problematic. Because now, the safe haven for food is now at risk of spreading COVID, right, and becoming a super-spreader.

And so, we realized that we needed to drop off the food in their homes, and that's the only way we could do this effectively. So through my legislative hat and through my small business hat, I realized that I think I was able to form a bridge to the missing element. Because we had the expertise from doctors. We had great nonprofits who were willing to do the work, and we had folks who were unemployed but were financially okay to say, "I can commit to running a food program for several months," being there twice or three times a week, or whatever it was.

What we did is, we reached out to the lobbying community. So major industries, who wanted to help to start donating money. Now, I was in this weird position – in the Hispanic Caucus, we were in a weird position because we didn't want the money to be a donation to the Hispanic Caucus, to my campaign, or to myself. It was problematic. And we also understood that, for example, if somebody wants to donate to my campaign, the most they can donate is \$10,000; but we realized that this project was going to cost several hundred thousand.

And so, even if we were willing to do it that way because, out of desperation, we needed to do something, that was going to be capped, and we were going to open ourselves to a really controversial and problematic scenario.

So we were able to link up, one-and-one, to where the money would go straight to La Bonita Supermarket. I reached out to La Bonita Supermarket, and I told them the idea, which was to set up a food delivery program. And they initially decided they were going to donate the food. Because when we first started the program, there were only about 20 families that we had identified, who had COVID and couldn't leave their homes. And that was very sustainable, and they were willing to donate that.

We were still, simultaneously, fundraising because I realized that that number was probably going to grow very fast. So preemptively, we knew that we needed to have more money than we anticipated. And we didn't know how much that was, but we knew it was going to be a lot. Logically, we knew it was going to be a lot.

So we started fundraising, and the money was coming into La Bonita, but it wasn't leaving. But soon that went from 20 families to 80, to 120, to once a week, twice a week, to three times a week. And then we had to create a program to receive the calls and kind of be the intake. So we're grouped very organically, and what I would say, was very grassroots. It needed to become a very coordinated and organized program.

So, all of a sudden, you had a group of volunteers, that all they did was filter out the families we could help in qualifying for the program, and filter out folks who, after they had – because later, as we became much more astute and understood social distancing. And realizing that if you isolated yourself for "X" amount of time, that you could actually, safely come back out. So there were folks that were being put into the program, while other folks were being removed from the program. And then folks who were a part of the program started becoming involved in tiers because they were so grateful that we had done that for them.

So it also became a revolving door of volunteers, of folks that went from the program. We would indirectly ask them if they could help us deliver the food – because that was the hardest part. In the mornings, we would get together right around 7:30 to 8:00 in the morning, and we would prepare boxes of food, and this was very meaningful and powerful to us. Because one of the problems – and again, it's not to minimize the efforts of everyone who participated with food programs and food pantry programs. But one of the things we realized is that food carries a lot of our identity, and it carries a lot of our culture. It carries a lot of – I always say, "If you want to bring people together, all you need is food," right?

So food just has this particular energy and power about it. But if you change somebody's food source, their diet, and their recipes, you're also taking a little bit of that identity, of who we are as a family and who we are as a community – and particularly in Latino communities, when they were going to food pantries, it wasn't what they were accustomed to. There wasn't spiciness to it, right? There weren't all these flavors. And I also think so many of us were going through very heavy and difficult moments in our lives, right? We know that mental health was a huge problem during the pandemic. And it's not just the food, but I realize that the food could help normalize and remind you, kind of, a little bit of your humanity, of your culture, and who you are.

So the boxes were very intentional. We started identifying families who were Mexican or had more of a Caribbean flavor to them, or Central Americans, or South Americans, and we started creating different boxes based on the family: the size and the type of cuisine that that family was most accustomed to. So that was very meaningful, and we would prepare those in the morning. And then, between 10 am and about noon, is when we would distribute these boxes. But the boxes were being distributed all over southern Nevada, and we also needed to become very coordinated in that effort. Because when we first started, I would grab two boxes, and I'd take two addresses, and I realized I'm delivering one in Pahrump, and then another in Henderson, right? We were like well, we could be a little bit more coordinated, and realized that if I get four boxes in Pahrump, I could do four families and not have to travel so far.

So we started becoming more specific and strategic about how we were distributing the boxes. But then the biggest problem became how we got the boxes approved to the number of families. And we were at 230 families, right, when we were doing 230 families a day. That means we needed 230 deliveries.

And that's where the Ethiopian community came in such a meaningful way. A lot of folks in our Ethiopian community do delivery. And there's a whole host of – we can get into a very deep dive of why that is in Las Vegas. But suffice it to say, we had a lot of Uber, limo, taxi, and bus drivers who were, all of a sudden, without employment – but also, being compensated at the time

because they did qualify for unemployment – who started coming in. And they were organized at the time, really at the time Assemblyman Alex Assefa brought them all in. And I remember one day, we sent out this desperate message to legislators saying, "We don't have drivers. We need to do 230 families tomorrow. We don't know what to do."

And we had already been over demanding on some of the nonprofits that were helping us, like "Leaders in Training," "Mi Familia Vota", a lot of legislators – excuse me – a lot of folks from our federal delegation started sending their staff and volunteers, but it wasn't enough.

So I remember, the next morning, there was a huge line that wrapped around the building of the grocery store, and we freaked out. Because one of the things that had been happening was one of the ways we would promote the program was, we would do Facebook Lives and we would put the date out there, right? "Call this number, if you have COVID, and you're currently confined to a bedroom, and unfortunately, you can't leave your home, or whatever it may be," and we would say it in English and Spanish. And at times, families would show up thinking they could just pick it up.

Magdalena Martinez [21:53]

Mm-hmm.

Edgar Flores [21:54]

So when I saw that line, I panicked because I thought that it was oh, my God. The families are showing up *here*. And we can't let them get near the food. Nobody can get near them. This is problematic. And then I realized that they were all volunteers and drivers that were coming out to help us. And it got to the point that we would have more drivers than deliveries. So think about that. Two hundred and twenty to 240 families. There were days that we had more than 240 drivers, and we had to apologize to the volunteers and say, "We don't need you to drive today." So that's what was happening in just one site. I can't imagine what was happening everywhere else.

And then we got very lucky because we had some very astute nonprofits that got involved with us and said, "Well, donation alone is not going to be sufficient because the private sector got to a point where they just couldn't do it either. And they, through their respective nonprofits, started applying for funds through Clark County, and we started getting matching dollars. I think at the time we were close to \$130,000 that had been spent already, and we were able to get that matched. And all of a sudden, conversations about "I don't think we can keep doing this" went into "We're going to be able to do this for a few more months." And we were out there, and I think we learned a lot. I think I personally will consistently, and always, in perpetuity, respond to a crisis in a very similar fashion; set up different tables; have conversations consistently, moving from table to table. That way, they don't operate in silos. But we do have common expertise per table so that we can effectively come up with plans.

The Nevada Hispanic Caucus, we created a website in Spanish that was just 100% information on directives, food, access, and wraparound services; everything that was coming our way, we were putting it all in Spanish, in a centralized location, and sharing that information everywhere. We realized that the organization in Northern Nevada, with our Latino-Latina community was

not the way it was structured here in Southern Nevada. And that's not to minimize them; it's just they weren't as coordinated. Now, they continue to meet, and we still have that core group of Members of the Leadership Community meeting.

And we realized how important it was to have a communications team. That was the other table that I forgot. There was a team that was just communications. It's just social media experts, folks that work in broadcast, radio, and print. All of those folks were put on the table. And they, at times – we were offering to translate the directions for free, right? For the governor; for different government entities. We were just translating information for them because we realized just how important that was. The same thing – that was actually what we started with in Northern Nevada because we realized that that was so essential. A lot of times, the services were out there, but there was no bridge connecting the folks who needed them to those services.

And so that table of just moving information was just so key and so powerful. I found myself reading a lot of military articles and military books. And I wish I could – had I cheated a little bit, and known I was going to bring this up, I would have had a book, so I could give them. But the reason I started reading them is the chaos of war – and then we so often focus on the horrific side of humans dying. But there's this whole strategic chain of events that have to take place, to move communication, to move food, and to move humans. There was this whole transportation element to it that helped me, kind of, become a little bit more creative and intelligent in engaging in these conversations – when we were trying to do something more important, and something that we've never been tasked with doing.

I realized that we were also recreating, often, a lot of us, as leaders, were recreating the wheel. And so I think a lot of us were just wasting so much energy and so many hours because we were trying to figure things out ourselves. And reading some of this stuff just – I was like "Wait a minute." (snaps fingers) Things would just click, and I'm like, "That makes sense. If we're going to address this issue, we should address it this way. Why are we having that conversation that way? That doesn't make sense."

So we just became a little bit more astute. Everybody was grossly underprepared for everything that was happening. But I will say, being prepared for something like this, in my opinion, did not exist. The possibility did not exist. And the reason for that is if, in 2018, a legislator, a governor, a city council member, or a board member would have been talking about preparing for a pandemic; would have been talking about – they would have been called "preppers." They would have been called crazy. But there are all of these phrases that would have been associated with that leader because it was just being over-precautious, right?

And so I do think that we should be overly critical of leaders during the pandemic, and we have to admit that things could have been done differently. But at the same exact time, in order for leadership to have been better prepared, we needed to have done things, that I think, in 2018 or 19, would have been completely discarded as "That's government – wasteful spending from the government that's unsubstantiated by "X, Y, and Z," and it would have been impossible to be adequately prepared.

The only other thing I'll share in watching everyone trying to do something positive, through a non-legislative lens, just as a community member. I remember we were talking about the education gap. Because I think communities of color have often known – I use the analogy during COVID that we so often used – that we use now when we talk about an opioid or drug epidemic. Where communities of color have consistently known that it's been out there. It's been out there. We've known – we've been talking about it. We've been trying to propose legislation to address these issues. The drug epidemic has been here for a very long time.

But it wasn't until it was impacting non-communities of color, that all of a sudden, these conversations, that there's an epidemic happening occurred, right? And I think this was very true during COVID; where there's things that communities of color just knew, that then became very evident. And all of a sudden, there's this moment of revelation of where you're like, we've known this. So things like the technology gap – we've known this – but it took this to really expose it. Access to healthcare – we've known this – but it took this pandemic to really expose it.

I think I also saw the unfortunate reality of communities that are often taken advantage of. So, one of the things that our firm was getting a lot of calls on was unemployment, but also just folks who weren't being paid, and folks whose labor was being really taken advantage of. And the pandemic really put that on high gear because, for example, in the construction industry, which a lot of immigrant and migrant communities operate, we realized that we were getting a lot of calls where they weren't being paid time and a half for overtime. And I started getting into areas of law that I don't necessarily practice in, but I also felt that we had a responsibility to participate in.

And I will say that is true for a lot of lawyers. I remember reaching out to a lot of different attorneys around town. And I remember them either having a willingness to research and figure it out, or doing a lot of pro bono work so that they could really help some of these folks who were – all of us collectively were going through a very difficult time, but then it was just that much worse, where they couldn't even get paid, right? While everybody else is staying home, they weren't even being paid.

So I think those are the big items that, when I think of the pandemic, that I think of what we did as a small business, as an attorney, and as a legislator, what we started doing. I also, I will say, toward the end – and I'm not saying that we're out of the pandemic – but as we started coming back into reopening everything up and doing certain things; I will say that I also found myself very frustrated politically because I do believe that in talking about essential workers, we had these trigger phrases that we started getting really comfortable with politically, which we often do. But then when it came to proposing legislation, and when we had an opportunity to serve all employees; serve all communities; serve all the zip codes; we fell, when we came short, again.

Again, this is not new, but historically, this is just an unfortunate reality, and we saw it come to light again. We had an opportunity to really show all essential workers that we were going to take care of them, and I don't think we did that effectively. That's not to minimize the good that was done, but that is only to amplify the fact that we consistently had to jump over certain communities.

Magdalena Martinez [33:04]

Can you give me an example of that? Are you thinking of a specific bill?

Edgar Flores [33:12]

Sure. Well, I can't remember the particular bill. But I will share that I was frustrated during the pandemic when we met as a body, and we were talking about an agenda to protect employees, that focused solely on a very particular narrow group of employees, which deserved all the support that we gave them, and more. But we could have extended those protections to all other employees.

And as a small business owner, I'll tell you, I don't know a single small business that wasn't already cleaning high-contact, high-traffic areas constantly. I don't know good small businesses that weren't already putting everybody on notice when there was a COVID outbreak. I don't know a small business that wasn't putting up different protective gear; whether it would be gloves, or making sure that there was hand sanitizer everywhere, and enforcing masks, etc. Whatever it was.

And so my frustration is, the good actors are going to do that anyway, but it's the bad actors that we really want to make sure that we're creating these rules for. And so I do think that we could have done certain things differently, and that's not a hindsight 2020 issue. Hindsight in 2020 for me – and this is what we didn't know, and as we were learning, we were modifying, adjusting, and changing course. And that's what you're supposed to do. You pivot.

But there were certain things where it wasn't that we didn't understand it, is that we willfully took that course in not taking that added step of protecting certain folks or ensuring that all communities were receiving certain benefits. And that's an unfortunate reality that's not just true of Nevada – it's true of the whole country and the world, quite frankly. But that's a reality that existed pre-COVID.

Magdalena Martinez [35:26]

Right. So are you referring to stimulus funding, regardless of income? Or are you referring to – I don't know – did the state provide any unemployment benefits?

Edgar Flores [35:44]

All of the above. So if I can give an example. Federally, there was a bill that was introduced, and it was aimed at helping families, and they were going to get additional money into families. But if you were a mixed family, where some of your family members were undocumented, and you aren't, and you're a citizen or a resident, there were scenarios like that where you weren't going to qualify for certain benefits. If your family was undocumented, but you were an essential worker, right? Let's say you worked construction, you worked in industries that you were deemed an essential worker, there were benefits that were not extended to you.

As we know, the undocumented community got no federal money when it came to the stimulus checks. Now, I get why that is, and it's a political argument that needed to be made. But if we acknowledge that there's "X" amount of human beings that are living in this country, and all of us, collectively – so, one time that they tested the notion of, if you're healthy/unhealthy, right?

Historically, that's always been true. But we live in a world, and we live in a city, a state, and a country where – and a world, really – but we live in a mindset of "As long as I'm good, I don't really care how everybody else is doing," unfortunately. It often feels that people live that way.

But this was the one time, where, no, no, no – it's not just you being healthy, we need everyone else to be healthy. Therefore we need to invest in the health of every single other individual. This is the one time where, if you're good, that may not be good enough if everybody around is dying, if everybody around you is sick if everybody around you can't work. This was the one time that we had an opportunity to really test what we would do in that scenario, and we did not ensure that we were helping all families. So it was frustrating to me, at a federal level, to see that happening.

Magdalena Martinez [38:04]

But at a state level, did we have that opportunity, and did we do it?

Edgar Flores [38:08]

Well, I don't know that we had the opportunity to give – so, a lot of the federal dollars, as we know, were tied to very specific guidelines. And so, even if we wanted to do "X, Y, and Z," there were a lot of things we couldn't do because of the limitations of the dollars that came to us. But I do remember on a particular occasion, just being able to extend protections to all employees. Because we have passed legislation where we focused on a particular group of employees, and extending protections to them - [overtalking @38:46]

Magdalena Martinez [38:47]

Before it goes to immigration status?

Edgar Flores [38:49]

Not necessarily just immigration status. It was mostly based on industry.

Magdalena Martinez [38:54]

Okay.

Edgar Flores [38:55]

Depending on the industry you served, there were protections that were guaranteed to you. But no other industries were afforded those protections. And that was problematic to me because it just didn't logically make sense. But if we realized that a particular industry needed these protections for their employees, that we would not extend them to all employees. So that was just one example of a moment that I thought we could have done something a little bit differently, and we didn't.

Magdalena Martinez [39:24]

Mm-hmm.

Edgar Flores [39:28]

In the grand scheme of things, looking back at what we did, and considering how we could have done things differently and better, I will still say that we consistently pivoted when we had to.

We consistently evolved. We consistently listened to the experts. And there was an opportunity for this to have become overly political, like it was at the state level like it was happening at the federal level, that I don't believe it happened here. I do believe that folks from both sides of the aisle realized that we were in a very difficult situation and that we needed to act. And while some things may have seemed hard-lined, and/or seemed overly – depending on the scale, going one way or the other politically, I do believe, in all the conversations I had, there was a genuine desire to take action that would better the lives of Nevadans.

I don't think I found myself in a situation where I thought I was in a room where we had an opportunity to act immediately, and for political purposes, they decided to wait. We know in politics, that often happens, right? There's an opportunity to take needed action on a particular item or do something, and sometimes the decision is made not to for the sake of doing it at a better time, or to avoid a political nightmare, whatever it may be. I genuinely believe that during the pandemic folks were acting based on what they thought they needed to do immediately. And that includes even some of the folks who I disagreed with, and it includes folks who disagreed with me. Even when they were disagreeing with me, I thought we were disagreeing for reasons that I can respect. I was frustratingly against it, or for it, and they weren't – or vice versa. But I still think that I can attribute a lot of that [c-41:33] to it was just two different perspectives, and they were going about it in whatever way they thought was best.

Magdalena Martinez [41:40]

Edgar, is there a particular state policy? There were two special sessions and one regular legislative session. Was there a particular policy, whether it was by you, or anybody, or the governor, or act, that you're particularly proud of, that the state did, in the interest of Nevadans and/or the most vulnerable population in our state?

Edgar Flores [42:09]

Sure. What I will say, so much of how we're reacting to the pandemic has landed on the interim finance committee.

Magdalena Martinez [42:25]

Okay.

Edgar Flores [42:26]

So much of the responsibility has fallen on them. And so, not to minimize anyone, but it is to really say that a lot of what they've been doing has been steering the shift in how Nevada's been working. Because no state agency has had an opportunity to do "X, Y, and Z" without them allocating resources in the way they've been doing it. Now obviously, the governor had a lot to do with that, and the counties and cities all respectively applied for their own funding, and they're giving out money in whatever way their dollars are tied, and folks are applying for. But I will say that I know that the interim finance committee is doing a lot of work to help put the money in the right places.

And I also think – I am particularly proud of the fact that different jurisdictions are also working together. We so often operate in silos. And the fact that the cities and counties, and state entities,

and the government were kind of all forced to come to the table. Number one, it showed us that we can do it.

Magdalena Martinez [43:41]

Mm-hmm.

Edgar Flores [43:43]

It's hard, but it can be done. But number two, it also forced – so often, jurisdictions have their own very specific agendas that often are in conflict with other jurisdictions. It also forced us to kind of put that aside for a little bit, which I thought was a positive. And you know, I will give credit to the governor; when we didn't know what was happening, we needed to take a step back, as data was coming in, and as the experts were sharing information. And while we were taking that step back, it needed to be in a very meaningful way, where we were putting the interests and safety of Nevadans first. And I think, through a political lens – if we talk strictly through what the right political move would have been, it would have been to let businesses do as they were doing; let people keep making money. Because so often, politically, folks based on their pockets.

Magdalena Martinez [44:54]

Mm-hmm.

Edgar Flores [44:56]

And I'm not minimizing folks who do that. I understand. So the governor needed to make a very difficult decision. And I give him all the credit because every political strategist would have probably told you "Help small business. Let people keep making money. You can always justify it later." But it wasn't going to be at the expense of Nevadans dying, and I think the governor understood that. And so, I give a lot of credit to the governor for making the decision that he made when he had to.

Magdalena Martinez [45:32]

Mm-hmm.

Edgar Flores [45:36]

With what resources we had in front of us. And so, I think a lot of us, also, you know, one of the things I often heard is "Why is the legislature listening and working so closely with the governor?" And they almost felt like there was a separation of what we ideally see, right? Where we have the government in one situation; we have the legislature in another. And I always remind folks, there were very important things that were happening. Number one, the powers that the governor had were very important because they allowed us to bring in federal aid. That was very important, and it was key because we desperately needed it.

Number two, we were not in session. And because we were not in session, there were things that we could not react to or propose to legislation. We needed to wait and see what was happening. We were in real-time; waiting for the different tables at the macro level that were happening that were meeting to provide guidance, and then react. And unfortunately, the government is slow that way, but it has to be. Because it would have made no sense for us to have acted first without having had the input of all the industries and all the stakeholders.

So I will also defend that perspective because I've seen either electeds, the governor, or other folks be attacked. But realistically, it needed to play its course in that way before we could intervene. But overall, like I said, I stand by the shutdown that we had, and gradually moving toward reopening. In my opinion, there was no better way to have done that.

Magdalena Martinez [47:42]

Mm-hmm. Now, I think you answered most of the questions that I had on my protocol here, actually, so, I just want to ask you one final question. Are you hopeful? And if yes, what are you hopeful about or for?

Edgar Flores [47:59]

Yes, I'm hopeful. The single most important thing for me from this pandemic: besides the lessons that the government learned – because obviously, that's very important, and we're going to be much better prepared in the future. But we pray that that never happens again. But realistically, it will. It's just historically, we've known that this will happen, whether it's 100 years from now, or 50, or 1,000. But what I am very hopeful about is that we genuinely take this horrible situation we were in as an opportunity to commit to the idea that we cannot inadequately serve some communities, while adequately serving others.

And I think there's this not that, in order to help one group adequately, you have to create this necessary pitfall of where other folks are thriving and moving up, and these other folks are just consistently, what appears, moving lower and lower: economically, health-wise, educationally, you name it. So I am hopeful to the notion and the idea that we understand that certain communities who have barriers, limitations, and lack of resources are now seeing – and they're out in the open, and they're – the sun is hitting them. Where we are not moving to a Nevada 2019, right? We're not just trying to go back to pre-pandemic, but rather, moving to a post-pandemic where we're collectively helping more humans. Period. For the sake of all of us.

I am hopeful that we will learn to understand that a society as a whole, that is healthy, employed, and protected, means that all of us individually will also be better off. That's what I'm hopeful for.

Magdalena Martinez [50:27]

Thank you so much, Edgar. You covered a lot of bases, and I appreciate it. I do want to give Facundo an opportunity to ask a question, if you have any questions you might want to ask Assemblyman Flores.

Edgar Flores [50:45]

Yeah, please.

Facundo Bentancourt [50:50]

Give me one second.

Magdalena Martinez [50:53]

Oh, go ahead, Facundo.

Facundo Bentancourt [51:00]

I apologize. So I guess the one question I kind of had, and by your answer, I could probably take a guess. But do you feel like your work as a community member, as a lawyer, or small business owner, did more for the communities that were more vulnerable than what you could do as a legislator?

Edgar Flores [51:22]

Yes. And that's true for two reasons. Number one, being a part-time legislator is very problematic for underrepresented communities. Because again, when one community gets the cold, other communities get the flu. And when we're only enacting certain things every two years, that's problematic. But also because I knew, and I think everybody from the Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus and the Black Caucus, both caucuses collectively understood that there was going to be a disproportional impact. And that when we propose legislation, it was going to disproportionately benefit certain communities over others.

Facundo Bentancourt [52:17]

Mm-hmm.

Edgar Flores [52:21]

And that's the role as a lawyer, small business owner, community member – that's where that activism kind of triggers. Because in the legislature, I can propose the most amazing bills, but if we don't have the majority vote, we don't have the majority vote. Period. And it takes very long. But as a small business owner, if you have three high schools that you want to make sure they get their senior pictures, you just do it. There's no asking – oh, I forgot to say this before, but I got a personal attack by someone who was in a leadership role and told me that "In order for us to do community work, we needed to ask for permission." Think about how crazy that sounds, but it's true. I was told "Well, wait a minute. If you're going to be doing all this stuff in the community, you've got to run this by people," which was crazy to me, but also normal. Because that's how this world operates often. (laughs)

And so I think you'll find a lot of legislators felt that what they were doing in the community was very meaningful. Not to minimize the legislation that later came. But again, one is immediate action, versus the long-term, and so, it just feels different. But it also feels very purpose-driven towards underrepresented communities. Because again, in the legislature, I can have the most beautiful bill that helps the underrepresented communities, but if we don't get to vote for it, all I'm doing is having a really nice parade without an actual benefit at the end.

Facundo Bentancourt [54:21]

I did have one more question, and you kind of mentioned it: how most of these problems already existed, but they were kind of put out into the light once the pandemic started. Are you still in contact with all of those different micro groups, that you created, to enact legislation, or just, I guess inform the public of issues that already existed but were actually going to address them, rather than say, "We're coming out of the pandemic. These issues don't exist anymore."

Edgar Flores [54:50]

Oh, so those conversations are still ongoing, but I don't want to go as far as saying that there's

legislation coming from them. However, all legislation, at least that I have, is vetted through someone or groups of those folks. "What do you think about this?" "What do you think about that?" And recommendations have absolutely come my way, or to other members of the Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus, and we're absolutely acting on them. But the purpose of those tables – it wasn't necessarily to come up with the ideal legislation, in my opinion. The purpose of those tables, in my opinion, was mostly to concentrate the information that I felt was staying in a very secluded way throughout Nevada. And we weren't focusing it in and putting the right people in front of each other.

The other thing that I realize – and I'll say this in a humbling way – to me, there were folks that are a part of my immediate circle, that I think I took for granted. And I think that's true of me, too, in other circles that I was a part of. Where we didn't realize "Wait a minute, Facundo. You know all this? Wait, you can provide that information? You're that bridge?" Where I also think it was a source of empowerment, for particular members, to really step up and do some really amazing work, who I think weren't getting enough opportunities, if you want to call it that. I think I just realized, like wait a minute. This human is absolutely amazing. Why have we not been channeling the resources and the intellect, and the know[ledge] of this person, right? That also ended up happening. And they continued to meet, but even more powerful than that, we're kind of no longer needed, and that's also powerful.

I think what happens – I've always pushed back and resisted in having circles where there are too many legislators. Because there's the ego of a legislator, there's the agenda of the legislator. There are so many things that happen in a very egotistical, ethnocentric, self-empowering – not empowering – because I always use "self-empowering" as a positive thing. But I mean to just benefit yourself, right? That happens sometimes through electeds, and sometimes, they can hijack a conversation, or take over a table, and I've always thought that that was problematic.

And one of the things I've seen is, these folks continue to meet, and continue to do positive things, and provide feedback, and just be a source of good in the community, without necessarily needing the legislator. Now, the legislator will propose legislation, but I'm going to be gone, right? I'm going to term out. But how powerful is it that those folks continue to meet and continue to influence other legislators? And really, that's probably the better outcome, right? That it doesn't matter what legislators are there, it's that they're listening to them. That they actually now realize that they bring something positive to the community and the table.

Facundo Bentancourt [58:11]

Thank you.

Magdalena Martinez [58:12]

Thank you, Facundo, for those questions. Those were really good questions. Edgar, I will have this transcribed and send it your way, like I've done with other interviews, and make sure that you give us the final "okay."

Edgar Flores [58:25]

Sounds good. I appreciate the work you're all doing. Be safe.

Magdalena Martinez [58:27]

I appreciate you, and we'll talk soon. Take care.

Edgar Flores [58:31]

All right. Be safe. Bye.

End of audio: 58:32