

An Interview with Steve Sisolak

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

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas
The Lincy Institute
2024

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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 Steve Sisolak, Nevada Governor, and was conducted on 2/23/24 by Magdalena Martinez. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Governor Sisolak

Date: 2-23-2024

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Magdalena Martinez, Kelliann Beavers

Magdalena Martinez [00:02]

You might hear my dog in the background. Hi everyone. We are here today with Mr. Steve Sisolak. Today is February 23rd, 2024, and Kelliann and I will be interviewing Mr. Sisolak, former Governor of the State of Nevada during the pandemic. And Mr. Sisolak, just to confirm that you are okay participating in this interview?

Steve Sisolak [00:25]

I am, yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:27]

And that it's okay to record?

Steve Sisolak [00:28]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:29]

And that we may attribute any quotes to you from the interview in any future publications.

Steve Sisolak [00:34]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:37]

Thank you so much. So let's get started. And let's start off with just a general question. If you could describe your role throughout the pandemic, and specifically, the role as the governor of the State of Nevada.

Steve Sisolak [00:50]

Well, obviously, we were at the forefront of the pandemic and had to make decisions related to the operations of the state, businesses, schools, and so forth and so on, and dealing with the federal government on any assistance they might give us. So try to coordinate the response overall to the pandemic.

Magdalena Martinez [01:10]

Can you speak a little bit more about that in terms of coordination? What did it look like, for you, in the early stages?

Steve Sisolak [01:18]

Well, we had some in-person meetings with the federal government, with the White House when we were there. And we had weekly, or a couple of times a week, phone calls with the various governors. Whether it was the White House, President Trump himself, or if it was with one of his

agencies, to tell us about the new information that they'd discovered, or for programs that they had talked about putting into place, and to try to coordinate that at the various state levels.

Magdalena Martinez [01:48]

Very helpful. Thank you. And in terms of reflecting back from that time, was there something that, in particular, was a pivotal point, or a pivotal moment from your perspective?

Steve Sisolak [02:01]

Well, the entire COVID situation was pivotal. I mean, it was a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week responsibility. I mean, information was coming in minute by minute. We were trying to protect our citizens and keep them as safe as possible with the information that we had medically about the virus. And also, at the same time, to try to keep our citizens safe and our economy functioning as best as possible.

Magdalena Martinez [02:29]

What we've heard from some of the interviewees also is that their leadership had to be – they had to really be reflective about their leadership in a new way. Can you talk a little bit about what the situation was like for you, in terms of reflecting on your leadership, say, before the pandemic, and then when the pandemic hit?

Steve Sisolak [02:51]

Well, you've got more time before the pandemic to make decisions, and to get input. During the pandemic, we gathered as much information as we possibly could. We had stakeholder groups, whether they be the medical community, the business community, the educational community, all the different communities we met with on the phone, local governments we'd had conversations with, and an awful lot of Zoom calls to try to gather their information and disseminate the information that we had, as best as possible, to them so that they knew how we were going to respond and react to the various situations that we were facing.

Magdalena Martinez [03:25]

Mm-hmm. And now, we spoke also to Mr. Jim Murren, who was the head of the Nevada COVID Task Force, and I believe you appointed him to that. Is that correct?

Steve Sisolak [03:35]

I did, yes.

Magdalena Martinez [03:36]

Could you tell us a little bit more about the impetus for that, and how that came about?

Steve Sisolak [03:41]

Well, certainly. I mean, the private sector had access to certain things that we did not have access to as government officials. I went to Jim and asked if he could help us in the situation. He eagerly responded, put in a lot of time, and did a lot of work as it came down to what we had to do. I mean, they helped us in the acquiring of PPE for our citizens, and when we had various situations, and bounced ideas off each other moving forward. Jim was instrumental in terms of

our response to COVID, we had a good task force put together, and I'm proud of the work that they did to get us to where we're at.

Magdalena Martinez [04:21]

And Mr. Sisolak, why Mr. Jim Murren?

Steve Sisolak [04:22]

Well, Jim was highly respected in the gaming industry. He had a name that he could get phone calls into these that I couldn't make. There were so many people to contact that I couldn't possibly do them all by myself. Jim had access to these folks. He had access, for example, to airplanes, to bring PPE over from foreign countries that were eager to obtain it, and he had some contacts in that area, so that was instrumental. That was very important for me to be able to touch some of those contacts he had.

Magdalena Martinez [04:55]

And how important is it for a state, for instance, a governor of a state to have those types of relationships with key business industries?

Steve Sisolak [05:04]

Well, it's extremely important because you don't know, at the beginning exactly, how a policy, restriction, or whatever protocol you're going put in place might affect someone. And it was very important to get their input, to get an opinion on what various potential actions might be, and to react to that, and how it would affect the businesses, and thus, the employees and our citizens, and it was crucial. It was very, very important. Like I said, I can't thank them enough. They made a lot of sacrifices, did a lot of work, got criticized a lot, and unfortunately, didn't get a lot of credit.

Magdalena Martinez [05:39]

Mmm, thank you for that. Thank you. Now, can you walk us through a timeline, as you remember it? What happened? When? What did you do? And speaking to some of the commissioners, for instance, one of them highlighted the COVID hotel, for instance, and the meetings before the actual shutdown. From your perspective, can you walk us through a timeline before, and then when the pandemic happened?

Steve Sisolak [06:06]

Well, it was a very quick timeline, and I'll try to recall it the best I possibly can. I was in Washington, DC at a National Governors Association meeting. Dr. Fauci came out, talked to all the governors, and said, "Look, we've got this virus that's on the radar, but it's really not something that we're really concerned with right now. We think we've got it under control, we don't think it's going to be a problem, and they had some medical experts to talk to us about that.

I got back to Nevada, and within a couple of weeks, all of a sudden, basically, all hell broke loose. You started getting cases rapidly. People started dying. We were counting, state by state, how people were being infected with the virus. We didn't know enough about it. If you think way back, we were advising people to wipe off their groceries or wipe off their mail before they bought it in the house. We didn't know how it was being spread, what was being done, and how

we didn't have enough access to enough personal protective equipment. The hospitals had it, but we didn't have it for everybody to use. Masks, gowns, gloves, and so forth, and so on.

It was frightening to see that happen. And then it just – it basically snowballed. It just got quicker and quicker and quicker. We knew we had to do something, and that led to all the meetings and the various protocols we put in place.

Magdalena Martinez [07:23]

Very helpful. Thank you. And speaking of the information changing on a daily basis, sometimes on an hourly basis, how did you, as governor, navigate all that information, disinformation, and misinformation? Just give us a glimpse of what it was like to be governor during a time when information was fast-changing and not always accurate.

Steve Sisolak [07:50]

Well, prior to that, the information we dealt with in the governor's office, you're dealing with budgets, rules, and so forth, and there's a playbook on how to work that stuff. I mean, every governor goes through – we all deal with the same things, in terms of how to keep the state functioning and running as best as possible.

There was no quote "playbook" for COVID. We didn't know what to do. We gathered as much information as we possibly could. I had a great staff – my chief of staff and the folks who I worked with to try to get this information assimilated. We hired some people who were experts in the medical industry and field to try to help us and assist us with that.

At the same time, I've got to stress, a lot of this was unknown. We didn't know what was going to happen next, or how it was going to happen. We did the best we possibly could with the information we had at the time, and I think that we made some difficult decisions, and did them with the best intentions in mind.

Clearly, there were negative impacts on some of the things that we decided. Some people didn't like it. The people who didn't like some of the things, the various restrictions we put into place, for example, interscholastic sports, a lot of people were really unhappy with that, and parents would call and complain about it. Then the other side's calling and claiming that their hospital's over capacity, and we need to help them in terms of getting people into beds. So you had all the various opinions coming forward, and you had to listen to all of them, take them as best you possibly could, and put them together to come up with a plan.

Magdalena Martinez [09:16]

And as governor, you're getting pulled from different directions, and you're getting criticism from different directions. How did you stay centered and focused as a leader?

Steve Sisolak [09:25]

Well, it was difficult. I mean, I bounced a lot off my wife when I'd come home. There were long, long days that we had to deal with these sorts of things. Some of the people had agendas – you have to understand that they had an agenda, and they were concerned with their specific agenda, their little cubbyhole compartment-type of thing, and not the overall picture that we had

to deal with. You had to take into account that they felt how was this going to affect them, and what they wanted to do. But we had to deal with overall, how was this going to help the state or affect the state with situations, and how was it going to affect our economy? How was it going to affect lives?

It was a very difficult, sobering time, and it was a 24-hour-a-day thing. When you've got coroners calling and saying, "Governor, we're going to need to get some more body bags. We're running out of body bags." I had mortuaries call in and say, "Can we help them get refrigerated trucks to put in the parking lot?" because they didn't have enough capacity to store bodies. That's a difficult thing to have to deal with, so you have – those things got priority, and you had to deal with – the maintaining of and protecting of human life was always my number one priority. It's something that we took extremely seriously, and how many of the decisions we made were going to impact people's lives and their health, that's what we focused on.

Magdalena Martinez [10:41]

And if you could describe your leadership during that time, in two to three words, what would they be?

Steve Sisolak [10:50]

I guess I'd leave that for other people to describe how we led. It was serious, it was difficult, and it was all-consuming.

Magdalena Martinez [10:59]

Mm-hmm. Yes, yes. And how did you, as governor, come to have some – maybe you didn't – but how did you get up every morning? What kept you going?

Steve Sisolak [11:12]

Well, the fact that I knew that the state, we had a real situation here. I was in regular contact with governors across the country in terms of procuring supplies, in terms of what they were doing and what we were doing, and if anybody had any ideas. We knew that we had to keep going. We had to keep going, and we had to make these decisions. It was spreading rapidly, and we didn't know – I got COVID when I was up in the Capitol. I was confined to the governor's house and mansion, and I got medical care right away. I got care, and it was fortunate that other people maybe didn't get it quite as quickly as I got it.

I knew the seriousness of the situation. It's something that every day, I'd get a report in the morning, and it would show how many people had died the previous day, and it would show how our hospital capacity was the previous day. Those reports would just pile up on my desk, and to look at them would just bring you down to earth in terms of "We've got a real problem here." Like I said, we pulled everybody in to deal with COVID, and there was a multitude, a plethora, of issues that dealt with that. It was the unemployment compensation for people who weren't working. It was the regulations that kept businesses closed. It was a whole educational part of this thing. It was a healthcare part. I mean, there were countless different issues that we faced, and we did the best we could to balance all of those and make a decision that was best, overall for everybody.

Magdalena Martinez [12:35]

It really was something that was of course, unprecedented. And as governor, I can only imagine you had to keep so many pieces functioning – unlike, perhaps, a specific agency – a state agency, or perhaps a certain industry. You had to consider every piece of the puzzle simultaneously.

Steve Sisolak [12:58]

Yeah, you did. You had to try to determine and keep in mind how one agency's action was going to affect another agency.

Magdalena Martinez [13:06]

Mm-hmm.

Steve Sisolak [13:07]

How to coordinate the various things to bring the State National Guard in, in order to help us with some of these things and setting up vaccine centers. You relied on a lot of people to help provide you with the information that they could, as best as possible, to make those right decisions.

Magdalena Martinez [13:24]

Mm-hmm. One of the things we're hearing from the interviewees, too, is that they hadn't really had time to reflect on their role during that time. And so having this conversation helped them to, perhaps, think about it from a different perspective – obviously, years past now.

The other thing was that there was an unprecedented "coming together," if you will, in some domains, and they feared that we would quickly revert back to the status quo the way things were. From your perspective, did that happen, too, in terms of the collaboration across state agencies and the collaboration across the state? What were some of the good things that you think came out of that?

Steve Sisolak [14:12]

Yeah. I think that the collaboration was a very good thing. I mean, we could put together a group if it was the school boards from all the counties. So we'd get them on the phone together and we had a meeting of the various tribal communities to get them all together, and our medical professionals, and you could do it very, very quickly. Everybody was willing to participate because we all had the same goal of protecting the citizens – residents in the state of Nevada.

It is slipping back the other way because people have their own interests. I think people did a good job of putting their own interests aside during the pandemic, focusing on the overall good, as opposed to their individual interests. That was a good thing, and it was a nice thing to see, but I guess that's part of life in general. It does slip back the other way, as times get back to normal, and you're dealing with a whole different set of issues.

Magdalena Martinez [15:02]

Now, in thinking about the governor's office and the groups that were hardest hit, how did you direct the state or the various agencies to assist those groups that were hardest hit, and which were those from your perspective?

Steve Sisolak [15:19]

Well, the unemployment issue was a big issue. We had a lot of people who weren't able to work, you know. We closed down a lot of businesses and we put restrictions in place. At the same time, we had an immense amount of fraud that was going on for the people claiming benefits, and people were saying, "Well, just pay everybody." Well, we *couldn't* just pay everybody. I mean, fraud was rampant in terms of people taking advantage of these various things. When you have a situation like this, you're always going to get some people who are going to try to find a weakness or a loophole and take advantage and profit for themselves.

We helped the various departments as best as we possibly could. But you've got to understand, during COVID, every department had its own issues. We had it with the education issues, which were numerous, even mentioned in a short interview like this. You had it with our health and human services, and you had it with the DMV in terms of peoples' simple things such as renewing their driver's licenses.

All the functions that the state had on a daily basis had to change. They had to adapt. I mean, they dealt with our faith leaders in terms of having services, and whether or not they were doing them virtually instead of doing them in person. Some were happy with that and accepted it, while others were very vocal in their opposition to this.

I remember being in Carson City and having people – with some individuals with AR-15s, walking up and down the sidewalk in front of the house, protesting that they didn't like this or they didn't like that. Or I should be able to say, "They have to wear a mask" or try to get people to get vaccines. People were – they were angry and frustrated, and oftentimes they took it out on the government, as opposed to reflecting inwardly and trying to help as best as possible.

Magdalena Martinez [17:03]

I think we've also observed that people were afraid. So that's – a lot of the anger stemmed from that.

Steve Sisolak [17:08]

Well, some people were afraid. You're absolutely right. Some people, it affected a lot. If you were in a family that had someone who had already died from COVID, or who had been impacted physically, health-wise from COVID, you viewed it differently than some of our rural communities, where it didn't spread as quickly, because they didn't have as much social interaction. So that affected how you were going to respond to these various things. If you had children of school age, you know, those issues were very important to you. If you were a senior citizen, you had different issues that you were concerned about. If you had a senior citizen in your family, and you were worried about how this was being handled in our assisted living facilities, those were issues.

Everybody has their own set of issues, and I understand it. It's their most important issue. But we had those issues coming from everybody in terms of how to deal with various things. People thought that they needed an answer quicker. Well, you couldn't *get* any quicker than we were

going. I mean, we were going seven days a week to do what we possibly could to help people, and sometimes people forgot that.

I'll say I bore the brunt of a lot of criticism as a result of maybe not going fast enough for some people, or not – just because we took input doesn't mean that we implemented everybody's suggestions that there were, and if we didn't, then they were unhappy about that. So there was a lot of room where people were complaining.

Magdalena Martinez [18:34]

And so, Mr. Sisolak, speaking of everyone having different priorities, and seeing the crisis or a crisis through their lens, how do we – how does an office like the governor's office try to, collectively, have everyone focus on one priority? Is that even possible?

Steve Sisolak [18:57]

I don't think it's possible. We focused on the preservation of life, which was always our most important thing. Everybody didn't focus on that. I mean, I had people calling up with [??19:07] to say, "This is the survival of the fittest. It's the vulnerable that are dying, and they're going to die anyway. So why are you making such a big deal out of that?" They were very, I guess, cold, as it came to the people who were in medical situations and conditions.

I don't know if you can get everybody focused on the same thing. Other users said, "I think that there's a potential to make a lot of profit," and wanted to do that part of it. Others were concerned about the economy not bouncing back.

I knew very, very well when I made the decision that it was to shut down and close the casinos and whatnot, that it was going to be difficult. I knew very well that was going to happen. But at the same time, I knew that our economy would bounce back; that we would be able to bounce back and get things going in the right direction, but getting everybody onboard was impossible. You *couldn't* get everybody because they had their own feelings, and that was difficult to assimilate into the general feeling.

Magdalena Martinez [20:06]

Mr. Sisolak, we've also heard from a lot of education leaders whose lives were threatened, and they were followed and recorded. How was your personal security during that time? Did you receive threats?

Steve Sisolak [20:20]

Oh yeah. I got more than my share of death threats, and we upped my security force a little bit. My wife was subjected to threats. I have two daughters who are both adult age, and they had their houses picketed. Yeah. For some people, that's how they decided to funnel their energy, and it was difficult.

Yes, we certainly had a lot of – we had people in our unemployment office be threatened. I mean, they got followed home, and they quit their jobs – they transferred out because some people were very, very mean-spirited. To this day, they maintain that they're still mean-spirited and unreasonable about these things, and it's really unfortunate that some people took it out on

individuals. I mean, I had it in a restaurant, where a guy threatened to hang me from a light pole with my wife. We had more than our share of threats, but you had to try to get through it as best you possibly could, and I signed up for the job. My wife and my kids did not sign up for that part of the job, but some people didn't care, and that was disappointing.

Magdalena Martinez [21:27]

Mm-hmm. Mr. Sisolak, in many ways, what happened in Nevada was a microcosm of what was happening nationally, and maybe, even globally. From your perspective, where are we now, from then, in terms of the different sides? Is it the same, worse, or better?

Steve Sisolak [21:49]

Well, I think a lot of people have tried to just put it in the past and not deal with it anymore. We still have the same – our country has become extremely partisan and political, and when you had a pandemic, that just fed into that partisanship and that's the way a lot of it was.

The other parts have brought people together in a way that I'd never seen before. You had people who were baking an extra casserole and taking it to their neighbor next door because they didn't have food to eat, or they were doing grocery shopping for a senior citizen. I can't even count how many food banks where I stopped in, and we handed out food to people. We had folks who were previously volunteers at the food bank, in terms of preparing meals and handing out food, and they suddenly became clients of that food bank.

So I think it gave them a different perspective. Some people really, really stepped up. I mean, they did what we asked. They called and they checked on their neighbor that they hadn't seen for a while, or their family member, just to make sure they were okay. There was a lot of isolation at the time, and we were worried about people being able to get through that themselves if nobody was checking on them. Unfortunately, some of that has waned since then, and we don't have as much of that nice interaction as we did.

But you saw the absolute best in people come up. They were donating their extra – whether it was food resources or financial resources to help people get by. You had some landlords that were very helpful and very assisting, and you had others that were difficult and were trying to evict people. We had to put eviction moratoriums in place, and then they didn't like that. They didn't like, you know, we'd have to put policies programs, and protocols into place, and when you did that, oftentimes you would find somebody who didn't like it. The problem is that the "somebodies" that didn't like it were really, really outspoken.

Now, I get a lot more comments. I'll see somebody at the grocery store, restaurant, dry cleaners, or whatever. And I would venture to say that since I left office, I've maybe had two or three that were negative that I ran into. I've had hundreds and hundreds that were just very positive, that "You did good" "You saved lives" "I appreciate it." I have one young man that came up to me and said, "Governor, I've got to tell you. We moved my grandmother here from New Jersey because they were having such problems back East that we thought she wasn't going to survive. We moved her here to Nevada, and she's well, doing good, and living well." That makes you feel good when you see that kind of reaction to things. But you certainly saw the other side of it, and the other side was more vocal and sometimes got more attention.

Magdalena Martinez [24:25]

Right, right. And so the federal government clearly played a significant role, particularly in getting resources to the states. Can you talk a little bit about some of the resource allocations, and then, also, if there's anything you wish the federal government, or any other level of government, would have done differently?

Steve Sisolak [24:45]

Well, yeah, they had access. They were the ones that were distributing the COVID tests and the vaccines when they became available, and how it was going to be done. Every governor was on the phone complaining, begging, and pleading for more. We were all in the same situation to get – whether it was the test kits like I said, or whether it was the vaccines that were necessary; the federal government in terms of aid assistance and financial resources.

I think that every state felt that they were not getting their fair share. I certainly felt Nevada didn't get as much as we had wanted. But understand that we're not the biggest state when you're dealing with – New York, Texas, California, and Florida were at the top of the list and they had more people, but we fought as hard as we possibly could for our state. I think that they did the best they possibly could but with limited resources. The logistics of some of these things were just enormous.

When you talk about getting the test kits out, the thing about the logistics of getting hundreds of millions of these units out to 50 states and all our territories was hard, and we didn't think that they were going fast enough. I think that they have since set in place – we've implemented in Nevada, for example, we have a stockpile now of PPE equipment, that if there's another incident – or we can use it for hospitals, whatever it might be.

I think we've set up some situations, but I don't think anybody knows what the next catastrophe could be, and we'll have to deal with that at the time. I just wish that people would try to be more understanding and try to view it from somebody else's situation. I mean, when you got two people calling, one was talking about – I remember I had an individual who called me and said, "Governor, I've supported you for your entire career. I've never asked you for anything, but I've got a favor to ask you." "What do you want?" He said, "I want to get into the hospital and say goodbye to my – what was it – my mother or father who was dying, and they won't let me."

I said, "I can't. You can't get in, okay? It's a health crisis, and we can't let anybody in there. We can get you a Zoom call. You can talk to somebody on the phone." Nurses were using their own phones to Zoom with family members before their loved ones died so that they could say goodbye. When you've got a situation where a mortuary says, "We need another refrigerated truck" because they were in the parking lots, and they couldn't have the funerals or the cremations fast enough. You were talking about some serious, serious problems, and other people were concerned about why they couldn't have a swimming competition at their high school. So it put it into perspective, and it made you think – I think you need to learn. I hope people learned that you've got to look at it sometimes from another person's shoes and their viewpoint to get a better overall perspective.

Magdalena Martinez [27:35]

Thank you. I'm going to switch it over to my colleague, Kelliann, now for the remainder of the questions.

Steve Sisolak [27:40]

Okay. Hi.

Kelliann Beavers [27:45]

Hi. Thank you so much for everything you shared about your experience. I remember, so clearly, feeling for the first time that I'd seen elected officials as somewhat superhuman until this moment when you could see their humanity. It was humanizing for me as a citizen, and reflecting on how citizens could be supportive of government in a different way.

Do you want to speak a bit about that and how that might carry forward? Because that's something I've definitely thought about since, especially as we've had these conversations with leaders who've been willing to be transparent with us.

Steve Sisolak [28:24]

Yeah. I hope it carries forward, Kelliann, but I'm not convinced that it will. When you see that some people don't ever meet their elected officials, or don't have a chance to, or you think that they're at a different level or whatnot. That's certainly not true, at least not in my case. When you're out at a senior center, where they're feeding people, and you went to help serve lunch one day to let them know. It wasn't just that you wanted to be there to help – which you did want to be there to help – but you wanted the people to know that they mattered, they cared, and their situation mattered when you're lifting up that box of produce, there's food to put in somebody's trunk, and you're seeing that they're handing out, you know, thousands of pounds of food. They'd drive up and they'd see, and they were shocked that you were there.

But at the same time, I think it made them feel good to know that we cared at every, single level: That people were involved, they weren't alone, and they had somebody to help them. At the time it was – if you remember, there was a shortage of toilet paper, you couldn't get food, you couldn't get eggs, and it was just terrible what we were dealing with. Other people viewed that as an opportunity to buy as much as they could and sell it on the internet and eBay, to make a big profit.

So the vast majority of people just – like the fact that they saw some of their elected officials in a more human capacity than they'd seen it previously, and that was a good thing.

Kelliann Beavers [29:49]

Thank you for that. You mentioned that moment when it was impossible to find toilet paper and some of those more extreme points in time. I think there's been almost a collective forgetting of how severe some of those moments were because now, there are vaccines, and the virus in their minds seems less threatening, and then, as they remember back, they see things in a different way. Do you want to speak a bit about the importance of really remembering the way things were, at the most challenging points, at the same time that we move forward?

Steve Sisolak [30:23]

Yeah. Well, I think that what you're doing is going to help with that, and that's going to preserve a lot of these comments and this information for the future. I mean, this is similar to me when I was growing up. My folks would talk about what they lived through during the Depression, how they didn't have food, there were no jobs, and they were all unemployed. You couldn't imagine it because you weren't there. I wasn't part of that.

Now, people going to in the future see what we had. We will have another situation pandemic –whether it's in a year, five years, or 100 years, it's going to happen again. Something will happen again. I think we learned some good things, in terms of being able to distribute resources, and to share and to help, but we didn't come up with all the answers, clearly.

We got better. I think that we need to be aware. Unfortunately, some people made it really political. That is a really unfortunate thing to me that they made it political, and they didn't understand why they might not have agreed with the decisions we made. We were doing the best we possibly could, and they forgot that or they didn't care about that, and that's hurtful to me. That's hurtful to me because I know how hard my staff worked, and I know how hard my committees worked to get these things done.

I didn't think twice about calling a meeting on a Friday night on the phone, a Zoom call. Everybody, that was their number one priority. If you had other plans, you'd drop them, you'd change them, and you'd participate in the meeting because you wanted to help. People forget about the sacrifices that individuals make, and that's unfortunate. But the people made these sacrifices for the right reason. They weren't looking for publicity or glory. They were just looking to try to help, and they did help. They saved lives. There's no doubt in my mind. We saved countless lives in the state of Nevada from the things that we did, and I'm proud of that.

Kelliann Beavers [32:16]

Absolutely. You saved lives in Nevada and outside of Nevada, you know? This carried across borders, so it made a huge difference.

Is there anything you'd like to say about specific policies or programs, like the CARES Act and ARPA, that implemented people; if you noticed how those policies that the state or federal government put in place impacted people positively or negatively?

Steve Sisolak [32:39]

I think the federal government did a good job in terms of putting programs in place. But when you do that on such a massive level and such an expedited timeline, it's hard to get that information disseminated to the general public. It really is. They didn't know what was available, and unfortunately, some people did not take it – were not able to take advantage of the programs we had in place, they didn't know about them, or they couldn't access them. We didn't do – the media tried to do a job, helping us in terms of getting that information out there, but at the same time, they were looking at the viewers. They were sensationalizing things and playing up to that sort of thing.

The programs that the federal government put in place helped, certainly. Unfortunately, there's always going to be somebody who's going to try to take advantage of this. You're seeing that now – prosecutions from people who got COVID benefits who weren't entitled to them – I'd watch shows on television or would read about them, and I'd just shake my head, figuring man, we needed that money, we needed it for a certain reason, and this is what people did, or that's what they did. I guess that's human nature, and there's nothing that you can do about it. There's always going to be somebody who's going to want to do that.

We need to come up with a way that we can get that information out quicker. With the advent of the internet, which we didn't have 50 years ago, that should still be able to help. Understand that everybody didn't have access to the internet, and we had to put up portable cell towers to get the internet out to people so we could do distance education. So we're going to get better in terms of connectivity, and making people aware that there are services available.

Kelliann Beavers [34:19]

Thank you. That's a good example of innovation, as we learned from other interviewees about that specific program of getting the internet extended to all the children. Do you want to talk about any other things that you thought were the most innovative ways organizations and citizens dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession following the pandemic?

Steve Sisolak [34:36]

Well, I think that a lot of the things we learned are that some of the functions were better left for nonprofits. Our faith-based community did a great job in terms of food banks. I mean, the government was not set up to hand out actual boxes of food. The faith-based communities and our nonprofits did a great job in terms of getting that out there. They did a great job in terms of helping us with transportation, getting people rides to doctor's appointments, and so forth and so on. The government had another function to do.

So I think that is what I learned, that was good. Then the thing I learned is that you can't do everything yourself. You have to be able to trust partners. You have to get partners that are going to be able to help you and you give them responsibility. The one mistake I think the federal government didn't do enough foresight, and some of the programs they gave us didn't have enough flexibility. It was very tight and you had to do exactly A, B, and C. You couldn't do B, C, and A. You had to do A, B, and C, in this order, in this time. That made it really difficult because we didn't have the staff in Nevada that other states had in terms of implementing some of these programs, and that made it difficult. I wish the federal government would have had more block grant money to give to the states to get it out there. Because the state's at our level, and then when passing it down to the counties and the cities, they knew what was best for their citizens and how to get the resources out there. That would have suited everybody better, I think.

Kelliann Beavers [36:02]

Thank you for that. We have two more questions. The next one is, what can we learn from the COVID crisis that could be lessons for future crises? You've talked some about that, but if there's anything else you'd like to share.

Steve Sisolak [36:14]

No – I think that's – we talked about a lot of things. One of the things that you have to do is remember what we did right and what we did wrong, it's quite possible that none of us are going to be around for the next crisis, and we'll all have passed by that point, but they'll be able to look back on this. I mean, we were looking back on one-hundred-year-old information in trying to help us with what to do. I think that staying prepared and as vigilant as best you possibly can is something we can learn, and to be flexible for the next crisis that'll come along.

I think the biggest thing that we need to learn to help us is just human behavior – to care more about your neighbors. When you saw that, you saw the great cooperation of the neighborhoods, churches, little PTAs, and whatnot providing food for people and providing transportation. Just a friendly ear and a touch was so nice. Hopefully, we learn to be a little kinder through this.

Kelliann Beavers [37:12]

Yes. That's something that Magda and I have talked a lot about, the compassion that grew from this, and that has the potential to continue to grow.

The last question is, are you hopeful, and if yes, what are you hopeful for?

Steve Sisolak [37:26]

That's a tough one. Yeah, I'm hopeful. You have to maintain your hope. I've got a lot of faith in human nature. Like I said, we focused a lot, and I told you a lot about the difficult things that we faced.

But I can tell you about some of the best things that we faced, too. People were doing everything they possibly could to make it easier for folks. They were handing out personal protective equipment, testing kits when they became available, and doctors and nurses. I had nurses and doctors sleeping in the hospitals. They couldn't go home because they were afraid they would take the virus home with them and infect their families. I had several who told me that they lived in their garage when they got home because they didn't want to go in the house and take a chance of infecting their wife, their husband, or their kids.

You saw people who were willing to do that. It didn't matter if you were punched in, or on or off the clock. They worked all hours, 24 hours a day, seven days a week to try to help somebody. If there was somebody who was in need, somebody stepped up and helped them, and that gave me a great amount of hope. It still gives me a great amount of hope to know that people did that. I hope we never forget that. I hope we – unfortunately, the memories have faded about the virus and the people. When they would ask me to talk about it, I'd do a speaking engagement. We'd talk about, you know, wiping down your mail or your groceries, not having toilet paper in the stores, or the rationing of certain things in the grocery store. It's hard to imagine that that's what we had, but we did have it. We did have that, and that's something we can't forget. We can't forget that that happened.

I'm hopeful that we've seen the best in people, and I'm thankful that we've seen the best in people. I hope that continues to grow, to enlarge itself, and that people remember that. Don't ever lose sight, you know, of the fact that it was a pretty dark time for a while there in our country. Some people are pretty cocky about it now and say, "Oh, it's no big deal; we got through." That's

not the way it was. When you had individuals say that – this is a hard part – people were dying, and they said, "Well, those are people who all had underlying conditions. They're going to die anyway."

I mean, it was a pretty cold attitude that some people had, that they were going to die anyway. We could never adopt that attitude, and I wouldn't. Like I said, people's lives were the most important thing. Jobs came back and our economies came back, but those lives that we lost, the 12,000 or so lives in the State of Nevada, are never coming back. There's always that one empty seat, at the Thanksgiving dinner table or the Christmas dinner table, of "so-and-so" who passed during COVID.

I lost dozens of good friends during COVID. Dozens of friends, that I hear that "So-and-so died because of COVID," and "So-and-so died." Each one of those isn't just a statistic and a number, it's a story. It's a family member. It's somebody who was cared about and loved, and that every one of them was an enormous loss.

Kelliann Beavers [40:22]

Thank you so much for the choices that you made, to keep us safe, and the memories that you hold, that no one else does, that you were willing to share with us. I'm really grateful for it and thank you so much for your time today.

Magda, if there's anything else you want to add.

Magdalena Martinez [40:36]

This is a bit unrelated, but perhaps, a little bit more positive. Las Vegas just hosted the Super Bowl.

Steve Sisolak [40:43]

Yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [40:44]

And I believe it was under your leadership, that that's why Las Vegas hosted the Super Bowl.

Steve Sisolak [40:51]

It is.

Magdalena Martinez [40:52]

And talking about just what a great, great Super Bowl it was. It wasn't just the game, but the whole package. Everything that Vegas does well, they did it during the Super Bowl.

Steve Sisolak [41:05]

Thank you for saying that. It was amazing. It was a tremendous opportunity. I'm really thankful we got it. I'm a huge sports fan, and that's why I want to get sports here. But more so than that, we had 12 - 14,000 people working to build that stadium. I mean, that stadium provided a lot of jobs, and let me tell you something, it still does provide an awful lot of jobs for people. We've got a lot of hotel rooms in Las Vegas – you know that – we've got to "keep heads in those beds,"

as they say. And to have the events that we have at Allegiant and the Super Bowl brought people here, brought a lot of money into our economy, and that's what keeps our economy going. Sometimes people don't look at that and say, "Well, I'm not a football fan." Well, it doesn't matter if you're not a football fan. Look at the people who are working at that stadium. That was a good thing, and we kept those people working during the pandemic, which was really great. So they were able to do that and thank you for noticing. Hopefully, we'll get another one soon.

Magdalena Martinez [41:54]

Well, congratulations to you for making that happen, and thank you.

Steve Sisolak [41:59]

Thank you.

Magdalena Martinez [42:01]

Have a great day. Thank you so much for your time.

Steve Sisolak [42:00]

Thank you. Have a wonderful day. Thanks for the opportunity. Enjoyed it.

Magdalena Martinez [42:05]

Thank you.

Steve Sisolak [42:07]

Take care, bye-bye.

End of audio: 42:07