

An Interview with Eric Brown

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

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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 Eric Brown, County Manager for Washoe County, and was conducted on 7/14/22 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Eric Brown

Date: 7-14-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Eric Brown

Kelliann Beavers [00:05]

Okay. So to confirm, you've reviewed the standard consent form and are comfortable with what's in it.

Eric Brown [00:10]

Yes.

Kelliann Beavers [00:11]

Okay, great. So the first question is, as a leader in your local community, how did you see your role, and the role of the county broadly, throughout the pandemic?

Eric Brown [00:25]

Well, during the pandemic, the county's role was to provide emergency support services for the region. And my role as the county manager was to oversee the establishment of the incident command team that would end up operationally and financially managing the crisis emergency management activities, and monitoring the ongoing spread of the pandemic, and how it was affecting various aspects of the community, and helping to make sure that we were directing resources appropriately based on the impacts that we were seeing.

Kelliann Beavers [01:24]

Thank you for sharing that. And the next question is, how did you work with, or observe, groups who were hardest hit by the pandemic, and who were those groups in your opinion?

Eric Brown [01:39]

Well, I think initially, we were seeing impacts on our healthcare workers and our first responders. So, our initial focus was to make sure we were addressing their needs. Because obviously, if they were incapacitated, we were really going to have a problem helping anybody else in the community.

I think as time went on, we began to see that those individuals in the community who did not have the option of working remotely – so, many of our hospitality workers, our gaming industry workers; those folks that had to go in to work, who were exposed to the public in their jobs. Very early on, we were seeing that they had high infection rates and were being disproportionately affected.

I think later on, we began to see that many of our communities of color, in particular, those – the Latino community, Spanish-speaking populations, with intergenerational households, and therefore, more difficult to see them socially distanced and following the earliest CDC guidance, they were being disproportionately affected. And then, of course, the elderly populations were

particularly vulnerable in the early stages. So, our nursing homes, skilled nursing facilities, and congregate settings where we had elderly people were disproportionately affected.

Kelliann Beavers [03:54]

The next question, some of it you've shared by the nature of the past two questions. But if you want to share anything else – can you walk through a timeline, as you remember it? What happened and what did you do as the pandemic started?

Eric Brown [04:12]

Well, it was a blur because I don't think anybody had been through this kind of thing before. And I remember it was mid-March when the governor declared the emergency declaration. And shortly thereafter, the county and the jurisdictions within the county of Reno/Sparks response followed suit. So that we could have the kind of access to funding and ability to procure what we needed to procure, without going through our normal procurement processes as required by either county ordinance or state laws.

It was a chaotic time. We were meeting initially as a region on a daily basis, and getting updates every morning on how many new cases. And again, if there were any parts of the population that were disproportionately impacted, we were scrambling, trying to find personal protective equipment, PPE. So whether that was masks or gloves for our healthcare workers, first responders, or things of that nature. There was no ready supply when this started, and it was very much kind of the Wild, Wild, West. Because all of a sudden, these providers of PPE would appear, and often, you didn't know these folks. They were not businesses that we had done business with before.

So it was a very treacherous situation to try to figure out whether or not they could actually deliver what they said they could, and the pricing was all over the map in terms of what the supplies would cost. But ultimately, I think we did a good job between the jurisdictions of dividing and conquering, and we were able to procure the PPE we needed to keep the community safe. We were very worried about housing for those folks who had either tested positive or were displaying symptoms, but we didn't know whether they had tested positive, and how we'd isolate those folks to keep from exposing other members of the public.

As you may know, we already have a housing shortage here in Nevada. So finding a place for these folks to go was a challenge, and very expensive to do. Then we had our homeless populations. We had a significant homeless population going into the pandemic. We knew it would get worse as a result of the pandemic. And again, trying to make sure that we kept them safe, and isolated any infected populations. That was an ongoing challenge, to try to make sure we could do that.

So it was a chaotic time. And again, we met on a daily basis to make sure that across the region and the jurisdictions, we were sharing information. I think one of the benefits of that was also that we had some amazing talent across the region. And in that kind of scenario where you're having daily calls, and if the environment of those calls is very open to suggestions, no bad ideas – which is kind of what we put in place – I think we were able to do some things that clearly we

wouldn't have been able to do, in an isolated fashion, if we had attempted to approach it in that manner.

Kelliann Beavers [09:00]

Yeah, the collaborative aspect sounds really important, and it's pretty amazing that you were able to connect each day there at the beginning. I'm sure that was both crucial and a challenge to make happen.

Eric Brown [09:15]

Yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [09:16]

And I understand you took the saying – although, let me know if I'm missing anyone from the picture – that the county and the leadership from the cities met each day. Were there other folks involved in terms of that collaboration that you felt were critical for that check-in?

Eric Brown [09:35]

Oh, yeah. Well, the health officer in the health district was on those calls. Our Emergency Manager for the county was on those calls. The law enforcement community was on those calls, as was our EMS community. And initially, the hospitals were also a part of those calls. So on any given morning, you could have 50-60 people on the calls.

Kelliann Beavers [10:12]

Wow.

Eric Brown [10:15]

But they were generally driven by the health officer, the emergency management folks, and our first responders.

Kelliann Beavers [10:25]

Got you. The next question doesn't have to be a critique of your local government. It could be about state government or any level of federal government. Is there anything that you wish the government, at any level, did differently or could do differently now, in response to the pandemic and the economic downturn?

Eric Brown [10:45]

Well, I think everybody recognized that walking into this, we didn't have a coordinated stockpile of inventory of things like personal protective equipment. So, as I said before, that made for a very chaotic situation where jurisdictions or, in some cases, the states were bidding against each other for what was available.

Kelliann Beavers [11:15]

Mm-hmm.

Eric Brown [11:18]

That was unfortunate. I think the other big area that is still an issue in my mind is, as we learn

more about the pandemic and the need to do contact tracing, in the early days, to try to figure out who the infected individuals had been in contact with so that they could be notified and tested. That was a very difficult thing for us to staff. And even as we staffed it, we would later learn that the pandemic would go through waves. And so if it's on the upswing, you couldn't staff fast enough to keep up with the demand to do contact tracing. If it's on the downswing, everybody's happy, and you've got people that you've hired to do contact tracing who sit around doing nothing. How long do you hold onto them?

Kelliann Beavers [12:33]

Right.

Eric Brown [12:35]

And can you hold onto them until the next peak period comes? That is a continuing problem. I think the ability – we had to build our information systems around the pandemic on the fly.

Kelliann Beavers [12:50]

Mm-hmm.

Eric Brown [12:52]

So in the early days, reporting was kind of crude, rough, and inaccurate because we didn't have a mechanism for easily documenting how many cases were detected by zip code or regionally. Later we were able to get our arms around that, but that took us months, and a lot of time and money to put in place.

And so, as we look to the future, I still think that there is going to be a need for what I'll call call center-type resources available for the next pandemic, whenever it comes because we know it's coming. And I would hope that we don't have a situation again where each jurisdiction or each county is left to its own, to figure out how to stand that up and staff it. It's really difficult to do. And it just seems to me that if there were state or federal resources to support that piece of it, that would be a tremendous benefit for us.

Kelliann Beavers [14:21]

That's really a fascinating and important observation, that seems obvious, that no one else has said so far. And I don't know why – I guess I get why it ended up being left to the local level. Because, as you've already stated, and many interviewees have stated, no one knew this was going to happen, and no one had encountered something like this before. But you're absolutely right that it is the kind of thing that, with some forethought, at a higher level of government, the local governments could be much more supported in making that happen, and it's important. I'm glad you shared that. And sometimes things that seem very obvious, you know, things happen so fast, and then you don't think back to them, and realize that that would help a lot next time if that were in a better, more organized and supportive program.

Eric Brown [15:12]

Yep.

Kelliann Beavers [15:19]

Gosh, I thought of something while you were talking that was separate that I wanted to ask you, and now it's slipped my mind, but maybe that will come back to me. I'll just go on with the stated questions. The next one is – you also talked a bit about this, just by nature of the past question. So if you think of anything, it is, what can we learn from the COVID crisis this time that could be lessons for future crises?

Eric Brown [15:48]

Well, that's one of them. Thinking about operationally, how local jurisdictions can be supported in a way that is both economical and would allow us to get the capacity to do things like contact tracing and that kind of thing quicker. I think we also had a challenge with testing capacity here in Nevada and in northern Nevada. So not only were people scrambling to get access to PPE, but in the early days before the federal government was able to procure tests and vaccines, you were on your own to do that as well. And we had to rely on our state lab here at the University of Nevada Reno, and they're fantastic, but here again, you had the same phenomenon of – as the undulations of the demand curve were experienced during various phases of the pandemic. There were times when the demand for testing and test capacity exceeded what was available to us. And what that meant was that people had to wait a long time to get their test results back. And as you know, it reduces the efficacy of the test – if I take the test today, and I'm not going to get my results for two weeks – well, how many people have I infected in that two-week period? And that was a real challenge for us.

And so, I think – and I feel better about our capacity now. But there's the issue of capacity and there's an issue of how that capacity is coordinated. And it was very frustrating that here, even as we brought additional capacity online, it wasn't very well-coordinated. So if the state corrections system, for instance, decided to go test 8,000 inmates this weekend, and you didn't know about that at the county level, well, they're using the same state labs to process those tests as we were depending on to test citizens. So, all of a sudden, instead of getting a two-day turnaround time for our test results, that balloons to 10-14 days.

Kelliann Beavers [18:52]

Right. And maybe that could have been phased, or there could have been some coordination there to sort of make it a reasonable timeframe for the public.

Eric Brown [18:59]

Right. But I think in terms of the essential objectives of keeping the community safe, communicating what's going on, and transparency. And again, working collaboratively across the region, looking back, I think we did a great job of that. This was a situation that nobody saw coming, and we did the best we could.

Kelliann Beavers [19:37]

Right. The question that I thought of a bit ago that came back to me; which is not that original of a question, but I am curious is, how are things now there? To some extent, I have a sense of how things are broadly now, but I'm just curious to know. I know there has been, I guess generally, an increase in cases here. But we don't have an increase in hospitalizations necessarily, and there's

sort of a simmering level of fear and paranoia. But everyone's also trying to get back to normal, so.

Eric Brown [20:10]

Yeah, it's the same here. We're seeing an increase in cases, certainly, but not in hospitalizations to any meaningful degree. And my county employs about 26 to 2,700 people. We're seeing a spike in sick leave hours – because we monitor that. And so we try to remind our employees and the public that it's clear that COVID's going to be with us. Any dreams of vanquishing it and never having to hear about it are gone. So, we're just going to have to learn to continue to do the things that we can do to mitigate it, while we go on living our lives and working every day. And that includes, we are thinking more intelligently about the layout of our offices, and what can we do to make sure that employees are not stacked on top of each other unnecessarily.

So we do remind people that it's still important to wash your hands. And as we see a surge in cases right now in congregate settings in county facilities: our homeless facilities or our senior center, places like that, we are wearing masks. And so, it's unfortunately just the way we're going to have to manage things going forward. And it's something that, as an employer, you want to make sure you're keeping your employees safe and doing the right things to keep the public safe if they're interacting with your employees. But we're certainly not going back to the days of shutting things down and mandating that people do various things.

Kelliann Beavers [22:34]

Right. Thankfully, at least, these surges have not been so deadly.

Eric Brown [22:40]

Right.

Kelliann Beavers [22:43]

The next question is, on a more positive note, what do you think have been the most innovative or interesting ways that organizations or communities in your area have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and/or the recession? It could be examples of collaboration programs or anything else that comes to mind that you're proud of, or thought was interesting to observe.

Eric Brown [23:06]

Well, the first thing I would say, from an economic standpoint – we were blessed that the pandemic really didn't have the kind of impact that it did in southern Nevada and some other communities. And I think that's a testament to a lot of hard work that's been taking place here in northern Nevada, over a number of years, to diversify the economy beyond gaming and tourism, into the tech sector – logistics, which are things that are kind of recession-proof. Everybody needs logistics. We have the tech companies that are here and were able to continue to work through the pandemic. And so, as a result of that, the economic impacts, the impact on employment, and so forth were as bad here, certainly as they were in southern Nevada or other surrounding markets.

I think our ability to pivot towards allowing people to work remotely was certainly an innovation if you want to call it that. I think we would have eventually gotten there as a region, or certainly as a county organization.

Kelliann Beavers [24:30]

Mm-hmm.

Eric Brown [24:31]

But I remember because I had just started in this position about three months before the pandemic hit.

Kelliann Beavers [24:40]

Oh, I don't know that I noticed that. Some folks, I've noticed that when I scheduled the interview. But that's so intense.

Eric Brown [24:47]

Yeah. So I started in November 2019. And so I was still getting acquainted with the organization, how it works, and its culture. And I remember, ironically, about two weeks before the pandemic hit, I had a department head meeting, where I commented to my department heads "Hey, you guys don't think anything of getting in your cars and trucks and driving halfway across the county for a 15-minute meeting, and then coming back to your office. And you do that because essentially, there's no real traffic here. But if you lived in the Bay Area or Southern California, you would never do that. You would use Teams, Zoom, or you'd do a teleconference."

And I remember saying to them that the county had already made the investment in Teams and Microsoft 365. And so the infrastructure was there to use virtual meeting tools. But we were going to have to get smarter about that – because there would come a time when the county would need a large part of its workforce to work remotely. Now, I was thinking of fire, earthquake, flood, or something like that.

Kelliann Beavers [26:13]

Right.

Eric Brown [26:15]

And so I asked the department heads to join me in encouraging people to work remotely. Because I pointed out to them "You need to be proficient at it so that when you really need to use it, you're comfortable using it. You can't wait until the emergency and then, for the first time, try to-

Kelliann Beavers [26:37]

Right, try and figure out how to not mute your mic and stuff.

Eric Brown [26:41]

Exactly. So half of the people looked at me like I was crazy. The other half were rejoicing. And it just ended up that, as the pandemic unfolded, we really needed to rely on people to work remotely. And I would say in hindsight, that we, like a lot of organizations learned that in many

cases it actually increased productivity. In fact, we've had more issues with people working remotely and burning themselves out. Because they're at home, working through breaks, working through the dinner hour, or whatever. And we have to scold them and say, "Go be with your family" or "Go do something. Go for a walk." So I think that's been one of the more transformative things that will stick with us going forward. Again, I think the pandemic really accelerated our need to do that.

Kelliann Beavers [27:54]

That's – you were a "seer" at the time. That's fortunate that you thought of that.

And the next question is, were there any specific policies that the state or federal government – for example, the CARES Act, ARPA funding, or anything similar implemented, that you noticed impacted people, and if so, how positively or negatively?

Eric Brown [28:21]

Well, I think the CARES Act was a godsend for us. Because we, at that time, still weren't sure what the impacts were going to be. So, your decision-making about what you were going to spend, how it was going to be funded. Remember, we're a county government, so we have to balance our budgets, and you can't spend money you don't have a source for. And so the CARES Act really helped us get through that by seeing how we could focus our money. And then a lot of that money initially went into things like the testing capacity that I mentioned earlier that we didn't have at that point. Testing expenses – you've got to pay people to do the tests, which wasn't something that I think we could have necessarily funded on our own. We used a lot of that money for overtime and labor expenses for public safety, which was a big deal. So, profound impacts.

ARPA, similarly I think, is going to have a huge benefit for us, but for us, I think ARPA is going to allow us to help people with recovery. I mentioned earlier, we were blessed that we weren't harmed as much economically as some other regions were. So, as a result, we don't need ARPA necessarily to help with economic mitigation things. But it is helping us do things like put in place the homeless facilities we need. We have seen a swell in homelessness as a result of the pandemic. And so, ARPA has allowed to put in place infrastructure to deal with that. It is allowing us to address some of the needs of our traditionally underserved communities in a lot of different ways. Some of them are NGO non-profit organizations. Some of it is encouraging investment in small businesses and those kinds of things. So the ability to have that funding, I think, can be really transformative for us, in that we're able to do some things that historically, the county hasn't been able to fund.

Kelliann Beavers [31:20]

When you were talking about the homeless population and the ability to fund some new facilities, are you guys – do you mean that you are planning for additional shelters or establishing new programs? Do you want to talk a little bit more about that if you'd like?

Eric Brown [31:35]

Sure. So if you haven't heard, Washoe County – the City of Sparks – the City of Reno pooled our resources to acquire about a 15-acre piece of property right in the heart of the region. And we

call it the "CARES Campus" because we use CARES Act money to make this possible. And so it allowed us to build kind of a super shelter facility that could house up to 600 people.

Kelliann Beavers [32:14]

Oh, my gosh. That's amazing.

Eric Brown [32:19]

And that was put together in the space of about 60 days. And we're now in phase II and we're using – so CARES Act money was used – primarily, not exclusively – to help make that happen. And then we're now in the second phase which is, we're using ARPA dollars to put in place additional buildings on that campus that will provide wraparound services.

Kelliann Beavers [32:46]

Wow.

Eric Brown [32:48]

So there was the shelter. That was the initial investment in the property and the land. And now we're building additional facilities that will allow for case managers, behavioral health specialists, and medical care providers to all be co-located on the same property. And then in stage III, we're using ARPA dollars to build a transitional housing facility. And it's already begun to show benefits in terms of getting our homeless populations off the Truckee River.

Kelliann Beavers [33:32]

Oh...

Eric Brown [33:34]

Out of our communities and into – because now we have a central place for them to go.

Kelliann Beavers [33:41]

Right.

Eric Brown [33:43]

And not just a place for them to go and be housed, but also, to receive services. So we've gotten additional monies from our state senators, who have appropriated congressional dollars to help with things, and it's truly a success story in the making.

Kelliann Beavers [34:05]

Certainly. I can't wait to continue to watch how that unfolds. Thanks for sharing a bit with me about it, and that's really commendable and wonderful for your community.

Related, the next question is, are you hopeful? And, if "yes," what are you hopeful for?

Eric Brown [34:24]

Yes, I'm very hopeful. I think, again, I've been through a lot of changes in my life – I shouldn't say "changes" – I'll call them "challenges" in my life, both professionally and personally. And I think I've learned that – as in the old saying "If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger," and I

believe that. And I think that the pandemic, while nobody would wish that on anyone, that as a region, and certainly as a county organization, we're better today probably than we were prior to the pandemic in a lot of different ways. I think we are more cognizant and focused on serving traditionally underserved communities. Because we saw what happened when they didn't have access to the same resources, or the ability to stay home during the early stages of the pandemic, as some other elements of the community did.

I think there's an opportunity to take that learning and act on it going forward, to make sure that over time, we do a better job of implementing social equity in the things that we do, and our approach to it. I think that, again, and I keep beating this drum – but the collaboration between the jurisdictions is huge. I haven't been here that long; again, I'm in year three. But I'm told that the jurisdictions didn't always play nice together. And indeed, during my tenure here, I've seen instances where food fights will break out. (laughter)

But, I guess, from my perspective, that's not productive, you know. We're public servants. We're here to serve the citizens and businesses of this region. And I think the pandemic has shown us that we're a lot better together, even when we disagree. Let's figure out a way to compromise and move forward. Then we are – if I just want to take my ball and go home because you won't do what I want you to do.

Kelliann Beavers [36:45]

That's a good analogy.

Eric Brown [36:47]

So I'm very hopeful for the future, yeah.

Kelliann Beavers [36:50]

I was wondering; when you mentioned the collaborative calls that you had each morning. Obviously, it's not necessary for that to be happening at this point. But has any of that been maintained in a way that there's more regional collaboration, more periodically obviously? Or is that something you feel was really just at the height of the emergency a necessitated thing?

Eric Brown [37:13]

We still do weekly calls, at least the managers. Reno/Sparks and I generally have a call every week. And while we don't focus necessarily on the pandemic on those calls now, there are other things that we focus on. And so I would say it was a model established during the pandemic that, at a certain level, we're still using. We're just using it to address other issues.

I would say also that we are focused on – we do encourage – *I* do encourage – other department heads within the county, to talk to and collaborate with their peers. So it's a thing; that we really do encourage our folks – so whether it's my chief financial officer or the sheriff and his law enforcement counterparts – we really do encourage our folks to keep the lines of communication open and be aware of what each other's challenges are. Because that's a much better model for coming up with a mutually agreed [upon] solution. And if the only time you hear from me is when I've got a problem, that's not really the best practice that will help us to get things resolved.

Kelliann Beavers [38:44]

That's a really good point, as far as the value of that kind of communication, even when it's not necessarily necessary. Building trust in a relationship is a huge part of it.

Well, I want to be respectful of your time. The only other thing I'm curious to know, if you think of anyone is if there is anyone else that you think we should speak to, that just comes to mind. Obviously, we'll be doing this all the way through Thanksgiving. But we've spoken with more people in southern Nevada just because of being familiar with our network here. And I want to ensure that we also talk with plenty of people in northern Nevada. So if there's anyone that you think of that it would be good for us to reach out to – it doesn't necessarily have to be government, although that's great. We're also interviewing folks from community organizations, from education, and from the business community.

Eric Brown [39:39]

Well, I think I would – if you don't have Mike Simerski on your list, from EDON. He might be a good one. Because from a business perspective, he has a good perspective across the region.

Kelliann Beavers [40:00]

Is "EDON" what you're saying? E-D-O-N?

Eric Brown [40:03]

It's the Economic Development Association of Western Nevada. EDAWN.

Kelliann Beavers [40:06]

Oh, great. I definitely want to speak to him. Because we are trying to ensure that we speak to folks that are in economic development organizations. So thanks for saying that.

Eric Brown [40:17]

The other one is purely from a health perspective or a public health perspective if you're not talking to the health officer here, Kevin Dick. He would be a good one to speak to because he was on these morning calls. In fact, he was the primary contributor to them in terms of content during the pandemic.

Kelliann Beavers [40:41]

Mm-hmm.

Eric Brown [40:42]

And in terms of what are the lessons learned from a public health standpoint? That we need to be aware of, going forward, I think his voice is important.

Kelliann Beavers [40:55]

Okay, thanks for that. I will definitely reach out to those two. And if anyone else comes to mind, let me know. And most of all, thank you so much for sharing your perspective. It was great to listen to you, learn from you, and to virtually meet you.

Eric Brown [41:10]

Same here. And if you're ever in Reno, if I can be of assistance, look me up.

Kelliann Beavers [41:16]

I certainly will, and vice versa. I hope you have a great afternoon.

Eric Brown [41:20]

Okay, thank you.

Kelliann Beavers [41:21]

Thanks.

End of audio: 41:24