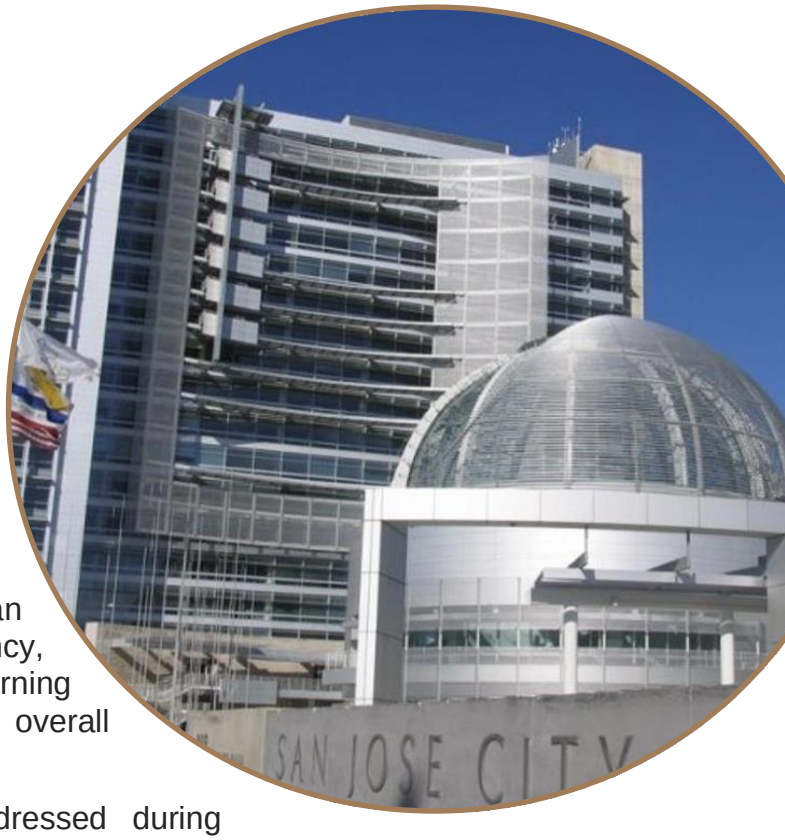
Impact of Race Equity in City Response



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world and changed life as we know it. With an unprecedented public health emergency, jurisdictions across the globe are continually learning of new and innovative practices to assure the overall health of the community.

A challenge that has been significantly addressed during response has been the inequities with the public health and social system. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recognized that communities of racial and ethnic minorities are more at risk due to overarching discrimination, access to healthcare, and various other factors.

As one of the most diverse cities in the United States, the City of San José has had the responsibility to ensure equity considerations in their response planning efforts. With large Latinx, Vietnamese, and Chinese, the City's response eventually reflected the diverse communities they serve.

Among their accomplishments, the City had set up a Language Access Unit and Digital Inclusion Unit in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). This planning effort helped address inequities in response servicing underserved populations. This included monumental efforts in multi-language translations, local community engagement, and identifying necessities for vulnerable populations.

These response efforts reflected the City's positioning in addressing issues and concerns for their diverse community. With that responsibility, the City has shown strides in incorporating equity considerations as a necessity in good governance.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many long-standing systemic health and social inequities that have put communities of racial and ethnic minorities at risk. Some inequities that exist include poverty, discrimination, access to primary education (K-12), income and wealth gap, housing, and healthcare access. These factors have directly affected and influenced these communities during the course of this ongoing response. Effectively, it puts these communities at the highest risk as the City navigate pandemic response.

These systemic inequities were especially important for the City of San José to acknowledge in their ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. San José is one of the most diverse cities in the United States with large Latinx, Chinese, and Vietnamese populations, within those communities, many have limited English proficiency. With language and cultural barriers, the City had acknowledged the importance of serving harder to reach communities, recognizing the likely difficulties that may be prevalent.

The City also understood that there were other communities that experienced difficulties during response. As a result of the pandemic, there is a continuing challenge to meet the needs of underserved populations, including those who are experiencing homelessness, as well as individuals and families economically displaced by loss of jobs and income. With physical and social distancing measures in place, basic services and interactions have been limited and/or cut off. These challenges forced the City to take on innovative and more substantial efforts to serve all communities. For the City, these efforts were a necessity. This was demonstrated in their strong efforts to ensure that vulnerable populations were being considered in the multitude of response planning efforts.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STEPS TO MEET CHALLENGES

Given the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to assume a forward-leaning posture in assessing, understanding, and appropriately responding to the myriad of life-sustaining needs throughout the community is a hallmark for any jurisdiction. One of the concerns that has been a focal point in San José has been to address the deeper systemic issues that have disproportionate adverse effects on its diverse populations. These same populations have shown to be most vulnerable to the catastrophic impacts of the pandemic.

As one of the most diverse cities in the U.S., San José has had to address their pandemic response efforts with a lens of equity. With large communities of Latinx, Chinese, and Vietnamese populations, these planning efforts resulted in a multitude of innovative and inclusive practices. According to the 2010 Census Data, less than half of the households in San José speak only English. This language barrier could result in many households not receiving direct information or communication from City officials; leaving them out of important updates as the City navigates pandemic response. The City's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during the pandemic response created the Language Access Unit to ensure that non- English speaking populations were being reached through translated materials and communications.

As an example, the official City of San José website has been set up for five languages: English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Traditional and Simplified Chinese. Additionally, there is an option to translate into eight additional languages, however these are machine translations and potentially contain a number of errors, but still provide general information to the community.

While translations helped alleviate language barriers, there was still an immense cultural obstacle in earning the trust of these diverse communities. It was found that these populations were more comfortable receiving updates and news from non-City official social media. In an effort to create a bond with the community during the response, the City had partnered with local influencers in each of the communities. These local celebrities had established trust with those populations and were able to speak on public health messages like wearing a mask, practicing social distancing, and properly washing your hands.

Along with communicating with the diverse community, the City had taken serious steps to address the necessities of vulnerable and underserved populations. Through their efforts, the City was able to identify vulnerable communities, whether it was through a priority index or existing data on the percentage of the population that were experiencing homelessness during the on- going pandemic. The priority index mapping and modeling assisted in their ability to determine which necessities were important to distribute. As an example, the City, in collaboration with regional partners, had set up a “Silicon Valley Strong” campaign aimed at aligning vulnerable communities with housing. Recent data found distinct disparity in those experiencing homelessness, specifically within the Latinx/Hispanic and Black or African American community. Along with the recent purchase of a hotel for the un- homed, the City has displayed exemplary efforts towards extending care and vital services to all populations in the community.

Another example of these innovative solutions was setting up the Digital Inclusion branch in the EOC. As a result of social and physical distancing, many services had moved to an online presence, including education. However, many households did not have access to the internet and were at a severe disadvantage with distanced learning and online services. It was found that over 100,000 households did not have proper access to the internet. To enable technology access among marginalized communities, the City expanded access to Wi-Fi by offering mobile hot spots and other connection devices. This effort helped bridge a gap for underserved communities that were disconnected as a result of several pandemic response procedures.

LESSONS LEARNED & GAPS

While the City has made tremendous strides in servicing the diverse community, there are lessons learned and gaps that they have identified moving forward in the response.

In their efforts to bridge communication between diverse communities, it was found that core messages were not consistently maintained when making direct translations from English to other languages due to the fact that they contained idiomatic phrases that did not bear the same significance or meaning in the translated language. The City learned from this, and moving forward, ensured that all disaster-related public messaging accounted for nuanced, cultural interpretations. Additionally, the City acknowledged that translating communications in conjunction with the English language materials was important to promote equity in information sharing across all communities during the response. Through this, the City has made concerted efforts to expand its Language Access Unit and strengthen its working relationships with key community partners who can provide surge capacity in the City’s efforts to equitably connect

with diverse communities in future disaster preparedness and response efforts. .

With their tremendous success expanding their outreach to difficult to reach communities, the City has had to assess the continuation of these services beyond the pandemic response. Due to the circumstances of the pandemic, services like Digital Inclusion became a necessity to ensure connectivity for all communities. This is a gap that the City is currently responding to and will continually monitor throughout the duration of the response.

CONCLUSION

It should be understood that impacts of COVID-19 merely amplified the deeply-rooted, societal inequities that existed long before the virus emerged. For San José, the priority to understand and meet the diverse needs across the City by leveraging the whole community approach to emergency management has been beneficial and has led to significant process improvements. By definition, the whole community approach is a means by which residents, emergency management practitioners, organizational and community leaders, and government officials can collectively understand and assess the needs of their respective communities and determine the best ways to organize and strengthen their assets, capacities, and interests. Through this approach, the City's disaster response efforts have progressively aimed to identify and bridge gaps that have disproportionately affected communities of color throughout this global pandemic. With new challenges resulting from the nature of the emergency, the City demonstrated great stride in addressing racial equity within their ongoing response.

With a significant diverse population, the City had the distinct responsibility to ensure that the unique needs across the entire community were taken seriously, attended to, and addressed throughout response. This started with their efforts to include multiple languages in their community engagement and communication plans. With over half of the population identifying with limited-English proficiency, it was important for the City to address the language access needs. As a result, the Language Access Unit was set up in the EOC; which allowed for materials to be translated into five languages. In addition, the City also leveraged local influences for those communities who were initially hesitant of City-officials. Through the use of public health messaging with local celebrities, the City was able to build trust in those communities.

The City also demonstrated the value of equity in the response by addressing significant gaps in minority communities. Data sets found that underserved areas were most at a disadvantage due to the physical and social distancing measures. With over 100,000 households lacking internet access, this led to the establishment of a Digital Inclusion Branch in the EOC. The branch implemented internet access to those vulnerable populations who may have needed it to access online services like distance learning.

With the pandemic response still ongoing, it is important for these efforts to continue and improve upon themselves. The rapid ability to assess and implement new practices for the whole community will only strengthen their resilience and the City's future response to emergencies.

CITY OF SAN JOSE
CAPITAL OF SILICON VALLEY

CONSTANT ASSOCIATES

COVID-19 PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (OAR)

SAN JOSÉ OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT