How the City of San José Leveraged Technology to Solve Problems Caused by COVID-19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up day-to-day operations in every city in the United States. However, one city had a particularly innovative approach of responding to COVID-19 related challenges by utilizing technology, tech partnerships, and data to solve and mitigate the most crucial issues in the area.

The City of San José is situated within Silicon Valley among tech giants like Google, Facebook and AT&T. It includes a very culturally diverse population of approximately 1.03 million residents.[1]

When COVID-19 hit, the City immediately snapped into action by utilizing digital platforms and relationships, and leveraging technology to:

- Aggregate all resources addressing food shortages, housing, COVID-19 testing and other relevant information into a dynamic online dashboard.
- Create an expansive strategy to communicate with hard-to-reach populations and those with limited or no English proficiency.
- Bridge the digital gap in education, by providing students with much-needed internet access in order to learn virtually.
- Move staff to be fully remote in 48 hours.
- Use startup methods like SCRUM to track goals and ensure accountability.
- Create resourceful solutions and partnerships between tech, government, and nonprofits.

[1] United States Census Bureau. 2018. https://www.census.gov/glossary/#term_Populationes

By pivoting fast to find the right solution, advancing technological capabilities, and utilizing existing relationships, the City of San José has proven that much of the startup approach can be utilized to respond to crises, and effectively serve communities.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

In December 2019, health officials in Wuhan, China discovered a highly contagious, unknown Coronavirus, which would later become known as COVID-19.[2] On January 24, 2020, the City of San José activated its Pandemic Response Plan in Stage 1, Monitoring, and established a Pandemic Management Team. The next day California received its first COVID-19 case – and the second followed shortly after. The third case of COVID-19 was identified in Santa Clara County, home of the City of San José, and the booming tech region of the Silicon Valley[3]. By February 3, 2020, Santa Clara County became the first county in the United States to declare a local health emergency.[4]

Like many organizations, the City of San José had the onerous task of transitioning staff to a virtual working environment over the weekend of March 13, 2020. The Information Technology (IT) staff worked tirelessly to set up remote work capabilities in 48 hours. That same weekend, City Emergency Operations Center (EOC) leaders spent their 48 hours determined to establish an EOC with some virtual components and disseminate information in the most effective way possible.

Over the next several months, City staff used creativity, efficient startup methods, and an incredible amount of dedication to solve and mitigate complex issues create by the COVID-19 disruption.

With constantly evolving information about the novel Coronavirus, and regular updates to City-wide response, the City needed a platform that they could constantly update. EOC branches needed to organize, without duplicating effort. Residents, as well as employees, needed to understand the steps that the City was taking in response to the pandemic.

Another challenge, familiar to many cities, is engaging hard-to-reach populations and vulnerable communities. Some communities have limited English proficiency, unreliable internet access, or other hardships that prevent them from receiving information virtually. Although Santa Clara County contains a bustling tech economy, they also have farming regions, individuals at and under the poverty line, and just over 6,000 individuals experiencing homelessness, with only 16% of those sheltered as of 2019.[5] This would pose intense challenges for the City to ensure that residents were able to safely shelter in place to reduce the spread of the disease.

In 2017 the City established a partnership with Zoom Technology in an effort to make the City more virtually inclusive and enhance the ability of City Staff to participate virtually.

[2] World Health Organization, Timeline of WHO's Response to COVID-19. https://www.who.int/news- room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline
[3] CalMatters. Timeline: California Reacts to Coronavirus. Updated September 22, 2020. https://calmatters.org/health/coronavirus/2020/04/gavi n-newsom-coronavirus-updates-timeline/
[4] City of San José Proclamation of Local Emergency https://www.sanJoséca.gov/home/showdocument?id=38890
[5] San Jose COVID-19 Preliminary Operational Assessment Report Survey

This partnership's adoption prior to the pandemic allowed the City to quickly meet the requirements for remote work and holding online public meetings. Given that Zoom and other teleconference software became a defining solution for how to keep workplaces connected throughout the United States, the long-term partnership helped to expedite this transition.

To add on to the challenges of transitioning to virtual work, ensuring all residents had information access, and figuring out a plan to shelter those experiencing homelessness, the City then learned that there was a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), certain foods, and other necessary items, like diapers, due to a disruption in the supply chain, which was guaranteed to make their work more challenging.

"Bias toward action"

One of the phrases commonly heard at the City of San José is the mantra of having a "Bias Toward Action". In the early months of the EOC activation, the City engaged numerous subject matter experts, Community-Based Organization (CBO) Experts and private sector partners to establish goals and get to work.

EOC staff immediately worked on ensuring that employees could work from home. They started working on creating a COVID-19 informational hub in the form of a dashboard on the website. Simultaneously, other EOC branches began looking into options for the unhoused population.

Internal recruitment for those with special skills, including language skills, began, with the intention of increasing engagement with vulnerable communities by translating important information about COVID-19.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STEPS TO MEET CHALLENGES

Internally, 81% of EOC staff who participated in an Operational Assessment Report survey, conducted in September and October of 2019, either agreed or strongly agreed that they had the technology and/or equipment necessary to complete their responsibilities.[233]

However, a functional virtual working environment was only one piece of the puzzle. Employees needed frequent and accurate updates on how the City was responding.

Digital Resources

The EOC developed a Digital Inclusion Branch and a Language and Access Unit in order to maintain and expand inclusivity efforts and identify needs.

One of the first accomplishments of the EOC was to swiftly establish a dynamic online dashboard that allowed both employees and the public to see the latest information regarding COVID-19 data and response, which was updated frequently. This dashboard acts as a hub with resources such as health information, where to get tested, help for businesses and more. The hub also includes a Virtual Local Assistance Center, or VLAC, which provides vital information for residents, including where to get food during the food shortage, immigrant resources, housing, employment and job training, health and wellness, utilities and internet, and family resources. This information is offered in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Simplified Chinese, and Traditional Chinese. The City utilized technology to maintain inclusivity one step

further by integrating a Google translate dashboard for eight other languages. Accessibility instructions are provided for those with auditory or functional needs (AFN), and a 311-phone system was also established to diversify communication options.

The VLAC displays emergency notifications and links to the latest updates on the City of San José Services and Operations through "Flash Reports". Several staff members commented on the importance of utilizing Flash Reports to keep staff updated on the latest news within the City.

Social media posting in multiple languages also helped to keep residents informed. The team worked with local influencers, such as Los Tigres del Norte, to create informational videos about COVID-19 to appeal to non- English-speaking communities.

As the EOC ramped up to respond to the expanding list of COVID-19 related needs, City staff became intentional with leveraging data that could help to pinpoint the more critical needs in the community and create streamlined processes.

A Priority Index, a GIS tool which used data to determine where the highest needs were throughout the region, was developed. This assisted the City in identifying specific zip codes that needed extra support.

Additionally, the City partnered with local organizations and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation to create #SiliconValleyStrong, an online platform specifically intended for the most vulnerable populations in the area to find free meals, financial help, and other needed resources.

Digital Inclusivity

In addition to creating accessible resources for hard to reach communities, the Digital Inclusion Branch focused on speeding up their 10-year timeline of implementing digital inclusivity for all families in the area. As soon as schools went online, there was a need for families to have adequate internet connectivity. Through a public-private- partnership with AT&T, the City was able to provide 11,000 hotspots with unlimited 4G LTE and highspeed internet to residents. 8,000 of those hotspots were distributed to students in need. The other 3,000 hotspots are available for check out at the San José Public Library and the City plans to purchase and distribute more.[6]

"I am grateful for the partnership with the San José City leaders, San José libraries and AT&T. Together, we will support students and families in need with resources that can provide meaningful education experiences outside the classroom and succeed academically." – Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Mary Ann Dewan.

LESSONS LEARNED & GAPS

Silicon Valley Mindset

As the San José EOC began rapidly expanding, new branches began taking on projects to ensure the community's needs were being met. It was clear there was a need for a simple way to organize tasks. So, the San José EOC adopted the use of Trello, a SCRUM platform, that allows users to see tasks and move them to different visual buckets depending on the status. SCRUM is very popular in the startup world and allows teams to quickly "sprint" towards sections

[6] San Jose Website August 3, 2020. https://www.sanJoséca.gov/Home/Components/News/News/1681/4699

of goals, stay accountable for their work, and pivot quickly to address what's not working and find the best solution.

Feedback on SCRUM methods and the "Bias Toward Action" mindset have remained very positive and could be included as a best practice for the future.

Gaps and Challenges

While the successes and newly discovered best practices from the City of San José are certainly impressive, there are always areas for improvement. The City has expressed interest in further improvement by commissioning a Preliminary Operational Assessment Report (OAR) to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the COVID-19 response.

One area identified is the involvement of diverse voices at the table during the initial response. In determining solutions for the community, it is crucial the City include the perspectives of local community-based organizations (CBOs) who already work with affected populations and might be better positioned to identify community needs. Additionally, the City can expand the table of decision makers to include members of the AFN community, and non-English speaking communities.

City leaders were proactive in making sure that information was produced for many of these communities. However, they can continue to learn from diverse perspectives who may be able to offer insight on fine tuning and interpreting information so that it is relevant to communities, and on reaching communities through their most utilized platforms and preferred methods of communication.

Another challenge for the City was their process for streamlining and recording documentation for the exorbitant amount of resource requests via 213RR forms. The City initially started managing the huge influx of forms through a basic process of using email and spreadsheets. When it was determined that the requests were overwhelming inboxes, the City pivoted to adopting Smart Sheets. Again, the City noticed that improvements needed to be made and pivoted again, this time utilizing the SimpliGov platform, which uses automation to simplify the process of managing forms. The latest process has received positive feedback from staff compared to its predecessor.

CONCLUSION

The City of San José offers valuable insight on assessing digital equity of residents and putting those in need at the forefront of discussions instead of an afterthought.

There are several lessons in the way the City utilized what they had to create solutions and maintain resourcefulness. The City was able to establish a partnership with Google and Second Harvest to secure food and necessities, because of already existing relationships with them. This highlights the importance of establishing relationships with both public, private, and government organizations during non-emergency time.

Technologically speaking, there was a great need for digital inclusivity for communication purposes. Through months of creatively leveraging platforms like the City website, videos, social media and the Priority Index, the City was able to bridge the technology gap and get residents the supplies and information they needed.

When we think of City management, terms like rule-based, bureaucratic, political often come to

mind. However, the mobilization of the City of San José could not be further from this depiction. The City has accomplished a revolutionary feat that can serve as an example for city leadership across the United States. Adopting a Silicon Valley mindset allowed leaders to *not* get caught up analyzing every detail and become paralyzed by choice – the common practice of making "perfect" the enemy of "good" -- but instead to focus energy on doing *something* and making incremental improvements later. This mindset resulted in staff acting quickly to take care of people but being open-minded enough to receive critical feedback and improve over time.

Thanks to the planning, innovation, and unrelenting dedication of staff committed to serving the residents of San José, this EOC activation has proven to be one-of-a-kind in the best possible way.

CITY OF SAN JOSE
CAPITAL OF SILICON VALLEY

CONSTANT ASSOCIATES

COVID-19 PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (OAR)

SAN JOSÉ OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT