As debate about police behavior raged over the summer in the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis, the nation's elected leaders in Washington seemed unable to agree on any response, except perhaps to amplify the shouting.

In Kansas City, Mo., however, Mayor Quinton Lucas took the simplest of steps to build public confidence in police accountability: He moved to make it easier for a citizen to file a complaint about police behavior, in part by removing a strange legal requirement that any complaint had to be notarized. “I don’t think of this ministry as being political,” he says of his organization, Mary’s Shelter. “We try not to be.”

And while national politicians lashed into fingerpointing over shortages of masks and surgical gowns during the pandemic, two businesswomen in Morganton, N.C., organized an network of small textile companies in the area to produce half a million masks and gowns for the region’s doctors, hospitals, businesses and citizens. “In the early days it was like the Riveter,” says Sara Chester, one of the businesswomen. “Everybody wanted to do their part.”

There are potentially big lessons in such small steps. At a time of deepening national division and political tribulation, many Americans have decided to rely less on Washington to deal with problems and have turned to local institutions, state governments, business leaders, their own communities and one another.

It’s no secret that Washington isn’t working particularly well these days. The partisan battle for control of the Senate and House has escalated sharply and many Democrats and Republicans, and there is little chance that the close division of power will have a moderating effect on both parties and empower centrists who hold the balance of power.

But we are just as likely to see more participation and gridlock in Washington and more of the cases that have recently dominated national political discourse. In that case, the need to find solutions to the nation’s problems may well find expression on the local level.

“One of my deepest hopes is that in the midst of all this noise and chaos and lack of trust people will say, ‘Yes, I’m going to vote on who’s going to Washington, but I’m going to make my neighborhood, the five blocks around where I live, my community, the best possible place to live,’” says Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican.

The idea of looking downstream for action and answers has long been a basic tenet of conservatives, who tend to distrust centralized power. But Robert Putnam, the former dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a self-described “moderated liberal Democrat,” says that inaction is increasingly unjust.

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National Divisions, Local Solutions

From the page 3 of The Wall Street Journal.

In July, a worker at Diamond Bar (Gm) in Anaheim, Calif., stands with boxes of surgical gowns produced by President Trump's small-dollar drug companies.