Communicating with Constituents and Best Practices During a Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for local and tribal leadership, and citizens have concerns and questions that don’t have easy answers. How can local officials effectively communicate with their constituents during an international public health crisis? Western Leaders Network offers the following suggestions and best practices.

- **Be informed, honest and empathetic.** It’s important to let people know how dire the situation is without causing panic and while still emanating hope and unity about our collective ability to get through and recover from this crisis.

- **Keep the lines of communication open.** During times of fear and uncertainty, like the current situation, people are hungry to have more communication, not less from their leaders, to provide them with information, as well as comfort and guidance. This can come in the form of regular briefings via virtual town halls, live Facebook press conferences from home, opinion editorials, social media posts, radio interviews, etc.

- **Set an example.** While public health directors and data are rightfully driving many of the policies and directives with COVID-19, as trusted messengers, elected officials can play an essential role in repeating and amplifying public health messages around social distancing, wearing masks and taking the proper precautions. Display and describe how you are personally following the directives, such as doing a press conference from your home rather than being out in public, or wearing a mask you made. When posting to social media, don’t forget to use Western Leaders Network’s tag, #LeadingFromHome.

- **Amplify the positive things.** Take the opportunity to encourage and express thanks for examples of cooperation and caring in the community, such as people reaching out to neighbors in need, donations to food drives and mask-making initiatives. You may want to take the lead in advertising a community donation opportunity to support at-risk community members like older citizens, the homeless, those with illnesses or immune deficiencies, medical personnel and first-responders. Ideally, in order to reduce confusion, duplication and scams, use an existing service provider or a single community effort to collect donations and disseminate services.

- **Show your human side.** Because people are struggling emotionally, financially and physically, it can be helpful to show your human side as well as your professional side. Acknowledge that you understand that people are struggling and provide them with supportive messages and empathy, as well as information on how to get assistance. People need to be able to relate to their local leaders as fellow human beings and community members, and to hear the message that we are all in this together.
• **Know your role.** Many elected officials have had to take the National Incident Management System training offered through FEMA. A big lesson from that training is to let your staff and emergency personnel do their jobs during an incident. As an elected official, the most important thing you can do for emergency operations staff is listen, offer thanks, and think about potential policy needs or solutions to the situation. Communicate what you learn by posting to social media. Constituents want regular updates, transparent communication, and to know you are advocating every day for your community.

• **Connect with other leaders.** It’s your job to connect with other local, regional, state and federal elected officials to regularly communicate your emergency status and advocate for certain needs, such as testing kits, PPE and adequate stimulus monies to help community members who have lost their jobs and businesses.

• **Prepare for next time.** Communities have learned the hard way that it’s very difficult to establish equitable distribution policies in the middle of a pandemic. Local leaders need to make sure their communities are prepared for the next public health crisis and not caught flat-footed. Local officials should be taking note of lessons learned throughout this crisis.