



The Government's Roles During COVID-19

A Question and Answer Session
with Troy Harper





Troy Harper, director of government strategy, joined OnSolve® in 2013, bringing more than 20 years of emergency services experience to the team. That included a 13-year tenure as the Emergency Management Chief for Flagler County, FL, a coastal county with 100,000 residents and one of Florida’s fastest-growing communities.

His career includes extensive planning, response and recovery activities for twelve federally declared disasters, weather emergencies, manmade incidents and wildfires, including one of Florida’s most devastating wildfires. Harper also served as the appointed County 911 Coordinator and managed a multi-jurisdictional Public Safety Radio System. He served in the United States Air Force and holds multiple certifications. His experiences with emergency management, law enforcement, fire rescue, public health and search and rescue bring a discipline-specific approach to the OnSolve methodology.

Among his many responsibilities, Troy defines the strategic direction and product enhancements for CodeRED, OnSolve’s flagship solution for crisis communications and notifications to the public and other groups served by all types of government agencies.

We spoke to Troy about public sector responsibilities and communications during COVID-19. Here is a transcript of that session, edited for clarity and conciseness.



TROY HARPER
ONSOLVE’S GENERAL MANAGER

Q:

Out of the gate, let me ask: what do you see as the broadest role of government during the pandemic?

A:

Government exists to provide for the infrastructure for the people, that’s the primary function of government and that infrastructure is then what feeds and fosters commerce to exist. So it’s critical that we don’t lose our workforce. It’s critical that the government workforce that’s there today, whether civic, social, tax-based, voter, that some of those functions can continue, even in a remote environment.

And in parallel, obviously, we’re seeing that across corporate America with organizations and their remote workforces. I think it’s so critical for governments to, without sounding harsh, mandate their employees to follow best practices.

Q:

Would you say that most government agencies are prepared for something of this scale?

A:

Historically, yes, I do. I think that the trigger should be irrelevant. Whether it's a flood, fire, earthquake, or tornado, really you're trying to manage resources and protect people. There might be a shortage of toilet paper, hotel rooms, protective gear or other things, depending on the situation. So, I would like to think that government as a whole, from the Department of Homeland Security down through FEMA, to all the local management agencies of the states, counties, and cities, were as prepared as possible. What I don't think we were prepared for was the demand on resources, because it's just not economically feasible to stockpile the resources for every single human being and every single case, or every single instance.

When the avian flu was a threat, there were a few health professionals at the national level who suspected that we potentially needed to plan to lose 50% of our workforce and in reality, today, we've become virtual to almost 100% of our workforce; very few people are still reporting to offices in most states as of today. So, I think the country as a whole, at least from the government standpoint, was really prepared to do work in a reduced workspace. The challenge is great for those professionals who have to respond ambulance workers, fire and rescue personnel, sanitation folks who are picking our garbage up every day, the US Postal Service — these are folks who have a physical interaction with something that every citizen touches every day. I mean the garbage cans, the mailboxes, the doorknobs, doorbells, things of that nature, which are all potential areas of virus cross-contamination.

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Q:

That's good to hear. I'd like to talk about communications specifically. Can you share some insights into how government can best communicate with citizens about COVID-19 information and updates?

A:

The reality is that emergencies start locally, so it's up to the local officials to make decisions based on the best information they have at hand. Because this is a pandemic, we're looking at the Department of Health and Human Services and the CDC managing this incident from an informational standpoint.

In other words, what is the rate of spread? What's the threat? What's the potential impact on any one area? And then local governments who have jurisdictional responsibilities are taking that information and making their determination on what infrastructure they're closing.

Key Takeaway

Q:

So what approach do you suggest? With all this information coming at us from federal, state and local, who are we to listen to?

A:

The home rule state concept really does empower the local government, but the resources and information are all flowing from the feds to the states, then to the county. So in my opinion, although this is a global, and really a federal, issue, it does reside at each state to make those decisions of how and when the resources are being managed.

And that's really what the emergency management concept is all about, in this country at least: managing resources through the state to the locals, to be able to manage information to and from the municipalities up through the counties to the state.

About OnSolve

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