

# FIRST RESPONSE



**SPRINGFIELD-GREENE COUNTY  
CONFRONTS COVID-19**  
MARCH-JULY 2020



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SPRINGFIELD-GREENE COUNTY CONFRONTS COVID-19 · MARCH-JULY 2020

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*First Response: Springfield-Greene County Confronts COVID-19 · March–July 2020 is published by the Community Foundation of the Ozarks to archive reflections of Community Leadership Forum members and a cross-section of leaders in other sectors. Interviews were conducted in June and July 2020 to capture the community response during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Principal research and writing by Alexis Jackson; design, production and editing by Aaron Scott and Louise Knauer. Cover photos provided by City of Springfield, CoxHealth, Discovery Center and the CFO.*

# Introduction

**O**n March 12, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the Ozarks. Four days later, Springfield Mayor Ken McClure declared a state of civil emergency in the City of Springfield as area cases continued to grow. One July 27, Greene County surpassed 1,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 health crisis forced many businesses to redesign their operations, nonprofits to refocus their efforts, churches to reimagine fellowship, and people everywhere to reconsider their normal ways of life. In the Ozarks, communities came together with innovative ideas to fight the pandemic across all sectors. CoxHealth built a state-of-the-art COVID-19 treatment center to guarantee quality care for all patients affected by the virus. White River Valley Electric Cooperative released capital credits to its members prior to fiscal year end as a form of financial support. The Discovery Center reopened as a pro-bono childcare and education facility for the children of healthcare workers. The list goes on.

Ours is a story of resilience and recovery in the Ozarks, but not without its challenges. Economic uncertainty, racial injustice, political polarization and resource scarcity are just some of the many obstacles made more severe by COVID-19. Community leaders were forced to navigate an information environment that changed throughout the day, with new issues arising every hour. With that came regrettable mistakes, unexpected triumphs, and more valuable lessons than can be counted.

This report contains a collection of narratives from community leaders in government, healthcare, education, human services and communications. Each narrative serves to piece together the community's COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. With this report, we commemorate the brave, innovative and critical work of our community in the battle against COVID-19. We also prepare the next generation for the war they will fight against some future pandemic, just as our leaders reached into century-old archives about the Spanish flu to learn from those who came before.

Thank you to all who contributed to this report for speaking openly about your trials and tribulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are all deeply grateful for the work you have done to keep our community safe during this unprecedented time.

Inspired by a book documenting Joplin's response to the 2011 tornado, Brian Fogle, president of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, conceived this project, which the CFO supported with staff and funding resources.

As Brian has said at least once a day since March 12—be safe, be well and be kind.

*Alexis Jackson*  
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# Ken McClure

Mayor, City of Springfield

Within days of Springfield's first confirmed case of COVID-19, Mayor Ken McClure had drafted orders on his desk to close businesses and mandate residents to shelter in place. The mayor's office is often viewed as a ceremonial position, but in the midst of a global pandemic, McClure's policymaking authority became one of the most important roles in city.

"I kept in close contact with the health director and the county commissioners to determine the best course of action for the city," McClure said. "Our congressional representatives in Washington are very involved in healthcare matters on the federal level, so we were

also kept up-to-date on what was happening in Congress as well."

McClure also assumed an important role as a communicator with the public. Alongside Springfield-Greene County Health Department Director Clay Goddard, McClure regularly addressed the public about the city's ordinances and restrictions and provided reasoning behind his policymaking decisions.

Not every Springfield resident agreed with McClure's decision-making.

"This definitely isn't what anybody signed up for, but city and county leaders continue to work overtime to fight this virus just to get pounded in the evening

on social media," McClure said.

"Some folks say that we've done the right thing; some folks say that we haven't done enough; some folks say we've done too much. Ultimately, we can't control the public's reaction to our response."

When the first coronavirus cases were confirmed in the United States, McClure began consulting library resources from the 1918 Spanish Flu outbreak. Within two weeks of the first Spanish flu case in Springfield, businesses were closed and public gatherings were prohibited. McClure began to get the feeling that history would repeat itself with COVID-19.

"I read the orders from the mayor at that time and used those to help craft my own," McClure said. "I constantly ask myself if I've done the right thing with my orders. I've had to put out a few amendments to improve them as we learned more information."

McClure worked closely with the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce, members of the faith

community and leaders in the nonprofit sector to understand the

impact of his orders on different stakeholders in the city. The mayor will continue working with city leaders as his office transitions its focus from COVID-19 response to recovery.

McClure believes that Springfield will continue to grapple with the effects of the virus for the foreseeable future.

"We're going to adjust to a new normal, at least until there is a vaccine," McClure said. "We can't keep things shut down because humans are social animals and we want to be able to get together. Churches will have to figure out how to continue to maintain their fellowship from a distance or through a virtual platform, schools will have to figure out how to navigate distance learning, and businesses will have to enable their employees to work from home. We have to learn how to coexist with the virus and learn how to enjoy the things in life that we used to enjoy in a different way."



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **COLLABORATION IS KEY:** McClure credits the region's network of collaboration between sectors for the city's success in mitigating the effects of the coronavirus.
- ▶ **THERE IS LITTLE SUNSHINE ON THE BATTLEFIELD:** McClure struggled to navigate the changing public sentiment on the virus. He acknowledged that it was impossible to please everyone and began focusing on the long-term public health goals for the city in his decision-making rather than the public demands.

*"I think this time has allowed for a lot of connections that would have never occurred otherwise. Neighbors are helping neighbors, and the community feels more connected to each other."*

# Jason Gage

City Manager, City of Springfield

Addressing COVID-19 in the City of Springfield defied everything City Manager Jason Gage had learned throughout both his academic and professional experiences. Gage was taught how to build communities by spurring economic growth. As Gage worked with elected leaders to implement stay-at-home restrictions and business closures to protect public health, he found himself at odds with the very economic priorities he had learned to champion.

“A key part of city management is making sure that businesses are strong so that our community can prosper and compete for residents and jobs,” Gage said. “I never thought that I would be in a position where I would be putting restrictions on businesses and our economy so that we could separate people and protect public health.”

As businesses closed their doors and consumers began shopping online, Gage witnessed the economic impact on both public and private revenues. Sales tax revenue, the largest income source for the city, declined steadily throughout March and April. Gage contends that the city will recover, but is not as optimistic for some businesses.

“Some businesses are teetering on the edge of cliff right now,” Gage said. “This pandemic has accelerated our transition into an online shopping environment, and that will have huge consequences for brick and mortar retailers in the area. Many of our

neighborhoods will be affected by a decrease in commercial traffic, which is the livelihood for a lot of those areas.”

However difficult it has been to see businesses close, Gage maintains his belief that these restrictions played a critical role in Springfield’s response to the virus.

“We are fortunate to be in a good place from a health perspective compared to a lot of cities of our size and larger,” Gage said. “However, we have to anticipate our numbers going up and continuing to increase throughout the year. We are recovering economically so far, and we will try to balance that while also mitigating the continued health impacts of the virus.”

Gage worked with both city and county leaders to address the coronavirus pandemic in the region. Gage believes that in many areas across the country, city and county officials do not share the same type of cooperative relationship demonstrated by Springfield and Greene County.

“When you’re balancing the interests of the rural parts of Greene County versus the urban part of the city, there are a few differences in perspective and approach and that have been difficult, but there has been a continued partnership all the way throughout the pandemic,” Gage said. “The way that we work together here in Springfield should be a model for other cities across the country.”

In addition to city and county

leaders, Gage worked closely with members of the general public

to address the impacts of COVID-19 in the city. As the virus evolved, Gage felt public sentiment toward the virus evolve alongside it.

“Early on, a lot of people were very concerned about the virus and willing to do what it took to slow the spread,” Gage said. “Now, I think we are going back into a sort of complacency toward it, largely because it has become so politicized. The virus is a health issue, not a political issue.”

Gage and other city leaders relied on video conferencing technology to connect with their constituents and gauge public sentiment on the issue. Leaders were able to connect with a greater number of community members through a virtual platform than an in-person event. Even after the pandemic passes, Gage sees a role for video conferencing technology



in public engagement.

Internally, Gage and his team

relied on video conferencing tools as the city’s administrative staff transitioned to a remote working environment. Many nonoffice staff, however, continued to work throughout the pandemic with new health guidelines in place. Under Gage’s leadership, the city was able to prevent any furloughs.

Gage and his team have made a concentrated effort to document their response to the pandemic as a reference for the future.

“After the Spanish Flu was the Roaring ’20s, and people were pretty happy and prosperous,” Gage said. “So much so, however, that they forgot about the virus. I hope that we continue to pay attention and that we don’t forget about the impact of this virus so that we can take what we’ve learned from this and do better in future pandemics.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **REGIONALISM IS KEY:** No matter how effective a city is on its own, Gage contends that the regional effort to contain the virus is the biggest predictor of the long-term consequences of the pandemic.
- ▶ **LEARN FROM NATURAL DISASTERS:** Gage took from the playbook of the city’s response to prior natural disasters in crafting his response to COVID-19. However, he cautions leaders from comparing COVID-19 to a natural disaster that can be addressed in days or weeks. The economic and health implications of the coronavirus will stay with the city much longer than a natural disaster.

“It’s not just a health issue, it’s also a financial issue, a psychological issue, a political issue and an operational issue. There are myriad aspects to consider, and it’s very difficult to balance at all.”

# Bob Dixon

Presiding Commissioner, Greene County

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the Ozarks, Greene County Presiding Commissioner Bob Dixon felt that the only way to prepare for its impact in the local community was to consider its implications for the entire region, not just one city or county.

“Our hospitals serve the entire region, so I began reaching out to presiding commissioners in the Ozarks region and opening a line of communication about what we could do together and if there’s

anything we can do to be of help,” Dixon said.

He also worked closely with city and county officials in Greene County to ensure a coordinated and unified response to the virus. While Greene County contains a diverse array of towns and cities all individually affected by the coronavirus, Dixon felt the municipalities put the region’s interests ahead of their own in committing to policies that would best protect public health across the county.

The community’s collaboration

was critical during the most difficult moments of the pandemic for Dixon.

“This is nothing like I’ve ever observed any public official going through,” Dixon said. “Early on, we had to get the word out through community leaders about the real health risks of the virus, and many citizens felt that it was no more dangerous than the flu. Another challenge was asking businesses to close and put their livelihood on the line. We had to be very clear and effective in our communication with the community about these decisions to avoid the possibility of true civil unrest.”

Dixon credits the Springfield-Greene County Health Department for its work to disseminate local data about the virus to the public as early as possible.



He believes this data helped build a more unified understanding

about the risks of the virus.

As the county transitions from COVID-19 response to recovery, Dixon’s primary focus will be the allocation of federal funding from the CARES Act. The team of commissioners appointed local businessman Dr. Lyle Foster, CEO of Big Momma’s and sociology professor at Missouri State University, to chair an advisory council that will review grant applications for the funds and make decisions about how to best appropriate them.

“This pandemic has shown how well we can all work together,” Dixon said. “It’s a testament to the kind of people that make up our community, and both as a citizen and a leader, I’m very grateful for that.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **BE TRANSPARENT:** Dixon believes that the open communication among elected officials, the health department and the general public built a foundation of trust that fostered community buy-in.
- ▶ **DOCUMENT THIS MOMENT:** COVID-19 will serve as a template for pandemic response in the future. Dixon hopes organizations will commit to documenting their response for later use.

*“The pandemic took our cooperation as a community to the next level,” Dixon said.*

*“We were able to come through it in a way that made relationships even stronger.*

*It really was the Ozarks’ opportunity to shine, and I think we did.”*

# Chris Coulter

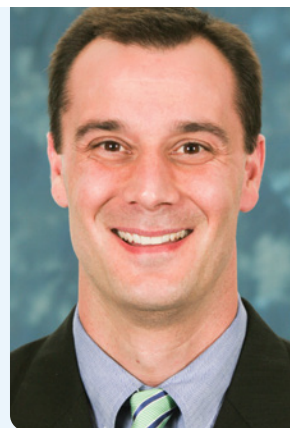
Administrator, Greene County

In a time where politics seemed closely intertwined with opinions about the coronavirus, Greene County Administrator Chris Coulter was able to play a nonpolitical role in coordinating the county’s response to COVID-19.

“I served in an advisory role for the County Commission and was able to look at what was best for both our government employees and our county residents from a nonpolitical lens,” Coulter said. “My twin is a pulmonologist and would provide me with regular

updates about the health effects of the virus. My sensitivity was very high, and I did not want politics to get in the way of a proper public health response.”

Coulter found that the



community was eager to work together for the greater

good. Engaging all stakeholders early on in the decision-making process helped to secure the compliance and understanding of

# Harold Bengsch

Commissioner — First District, Greene County

As the former director for the Springfield-Greene County Health Department and a current commissioner for Greene County, Harold Bengsch immediately sprang into action to address COVID-19 in the Ozarks. Bengsch sought the latest public health data from the global, national and local levels to inform his decision-making approach on the commission.

“Our decision was to place as much faith in the data of the Springfield-Greene County Health Department as we possibly could, and that was not a mistake because what they were forecasting was going to happen, did happen,” Bengsch said.

Local health data also helped guide the work of the two regional hospital networks, CoxHealth and Mercy. Working alongside leaders from the two health systems, elected leaders like Bengsch

determined the necessary policies to flatten the curve of infection.

Bengsch found the most difficult part of the county’s response to COVID-19 to be communication with the public about the science of the virus. Because initial projections about the impact of the virus were overestimated, he believes many members of the public lost trust in epidemiological reports.

“Public health officials cannot prove that what they did made a difference because we cannot show the public what would have happened had we not taken action to close businesses and keep residents at home,” Bengsch said.

“Public health just has to take it on the chin and keep doing the right thing.”

As the county transitions from COVID-19 response to recovery, Bengsch has his sights set on

several issue areas that he believes will strengthen the community coming out of the coronavirus crisis, including family care.

Bengsch sees the recently opened Family Justice Center playing a critical role in tackling the mental health, domestic violence and family crisis issues accentuated by the pandemic.

With November 2020 marking



the end of his tenure with the Greene County Commission and

a 60-plus-year career in public service, Bengsch could not have asked for a more challenging, yet rewarding, year in office.

“Memory tends to fade with time, but I think the consequences of this pandemic have been so impactful on everybody that it will not be forgotten,” he said.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE:** Even when Greene County had successfully flattened the curve, Bengsch remained concerned about the trends in nearby communities.
- ▶ **PINPOINT THE FRUSTRATION:** Bengsch found that conflicting science on the virus led to frustration from community members in following public health protocols. Once the county relied more exclusively on local data, residents began to understand the effects of COVID-19 in their own backyard.

*“If there’s one thing that this community does well, it’s working together,” Bengsch said. “People here are eager to collaborate, and you don’t see that in many communities.”*

organizations like the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce when difficult decisions to close businesses were made.

Greene County experienced similar revenue challenges as some area businesses. Coulter found it nearly impossible to predict revenue losses or develop a formula for budgeting in a time when government spending was rapidly changing.

“This pandemic has helped us understand how a virus like this can just decimate not only a community, but the globe,” Coulter

said. “We need to be sensitive to what we can do to protect our friends, family, and community members. I am grateful for the action of our community leaders in keeping us safe.”

Coulter credits leaders beyond those working in government.

“We have such great leadership throughout the county and the city, and within the leadership of our businesses, hospitals and nonprofit organizations,” Coulter said. “We have been able to stress to our community we’re in all this together.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **CREATE A CUSHION:** Budget constraints and unpredictable revenue losses added another challenge for Greene County during the pandemic.
- ▶ **MAKE HYGIENE APOLITICAL AGAIN:** Coulter repeatedly stressed the importance of handwashing, masking and social distancing as small actions that can create a big impact on public health.

# Clay Goddard

*Director, Springfield-Greene County Health Department*

Springfield-Greene County Health Director Clay Goddard has been the face of the region’s coronavirus response since early March.

“Beginning around the first of the year, I had trouble sleeping as I realized the magnitude of the pandemic,” Goddard said.

As the virus spread to the Ozarks, the Health Department quickly took action. Its response focused on three key areas: testing, containment and mitigation.

Through a public-private partnership with Springfield’s own Dynamic DNA, the Health Department was able to offer localized testing that delivered results within 48–72 hours, compared to the CDC’s 14-day waiting period.

Containment efforts focused on contact tracing for potential community exposure from folks who had tested positive for COVID-19.

While some staff maintained their roles in core public health responsibilities, it was all available hands on deck for others to assist with contact tracing. This coordinated effort provided the public with almost instantaneous information about their exposure risk.

The driving force behind the Department’s mitigation efforts were the coordinated stay-at-home orders issued in late March by the City of Springfield and the Greene County Commission. Goddard credits the order for flattening the curve in the county and helping the hospitals build capacity to care for patients without being overrun.

“If you look at the numbers, all of this work was successful,” Goddard said. “Among all Midwestern counties with a population greater than 100,000, we have the lowest

infection rate per 100,000.”

The Health Department coordinated with several county and city leaders to craft its response.

“We held several daily conference calls with the mayor, the commissioners, the Chamber of Commerce, and other leaders in the community,” Goddard said. “We were lucky to have folks working together so that we could focus on the public health response and other sectors could handle the business response and more.”

Goddard also relied on the public’s cooperation with orders and safety recommendations as the cornerstone of the Department’s coronavirus response. Goddard led daily press briefings that were broadcast on social media and news outlets to arm the public with timely and important information.

“(Through our briefings), we deconstructed information for the public. In an event like this, there is so much information ranging in credibility, so it was very important for us to issue digestible messages that could relate to people,” Goddard said.

Goddard’s messaging was not always met with a welcome response. Some residents took to social media and letter writing to express their discontent with



the Department’s response. While Goddard was taken aback by

some of the negative feedback, he believes that the community’s outpouring of support has been stronger than the disdain.

“Just when you lose faith in what you are doing or in the community’s support, there is a card to lift your spirits,” Goddard said.

Goddard hopes the community will maintain its commitment to personal responsibility and public health as the pandemic continues into the summer and fall.

“At this point, we are in a long slog as we bridge to a vaccine,” Goddard stated. “We will continue to push for personal and corporate responsibility in the way that safety measures are carried out to protect the public health of our community. A lot of folks are psychologically done with the virus. I get it, we are all very tired. However, the virus is not done with us. It will continue to look for vulnerabilities and the best thing we can do is continue with widespread testing and early identification as our best tools.”

Goddard noted that quarantining and social distancing are not new protocols. These conventions were critical to curbing the spread of the Spanish Flu in 1918 and have been practiced by society

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **DOCUMENT YOUR ACTIONS EARLY AND OFTEN:** Goddard said his office’s response was informed by lessons learned during the 1918 Spanish Flu, despite the advances in health care since then.
- ▶ **DELIVER CONSISTENT INFORMATION:** Convey information to the public in relatable and easily-digestible messages that are consistent among community leaders.
- ▶ **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY IS HERE TO STAY:** The prospect of an eventual vaccine will not mean the end of protective measures, like social distancing. It may well be a complicated two-dose vaccine that will take many months to reach everyone who wants it.



# Community Timeline

## COVID-19 response in Springfield-Greene County, March–July 2020

for centuries. Goddard also added masking to the list of preventative measures that can be taken against the virus, praising the role of masks in stopping the spread of COVID-19 between hair stylists and clients at a Springfield Great Clips location. As we await a vaccine, social distancing and masking will continue to be encouraged by the Health Department and other government officials.

Goddard believes the community has learned a great deal from this pandemic and is better prepared to tackle public health crises in the future. However, the pandemic has also illuminated several structural issues in Missouri's public health system that Goddard would like to see addressed.

"There is little consolidation of health departments in the State of Missouri," Goddard noted. "If smaller departments

consolidated into one, it would be easier to share resources and offer a community significant action. We are fortunate in Springfield to have sufficient resources and personnel, but small rural health departments with only two to five folks cannot offer the same type of response and resources to their communities, and rising case numbers in rural areas have affirmed that."

With looming uncertainty about the pandemic's end, Goddard speculates that his work has only just begun.

"I think that this will not be the last major public health crisis that we will face in our lifetimes. Nor is this the end of the coronavirus. We have learned a lot from this pandemic and the biggest takeaway is that when challenges arise, we must always be prepared to answer the call," Goddard said.

*"I already knew that we had a great community here in the Ozarks, but this pandemic has affirmed that belief further," Goddard said. "They say that you should not wait to make friends until you need them, and, thankfully, that was never a problem for us here. We already have a network of collaboration in our region that made it a lot easier to immediately begin working together and coordinating our response."*

- MARCH 4:** Springfield-Greene County COVID-19 task force launched
- MARCH 12:** First presumptive positive case in Greene County
- MARCH 16:** Emergency declared in Springfield; the Community Foundation of the Ozarks opens COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund
- MARCH 17:** Hospitals postpone non-urgent surgeries; gatherings limited to 10 people or less; Missouri State closes campus buildings, announces transition to remote learning; Discovery Center Inc. announces its plan to reopen as a daycare for the children of healthcare workers; City Utilities announces moratorium on utility shut-offs through end of May
- MARCH 20:** The CFO announces a \$1 million commitment to its COVID-19 fund by the CFO, its regional affiliate foundations, Missouri Foundation for Health and Coover Charitable Foundation
- MARCH 23:** First COVID-related death reported in Greene County
- MARCH 24:** Springfield stay-at-home order announced
- MARCH 25:** The CFO opens COVID-19 grant program
- MARCH 31:** KY3 and KOLR 10 host joint townhall with health experts to answer questions from community members; Dynamic DNA announces it will begin testing for COVID-19
- APRIL 3:** Governor Parson issues Stay Home Missouri order; the CFO awards first COVID-19 grants
- APRIL 10:** CoxHealth unveils its new 51-bed COVID-19 wing after two weeks of construction
- APRIL 21:** Springfield stay-at-home order amended to allow nonessential businesses to resume curbside operations
- APRIL 30:** Springfield-Greene County leaders announce Phase One of Road to Recovery for the gradual reopening of businesses
- MAY 4:** Phase One of Road to Recovery implemented; nonessential businesses operate with 25% capacity constraints; Missouri disburses \$34 million in federal CARES Act funds to Greene County
- MAY 7:** Phase One amended to allow for mass gatherings of 25 people and the reopening of most businesses including bars, entertainment venues and in-person worship services
- MAY 15:** Springfield Regional Arts Council Arts Relief & Recovery grants awarded to support operations at arts organizations
- MAY 23:** Phase Two of Road to Recovery implemented with 25% occupancy restrictions based on square footage
- JUNE 8:** Health Department announces no known transmission from 139 clients exposed to infected Great Clips stylists
- JUNE 15:** Phase Three of Road to Recovery implemented with 50% occupancy restrictions based on square footage
- JUNE 30:** The CFO's fiscal year ends with \$2.29M in total COVID-related grantmaking
- JULY 15:** Reaching capacity in its ICU, CoxHealth admits first patient to dedicated COVID-19 wing
- JULY 16:** Masking ordinance, passed by Springfield City Council, implemented within city limits
- JULY 20:** Greene County opens first of five CARES Act Relief Fund grant rounds; first grants issued Aug. 13

# Steve Edwards

President and CEO, CoxHealth



In early February, CoxHealth President and CEO Steve Edwards established an incident command center to address COVID-19, a task force that, even six months later, worked around the clock to combat the novel coronavirus. Task force members quickly outlined their four key focus areas at the center of CoxHealth's response: suppression, stuff, staff and space.

Efforts to suppress the virus focused on educating the community about the risks of contracting COVID-19 and the actions individuals could take to slow its spread. Edwards became a recognizable face on social media as CoxHealth released videos of him speaking directly to the public about masking and social distancing. He saw many elected officials constrained by the polarizing public sentiment toward the virus, making it difficult for them to address the community as readily as he could.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **CRISES HIGHLIGHT VULNERABILITIES:** For Edwards, COVID-19 illuminated vulnerabilities in pandemic preparation on a national, local and institutional level. It also disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable members of the community.
- ▶ **LOOK TO THE SCIENCE:** Edwards pointed the community to the science behind the spread of coronavirus as a means of encouraging collaboration. He hopes this pandemic leads to a renewed sense of appreciation for scientists and public health professionals.

"In a horror movie, the scariest part is before you actually see the monster. When you see the monster, you know it, and you become tactile and kind of figure out how to deal with it. Our theory with the virus was to tell the whole truth and reveal the scariest part of the monster so that we can begin dealing with it as a community," Edwards said.

The hospital's focus on stuff and staff were closely related. When the pandemic first reached the Ozarks, the incident command team scrambled to assemble an adequate amount of personal protective equipment for hospital staff.

"Never in my career have I dealt with scarcity of resources," Edwards said. "But as we were hearing information come out of China and the Lombardy region of Italy, we began ordering ahead, anticipating that our community could be next."

CoxHealth made a concentrated effort to reassign personnel from units that were underutilized during the pandemic into COVID-related care to prevent layoffs.

CoxHealth also commissioned the construction of a 51-bed COVID-19 triage unit and retrofitted 100 negative pressure rooms as a part of its focus on building space. It was not until four months after the first COVID-19 case was reported in the Ozarks that CoxHealth admitted its first patient into the unit.

Edwards worked closely with Mercy President Craig McCoy to coordinate the region's response to COVID-19 care.

"Mercy and CoxHealth have been competitors for years, but we very quickly realized that right now, we're allies," Edwards said. "We may be may be warring countries, but we have a common enemy in COVID-19."

CoxHealth and Mercy both worked with other hospital systems in the region to share information, resources and care as the pandemic continued to grip the Ozarks. Edwards noted CoxHealth and Mercy both had a vested interest in the public-health measures being taken to slow the spread of coronavirus in Springfield, surrounding communities and

as far as north-west Arkansas. If hospital capacity is overwhelmed in these regions, leaders will look to the Mercy and CoxHealth locations in Springfield to provide supplemental patient care.

As cases rose in the Ozarks, Edwards said CoxHealth became better prepared to deliver patient care for COVID-19 than when the pandemic began. CoxHealth has developed in-house testing capabilities, acquired sufficient personal protective and medical equipment to last at least six months, and discovered more effective ways to care for patients with the virus.

Above all, Edwards credits his team of doctors, nurses and other hospital staff for their work in treating patients with the novel coronavirus.

"The rally around nurses and doctors was pretty powerful to us," Edwards. "So many members of my family are in the nursing profession, and I know how difficult it can be."

Edwards also expressed his gratitude for the community's participation in slowing the spread of COVID-19 in the Ozarks. He encourages community members to continue masking and take personal responsibility for public health for as long as the region has to fight to contain the virus.

*"Great teams are not usually made up of the greatest players, but rather **really good players that are great together**," Edwards said of his team. "And nothing has created the kind of culture and chemistry of a great team than this crisis."*

# Craig McCoy

President, Mercy Springfield

Long before Craig McCoy sat at the helm of Mercy Springfield, he served as a paramedic for seven years. The day-to-day workstream as a paramedic was always unpredictable for McCoy and his team, but served as arguably the most helpful preparation for the unexpected challenges he would face as the hospital's newly minted president in the middle of a global pandemic.

In early March, McCoy began preparing the Mercy regional network for the potential onslaught of COVID-19 hospitalizations in the region. All related medical equipment was assessed and replacements were ordered, and elective surgeries were suspended to prevent overcrowding in the hospital. Mercy staff leveraged the network's telemedicine facility in Chesterfield, a St. Louis suburb, to begin meeting with some patients online and reducing foot traffic into the local clinics.

Several of the regional Mercy facilities overseen by McCoy are much smaller than those in Springfield and have very few resources and staff. To ensure that all sites were equipped to address the COVID-19 crisis, McCoy launched

an emergency regionalization strategy.

"We used the opportunity to help us better coordinate as a hospital network," McCoy said. "We asked ourselves how we could better use resources in Springfield to bolster what we have in outlying areas."

A lot of Mercy's work to combat the coronavirus happened behind the scenes.

"We quietly worked within our system to modify some of our facilities and retrofit 300 negative pressure rooms," McCoy said. "We were able to serve six times as many patients in negative pressure rooms as could be treated in the region's other COVID facility, and we could do so with very minimal capital investment."

For McCoy, building capacity to treat COVID-19 patients was not a competition. Mercy remained in close communication with city and county officials, education leaders, and even network rival CoxHealth to collaborate on ways to better serve the community. Together, Cox and Mercy developed crisis-care plans to treat patients in JQH Arena or to develop Mercy's underground parking garage into

a triage facility, if needed.

McCoy was pleasantly surprised when the initial case numbers in the Ozarks never reached the level to overwhelm hospital capacity. He credits both city officials and his team of health professionals for their important work in slowing the spread of the virus.

"It gave me an opportunity to see how the team was going to work together and see what the capabilities are," McCoy said. "I was really pleased with seeing how a lot of the team really stepped up and went above and



beyond and was forward-thinking."

McCoy made it a priority to care for his team members as they faced an unprecedented work environment. For instance, Mercy developed an internal grocery service at some of its facilities so employees could pick up their essentials before leaving work.

"As a faith-based health system, our mission is to minister to our patients by caring for them. Throughout this pandemic, we have renewed our equally important priority to minister to our co-workers as well," McCoy said.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **THIS ISN'T THE FIRST PANDEMIC AND WON'T BE THE LAST:** McCoy reminded us that, because the Sisters of Mercy was born out of a pandemic in Ireland, this is not Mercy's first experience with crisis care. As cases rose in the region, McCoy's team relied on decades of experience to continue delivering patient care in this pandemic.
- **DON'T EXPECT AN ADJUSTMENT PERIOD:** McCoy started at Mercy just two months before the pandemic spread to the Ozarks. He relied on the expertise of his team in making executive decisions, knowing that he could not wait to acclimate to the system before he had to make difficult decisions.

*"I do think that **the innovation in patient care we saw during this pandemic will continue into the future,**" McCoy said. "Our rapid response and ability to adapt to a crisis situation with little information demonstrated how our team can quickly embrace change."*

# Dr. John Jungmann

Superintendent, Springfield Public Schools



When Dr. John Jungmann, superintendent of Springfield Public Schools, made the decision to transition all instruction online for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all hands were needed on deck. SPS serves more than 25,000 students across its district, supported by nearly 3,500 teachers and staff members. To support all staff, students and families in this transition, Dr. Jungmann and his team immediately developed an action plan.

Jungmann’s initial focus was on training teachers to succeed in a virtual-instruction environment. SPS administrators developed training modules for teachers to review over the scheduled spring break period.

During the same week, teachers, administrators and staff members began conducting wellness checks

with students, inquiring about their health, food security, and internet and technology access. From these wellness checks, SPS began providing meals, hotspots and other support to students in need.

SPS also launched a learning management system for all of its students using the platform Canvas. This website became a “one-stop-shop” for instruction, assignments and communication between teachers and students.

An important part of SPS’ online transition was collaborating with other school districts.

“We made a commitment early on to work with other school districts in our region, especially those that border Springfield, as well as the smaller school districts,” Jungmann said. “We shared resources with one another and we planned together to make sure that we were offering consistent

approaches to learning and community supports.”

SPS also found creative ways to use the skill sets of its teachers and staff members when regular school operations were suspended. The district repurposed several of its facilities as daycare centers for the children of healthcare workers. Paraprofessionals in the district served as caretakers while other supporting staff members maintained the sites.

As SPS prepared to reopen its schools in the fall, Jungmann said he believed the district is better equipped to manage the ongoing coronavirus crisis than when it first began.

“When COVID-19 initially started, we made the decision to freeze our grading,” Jungmann said. “This was the right decision in the middle of an unpredictable pandemic, but it would not be the appropriate response going forward. We will have to come up with a different design and approach to evaluation, instruction and so much more.”

Before announcing its fall reopening strategy, SPS collected data from conversations with teachers, staff, parents and students in the district about

their comfort level in returning to school and their preferences

between instruction options. Ultimately, the district decided to offer families the choice between a hybrid option, with in-person instruction two days a week, or a fully virtual option at home. Using its online learning management system, SPS hopes to offer the same, high-quality learning experience for students in both formats.

“Our families and our staff have different health concerns and needs so we want to make sure that we’re flexible in our reopening plan,” Jungmann said. “Even after this pandemic, parents and students will still need choices in how they want to experience their education. A fully seated option will serve some students, but some may find that a virtual option works best for them.”

COVID-19 has radically changed the future of education at SPS and beyond. Nevertheless, Jungmann emphasizes that one thing will never change—the district’s commitment to its students.

“Our responsibility has always been to the kids, and that will continue to be our priority as we address COVID-19 for the foreseeable future,” Jungmann said.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **EDUCATION IS FLEXIBLE:** Don’t believe the stereotype that education systems cannot evolve. Almost overnight, SPS overhauled its learning management system and instituted a new style of instruction.
- ▶ **EQUITY IN EDUCATION IS NEEDED:** This pandemic has highlighted the inequities in access between students in our region, be it gaps in education, technology or health care.

*“I hope that this has given folks a higher appreciation for the work that our teachers do,” Dr. Jungmann said. “When parents were staying home and having to fill the role of a teacher over the course of the spring semester, I think that they realized just how much hard work goes in to being a teacher and how our teachers successfully enrich not just one student, but upwards of 25 students at a time.”*

# Dr. Hal Higdon

Chancellor, Ozarks Technical Community College

Ozarks Technical Community College Chancellor Dr. Hal Higdon began planning for a situation like the COVID-19 pandemic long before the first case appeared in the Wuhan province of China. A few years prior, in response to growing concern about other viral outbreaks such as Avian Disease or SARS, OTC made the decision to require every course to have an online component. Even courses like welding were required to have an online syllabus and course page complete with the ability to proctor exams, create assignments and offer asynchronous instruction.

When Higdon made the decision in March to close OTC campuses across the region in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the infrastructure for online learning already was in place.

“Of course, there was a lot of professional development to do on the fly with the instructors who were not used to teaching online,” Higdon said.

OTC instructors were not the only individuals who needed extra assistance in navigating the transition to online learning. Higdon notes that several students struggled with the transition online due to technology constraints, conflicting schedules or other personal reasons. However, OTC staff

and administration were quick to understand and adapt to student needs during this crisis.

“We called each student personally to check in on them. We asked them about their personal, technological, financial and/or health needs, and how we could best meet those needs,” Higdon said.

Using the information gathered from the student phone calls, Higdon and his team created a database of information that could be used to inform their use of student emergency money and government funding from the CARES Act. In June, OTC also announced technology grants to assist students in obtaining the necessary technology for potential online learning in the future. Higdon credits these efforts for OTC’s 15 percent increase in enrollment for summer classes.

As OTC made plans to reopen for classes in the fall, Higdon believes there will be some lasting changes to the college’s instruction going forward.

“We already saw a big change in the modality of summer classes with 90 percent of classes already online,” Higdon said. “For the fall, we are going to also see a bigger shift to more hybrid and more online classes that used to be 100 percent seated. Overall, we will be thinking of ways to minimize time on campus and maximize the use

of technology.”

Like MSU President Cliff Smart, Higdon believes the full campus closure in March may have been an overreaction. Once OTC acquired the necessary protective equipment and established the proper safety procedures, students were able to return to campus in small groups in April and May to complete lab requirements. With more information about the nature of the coronavirus from the beginning, Higdon believes these protocols could have been practiced, in place of closing campus completely.

Without a full sense of how COVID-19 would impact the Ozarks, Higdon relied heavily on the network of educational leaders in the region.

“During this time, we have met weekly so that all the universities, colleges and the school districts are speaking out of the same playbook and learning best practices



from each other,” Higdon said. “I think that’s not new for Springfield, we just relied on it more.”

Community leaders also relied on Higdon and the resources available at OTC to assist in their own response to the virus. In the second week of pandemic, Higdon offered the college’s available PPE and ventilators to CoxHealth. Higdon notes that helping the regional health partners was one of the college’s first priorities during this pandemic.

Higdon acknowledges that OTC’s response to the COVID-19 crisis has been a community effort, extending from staff to students and everyone in between.

“The lack of complaint by our employees and our students has been massive. People have just been so positive,” Higdon said. “I’ve really been touched by the positive way our faculty, our staff and our students have handled the changes.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **PREPARATION IS KEY:** Higdon put it simply, “There’s no such thing as being too prepared.”
- ▶ **DON’T SPEND TOO QUICKLY:** OTC was able to absorb massive state budget cuts through a conservative budgeting strategy. They have become the only school in the state that has not eliminated programs or furloughed employees during the pandemic.

*“I think the course we were on was a steady pace of more technology and **we just put it into hyperdrive.** Late adopters were forced to adopt it and they liked it better than they thought they did.”*

# Clif Smart

President, Missouri State University

Missouri State University President Clif Smart is no stranger to change management. Smart oversees a rapidly growing student body of more than 26,000 on two campuses in southwest Missouri. Despite more than a decade of leadership experience in higher education, nothing could prepare Smart for the challenges that would arise from the novel coronavirus.

Missouri State began transitioning its classes online shortly after the first COVID-19 case was announced in Springfield. Almost 82 percent of the university's classes were offered in a seated format, requiring a massive overhaul in instruction.

Smart admits that nearly half of all instructors had little to no experience teaching online. The university's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning

immediately began offering training for online instruction, including peer-to-peer guidance from faculty members who had previously taught online.

The transition to online learning presented a challenge for students at Missouri State as well. Several students did not have internet access at home and many were juggling other responsibilities outside of their studies.

"A big part of the transition to online learning was supporting our students," Smart said. "We gave out over 100 hotspots to help students connect to the internet. We also set up a hotline for students to text or call at all hours of the day. We also had our leadership and administrative teams contact students directly to check in and see if we could assist in any way."

Smart worked closely with leaders at other regional universities

and colleges to determine MSU's course of action.

Before any campus released a public decision about its operations during the pandemic, leaders from other area institutions were made aware.

"None of us have all the answers and there's some comfort in knowing that you're in the mainstream of what other people are doing," Smart said.

However, Smart was braced for several challenges as his team began preparing for the fall semester.

"How are we going to reopen campus? Are students really going to wear a mask even if we limit it to classrooms? What do we do if they don't? What do we do if 1,000 people test positive for the virus in September? These are all questions with no easy answer," Smart said.

Smart's team prepared for the reopening of campus with several new policies. A masking requirement, travel restrictions and hybrid class structures are just some of the procedures put in place for the fall semester.

Smart hopes these policies will help the university discover how to live and work with the virus going forward, as another shutdown "is not a viable option." With the information available to him now, Smart believes a complete closure

of the campus in March could have been prevented.

Nevertheless,

Smart believes the university has learned several valuable lessons from the pandemic and the response that followed.

"We gained light years in our digital-learning capabilities by moving everything online," Smart said. "We may be able to offer more online options for undergraduates, with the opportunity to complete coursework completely online for our nontraditional students."

Despite the university's technological advancements in instruction, Smart still sees a lasting place for on-campus learning experiences.

"It's not that, in 20 years, all universities are going to be online. There is some value in that for certain markets, but I think this pandemic has also made it very clear that the great bulk of our students value an on-campus experience, not just for the social component, but also for the learning," Smart said.

That experience looked drastically different as Missouri State reopened for classes in the fall. However, Smart believes that his students and staff will "Bear Up" to meet the challenges that come their way.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **MORE THAN JUST A LEARNING TRANSITION:** Missouri State created counseling programs to support the mental health of students, set up a housing and meals program for international students unable to return home, and provided ongoing support for students as needed.
- ▶ **MORE THAN JUST A PANDEMIC:** Ongoing racial justice concerns, compounded with the upcoming presidential election and state education budget cuts, will make for a difficult fall semester for students across the country — and that does not even begin to include COVID-19.

*"When you have something like this, it expedites change. It quickens the pace of technology, it quickens the pace of changing work practices, it quickens the pace of having online instruction as a viable option. People had to be creative about how to deliver classes, and that's valuable going forward."*

# Matt Morrow

President, Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce



No public health crisis has affected the business community quite like the COVID-19 pandemic. Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce President Matt Morrow found himself in a difficult position, watching businesses shutter their doors as public leaders fought to protect against community spread of the coronavirus.

“You never think that the economy will be completely closed like it was and that businesses would be categorized as essential and nonessential,” Morrow said. “We tried to be as nimble and responsive as possible, creating a collaborative table where we could partner with public officials and work together to meet these challenges as businesses continued to face obstacles.”

The Chamber played a central role in the business response to COVID-19. Morrow and his team held ongoing dialogues with public health officials and policymakers as decisions were made to close businesses during the stay-at-home order in Greene County. As the business voice at the table, the Chamber advocated for several amendments to orders proposed by city and county officials that would help businesses operate safely during the pandemic.

Morrow’s team also served the Chamber’s membership network by offering relevant resources for navigating the pandemic. The Chamber launched a COVID-19 business resources page on its website to aggregate information from city, county, state and federal governments and departments concerning business operations and recovery. Businesses looked to the Chamber’s resources for help with applying for loans through the Paycheck Protection Program, established under the CARES Act.

“We were able to connect with a large amount of our members, and those outside of the Chamber network, to connect them to resources that have been helpful during this crisis,” Morrow said. “In an event like this, days matter, and so it was important that we could disseminate information as quickly as possible, but also as reliably as possible.”

As businesses reopen and focus shifts from COVID-19 response to recovery, the Chamber continues to offer resources to help area businesses make the right decisions for them.

“The resources that we offer to our members and to the business community will change as we start to reopen the economy,” Morrow said. “We want to inform our

business community of how to take advantage of the grant money resources and loans that will be flowing into our community. We also want to help our businesses keep customers safe and learn how to practice personal and corporate responsibility with safety protocols. Folks across the board need a voice and needed direction during this time, and customers themselves need to be reassured that they will be safe entering into businesses and being a part of the marketplace.”

Despite the business challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, Morrow believes the Springfield area can emerge from the crisis stronger than before.

“I think we have a great

opportunity for our local economy through talent attraction, business growth and startup growth,” Morrow said. “Amidst the pandemic, many young people are considering communities like Springfield for building their careers. We have just enough to do and a lot of growing businesses where they can see themselves succeeding.”

Morrow notes that these opportunities are not unique to Springfield, however. If the region is to capture the potential benefits from this pandemic, Springfield will have to compete for it fiercely.

“The sacrifice throughout this pandemic has been too great for us not to clench this opportunity full force,” Morrow said.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **INNOVATION BEATS ELIMINATION:** Many businesses that quickly innovated during the pandemic to meet new community needs were able to survive. Dynamic DNA, for example, quickly adapted its operations to offer COVID-19 testing.
- ▶ **RISK YIELDS REWARD:** Businesses took quick action to keep customers safe, while simultaneously finding a way to keep their doors open. With little information available, businesses had to endure high risks in their decision making.
- ▶ **MAKE FRIENDS BEFORE YOU NEED THEM:** Morrow credits Springfield’s existing network of collaboration for the community’s quick and coordinated response to the pandemic.

*“I believe that we take business for granted and we shouldn’t,” Morrow said.*

*“We think that it will always be there, and that jobs will always be there, but this crisis has taught us that this is not always the case. I hope that we’ve learned*

**that business is the horse that pulls the cart in our society.”**

# Samuel Knox

Executive Director, Minorities in Business



Samuel Knox is no stranger to adversity. As a small business owner and the executive director of Minorities in Business, Knox realized early on that the COVID-19 pandemic would bring sweeping changes and mounting challenges for the business community, including his own enterprise, Unite Magazine.

Fortunately, the Minorities in Business network had the full support of the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce and other local organizations to navigate the challenges the pandemic would bring. Knox and his team immediately launched a COVID-19 business

resources page on the MIB website, using resources the Chamber had consolidated from government entities. MIB also offered information and training sessions on Zoom to help members apply for funds from the Paycheck Protection Program and U.S. Small Business Administration.

A few weeks into the pandemic, however, Knox and his team found themselves faced with another difficult challenge.

“One of the challenges that we didn’t expect from this virus was how it disproportionately impacted the African American community. We immediately knew that this was something that we wanted

to address as an organization,” Knox said.

Knox’s publication, *Unite Magazine*, delivers content geared toward the local African American community. During the pandemic, however, *Unite* suspended its printing operations out of safety concerns. Without the publication serving as a reliable communication channel, Knox worried that the local African American community would not have access to critical information and resources about the pandemic and its impact.

“We wanted to reach these communities with important information about the virus even though we couldn’t do it through *Unite*, so we had to get creative,” Knox said. “We worked with the Community Partnership of the Ozarks, the Springfield NAACP and Prosper Springfield to form a partnership where we could get information to the African American community and African American churches about the latest health and safety practices and where they could get

access to information and care when they needed it.”

Minorities in Business also released a compiled list of minority-owned businesses in the area to support during the pandemic and beyond. After the high-profile killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, communities around the country have renewed their commitments to racial justice, including their support of the minority business community. Knox hopes the community’s work to confront both challenges will lead to greater collaboration and unity in the future.

“I hope that this pandemic brings us closer together as a community,” Knox said. “We’ve had so many folks in our community working hard to keep us safe. I don’t want this to be a time of polarization with folks feeling like their freedoms are being infringed upon, I just want us to be able to move forward as a community and confront this challenge so that we can accomplish other challenges that we will face in the future.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN:** Knox regrets waiting to learn online communication technologies like Zoom until they were needed. If he had begun his technological literacy earlier, he believes he could have used the tools more strategically.
- **LEAN ON THE STRENGTHS OF OTHERS:** Knox finds that this pandemic has highlighted his weaknesses in a new way. He encourages others to depend on the strengths of those around them to fill in the gaps.

*“During this pandemic, I have witnessed stakeholders working together in a collaborative way that is really visible here in Springfield,” Knox said. “We already had the relationships in place to work together successfully and the staying power to confront this challenge, and I’ve been proud of how our community has been able to do so.”*



# Ryan Sivill

Board Chair, The Network

As a full-time employee at BKD, board chair of the largest network of young professionals in the region and a proud parent of two, Ryan Sivill wore several different hats as he navigated the COVID-19 pandemic in the Ozarks. He experienced firsthand the impact of the virus on the business community, education system, healthcare sector and individual families across the region.

As The Network’s Leadership Council and chamber staff brainstormed ways to keep the membership of the Network engaged without the ability to meet in person, he knew that they, too, would be juggling a diverse array of concerns.

“Our initial thought was, ‘What can we do for our members to help them through this?’” Sivill said. “There was no blanket answer. When you think about it, we have members ages 22 through 40, so there are a lot of different dynamics and people in that bracket in very different situations. You’ve

got parents, you’ve got people who are single, and everyone probably needs something different.”

The Network used the professional programming made available by the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce to cater to the diverse needs of its members. The Network also coordinated specific sessions to touch on topics more relevant to young professionals, like mental health.

As a professional organization that emphasizes the importance of the community it serves, it was a difficult transition for The Network to adjust to a virtual meeting environment.

“I think we have traditionally been an organization that meets in person. We haven’t done a lot of virtual events, which maybe is a little different for an organization that serves young people,” Sivill said. “We have discovered that you do not all have to be in the same room to connect with one another. I think the same concept applies to working as well. We can tap into those people who can work

anywhere, but live here.”

Sivill believes this pandemic has reinforced for members the benefits of living and working in the Springfield area. Moving forward, he hopes that The Network members can serve as “cheerleaders” for the region, convincing other young people to plant their roots in the Springfield community.

“I think part of our role as members of The Network could be to exemplify passion for the community and attract others with our passion,” Sivill said.

As businesses reopened and attention shifted from COVID-19



response to recovery, Sivill also identified a role for members of

The Network in shaping the future of the Springfield community.

“As a society, we have a renewed focus on family time and being at home. So how does that affect our focus on neighborhoods or amenities for families? I think the way that we operate as a society and how we invest in our resources is going to drastically change,” Sivill said.

“I want to ultimately engage our members on their thoughts and ensure that their voices are heard as we move forward as a community.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE THE CRISIS:** Springfield’s network of community leaders and commitment to collaboration made the response effort more seamless.
- **KEEP THE LIGHTEARTEDNESS:** The Network included social events and game nights in its lineup of virtual programming to maintain a sense of lightheartedness amidst all of the tumultuousness of the pandemic.

*“I think the question is going to be, ‘How can we come out of this stronger and leverage what we learned to build a healthier community in all aspects?’” Sivill said.*

# Bart Brown

*President and CEO, Ozarks Food Harvest*

Ozarks Food Harvest President and CEO Bart Brown and his team were some of the first responders to emerging community needs during the COVID-19 crisis in the Ozarks. Through its network of 270 hunger-relief agencies across 28 counties, OFH supplied more than a million meals to families fighting food insecurity during the pandemic.

OFH adheres to strict food safety and hygiene guidelines in its daily work, making the integration of COVID-19 safety protocols nearly seamless. The biggest transition for OFH was modifying its distribution channels to more quickly respond to hunger needs during the pandemic.

“We communicated with our

member agencies to safeguard two to four weeks’ worth of food in their banks and pantries, anticipating that we would be shut-in for a while,” Brown said. “We also helped disseminate information about switching to a drive-by distribution model, and helped our partner agencies secure the infrastructure needed to do so.”

Once its partner organizations were prepared to serve the community in a crisis state, Brown’s team conducted additional outreach to members of the community most affected by the virus to inform them of OFH’s resources.

“We wanted to reach the newly dislocated workers that had been laid off due to COVID-19, as many weren’t aware of the food pantry network since most had no prior

need to seek one,” Brown said. “We found that the best way to reach these folks was to go where they are, so we started with an outreach to their employers.”

With the increased community need for hunger relief, OFH supplied 1.1 million meals between March and May, valued at \$1.8 million. OFH also ramped up its SNAP outreach services to help register 330 new individuals for food-stamp benefits, generating 357,000 meals and \$1.5 million for the local economy.

OFH worked closely with Springfield Public Schools to provide meals to students and families during the pandemic through their Mobile Food Pantries. These mobile pantries were expanded to towns in the surrounding areas as OFH teamed up with local hunger-relief partners within those vicinities.

In the first three months of pandemic alone, more than 425,000 meals were distributed through Mobile Food Pantries, serving more than 25,000 individuals. An estimated 60 percent of those families were receiving help for the very first time in their lives.

OFH also expanded its

fundraising efforts to meet the growing demand for food services.

Grants, food donations and monetary gifts flowed in from across the community to support the work of Brown’s team.

Brown also relied on key partnerships with other community organizations to support OFH’s work during the pandemic. Missouri Foundation for Health provided grant money for OFH to employ in their warehouses workers who had been let go during the pandemic.

OFH typically relies on volunteers to sort and package food for distribution, but with strict public-health guidelines, OFH desperately needed dedicated employees to fill that need.

Brown believes OFH has discovered more ways to improve its operations and meet community hunger needs following the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This is a great opportunity for us to move forward distributing more fresh, healthy food and developing the infrastructure needed to do so,” Brown said. “That’s where food donations are going, and we want to be a part of building a healthier food supply in our community.”



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **SUPPLY AND DEMAND ISSUES:** Pandemic markets do not operate under the same principles as the free markets to which we are accustomed. Brown found himself with money to spend and little food on which to spend it due to other shortages in the supply chain. Food from federal programs helped meet this market inefficiency.
- ▶ **THERE IS ALWAYS A WILLING VOLUNTEER:** OFH ceased its usual volunteer operations out of safety concerns during the pandemic. However, eager volunteers adapted to the change and helped OFH secure hand sanitizer and protective equipment instead, enabling Brown’s team to begin the drive-by food services safely.

*“I don’t know if it’s because of the size of Springfield, or if it’s because we know each other, or if it is because where we are located in the United States, but **it’s always impressive to me to see how we react in times like this,**” Brown said. **“No one ever panics.** Instead, we focus on what we have been able to accomplish and how we have been able to meet community needs.”*

# Starr Kohler

CEO, SeniorAge Area Agency on Aging

**S**tarr Kohler, CEO of SeniorAge Area Agency on Aging, had no choice but to act quickly when the COVID-19 pandemic first arrived in the United States. Kohler's team cares for the population most vulnerable to the virus—senior citizens. In January, SeniorAge began reviewing its processes to evaluate their preparedness for an outbreak in the Ozarks. It immediately became clear that closing the SeniorAge facilities would be the safest course of action.

After making the decision to close its doors, Kohler's focus shifted to finding creative and safe ways to continue delivering services to seniors during the pandemic. To replace the meal services provided at its center, SeniorAge offered curbside meal pick-up and volunteers delivered meals to thousands of seniors at home, implementing strict sanitation protocols to protect the recipients. "We are preparing around 32,000 meals a week for seniors in need of nutrition, triple what we were providing prior to the pandemic," Kohler said. "It's truly taken heroism on the service line, making a near-impossible pace of work happen."

Kohler's team also knew that isolation would pose a challenge

for the seniors served by her facilities.

"We started cranking up our telephone reassurance program, and it went from several hundred calls to well over almost 18,000 so far," Kohler said. "Our staff and volunteers are just calling seniors making sure they have what they need, that they're not in crisis, and that they don't feel alone."

Kohler's team also has helped enroll more than 400 seniors in Medicare and managed more than 4,000 federal tax returns for seniors during the pandemic. SeniorAge volunteers relied on phone calls and contactless drop-off to exchange information with the participating seniors.

"I've always felt that our team was up to any kind of a challenge, and that we could manage it together, collaboratively," Kohler said. "Now there's no hypothetical on that at all because through this pandemic, they have exceeded every expectation I had for being nimble and have just immediately stepped into the challenges without any kind of disparity."

Other organizations in the community supported the work of SeniorAge by pooling their resources together to expand the impact of the facilities' services for seniors. The Missouri Department

of Health and Senior Services also worked quickly to provide waivers to organizations like SeniorAge so that senior facilities could reallocate their funding and grant money toward the emerging needs of the pandemic.

One such challenge Kohler's team addressed was the technological transition for seniors. Kohler herself admits the difficulties she faced in adjusting to remote work and increasing her reliance on technology. She immediately knew that this transition would be doubly difficult for the seniors she serves.

"We serve the most vulnerable population, and those vulnerabilities were being exploited during the pandemic," Kohler said. "Scammers were preying on the technological illiteracy of our



seniors from the beginning. We quickly developed a first-alert system

to inform our seniors about scams and to prevent them from being exploited."

SeniorAge also provided input to Community Partnership of the Ozarks in the development of technological literacy videos to help our seniors get up to speed with the new communication environment.

Kohler predicts that it will be quite some time before SeniorAge can resume its operations as normal. However, her team will continue providing services to seniors from a distance.

"I think the pandemic has reinforced, in our minds, the vulnerability of seniors and how much they truly need us to be their advocates," Kohler said.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **TAKE CARE OF YOUR STAFF:** Kohler has always believed that a staff that is cared for can better care for others. The pandemic only reinforced the importance of checking in on and caring for staff members.
- ▶ **THE COLLECTIVE IS STRONGER:** To successfully transition SeniorAge's services during the pandemic, Kohler needed the help of her entire staff, other community organizations, volunteers and the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.

*"We need to be advocates for our seniors—to be on their side; to be recognizing who they are and what they can contribute; and **what they need to continue to be a part of the community at large,**" Kohler said.*

# Rob Blevins

Executive Director, Discovery Center of Springfield

Within a single week, Rob Blevins and his team at the Discovery Center of Springfield had transitioned a multistory science center into a full-time daycare and learning center for the children of health care workers during the pandemic.

“In January, we began looking at contingency plans as we saw the virus take hold in other communities across the country,” Blevins said. “We tried to reduce our capacity levels and maintain our same operations, but it did not make sense once the virus arrived in our community. Instead, we decided to completely redesign our operations to meet a community need for childcare for the children of healthcare workers who had no other choice but to go into work during this time.”

Blevins credits the Discovery Center’s open-book management for the facility’s agility in

responding to the need for childcare services. Under this management style, all team members have an equal level of standing in organizational decisions and responsibilities. As the Discovery Center implemented strict cleaning regimens to prepare for its reopening, this meant that all staff members assisted in cleaning duties.

Another feature of open-book management is an action orientation among staff. During regular meetings of the staff, employees share updates about what they have accomplished to further the organization’s mission, what they plan to accomplish before their next update, and how co-workers can help them accomplish those tasks.

“As a team, we all sat down at a table to strategize what this new opening would look like,” Blevins said. “We thought of all of the questions that any stakeholder involved would consider. From a

parent’s perspective, they want to know it’s a safe place to leave their child. We also needed to consider a health and hygiene perspective and what needed to be done in terms of cleaning. We also needed to know what licensing we needed to operate. Finally, we considered what type of messaging was needed to convey this opportunity to healthcare workers. This type of project management allowed our team to divide and conquer, meeting regularly to provide updates to one another.”

Even with meticulous planning, Blevins encountered several challenges in operating as a childcare facility.

“In operating as a free service, we served many vulnerable and needy families, bringing with that challenges we did not initially consider,” Blevins said. “At one point, 25 percent of our children were food insecure. We knew we needed to meet their needs, but when we agreed to do so, we did not even have a donor in place. Thankfully, the Ozarks Food Harvest was able to deliver meals to our facility and to the families we serve.”

Blevins’ team also took on an unusual role as disciplinarians when behavioral issues arose.

“We learned that when you don’t have anything to eat, or if you are

being abused at home, for example, it can affect your behavior and can

certainly make it difficult to focus on your education,” Blevins said. “It made us look at our response more holistically. We felt like we could have more honest conversations with the children and parents depending on the Discovery Center because we did not have to operate like a traditional school system.”

Indeed, the Discovery Center offered unique learning and childcare experiences that could not be found in schools. Children in the program interacted with the center’s exhibits, conducted their own science experiments and even participated in a lab-coat graduation ceremony.

Blevins hopes the Discovery Center’s response to the pandemic reminds Springfield residents about the importance of having a science center in their community.

“I think, when we first opened in 1998 as the Discovery Center Inc., there was a large excitement for science,” Blevins said. “Over the course of the past few decades, that excitement has waned a bit. I hope that this pandemic reminds our society about the important role a science center can play in the local economy, education system and, now, even health system.”



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **PRACTICE BOLD LEADERSHIP:** Blevins believes that without the courageous work of his team to completely transition their operations to offer childcare, the Discovery Center may not have survived the pandemic.
- ▶ **DEVELOP HERD IMMUNITY TO IGNORANCE:** The pandemic has highlighted gaps in scientific literacy across Americans. Blevins believes that science centers like the Discovery Center play a critical role in fostering scientific literacy.

“COVID-19 is teaching us what’s important in life and **what our role is in this community as a science center**,” Blevins said. “We know that we will plan to care for kids in the future and make that a larger part of what we’re doing.”

# Janet Dankert

*President and CEO, Community Partnership of the Ozarks*

Even amidst a transition to remote work, a cancellation of the annual fundraiser and a growing concern for the health and safety of its staff and beneficiaries, Community Partnership of the Ozarks President and CEO Janet Dankert knew that the essential work of the organization had to continue.

CPO immediately released a hub on its website to help community members access emergency resources through its network of partner organizations or elsewhere. CPO also worked closely with its “Philanthropy Row” neighbors in downtown Springfield—the Community Foundation of the Ozarks and United Way of the Ozarks—to pool resources and coordinate a unified response to the pandemic.

“We were lucky that we had a good technology plan in place to make the transition to virtual work and service delivery possible,” Dankert said. “We set up ways to do virtual home visits with the families we serve, and virtual visits to the childcare centers that we support.”

Even after the pandemic has passed, Dankert believes that

virtual visits will become more popular within the social-services sphere, allowing for more regular and cost-effective check-ins with families and children.

CPO’s team also leveraged technology in creative ways outside of their traditional services. For example, CPO worked with SeniorAge Area Agency on Aging to create short “how-to” videos for seniors served by the agency.

While virtual alternatives replaced some of CPO’s in-person work, there was still significant need for CPO services on the ground. Dankert’s team worked with local hotels to house more than 300 hyper-vulnerable homeless individuals starting in April when social distancing guidelines prevented congregate sheltering. Philanthropy Row then worked to organize meal delivery to folks staying in the hotels and motels to ensure their full needs were met.

“This is something new that we’ve never faced before, and to see the way our health systems, our health department, our city and our county, and our nonprofits have come together was really incredible,” Dankert said.



Dankert believes this collaboration will continue to play a role in CPO’s transition from COVID-19 response to COVID-19 recovery in the community.

“We will be working with families who may be at risk for homelessness due to the financial implications of the pandemic,” Dankert said. “We are getting funding from the City of Springfield to help families that might be on the edge of homelessness through our diversion program. Diversion is a prevention program that saves the community money by preventing families from entering the homeless shelter system and promoting

better outcomes for families in need.”

CPO will also offer crisis intervention services to families by helping with rent, utility bills and basic needs; technical assistance and support to child care providers; and community education to address mental health needs related to social isolation.

“Nothing stopped for us when the pandemic hit,” Dankert said. “We pivoted to working from home, but nothing stopped. If anything, we probably worked more than before to make sure that needs were being met. I don’t see that changing for a very long time.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN:** To completely transition both CPO’s internal and external operations, Dankert kept in close communication with her entire team and the partners with which she works. With public health information changing daily, clear communication kept the entire staff on the same page.
- **NON-PROFITS MUST INVEST IN TECHNOLOGY:** Dankert believes that more nonprofits could benefit from dedicated technology staff to keep pace with changing technological innovation and expand service reach.

*“Everything that we do is community-based, and so we had to change the way we do business and we had to change some systems, but **the pandemic didn’t change our mission at all,**” Dankert said. “As a matter of fact, **this proved really what our role is in the community.**”*

# Greg Burris

President and CEO, United Way of the Ozarks



Burris believes that promoting community ownership is more

As the former Springfield city manager and current CEO of United Way of the Ozarks, Greg Burris saw the pandemic as another opportunity to bring together the community to inspire change.

Before the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Springfield, Burris and his counterparts on “Philanthropy Row” in downtown Springfield had begun meeting to discuss ways the three organizations could better strengthen existing partnerships. That initial meeting with the Community Foundation of the Ozarks’s Brian Fogle and Community Partnership of the Ozarks’ Janet Dankert became a daily meeting through the early weeks of the outbreak as the three discussed coordination.

Burris knew that almost every nonprofit and advocacy organization in the Springfield area was connected to one of the three organizations in some way. Through Philanthropy Row’s coordinated

efforts, regional nonprofits could communicate with one another, share resources and identify funding opportunities to support their work during the pandemic.

The Have Faith Initiative was one of the most fruitful products of the interagency collaboration among the three organizations. Burris helped coordinate this group of faith leaders from all denominations, religions and creeds as they worked together to meet community needs during the pandemic.

“The Have Faith Initiative has been an opportunity for a two-way conversation between faith leaders and public officials,” Burris said. “The faith leaders get to hear weekly from the Springfield mayor, commissioners, health director and others, to have a dialogue. The elected leaders are also able to disseminate information to the public through the faith leaders in the community who often serve a more trusted role in the lives of

everyday citizens. For example, the faith leaders who have encouraged masking after hearing directly from public health officials have helped to save lives.”

Burris hopes the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the community coordination it has produced, will inspire more local residents to get involved in philanthropic pursuits in the region.

“I want to move United Way toward a mission of building community ownership,” Burris said. “I want each person to feel like he or she owns this community, because if they feel like they own this community, things like fundraising and volunteerism take care of themselves. In order for you to own your community, you have to understand your community. There are tons of people who live in our community who have not driven north of Chestnut Expressway in a decade, and they don’t see those areas of town where people are really struggling, and so it results in way less empathy.”

Burris and his team are working on a video series to capture the challenges faced by Springfield residents, in hopes that it will inspire community members to get involved. With the additional challenges brought by COVID-19,

important than ever.

While the pandemic has highlighted the importance of philanthropic work like that of the United Way, it also has brought significant challenges for the nonprofit community. Most organizations across the country, including United Way, cancelled the fundraisers on which their work depends. Burris served as a convener for United Way’s 22 agency partners, as many organizational leaders were forced to make difficult operational decisions within tight budgets.

“Throughout the pandemic, we have been hosting weekly Zoom calls with other nonprofit leaders, and it has been really gratifying,” Burris said. “It has become a safe space for CEOs to share with their peers the challenges they are facing in a way that they cannot with their employees.”

From the Philanthropy Row partnership to the Have Faith Initiative to the nonprofit Zoom calls, Burris has found Springfield’s spirit of collaboration at every turn during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Collaboration is kind of in the water here,” Burris said. “Nobody collaborates like we do it.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **WE ARE RESILIENT:** Burris believes that the community’s flexibility and ingenuity in the midst of the crisis demonstrates that Springfield is more resilient than residents may have thought.
- ▶ **WE ARE SMALL AND MIGHTY:** Burris says Springfield’s size provides the optimal level of challenges and resources to make crisis response effective.

*“What makes this community special and unique is that **we have this foundation of trust that we have developed over decades** of working together,” Burris said.*

# Brian Fogle

President and CEO, Community Foundation of the Ozarks

With a novel coronavirus, the information environment can change in an instant, forcing organizations to reverse course right alongside it. Brian Fogle, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, challenged his team to remain flexible and responsive to changing community needs as COVID-19 swept through the region.

Within hours of hearing from Springfield-Greene County Health Director Clay Goddard about the imminent threat of the virus on public health, the CFO announced its COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund and began accepting grant applications from organizations in its service area. With donations from the Louis L. and Julia Dorothy Coover Charitable Foundation, Missouri Foundation for Health and White River Valley Electric Trust, the fund reached \$1 million in just three days. The CFO announced its first round of grants on April 3.

“The grantmaking committee for the COVID-19 fund was comprised of all volunteers who put in countless hours to select grant recipients,” Fogle said. “I cannot thank them enough for all of their hard work.”

The CFO continued to adapt quickly to new challenges as the

pandemic wore on. When Springfield Public Schools released its hybrid learning model, the CFO announced a \$100,000 education grant fund to provide childcare and learning support for students and families challenged by the hybrid model.

As the pandemic exposed long-standing issues of equity and racial injustice in the Ozarks and across the country, CFO announced its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Grant Program to offer funding support to organizations tackling those challenges.

The CFO also worked closely with other nonprofit partners to bolster their response to COVID-19 issues in the community. United Way of the Ozarks and Community Partnership of the Ozarks formed a triad with the CFO, creating a joint list of community needs to share with funding partners and issuing joint announcements of support for public health policies enacted by the City of Springfield.

“Crisis is not a time to make friends, but rather a time to rely on your existing friends,” Fogle said. “We have been a part of the Community Leadership Forum for 10 years, and so we were lucky to be able to hear from folks in the community directly about what their needs were and respond to those needs in concert with United

Way and CPO.”

Even after working diligently to respond to community needs during the pandemic, however, Fogle still fears that the CFO and other nonprofit organizations may be left out of the city’s economic recovery efforts.

“The CARES Act provided much needed resources to help with COVID-related needs, but channeled the dollars to many public entities who had not previously had grant experience. We as grantmakers and nonprofits could have been more active in public policy decisions on assisting with grantmaking,” Fogle said. “At the CFO, we have been distributing



funds for years. It makes sense for us to be involved in this process, but

as a sector, we don’t do as good of a job at public policy advocacy as businesses and governmental entities.”

In addition to improving advocacy efforts, Fogle believes that nonprofits will be better prepared to face future disasters, pandemics and crises after experiencing the COVID-19 outbreak.

“This wasn’t something any of us had in our guidebooks,” Fogle said. “However, we have a strong and collaborative community, and we will continue to work together and learn from one another as we face new challenges in the future.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **KEEP YOUR EXPECTATIONS FAIR:** Fogle believes that many community members were under the impression that COVID-19 would be eradicated by the end of the summer due to stay-at-home orders implemented in the spring. Fogle theorizes that when these expectations were not met, the public became more disillusioned with public health measures, prolonging the battle to contain the virus.
- **THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY OF ISOLATION:** Fogle contends that forced isolation has unearthed vast amounts of creativity and innovation among individual thinkers, but has also enabled more polarity and distance across people groups. Social recovery should be a concentrated effort in the aftermath of the pandemic.

*“Springfield’s case numbers are lower than many other communities of our size because we have a collaborative community that is **willing to work together to address the challenges** that we’re facing.”*

# Regina Greer Cooper

Executive Director, Springfield-Greene County Library District



Even though the COVID-19 pandemic felt like a story straight out of a novel, it was not one that could be checked out as the virus swept through the Ozarks. Following advice from the CDC and the Springfield-Greene County Health Department, Regina Greer Cooper, executive director of the Springfield-Greene County Library District, made the difficult decision to close the network of 10 local libraries on March 17.

Closing the doors to the library system, however, did not close the public's access to the wealth of online resources offered by the library.

"We have a lot of virtual

resources, including databases, language-learning software, e-books, audiobooks, music and streaming services," Cooper said. "Several of our suppliers worked with us to make those resources even more widely available than before."

The library system also allowed individuals outside of Greene County to register for a library card at no extra charge during the pandemic, widening the reach of library services even farther.

As the city and county began lifting restrictions for COVID-19 in May, the library system adopted sweeping changes to its operations to keep staff and patrons safe. In early May, libraries began offering drive-up book checkout

and drop-off. On May 26, Cooper made the decision to reopen all library facilities with strict safety guidelines.

Library staff wore personal protective equipment and library furniture was rearranged to allow for social distancing. Cooper closely followed the studies coming out of universities and research labs across the country about the spread of coronavirus from library materials and how to properly sanitize the resources.

As an extra precaution to keep staff and patrons safe, the library system transitioned to a contactless checkout system using a free application available on mobile phones. Cooper plans to continue using this application after the pandemic passes for customers who prefer self-checkout.

Cooper admits that it was difficult to make operational decisions for the library with little information about the nature of the coronavirus. While she wanted to wait to release information to

her staff about a decision until it was finalized, she quickly realized

that during the pandemic, her staff needed continuous updates and communication even before decisions were made to provide reassurance.

"Eventually, (the leadership team) decided that it would be better to share about the things we were considering and talking about even before we had arrived at a decision, because it seemed to calm down some of the staff," Cooper said. "Everybody wanted an answer yesterday to a question that we didn't have an answer to yet."

Even amidst the uncertainty of the virus, Cooper's team worked effectively to provide resources to the public during the closure of the library campuses.

"We want to remind everybody that we're here to help you through this difficult time and any other difficult time that might come up," Cooper said. "We are here for you and we want to hear from you."

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **LISTEN TO STAFF CONCERNS:** Some of Cooper's staff expressed strong concerns about returning to work. It was not until Cooper explained the thorough safety procedures the library would take that staff felt comfortable returning.
- ▶ **ONLY FOOLS RUSH IN:** The library system reopened slowly, offering more services as it became safe to do so. When in recovery, it is okay not to return to normal operations all at once.

**"Libraries have always been there to serve everybody, and that did not change during COVID-19,"** Cooper said. *"We have resources to help people with their daily lives, from mental health to finding a job."*



# Gary Gibson

General Manager, City Utilities of Springfield

As community members in Springfield faced an uncertain and unpredictable public health crisis, City Utilities of Springfield knew that any disruptions to its services would only cause additional complications for customers.

Beginning in early February, all CU departments began updating their pandemic plans to ensure continuity in services if an outbreak swept through the Ozarks. By March 17, a dedicated COVID-19 taskforce was formed, meeting twice a day to examine any challenges that might impede the organization’s ability to deliver services to the Springfield area.

“Due to City Utilities’ critical infrastructures and services, the COVID-19 planning focused on the worst-case scenarios,” said Gary Gibson, CU General Manager.

“Sequestration plans for critical areas were created to ensure customers would not experience any disruption to their services.”

The COVID-19 taskforce analyzed the latest information about the impact of the virus to help determine needed policy changes that could protect CU and its assets. Even with regular meetings, it was often difficult for CU to identify the proper timing of certain policies as the impact of the virus continued to rapidly evolve.

One of CU’s most consequential decisions during the pandemic was its moratorium on utility shut-offs due to unpaid bills. CU announced the policy in late March and extended the decision through July 6. For Springfield families with a high household energy burden, the moratorium

provided a sort of financial relief during a time of economic crisis for many.

City Utilities carefully documented its response to the pandemic to serve as a resource in the future. This documentation has also served as a valuable resource for other utilities across the state and nation, shared by Springfield employees serving on industrywide crisis response teams.



City Utilities credits its employees for helping the organization

maintain its goal of providing uninterrupted utility services to the Springfield community during the pandemic.

“The ingenuity of our employees shined during times like these as we worked together towards a common goal in a very uncertain time,” Gibson said.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **BE FLEXIBLE:** Gibson contends that no matter how big or small your organization may be, it is important to remain flexible in order to adapt to crisis situations.
- ▶ **COMMUNICATE CONSTANTLY:** Gibson believes that communication mitigates the uncertainty employees are experiencing during a crisis.

*“Our primary goal throughout the pandemic remained **protecting our workforce while providing Springfield with the essential services** they rely upon for their daily lives,” Gibson said. “Going through an actual pandemic event has provided us the experience to improve our future planning and response efforts.”*

# Have Faith Initiative

Rev. Mark Struckhoff, former Executive Director of the Council of Churches of the Ozarks, and Rev. Bob Roberts, Minister of Missions at Second Baptist Church

As soon as the first case of COVID-19 was reported in the Ozarks, the faith community was ready to spring into action to address the challenges that would follow. Faith leaders immediately began contacting city and county officials to offer their resources, time and support. For the elected leaders working long hours to plan the public response to COVID-19, it was difficult to identify and coordinate opportunities for the faith community to get involved.

Cora Scott, Director of Public Information and Civic Engagement for the City of Springfield, envisioned the faith community working together to address COVID-19 from a humanitarian perspective, guided by the latest updates from public officials. From this vision, the Have Faith Initiative was born. Scott tapped United Way of the Ozarks CEO Greg Burris to chair the initiative, and Burris appointed Rev. Mark Struckhoff, former executive

director of Council of Churches of the Ozarks, and Rev. Bob Roberts of Second Baptist Church to organize the faith leaders eager to be involved. (Rev. Jenn Simmons of National Avenue Christian Church has since replaced Rev. Struckhoff after he accepted a new position in Columbia.)

“This has always been an extremely collaborative community, and anytime there is an opportunity that arises within our community, we ensure that all sectors are represented at the table,” Roberts said.

The Have Faith Initiative membership included faith leaders from a variety of Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic and other traditions. The membership had the opportunity to hear directly from public officials during weekly Zoom meetings. These conversations provided an opportunity for elected leaders to disseminate messages on public health to the community through the conduit of faith leaders, and for faith leaders

to provide their perspectives on COVID-19 response in congregations to public officials.

Members of the initiative were divided into three committees to address emerging issues in the community including emergency needs like food and shelter, spiritual and mental health needs, and communication of COVID-19 information. This structure enabled faith leaders to share resources and coordinate their response to community issues, creating a stronger, more unified front.

While members of the Have Faith Initiative generally shared a similar perspective on the importance of social distancing and masking to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, there was a mixed response to the virus among members of the faith community at large. Some faith leaders, including a handful in the Ozarks, refused to cancel in-person services despite advice from public health experts.

“Faith communities wanted to get back to a sense of routine as soon as possible,” Struckhoff said. “However, when you have access to the mayor, the county commissioners and the public health director all explaining the basis of their decisions directly to our group of members, you can better understand the sacrifices that need to be made to protect public health.”

Roberts adds that some of his peers outside of the initiative were even critical of his decision to

follow public health guidance on closing houses of worship. However, Roberts considers his respect for elected officials to be biblical, and believes other members of the Have Faith Initiative share the same sentiment.

In addition to providing coronavirus response, the Have Faith Initiative also began tackling racial justice issues in the local faith community following the May death of George Floyd, the Minneapolis man whose death during a police arrest sparked a clarion call across the nation. Members of the group conducted listening sessions with faith leaders and congregants of color to learn about their experiences as a part of the local faith community and what leaders could be doing to provide more support to the Black community.

“The pandemic within the pandemic is systemic racism,” Struckhoff said. “As a community, we wanted to respond in a way that was relevant and intentional to the social vulnerabilities that this pandemic has reminded of.”

Struckhoff and Roberts do not know what the future holds for the Have Faith Initiative following the pandemic, but they hope the group continues to collaborate and meet community needs as the situation evolves.

“It’s not about certainty in times like this, it’s about trust,” Roberts said. “I’ll just say how grateful I am for the faith of others around me.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **WE ARE ALL CONNECTED:** Roberts and Struckhoff view the interfaith approach to the pandemic as a reflection of the interconnectedness between all members of the community, regardless of religious tradition or belief. To be successful, we must acknowledge and build on this interconnectivity.
- ▶ **WE ARE BETTER BECAUSE OF IT:** Struckhoff considers himself a better man for having experienced the pandemic. He encourages others to reflect on the lessons learned in their own lives.

*“Everybody just wants to feel heard,” Struckhoff said. “They’re struggling right now, and I think the Have Faith Initiative has provided a space where faith leaders can express those concerns to public officials and learn from their responses.”*

# Cora Scott

*Director of Public Information and Civic Engagement, City of Springfield*

In a rapidly changing public health crisis, Cora Scott's role as the Public Information Director for the City of Springfield became more important than ever. Springfieldians relied on Scott to share relevant and timely information about the coronavirus throughout the pandemic.

Scott felt that the best way to communicate with residents about the virus was through a unified message. Her team established a Joint Information Center where representatives from other city and county departments, local school districts and universities, businesses, and the media could share information and develop a central messaging strategy.

"The biggest part of our information strategy was hosting regular press conferences and briefings," Scott said. "We decided to put the Springfield-Greene County Health Director Clay Goddard at the forefront of those briefings because he had a very clear and deliberate way of delivering public health information that helped build trust in the community."

Scott also accomplished an incredible feat in coordinating a

joint town hall broadcast between KYTV and KOLR, historically rival networks. Her team also took to social media livestreaming to make news conferences more accessible to the general public.

Another key communication channel for the City of Springfield was the faith community. Scott helped arrange the Have Faith Initiative, a network of faith leaders from all religions who met regularly with city and county officials to engage in a two-way dialogue about the best response to the virus. Faith leaders committed to share public health protocols with their congregations and to reinforce the policies the city and county were promoting.

Scott believes that all of these efforts were critical to keeping the COVID-19 case numbers and death toll low in the Ozarks.

However, Scott admits that the City of Springfield faced several unexpected challenges along the way.

"I worked in healthcare for 18 years prior to coming to the City, and one thing I did not anticipate was the politicization of mask wearing," Scott said. "The City did

not initially enact a mask mandate in Springfield because we felt that it would undermine our overall attempt to keep everyone safe due to the amount of backlash we would receive. We also did not want to give residents a false sense of security when they were wearing a mask. However, the science became abundantly clear from the Great Clips incident (where face covering was credited for no clients becoming infected after two stylists tested positive) that masking was effective and needed."

Scott faced another unexpected challenge when protestors gathered in the streets following the May death of George Floyd, a Black American who died during an arrest by Minneapolis police.



While the protests violated the City's mass gathering guidelines, city

leaders made the difficult decision to allow the protests.

"I asked Clay Goddard what his thoughts were in allowing the protests because I knew it was dangerous to bring people together right now, and he said that it was a healing moment in our country and he couldn't see us banning those types of protests in any way, shape or form," Scott said. "He said that the only thing worse than COVID-19 is systemic racism and oppression."

Scott hopes the pandemic creates a greater sense of empathy in the community, especially for those faced with difficult decisions to keep the community safe.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR:** Scott hopes for more neighbor-to-neighbor interaction in the future, as the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the challenges of isolation and loneliness.
- ▶ **DOCUMENT THE CRISIS:** From personal experience, Scott knows that it is incredibly difficult to chronicle your response to a crisis after it has passed. Reflect a little bit every day.

*"Deciding to bring in local subject matter experts like Steve Edwards and Clay Goddard to relay information to the public was **important in building trust with our constituents**," Scott said. "I was surprised at how much Springfieldians **really do look to the government and Health Department** to tell them the right thing to do."*

# Amos Bridges

Editor-in-Chief, Springfield News-Leader

When the Springfield News-Leader first began reporting on the novel coronavirus in the United States, Editor-in-Chief Amos Bridges considered it a coastal situation that would likely be handled before it could ever reach the Ozarks. By the second week of March, Bridges and his team had transitioned to fully remote work and were reporting on COVID-19 news as the first cases were confirmed in Springfield.

“Once the announcement came from our corporate headquarters that all affiliate newspapers would be suspending in-person operations, our reporters began working nonstop and through the week-ends on COVID coverage,” Bridges said. “We essentially shifted into crisis mode.”

The News-Leader is no stranger to crisis coverage. From the Joplin tornado to the Branson duck boat sinking, Bridges’ team has a wealth

of experience providing readers with timely information about the latest events gripping the Ozarks. Unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these crisis events had a clear beginning and end in the news cycle. With no end to the virus in sight, crisis reporting has become the everyday routine of Bridges’ staff.

“It can be a bit difficult to keep up our reporters’ morale and their ability to continue following a crisis situation for a number of months, particularly when their health and safety are at risk,” Bridges said.

The News-Leader placed a strong emphasis on caring for the mental health of its employees to combat burnout and help with the social isolation that can arise from remote work.

“It’s hard to not see co-workers, and we want to be able to check in on the mental health of our colleagues and that can be difficult

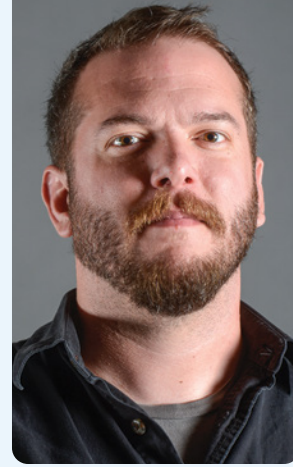
from a distance,” Bridges said. “We find that a lot of our young reporters are always saying yes to doing another story, and that’s great until you end up hitting a wall. So, we have been really intentional about giving a break to our reporters even when they’re not asking for one.”

Bridges notes that while nothing can replace face-to-face interactions in the newsroom, online communication channels like Slack, Microsoft Teams and Zoom have helped the staff feel more connected through the pandemic. The News-Leader has also used these same tools to conduct interviews in a safe and convenient manner.

Bridges believes that the new tools his team has discovered will make working from home more of a commonplace activity at the News-Leader even after the pandemic passes.

Not all of the changes from the coronavirus have been positive for the News-Leader. Declining revenue from advertisements forced the newspaper to furlough several of its reporters.

“The economics of our business are closely tied with the economics of local businesses. And when local businesses are struggling, that kind of trickles up to us,” Bridges said. “However, in the third quarter, we will be working on getting folks



back to work. It can be tough when you have some folks out of work, especially when there is an endless number of stories that we could be working on during this time.”

The News-Leader’s furloughs have not stopped the organization from providing robust coverage of the virus to the Springfield community. The paper suspended the paywall on its online coverage of the coronavirus, leading to an uptick in subscriptions and support from readers who see a renewed value in the News-Leader’s work.

Bridges also believes his team successfully balanced the polarizing public sentiment on the coronavirus with the paper’s responsibility to equip readers with the latest facts.

“We stuck to an objective reporting of the facts like we always do,” Bridges said. “We often tried to gauge what the public sentiment on local ordinances would be through our reporting and by interviewing folks in the community. We were also sure to get many alternative points of view and work them in appropriately. I think that the city has done an excellent job of putting the voices of experts at the front and center in this pandemic, and we have tried to do that in our reporting as well.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **THE FUTURE IS DECENTRALIZED:** Bridges finds that productivity did not suffer while working remotely. Going forward, it is possible that the office will serve as a meeting point, but staff do not necessarily need to be physically present to complete their work.
- ▶ **MEDIA AS THE FIFTH ESTATE:** The media serves a critical role as a public information resource and accountability mechanism for elected officials. Bridges hopes that the pandemic has reminded the public of the importance of the media’s role in society.

*“I hope this pandemic reminds folks of the importance of what we do as a news publication and what the media does in general,” Bridges said.*

*“We were able to pull important information together from all over, integrate alternative points of view and really serve the public during this time.”*

# Jennifer Jackson

Owner and Publisher, *Springfield Business Journal*

When the COVID-19 pandemic first entered the Ozarks, Springfield Business Journal Owner and Publisher Jennifer Jackson found herself adapting to its changes right alongside the businesses her paper serves. In early March, SBJ quickly transitioned to a remote working environment and began covering COVID-19 business news free of charge.

“Springfield Business Journal felt like it was important to report on the business aspects of the crisis as soon as possible,” Jackson said. “We saw an enormous amount of coverage in the local news about the health impact and health warnings associated with the virus, but there was a gap in coverage related to the business impact that we were able to serve.”

Jackson and her team met the community’s need for business news through their traditional print medium, online and digital coverage, and virtual events.

“Having a method to keep business owners informed of early successes of other businesses adapting funding resources, or even what we had to learn from the failure of businesses or closures of businesses, could do nothing but benefit those that are still struggling to find their way,” Jackson said.

To provide timely resources

and coverage to area businesses, the Journal relied on new technologies and platforms to connect with their readers. Zoom, the videoconferencing platform, became the Journal’s primary tool for meetings, events and broadcasts.

“We embraced new technologies more rapidly than we otherwise would have,” Jackson said. “There are things that we do that require a personal element, and programs like Zoom helped us maintain some of that personal element for meetings and events—even photography! I had the fortune of having my college-aged daughters home from school to help with the technology transition, but there’s something to be said about attracting the 18- to 24-year-olds to your workplace.”

Jackson believes that the advances made in virtual-event broadcasting and organizing will remain a part of the Journal’s operations long after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

As the Springfield area transitions to COVID-19 recovery, SBJ is offering valuable data about the impact of COVID-19 on business and consumer sentiment through its Economic Growth Forum events. Just weeks before the pandemic spread to the Ozarks, SBJ finished the data collection from its second-annual Economic

Growth survey. As businesses closed their doors to prevent the spread of the virus, it became clear that the data SBJ collected no longer accurately captured the local business sentiment. SBJ quickly issued a new survey, becoming the first organization in the area to collect data about the business impact of COVID-19.

Alongside SBJ’s achievements, however, have come plenty of challenges. As many workplaces are discovering, the remote working environment makes timely and clear communication more difficult. Jackson hopes to return the staff to the office as soon as it is safe.

“When we headed home, we weren’t prepared for the length of time that this would go on,” Jackson said. “I never anticipated that four or five months down the road,



we would still be somewhat divided as a staff on when and how to return

to optimal operations together under one roof.”

The Journal also encountered external challenges in navigating the mixed public sentiment around COVID-19 while remaining a trusted business news source for its readers.

“I would say there has been some sentiment that folks are tired of negative news and have grown weary of COVID, COVID, COVID,” Jackson said.

“But Springfield Business Journal works very hard to provide critical and balanced information without taking a stance. Right now, that coverage will remain focused on COVID issues that our readers need to make the best business decisions they can.”

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **INDUSTRY IS CONNECTED:** Jackson believes that in Springfield, the success of industries from marketing to manufacturing are all intertwined. To move forward from this pandemic, all industries must work together and no one can be left behind.
- **SENSATIONALISM DOES NOT SELL:** Jackson hopes that news organizations will renew their commitment to informing the public and taking responsibility for the information they disseminate, as this has been far more appreciated by the public throughout the pandemic than sensationalism.

*“Springfield Business Journal has always seen its role to be a connector or conduit for businesses to learn about each other and for business people to learn about the kinds of issues that impact day-to-day operations in our area,” Jackson said. “No one can deny that, today, the COVID-19 outbreak in our local community is the single biggest issue impacting business.”*

# COVID-19 Community Resources

## Springfield-Greene County Health Department

▶ [springfieldmo.gov/5068/Coronavirus](http://springfieldmo.gov/5068/Coronavirus)

## City of Springfield

▶ [springfieldmo.gov/5151/Citys-Response-During-Coronavirus](http://springfieldmo.gov/5151/Citys-Response-During-Coronavirus)

## Greene County CARES Act Relief Fund

▶ [greenecountymo.gov/cares](http://greenecountymo.gov/cares)

## City Utilities of Springfield COVID-19 response

▶ [cityutilities.net/covid/](http://cityutilities.net/covid/)

## CoxHealth coronavirus resources

▶ [coxhealth.com/coronavirus](http://coxhealth.com/coronavirus)

## Mercy Health coronavirus resources

▶ [mercy.com/mercy-health-monitoring-coronavirus-covid-19](http://mercy.com/mercy-health-monitoring-coronavirus-covid-19)

## Springfield Public Schools

▶ [sps.org](http://sps.org)

## Ozarks Technical Community College COVID-19 information

▶ [otc.edu/covid](http://otc.edu/covid)

## Missouri State University COVID-19 information center

▶ [missouristate.edu/Coronavirus](http://missouristate.edu/Coronavirus)

## Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce COVID-19 information

▶ [springfieldchamber.com/responding-to-covid-19-novel-coronavirus/](http://springfieldchamber.com/responding-to-covid-19-novel-coronavirus/)

## Minorities in Business COVID-19 business resources

▶ [sgfmib.com/biz-information-resources](http://sgfmib.com/biz-information-resources)

## Ozarks Food Harvest

▶ [ozarksfoodharvest.org](http://ozarksfoodharvest.org)

## SeniorAge Area Agency on Aging

▶ [senioragemo.org](http://senioragemo.org)

## Discovery Center of Springfield

▶ [discoverycenter.org](http://discoverycenter.org)

## Community Partnership of the Ozarks COVID-19 response

▶ [cpozarks.org/covid19](http://cpozarks.org/covid19)

## United Way of the Ozarks COVID-19 resources

▶ [uwozarks.org/covid19](http://uwozarks.org/covid19)

## Community Foundation of the Ozarks COVID-19 information

▶ [cfozarks.org/covid19](http://cfozarks.org/covid19)

## Springfield-Greene County Library

▶ [thelibrary.org](http://thelibrary.org)

## Springfield News-Leader

▶ [news-leader.com](http://news-leader.com)

## Springfield Business Journal coronavirus coverage

▶ [sbj.net/stories/coronavirus-coverage,68060](http://sbj.net/stories/coronavirus-coverage,68060)

