Event Report

City-Led Response: Mayoral Leadership, Strategic Communications and Key Decision Points for Healing and Long-Term Social Cohesion

Webinar
27 March 2024

Summary

On 27 March 2024, the Strong Cities Network and the National League of Cities (NLC) inaugurated their strategic partnership by co-hosting a webinar on 'City-Led Response: Mayoral Leadership, Strategic Communications and Key Decision Points for Healing and Long-Term Social Cohesion'. The event focused on how mayoral leadership in the aftermath of a hate- or extremism-motived incident – and in the longer term – can support resilience and strengthen social cohesion. In conjunction with the webinar, Strong Cities released its new Guide for City-Led Response offering support for mayors, other subnational officials and the local and state governments they lead in formulating a sensitive and effective response in the wake of a hate- or violent extremism-motivated attack, incident or crisis.

The executive directors of Strong Cities and the NLC joined Mayor Tim Kelly of Chattanooga (Tennessee), Deputy Mayor Erin Bromaghim of Los Angeles (California) and Deputy Mayor Lakeesha Eure of Newark (New Jersey) to discuss their experiences and how local leaders can most effectively prepare their cities and communities or such incidents and then effectively manage the response in the wake of such tragedy. Speakers shared insights on how hate and extremism, particularly aimed at historically marginalised communities, are affecting their cities as well as strategies and examples for laying the proper groundwork for ensuring social cohesion in advance of, and following, such incidents.

Key Takeaways

1. **When hate and extremism-motivated incidents occur, it is cities that are most impacted.** Though federal and state authorities are usually the ones mandated with immediate post-incident response, it is local communities within cities that are most impacted by such incidents and therefore mayors and other elected local leaders and local government leaders have a central role to play in maintaining cohesion within and among communities in their city, both before any crisis as well as to support recovery over the long-term, well after the attention of federal and state authorities has moved on to another crisis.

2. **The threat is real and so preparation and coordination are key.** Given rising levels of hate and even threats against government officials themselves, local leaders should ensure that all building blocks are in place to mitigate the risk of a crisis in their cities when an incident occurs. To do this, city leaders need to "lock arms" with others in coordination. This includes making sure that all local government agencies in their cities are prepared and that the crisis response and management mechanisms and plans to enable effective coordination with other relevant stakeholders (whether federal, state, county, or other local governments within the county) are in place.

3. **Communication from local leadership and providing outlets for communities to raise their voice and be heard are essential.** Mayors and other city leaders need to reach out to their communities through multiple channels to ensure that all residents are reached, including those from historically-marginalised neighbourhoods and non-English speaking populations. Conversely, local governments should provide community members with spaces to share their concerns. Community organisations, 'aggregators' and 'people's assemblies' can play a key role in ensuring that local leaders hear from all communities across the city.

4. **Local leaders should appreciate how communities understand their own sense of safety and address their needs and priorities.** A 'public health'-informed approach allows cities to address the drivers of violence and other public safety issues (e.g., homelessness) by addressing root causes, such as mental health, trauma and socio-economic circumstances unique to each individual. Investing in community well-being and relieving chronic societal stresses helps prevent incidents from the outset and helps communities feel safe according to their own needs.

5. **Local leaders should bring residents together in a shared community and stand up for that community and its values.** Reinforcing to residents that they are all members of a shared, singular city community is essential, especially in polarising times. And when outsiders attempt to demonise specific communities or demean a city's values, it is up to mayors and other city leaders to stand up on behalf of those being targeted and uphold those values, even in the face of political pressure.

When Hate and Extremism-Motivated Incidents Occur, It Is Cities That Are Most Impacted

In his opening remarks, Eric Rosand, **Executive Director of the Strong Cities Network**, noted that in the immediate aftermath of an attack on a city or during heightened inter-communal or other tensions, federal and state authorities often take the lead in the emergency response, reinforcing public safety and launching criminal investigations. However, the impact of the instability that ensues can run deep, causing untold social and other consequences across communities. No matter how resilient they are, communities require strong local leadership to help them heal and recover. Accordingly, mayors and other local leaders and officials have critical roles to play in stabilising, reassuring, supporting and tackling social division in the aftermath. There are also increasing pressures on local public institutions to establish clear roles and protocols for responding to and mitigating the impacts of such incidents for their constituents. This role complements, rather than duplicates, national and state government action.

Tim Kelly, Mayor of Chattanooga (Tennessee), said that he was inspired to run for office amid the divisiveness of the 2016 presidential election after reading *The New Localism: How Cities Can Thrive in the Age of Populism* by Bruce Katz and Jeremy Nowak. The book instilled his belief in the power of cities and that the world is a network of cities. Cities are where the vast majority of innovation, economic activity and human progress happens. Accordingly, Mayor Kelly finds divisive national politics as an opportunity for a 'teachable moment' about localism: why good roads, good jobs and public safety – all local issues – are the issues that really matter, and while state and federal governments have a role to play in responding to hate and extremism-motivated incidents, mayors have a higher degree of trust in their community and it is a mayor's job to be there and reinforce a sense of calm and togetherness following an incident.

The Threat is Real; Preparation and Coordination are Key

Clarence Anthony, **CEO and Executive Director of the National League of Cities**, acknowledged that incidents of hate are plaguing our democracy, with heightened antagonism from misinformation and hyper-partisanship. Whether due to religion, race, or other beliefs, he said that "hate is real in our nation and our cities. We are losing our ability to have meaningful and reasonably engaged conversations with each other in political discourse." Local officials are on the frontlines, with more than one-third of Americans believing that violence against the government is justified. An NLC survey in 2021 found that 81% of elected officials have themselves received harassment, threats and bullying, including aimed at their children on social media.

Cities, towns and villages need a strategy and mitigation plan to minimise these threats, he stressed. Failing to plan and act, is already driving people away from public service and creating a leadership vacuum. The NLC recommends a three-pronged approach in planning: 1) securing the physical safety of public officials, 2) promoting mental health and wellbeing, and 3) improving and encouraging civil discourse. He emphasised that cities must be prepared to meet the threat in advance of any actual incident.

Lakeesha Eure, **Deputy Mayor of Public Safety in Newark (New Jersey)**, underscored how mayor-driven coordination is key. She said that Mayor Ras J. Baraka is willing to put pressure on heads of all city agencies – water, public safety, clergy liaisons, housing, migrants, etc. – to be active and activated at all times. In that manner, when a crisis happens, the city is already ahead of it: "The city is always ready so it doesn't have to get ready." In fact, she noted how Mayor Baraka is hands-on, often taking responsibility and doing things himself rather than delegating, in order to show residents and agency leaders how things are being, and should be, done. His administration believes that accountability and coordination are key.

Erin Bromaghim, **Deputy Mayor of International Affairs in Los Angeles (California)**, highlighted the fact that the city is just one of 88 cities in Los Angeles County. Given this large array of geographically-overlapping jurisdictions and their attendant officials, Mayor Karen Bass is committed to 'locking arms' across all levels of government. The city, along with the county, has emergency management plans in place that are activated at a moment's notice – most recently, when fire destroyed a portion of a major highway that runs through the city, leading local and county leaders as well as state and federal officials to respond.

Communication from Local Leadership and Providing Outlets for Communities to Raise Their Voice and Be Heard are Essential

Deputy Mayor Lakeesha Eure recalled Newark's history of activism and legacy of grassroots-based politics. In such a milieu, "Communication is key." Reflecting that legacy, Mayor Baraka's strategy has been very direct, staying in communication with residents through multiple avenues of distribution: knocking on doors, snail mail, appearing on Facebook Live three times per week, increasing the number of 'State of City' addresses to two per year and regularly delivering messages and reassuring communities that he is on top of things. Leadership makes a deliberate effort to do effective communications tailored to all residents – youth, seniors, each ethnic/racial/religious demographic, non-English speaking populations and especially folks that are not connected to the mainstream and those who oppose the mayor and his administration. The mayor wants a team that is diverse and sophisticated enough to be able to go to all those communities, having designated a new deputy mayor for intercultural affairs to reach minority communities. If there are hard-to-reach populations, then the team will reach out to those who can connect with those populations.

The mayor recognises the importance of listening to voices from the bottom up: "Allowing for voice and choice for all residents." This includes a consistent series of community meetings, public safety meetings, resident meetings and meetings with private interest groups (such as property and business owners). The key is to provide safe spaces for people to meet and express their concerns, including at city council meetings. Though those meetings can turn heated, it is important to give communities a voice and register their complaints. Often, the answers are to provide more space for the community to have a voice, more meetings and more touch points with government, even if they overlap: "You can never have enough space for community meetings," Deputy Mayor Eure stressed.

In that vein, the Newark People's Assembly serves as a liaison between community and the mayor's office. And sometimes, when some communities say they don't want to be part of politics, leaders need to win them over by emphasising that "everything is politics," and if "you're not doing politics, you're not doing anything" to actually serve your community.

Dep. Mayor Bromaghim agreed, saying that for city leaders, "You have to be present, to create that space, to bring that solidarity, to listen, to learn." Given that leaders don't share the same lived experience as everyone else in their communities the only way to incorporate their perspective is "by building that bigger tent, that safer space, by caring." In Los Angeles, there are organisations and community groups throughout the city that play an "aggregator" role, who collect the voices of their communities and then help city leaders "listen to their concerns, hold that safe space for reaction and solidarity and then begin that communication with them." Cultivating this network of aggregators is important to be more effective, to demonstrate that presence and stability and then be responsive based on their feedback from community. Given their importance, local officials have the responsibility to create these spaces and platforms.

In this vein, **Mayor Kelly** stressed the importance of building trust with residents, noting that city leaders can't wait for crises to happen and then take out the tactical playbook. Rather, the "war is won in the small battles every day of building those small bridges and having programmes in place so you have those communications with…communities, so that when you get behind that podium in a moment of crisis, you already have that credibility and people trust that what you're saying is correct."

> **"Until we rid our world of hate, we have to be prepared, we have to be ready. We can't wait [until tragedy strikes] and say, I can't believe it happened in my community."**
>
> Clarence Anthony
> CEO and Executive Director

Local Leaders Should Appreciate How Communities Understand Their Own Sense of Safety and Address Their Needs and Priorities

According to **Deputy Mayor Eure**, "The welfare and wellbeing of people is at the heart of everything [local leaders] do." It is essential that residents feel safe and the City of Newark approaches violence and its prevention as a public health issue, with a focus on the "social determinants of health" and safety. And the city now has the resources to actually fund and invest in that approach more than ever before, dedicating about $20M in community public health, with aims to generate more federal and state grants from offices of violence prevention and health departments.

This approach has involved looking at root causes of community wellbeing challenges and incorporating data-informed approaches – through organisations such as the Newark Public Safety Collaborative – that were not previously used in the city. And they are finding that the root causes of most crises are a result of undiagnosed mental health issues – particularly among youth – and trauma: historical trauma, generational trauma and inter-personal trauma. She said the city now has four trauma recovery centres, including two that are run by community-based organisations. The city also convenes a "Trauma to Trust" training between law enforcement officials and the community to allow participants to address their own trauma and self-care: "You can't help others if you can't help yourself first. You can't lead if you're not self-accountable."

The framing is not that the city is attempting to "drive down violence," it is that the city is "increasing well-being, trauma recovery, mental health services and investment." Though it might ultimately reduce violence in the city, for the administration "it is addressing the social determinants of health that is paramount." The mayor, she said, convenes the departments of public health and public safety each week and is building a task force so that health workers, law enforcement and communities can work together on addressing these issues. In this manner, the city is gaining trust of communities affected by trauma by demonstrating that it is addressing their trauma and providing them resources to alleviate it.

In Los Angeles, **Deputy Mayor Bromaghim** said that Mayor Bass appointed a deputy mayor of community safety who is different to the deputy mayor for public safety. While the latter addresses police, fire and emergency management, the former is focused on the community: violence intervention work, liaising with community groups who are out in the field, gang violence reduction, youth development programming, etc. The administration understands that social service provision is not 'one size fits all,' and so it is looking to learn how best to "put the public back in public service," through a new 'community safety survey.' The survey will help officials understand how Los Angeles communities (across all 450 square miles, 220 languages and 4 million people) define safety in their communities differently and what services they expect the city to deliver in order to provide that sense of community safety. The city will then take a "community-informed, lived experience-informed" design approach to service provision, ensuring that it is crafted to meet those distinct needs.

She added that the city's 'locking arms' concept for inter-governmental coordination is being leveraged to address chronic stresses. Los Angeles County has large, unhoused communities, with 70,000 people sleeping in unhoused shelters. It is a problem that cannot be solved without all levels of government working in lockstep. Such an issue demands a public health approach: every unhoused individual has their own unique combination of trauma and economic issues that landed them in this situation – and then may have compounding trauma from their time on the street on top

of that. This requires local agencies to address each person individually to bring them inside safety. Mayor Bass's "Inside Safe" programme is a key component of her community safety strategy to recognise that needs are individualised.

And some incidents can be predicted and addressed beforehand. With Los Angeles slated to host the 2026 World Cup and 2028 Olympics, she said the administration is already looking how communities are impacted by such major events, with plans in place to address human rights and unique risks that confront local communities, from labour violations and human exploitation and trafficking to racism, discrimination and how security parameters will impact residents. Los Angeles is using these events to create broader networks of responders from organisations and individuals who specialise in the mitigation of these risks (e.g. trafficking, countering racism) and bring together a broad coalition of organisations to address these concerns for the long term.

Mayor Kelly echoed that the notion of compounding trauma is very real in vulnerable communities. As mayor, he inaugurated an Office of Equity and Community Engagement and an Office of New Americans to meet the needs of his diverse population. Chattanooga has been "intentional about building bridges" from the outset, to ensure that such communities feel that their presence is represented and felt so when times of crisis do arise, they feel protected. This is especially true with some immigrant communities who are preyed upon frequently and yet do not feel safe with police. The mayor's office reaches out repeatedly to ensure that they can feel safe and protected. Such dynamics are a "very real challenge" that "requires intentionality from city leadership and that's what we're doing."

Local Leaders Should Bring Residents Together in Shared Community and Stand Up for that Community and Its Values

Mayor Kelly reiterated that while tactical responses post-incident are important, a broader strategy of constantly trying to bring folks together in a way that reinforces community is essential. He added that, "the better job a city does on this in the course of time, the easier it is in a time of crisis." As a 'localist,' the mayor stresses to residents that they ought to think of themselves first and foremost as 'Chattanoogans.' The messages they see on television demonising other groups, whether nationally or locally, are just trying to generate outrage to keep people watching – ultimately, what is needed is not more complicated than 'love thy neighbour.' And to do so, his administration seeks to build bridges between various elements of the community, without playing favourites or picking sides. This 'convening function' of the mayor's office is "hugely important" as "people look to the mayor for leadership, calm and cohesion," particularly in times of crisis.

> **"We live together in our cities, so in times of crises, it is up to the mayor to be clear that we have to come together as city residents to calm the waters and face these issues together."**
>
> Mayor Tim Kelly
> Chattanooga, Tennessee

Deputy Mayor Eure said that a key skill for leaders is knowing how to bring entities together. Even for entities that may not agree with the administration on all issues, they can recognise that they "all care about the community": "We find that one thing we agree on and we work on that." In Newark, the Brick City Peace Collective brings together all organisations involved in violence intervention work to meet monthly, share data and work with city government to do community-led response. The mayor insists that all groups participate and work collaboratively – he will "not support siloed work." She said that he sets the tone and is willing to hold people accountable, so the community understands that this collaborative work is for the benefit of the whole city.

Deputy Mayor Bromaghim emphasised that there is no room for inauthenticity at the local level and no room for anything other than a 'big-tent approach,' because "your community is your community – you can't redraw it or change it. All you can do is invite people in to create that space." And when outsiders – whether politicians or others – use demeaning rhetoric targeting specific communities in Los Angeles, it is the city government's role to speaking up in support of communities: "We have to actively counter that rhetoric by standing up, being vocal, creating space for those impacted communities." Likewise, when California's values are demeaned, or the federal government attempts to discriminate against its residents for their progressive principles, local government leaders need to "stand up" and affirm that they will "protect these as core values."

Next Steps

This webinar was the inaugural event of the new strategic partnership between the Strong Cities Network and the National League of Cities. The partnership is aimed at supporting cities and local governments to tackle rising hate, extremism and polarisation with new key resources and member networks of cities – including those across the globe – facing similar struggles. Information on future programmes and activities will be forthcoming.

Additional Resources

- A Guide for City-Led Response, Strong Cities Network (March 2024)

- Responding to a Terror Attack: A Strong Cities Toolkit, Strong Cities Network (January 2020)

- A Guide for Cities: Preventing Hate, Extremism & Polarisation, Strong Cities Network (September 2023)

- A Guide for Mayors: Preventing and Responding to Hate, Extremism and Polarisation, Strong Cities Network (September 2023)

- Preventing and Responding to Election Disruption and Violence: Ten Considerations for Cities, Strong Cities Network (March 2024)

- Navigating Local Impacts of Global Crises: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Cities – Lessons from the Israel-Gaza Crisis, Strong Cities Network (December 2023)

Contact Information

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For more information on the National League of Cities and its Center for Municipal Practice, please contact centerformunicipalpractice@nlc.org.