

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 14, “2021 Legislative Series: Responding to COVID-19”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fisher:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is The City Speak. I'm your special host for our legislative preview, Luke Fischer. Through this series of three podcasts, we'll cover topics on the economy, pandemic, and race equity. We hope to introduce you to our team of lobbyists at the Capitol, and to help you be best prepared for the upcoming legislative session. We're recording today's podcast on Friday, January 8th, 2021. I think that that's an important thing to note, recognizing that there's a lot in flux in the world right now, but today's recording will give you some good insight to the upcoming Minnesota legislative session. [Podcast theme fades out]

Luke Fischer:

All right. This next conversation is about the pandemic and the state, federal, and local partnership that cities have used and relied on to respond to COVID-19. I'm joined today by two of our IGR, intergovernmental relations lobbyists, Daniel Lightfoot, and Ann Lindstrom. I'll give you a little bit of background about who they are and then we'll dive right into the conversation.

Luke Fischer:

Daniel Lightfoot has been an intergovernmental relations representative with the League for two years. The main issues he covers at the state Capitol are broadband and housing, and he tag teams federal relations and advocacy with Ann Lindstrom. Ann Lindstrom is our other guest, and she has been on League staff for about eight years. She covers elections, employment and HR issues, and regulated industries, in addition to the federal relations portfolio that she helps manage with Daniel. Welcome to both of you. Daniel, we're happy you're here. Hello.

Daniel Lightfoot:

Happy to be here. Thanks Luke.

Luke Fischer:

Hi Ann. How are you?

Ann Lindstrom:

I'm great. Thanks for having us.

Luke Fischer:

Good. So, I'm really excited to have this conversation about the pandemic, and the state, federal, and local coordination that's happened. And I'm wondering if you can give us just a little bit of a background, Daniel, maybe on what that relationship has looked like over the past few months.

Daniel Lightfoot:

Sure, Luke. So, since the beginning of the pandemic, I think you've seen all levels of government working together to respond. And you've heard a lot of elected officials, including Governor Walz and officials at the federal level claim that the response to that pandemic is locally executed, state managed, and federally supported. And that's really where our goals have been as an organization to support our cities.

And what that looks like is, resources that are coming from the federal government that flow through the states and ultimately come to our cities, that partnership is so important for that flow of resources to be effective and those resources to be flexible in nature.

Daniel Lightfoot:

And one of the things that I think was a little bit of a, of a setback with the coronavirus relief funds, was that those funds went through to the state but there wasn't really a clear guideline on how those funds would ultimately be distributed to cities and local units of government. But it took a lot of effort and it took a lot of coordination with the state and ultimately, we were able to successfully get those funds out. But looking ahead, what we're trying to ensure as we go forward with the pandemic is, is making sure that those funds are flexible in nature and can be directly attributed and dispersed to local units of government to best respond to the pandemic.

Luke Fischer:

So, where have cities sort of seen some rub with that assistance that's come through the Coronavirus Relief Act — where have cities encountered challenges using those funds?

Daniel Lightfoot:

I think at the federal level because it was such a large amount of funding, the bill language was a little bit ambiguous. A lot of the guidance was left with the Department of the Treasury to figure out what the parameters for those funds were. And we saw a lot of conflicting guidance, and so some of the ambiguity there as cities are trying to deploy these funds quickly was challenging. And so, what we're trying to do moving forward is make sure that those guidelines are clear. And one way to ensure that is, is ensuring that there's added flexibility for those funds.

Daniel Lightfoot:

The other thing about the coronavirus relief funds that was challenging for cities is they were reserved for unbudgeted COVID-19 costs. And we know, of course, that cities are struggling with a substantial increase of those costs, but the funds weren't able to be used for revenue loss, which is another severe challenge that cities are facing as they respond to this pandemic is, is revenue loss directly associated with the pandemic, whether it's tax revenues, fee revenues, et cetera.

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Daniel Lightfoot:

So, we're hoping that direct funding can cover both loss of revenue as well as unbudgeted costs.

Luke Fischer:

So, Ann I'm wondering, what does federal advocacy look like right now around the pandemic? How have cities been effectively advocating and making sure that their voice is heard at the national level?

Ann Lindstrom:

I think sharing the experiences of the services that they're delivering to our congressional delegation and members of Congress who are making the decisions and people in agencies. Just like our work at the state level, we're always engaged in education about what cities do and members of Congress need to know that, too. They might not understand the different types of things that cities are doing in response to COVID-19.

Luke Fischer:

Recognizing that there is a change in power coming in D.C. and at the national level, we're going to see a new administration, we're going to see a new Congress. What are we hearing from our partners at the national level about what that means for cities' ability to respond to the pandemic?

Ann Lindstrom:

What we have heard from the incoming Biden administration is support for getting direct federal funding to cities. And again, the message around that is it allows cities to be more nimble and resourceful to the same group of constituents that members of Congress have. The majorities in both the House and the Senate have communicated a commitment to getting direct federal flexible funding to cities as well.

Daniel Lightfoot:

Yeah, we got close. We grew our advocacy with the National League of Cities and with our Congressional delegation, you know, that was overwhelmingly supportive, both Republicans and Democrats. Because there is an understanding that in order to continue to provide the essential services that cities provide, while also continuing to respond to this pandemic, there is going to need to be assistance from the federal government. And obviously we were very thankful that the coronavirus relief funds were ultimately distributed to cities in Minnesota, but we can't just check the box and stop there. This pandemic is continuing, and we're seeing throughout these conversations that cities are having to make painful decisions of cuts and layoffs and delaying capital projects in order to continue to providing those core services.

Daniel Lightfoot:

So, with the revenue loss, as well as the expenditure increases for the pandemic, it is absolutely essential that we do get an additional layer of federal assistance that is direct to cities, that doesn't have to flow necessarily through the state, and that is flexible in nature that can be used for revenue loss.

Luke Fischer:

You know, one of the things that I've heard a little bit about from cities is some misdirection, or hard to understand guidance, from the Department of Treasury around how funds can be spent. Have we been effective generally as cities in the country advocating for — Daniel, you talked about flexibility — but for clearer guidelines at the beginning of any new potential funding?

Daniel Lightfoot:

Yeah. You're spot on Luke. You know, when the state imposed a pretty strict timeline of when those coronavirus relief funds had to be spent, it was really important that cities had clear understanding on how those dollars could be spent. Obviously, cities have different priorities and are responding based on community needs to this pandemic in different ways, and this pandemic is hitting different cities in different ways based on their tax base and many other factors.

Daniel Lightfoot:

And so, it was frustrating to have to continually go back to treasury officials to say, "You know, the guidance that you released last week looks different than the one this week, and we're trying to get money out the door, but we want to do that." And you know, 'cause when audits come around, there could be some challenges there. So, I think we have signaled certainly to the Minnesota delegation, the importance of clear guidance from the Treasury with any new additional federal funding.

Luke Fischer:

So, I think one of the questions that I've gotten, Ann, maybe you can weigh in on this a little bit, is we've talked a lot about sort of that federal state relationship. What does the local relationship look like with a state lately? When it comes to the state's distribution of these funds, what have we been doing to help coordinate and ensure that at least at the state level we're having our needs met?

Ann Lindstrom:

Again, a lot of communication about what cities need and how this should work. In the beginning, I think it's fair to say that it was a bit contentious in determining how to get it out the door and, you know, population thresholds. And it took a lot of navigating between our brothers and sisters at the counties, and then working with members of the Legislature and the administration to figure out the best way to distribute a lot of money. I think that our relationship with the state has been successful. I mean, again, we have a fair amount of conversation with a lot of people who are ultimately making some of these decisions about it. I think there's always room for improvement, but that is not unlike any other legislative issue [laughs] that we work on that involves our relationship with the state.

Daniel Lightfoot:

And I think the state understands how important it is that different cities, our members in Minnesota, have different needs in this pandemic. And they really, I think, looked to the League and our representation of our members to determine what is the most equitable way to distribute these funds. There was no roadmap for the state to figure out how to distribute these funds. And so, you know, our department worked very hard with state officials to ensure that cities of all sizes get equitable disbursement of these dollars to help assist with pandemic response.

Luke Fischer:

So, recognizing that there's been a lot of really significant lifting that's happened at the federal level, at the state level, at the local level, to respond to the pandemic, what's some good advice for city officials to advocate for themselves as they're encountering challenges related to the pandemic going forward, if I think about this upcoming legislative session and they're encountering issues that are related to the pandemic?

Ann Lindstrom:

There's one silver lining that we see about everybody working from their basements is that our members have a direct line to our members of the Legislature and Congress in a way that maybe they didn't before. And so, it sort of levels the playing field a bit. So, I'm thinking of, you know, one of our members can reach out to their legislators and schedule a phone call or a Zoom meeting in a way that wasn't as tenable before, or as easy to do.

Daniel Lightfoot:

Yeah. You know, telling your story, you know, our city officials are the boots on the ground. They are the ones that have the pulse of, you know, how the pandemic response is going, how those resources are being deployed effectively. And I think one of the reasons why we were able to get so much traction this last round of assistance package negotiations at the federal level is all of the stories and cases from cities around the country, and around our state, on the needs for that direct federal assistance.

Ann Lindstrom:

Our parent organization, the National League of Cities, has been working tirelessly on behalf of cities across the country. And they've already put out a call for more data and more stories like Daniel said, that they can bring forward in this next Congress. And again, they're very reachable. It matters. And it moves the needle when we are able to get that, because, you know, just like at the state Legislature, you know, members of Congress would rather hear directly from city officials than the lobbyists.

Daniel Lightfoot:

Absolutely.

Ann Lindstrom:

So we try and take that information when we're able to get it and use it to their advantage.

Luke Fischer:

We're at a point in the arc of the pandemic where, I've recently heard that we're in the fourth or fifth inning, and we've got a ways to go before we get back to normal. So, there's a lot of advocacy to be done yet, there's a lot of work in front of us. And Daniel Lightfoot and Ann Lindstrom, I think you both did a great job helping our members get their arms around what that looks like, at the federal level and what that looks like in coordination with the state level. So, thank you very much to both of you for making some time for us today.

Luke Fischer:

I do think it's important to point out that our entire lobbyist team are accessible, and available, and easy to get a hold of and in touch with throughout the session. So, if you have questions I know you both are available on email at strange hours of the day when the Legislature is meeting [laughs], you've got a presence on social media, and you're great people to follow along with to keep up on current events and on legislation as it's unfolding. So, thank you to both of you for your work at the Capitol and for the things that you do on behalf of our members.

Ann Lindstrom:

Thanks for having us.

Daniel Lightfoot:

Absolutely. Thanks Luke.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

All right, listeners, in this episode of The City Speak [podcast theme music fades out] we covered pandemic response and the close coordination that happens between federal, state, and local units of government. As we wrap up every episode, we like to highlight a few key takeaways for city officials to focus in on.

Luke Fischer:

Listening to Daniel and Ann talk, one of the things that I realized is that pandemic response will continue to take close and careful coordination between local units of government and state and federal partners. This pandemic requires a huge lift and a lot of coordination. Second takeaway I had is that details matter in how federal packages are structured, which brings me to the third point: Your stories and experiences are so important for Congress people, for state legislators to hear so they can craft bills that provide the assistance that your city needs.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

So, with that, this is one of our three-part legislative preview series. We've covered the economy, the pandemic, and race equity. Thank you so much for making time to listen in to this episode and do check out the others if you haven't already. Be ready, we're working on season four right now. Until then, be well.

[Podcast theme music ends]