

**Advice to a public official responsible for stimulus funds:
Create a bold vision and roadmap, celebrate every success, and tell your story
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Dear state and local government official: Thank you for showing up, again and again throughout the pandemic, in the face of danger and without being sufficiently appreciated. You are undoubtedly tired from this sprint-marathon, juggling outsized work and personal responsibilities, working more and under greater stress while the public clapped/sang/banged pots for seemingly everyone but public sector employees. As one public official told me, her staff are feeling “pretty beat up.”

You’re exhausted, and may have a significant amount of federal stimulus dollars to spend – with time constraints and complex guidelines. These incoming billions are a once in a generation chance to make strategic long-term investments across government. And yet, coming on the heels of overwork, the timing is tough. One public health official told me she’d find it easier to take a 10% budget cut than to handle the tripling of her budget in such a short time. You know there will be scrutiny from the press regardless of how good a job you do on this enormous task. Your team may be diminished through retirements, staff lost to COVID-related illness, death, and attrition due to the “big quit” inspired by the pandemic.

You know that if exhaustion gets the best of you and your team, the results may include misspent funds, failed projects, or just not maximizing impact. Many senior leaders in government have risen through the ranks based on expertise and policy knowledge, not because they are experts in project planning and management - yet these skillsets are needed to effectively steward federal stimulus dollars.

Fed up? I don’t blame you. Having been responsible for federal homeland security funding in Massachusetts in the post 9/11 era, I have seen this movie before, and it’s a thriller, but always on the brink of horror. So, here is my unsolicited advice:

- 1. Create a long-term strategy.** The magnitude, variety, and in some areas, flexibility of the federal funding cries out for a long-term strategy. Federal stimulus dollars need to be spent by the end of calendar year 2024, but the impact can last for generations, so the first task is to think of the game-changing investments that will make the biggest difference. It’s important to create a long-term strategy that every funded project can advance, and to engage key stakeholders in developing the strategy. When Massachusetts received federal homeland security funding in the post 9/11 era, we were the first state to publish our homeland security strategy and funding plans. We actively engaged stakeholders in strategy discussions and then aggressively shared the final plan, and provided training on how local efforts could align with state goals. We required that all funded projects align with a data-driven statewide strategy based on documented security risks, according to shared definitions of threats, risks, and vulnerabilities. We required that voice and data communications projects fit within the statewide interoperability strategy. Publishing the strategy and training to it helped get everyone on the same page.

- 2. Think big.** Government culture does not facilitate risk-taking and innovation. Yet, to fail to take any risks now with once in a generation funding is to waste an opportunity to be bold. [John Roman](#) points out that bold reforms and big ideas are more likely to have lasting impact than small reforms that we hope will spread to become larger ones. This is a time to take some risks, and in so doing we should expect some failure. If/when that happens, don't indulge in a blame game, instead mine the results for insight and learning, then move on to the next challenge with greater wisdom. One of the "big ideas" we put in place in Massachusetts when our homeland security funding was increased 20-fold (from \$6 million to \$123 million) was regional collaboration – an idea inspired by my then-boss and Secretary of Public Safety [Ed Flynn's](#) experience as the Arlington, VA police chief who led the response to the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, when collaboration across jurisdictional lines was essential to effective response. Massachusetts has 351 cities and towns, some older than the country itself, so local independence is hard-wired and collaboration was not the norm. Using the federal homeland security funding as leverage, we forced cities and towns work across jurisdictional boundaries in regional collaboratives if they wanted funding (and they all did). Many credit the seamless collaboration of first responders at the finish line of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and subsequent coordinated regional investigation to the fact that they had been training together for years - the power of the new money and my boss' vision, supported by that of Governor Romney who had overseen security for the first post 9/11 Olympics, that regional collaboration mattered allowed us to create that mandate and it has paid dividends ever since. Another of our "big ideas" was that any major project had to successfully complete a planning phase before the balance of funds were disbursed. We also required a cross-disciplinary approach to homeland security that brought public health into planning alongside traditional first responders.
- 3. Support your team and celebrate even small wins.** A public official recently told me that her entire team, most especially the frontline customer service staff, feels under siege by the way the public takes out their pandemic frustrations on them. This is the time when public servants need unconditional support from their bosses. It can come in the form of latitude to be creative, training and professional development, or the ability to hire temporary staff to help get the work done. Whatever it takes, make sure your people have the resources they need to get the job done, and that they know that you will back them up. I was blessed to have the complete support of my boss, and his boss as well when I was responsible for the homeland security rollout in Massachusetts. I hired a tech company to develop our first ever digital grant application, and we brought in a consultant to help us get the homeland security strategy finished more quickly and completely. At this point in the pandemic, everyone is exhausted, so celebrating small wins is important.
- 4. Gather public ideas and input.** Truly innovative ideas seldom come from inside an organization – Henry Ford got his idea for the automobile assembly line from observing the meatpacking business. Outside voices must be brought in to make the federal stimulus more effective, and also more relevant to and impactful for historically underrepresented groups. Gathering the perspectives of local residents, advocates, academics, and private sector leaders brings fresh

perspective to government – all the more important at a time for bold ideas. Technology makes it far easier than in the past to gather stakeholder input and to maintain ongoing engagement in your planning process, as well as providing customer feedback with satisfaction during the process. The pandemic has energized civic engagement with online access to previously cloistered “public meetings” that had been attended by a small but vocal minority. Now virtual platforms, particularly if they allow asynchronous contributions, will significantly increase the public’s ability to not only have input, but to feel they are truly part of the process. Participatory budgeting, virtual town halls, customer feedback surveys, online suggestions boxes and many other new models of engagement offer templates for getting public input on the stimulus spending plan.

5. **“Show your work” as you make funding decisions.** When critics later try to assail your results, as they say in grade school math class, “show your work” by making public your strategy for allocating funding. In the rollout of homeland security funding in Massachusetts, we had a competitive grant program with four criteria: degree of threat, degree of readiness, degree of cooperation, and reasonableness of request, and we provided explanations how each criterion was derived and numeric values for each level of assessment. Every proposal was read and scored by three readers, incorporating the expertise of professionals from nearby states to further our objectivity. During the initial post-9/11 homeland security funding surge, nearly every project denied funding appealed our decision. But since we had trained applicants in advance on the criteria, and since we had numerical scores for every selection criterion and could walk an applicant through the reasons we found their strategy weak and the rationale for the low score, they generally came to understand our funding decisions. One mayor even apologized for yelling at me, after he understood why we made our decision.
6. **Be clear with grantees about expectations.** New programs can create confusion in government, and if the past is any indication, the federal government will give conflicting advice to different state and local government entities and will sometimes be late or vague in its guidance. But state and local governments passing funding along to local grantees can communicate clear expectations and should provide ample training to grantees on what’s expected, along with clear fact sheets. Technical assistance to support grantee progress should be built in to help rather than criticize grantees who falter – if they all are successful then the portfolio of investments was perhaps too timid.
7. **Tell your story to the public.** This once in a generation federal investment in state and local capacity has the power to change the economic landscape with your selection of stimulus projects. You will also have the rare opportunity to restore faith in government if a general perception emerges that investments are being made on the basis of careful, disciplined analyses and that reporting on progress is done diligently and consistently. Most of us in government are too busy doing the good work of the people to spend time documenting it, but it’s important to do so in this case. The stimulus legislation did not pass unanimously, so there are plenty out there who do not support it. As time goes on the critics will line up to find fault. During the Massachusetts homeland security rollout, I asked a reporter from our local newspaper why he wouldn’t write a story about the work we’d done to fix prior grantmaking

improprieties as we rolled out the new funding, or the [recognition](#) we got from a think tank for it. He said, laughing, “Sure, I’ll write about that when I go to work for Good Government Weekly.” Since you can’t count on your local press to celebrate your successes, here are two ideas:

- a. **Tell the story in real time with dashboards and visualizations for transparent progress reports.** Share progress updates publicly, in a variety of media, and keep a dashboard up to date on funding opportunities, funded projects, and progress once projects begin. Bring the public into this process by asking them for feedback on how they want to view the results, how they are using the site and how it can be made more user-friendly.
- b. **Document the story in a variety of formats over the coming years.** The public takes in information in many ways, yet government typically uses fewer means of delivering a message. Why not invite in local journalism students, or find freelance writers who can document what you are doing and prepare case studies, talking points, or speeches, or use innovative tools such as social media, TikTok videos and the like to get the word out that you are working hard to use federal dollars to address the public’s top priorities. Further, use the power of photos to literally show the public what you have done with the funds. In Boston, as in many cities, when a 311 complaint is resolved, the operational team snaps a photo and posts it to the site. So after the rathole I complained about is plugged up, I get to see a photo of it.

This is an exciting time to be in government. The next few years are going to offer a lifetime of opportunity to invent new models of service governance that offer the public in a continuous cycle of improvement and customer service excellence. Along the way, if we do it right, we might even restore the public’s faith in government.