

Title: **The power of civil society: A lesson from a pandemic**
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The power of civil society: A lesson from a pandemic

Many of us are central planners ourselves; we are the ones who make the decisions for production and distribution in our households, businesses and social institutions. When an emergency arises, we are the ones who decide how to respond. So it's only natural that with the COVID-19 pandemic, we turn to the government to find out what's to be done.

Just a few days into the intense social distancing that's been recommended, however, we're already seeing that decentralized efforts solve problems quickly and nimbly, while centralized efforts have fumbled badly. I do not mean to suggest that no government intervention is necessary to address the grave situation we are in. Rather, my purpose here is to draw attention to the ways that private and community efforts can deal with myriad detailed needs that no large-scale laws or programs could possibly address.

The experience of the pandemic in the United States has been marked by one striking failure right up front — a lack of tests. In fact, other countries, such as South Korea, dropped their version of Food and Drug Administration approval requirements within a week of the news and successfully controlled the virus by just testing everyone in sight and only isolating the positives.

Here, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's test failed, and scientists who developed tests early on were shut down because their tests hadn't gone through the full approval process. Luckily, heroes such as Dr. Helen Chu defied FDA bans (twice) and went on testing any-

way, which is how we realized the spread was getting bad in Washington. An Alabama company has now created a one-day test, and the best website in the world for tracking the spread was created in late December by 17-year-old Avi Schiffmann from Seattle.

In the meantime, anybody who can has moved work online so that people can practice social distancing; Zoom and other companies are rising to the occasion with an onslaught of new users. Panera, Starbucks, other chains and many local places have moved to "to-go" only, and some have discounted prices, such as my favorite place, House of India. Various distilleries, such as the one near me in Wellston, Missouri, are switching their production to hand sanitizer because the alcohol works for that too. Some are even donating the proceeds from their sales. Volunteers are 3D printing ventilator devices, respirator valves, and plastic safety masks. Taiwan is just sending the U.S. 100,000 extra masks every week. Neighborhoods are forming food delivery task forces on Facebook to get out school lunches and make sure the elderly have supplies.

Regulations on trucking, food and alcohol delivery, and (finally) FDA approvals are being dropped faster than a hot potato to allow the economy to adjust to this new circumstance as quickly as possible. Now that it looks as if we might have found some effective therapies, Bayer is already pledging to donate millions of pills. Nearly 400 internet providers have voluntarily pledged to keep internet provision going despite any payment issues, thanks to Ajit Pai's "Keep America Connected" efforts.

Grocery stores have started the day with seniors-only shopping times and are hiring "no-touch" delivery people as fast as possible. Amazon is just plain saving our lives — and don't forget all the

truckers that involves. Lowe's, Walmart and other large companies are covering paid leave, especially for older workers. Other local businesses are paying people's delinquent utility bills so that they don't get shut off, like NorthStar Insurance did for residents of Troy, Missouri.

On the home front, online education companies are offering free subscriptions as parents launch into home-schooling. Groups are forming fast on Facebook to coordinate efforts and create lists of resources.

Church services are livestreaming. Mo Willems is offering doodle sessions online, and Josh Gad (otherwise known as Olaf the Snowman) will read your kids bedtime stories and talk to them about their fears. Italians are singing to each other from their porches, and museums are creating free video tours. High school kids are performing the choir concerts remotely and posting it online. The list could go on and on, but you get the picture.

With well-developed market mechanisms and especially internet connectivity, we are moving fast to save our sick, serve our elderly and marginalized, and keep some beauty and togetherness in our lives during dark times.

Don't wait for the planners to tell you what to do. Get on your social networking platforms or call someone who can. Sign up to give. Sign up to receive. Download a lovely (free) read from Audible or watch a (free) opera from the Met. We are more powerful than we think.

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