

Mayor Curtatone's Culture of Curiosity

Building Data Capabilities at Somerville City Hall

Epilogue

LISA C. COX AND JORRIT DE JONG

On February 1, 2020, within a month of the start of Mayor Joseph Curtatone's ninth term, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Massachusetts. The mayor and his staff's "attention to data helped the city flag the outbreak of coronavirus long before other cities were paying attention—in January," reported one local magazine.¹ The mayor had seen predictive modeling that convinced him the virus would come to Somerville, although he was uncertain as to how quickly it would arrive.² He admitted that he "never would have anticipated taking on such a crisis of this magnitude."³

At the end of February, Cambridge-based biotech company, Biogen, hosted a conference in Boston that would prove to be one of the country's first "super-spreader" events. Within several weeks, the state had recorded its first COVID-19 death, and Massachusetts was soon the state with the third-most COVID-19-related deaths in the country, behind New York and New Jersey.

In March, Mayor Curtatone took several key steps in a decisive COVID-19 response. As one example of the city's intensive efforts to maintain regional coordination and information channels throughout the crisis, on March 13, the mayor convened thirty city leaders from the state to present models that experts on epidemiology had shared with Somerville's public health team.⁴ The day after the meeting, Curtatone and nearly three dozen city leaders sent a letter to the governor requesting to close Somerville's schools, and the next day the governor began ordering that schools close across the commonwealth.⁵

The mayor also established a COVID-19 incident command system (ICS),ⁱ whose primary mission was to help prevent COVID-19 related deaths, and asked Omar Boukili, a former Somerville senior policy advisor, to rejoin the city to become the incident commander. "Don't tell [Mayor Curtatone] I said this, but I was sold within five minutes of speaking to him about it," he quipped, adding, "I knew this was all so unknown—we didn't understand how this thing moved around or the dynamics around it, so the unknowns were everywhere."⁶

ⁱ "The Incident Command System (ICS) [also known as Incident Management System (IMS)] is a standardized hierarchical structure that allows for a cooperative response by multiple agencies, both within and outside of government, to organize and coordinate response activities without compromising the decision-making authority of local command." (Source: www.nationalservice.gov)

Also during March, a poll showed that “Just 46% of Americans . . . say the federal government is doing enough to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, down from 61% in February. . . . while 60% say they had not very much or no trust at all in what [the President is] saying.”⁷ Like many Americans, the mayor and other public officials were of the opinion that the federal government’s response to the crisis was lacking. He also felt that the state’s governor was slow moving. Within this environment, the ICS took the lead on Somerville’s response, and the newly assigned section chiefsⁱⁱ began meeting with the mayor and other senior staff every morning, seven days a week, to brief the mayor on the latest research, guidelines, issues, and progress.

Boukili said that he and Curtatone spoke frequently throughout each day. He felt empowered to respond to many facets of the crisis on his own and said he “never felt any pushback or leash” from the mayor. “He asked me to lead the response, and thanks to my teammates, that’s what I was able to do.” After a year, Boukili went to work for the City of Boston and Kristen Stelljes, the SomerStat director, became incident commander.

Stelljes remembered the chaos of the early days: “In March, we were all called into a conference room—in hindsight, that wasn’t a great idea, we just knew so little—and I remember being told, ‘you’re the planning chief, which means you have to come up with an incident action plan,’ and I was like, *what?*”⁸ Stelljes recalled her colleagues being in similar situations, as “most of the staff had not been trained in emergency management.” Still, she said that the team put data at the center from the start.

Because of Stelljes’s and the staff’s familiarity with SomerStat meetings, she modeled the ICS planning team’s meetings and processes after SomerStat. For example, the planning team assigned liaisons to each of the different departments in the same way that SomerStat assigned analysts to different departments. The liaisons then supported the departments by helping them analyze state data, setting up new workflows for tracking data, and then analyzing it together for decision-making purposes.

The team soon set up a public COVID-19 dashboard on the city’s website, which tracked positive cases in the city, fatalities, moving averages, and later included a heat map of positive cases, rates by age group, gender, and race, as well as other data points that were added as they became available. The city also set up a dashboard for public schools and a public economic recovery dashboard, sharing local data for employment, transit impact, business assistance, and other topics.

A collaborative team met with the mayor daily to make decisions on purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks; when to quarantine; when and how to limit gatherings and business activities; and where to direct resources to address health, economic, and social impacts. To help make these decisions, the team digested mounds of available data from around the world, tracked local data, and gathered information on community needs from frontline staff. “I’m a public policy guy, but it’s not frightening to read scientific papers and then reach out to experts to discuss and seek guidance,” Boukili said. The team worked with academics to help understand an array of topics, such as

ⁱⁱ In the ICS structure, each “section” (akin to a department) had a chief. The standard ICS sections were operations, planning, logistics, and finance/administration. Somerville also innovated on the standard model by, for example, adding an Immigration Services Unit to help better address marginalized communities that were hit disproportionately by the pandemic.

epidemiology, racial disparities in the COVID-19 data, and wastewater sampling. The city eventually hired a PhD in public health to help read the many research findings that were being published every week and report back to the chiefs.

Stelljes said, “The mayor has not been afraid to be critical of the governor’s guidelines or stand out on his own and do what is right for the community based on case data and experts.” For example, as the state began to partially reopen in the summer of 2020, and nearly all communities moved into phase 3, Somerville was the last community to do so, “saying its 7-day and 14-day case averages were still too high.”⁹ Furthermore, among statewide disagreement about whether schools should be in person or not, Somerville was one of the first cities in the state to announce a fully virtual fall 2020 school year. The decision was controversial, but the mayor was confident in his processes and didn’t want to open schools until he had an engineering firm assess the aged school buildings’ ventilation systems and until the city had a robust surveillance testing system in place for teachers and students.

The mayor’s overarching approach to responding to the COVID-19 crisis in Somerville was highly customized. He said, “We need to move forward with a process that fits our community . . . Safety and a sustainable recovery will be the guiding stars of our local reopening efforts. We will evaluate every element of the Governor’s plan and determine what works best here and then implement a timeline that aligns with local and regional data concerning the spread of this disease. COVID-19 is not going away any time soon, so we will take things one informed step at a time. We do not want to risk rushing back to a perceived state of normal in the short-term, only to put people’s lives needlessly at risk or jeopardize our economic recovery. As the most densely populated city in New England, we cannot afford to be haphazard with our response to this public health threat.”¹⁰ The response spanned not just the public health concerns of the spreading virus, but food access efforts, supports for elders, and an eviction moratorium, among other elements.

In mounting a rigorous response to the pandemic, Stelljes and Boukili credited city staff—both within and outside the ICS—with a willingness to, as Stelljes said, “put blood, sweat, and tears” into serving the public. “We were working twelve to sixteen-hour days at the beginning,” said Stelljes. Both also praised the staff with what Boukili called “a certain versatility.” He continued, “Folks working in parks, open space planning, mobility, rodent control could be redeployed in a different fashion because they could just grab data and analyze it to the best of their abilities and then transfer it to someone who can do more, or folks could do legwork or just manage a project, even while it was a very different job than what they were hired for.” Boukili added that this type of adaptability “totally changed my perception of government. I guess I believed it, but I had never seen it.”

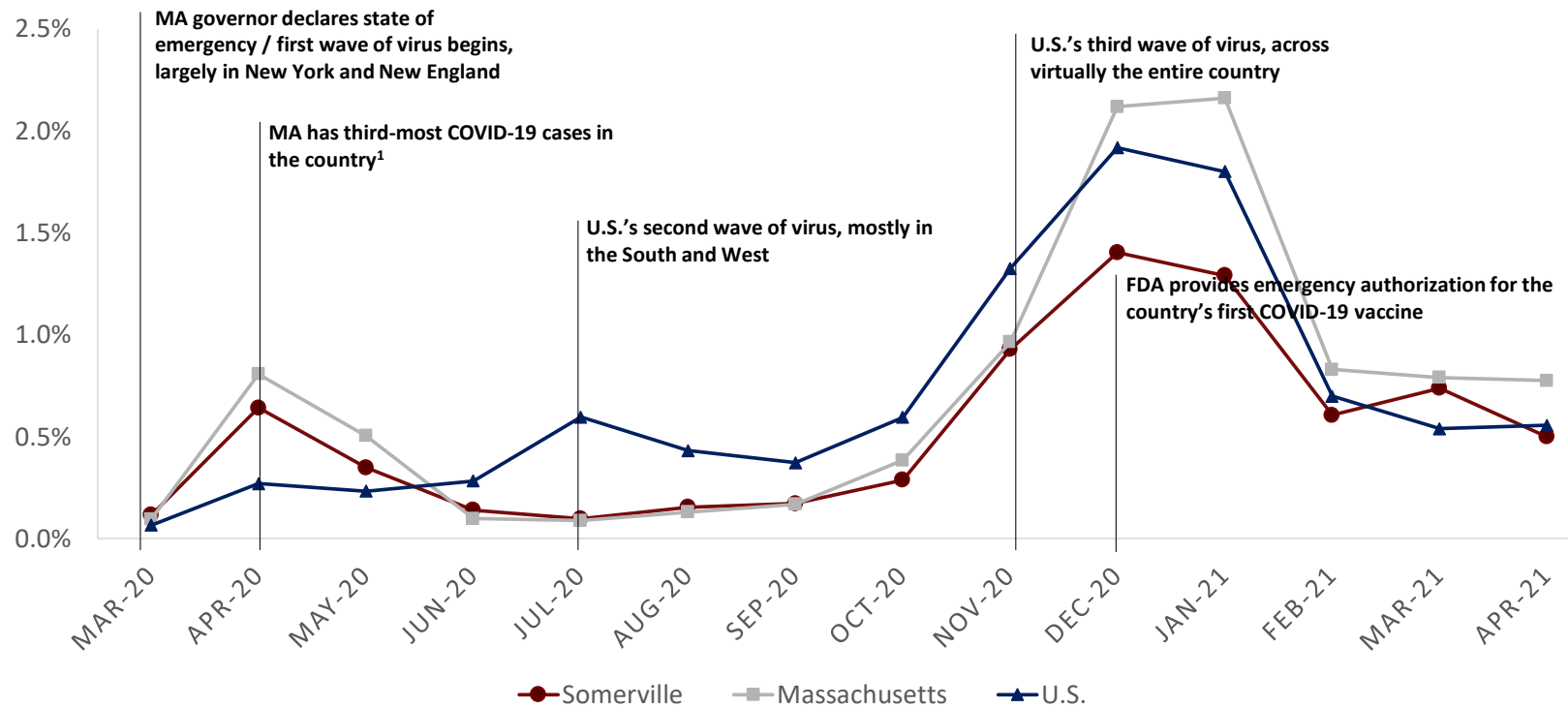
Meanwhile, the mayor was also overseeing a number of non-COVID related efforts in 2020 and 2021 to continue to modernize the city’s government, including the following:

- A city charter review process
- The launch of a Racial and Social Justice Office and a community-led effort to reimagine policing in Somerville
- The addition of a digital innovation officer to the SomerStat team
- The relaunch of Somerville Academy for Innovative Leadership (SAIL)

In March 2021, after nine terms in office, Mayor Curtatone decided not to run for re-election in 2022. After a year that *TIME* magazine referred to on its cover as “THE WORST YEAR EVER,” when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the planet, the U.S. president was impeached (and acquitted), police killings of unarmed black Americans took center stage, and a presidential election’s results were disputed, Curtatone told the *Boston Globe*, “I’m tired of COVID — I’m not tired of the job. My passion for public service is there. . . . I feel good about [leaving], but I’m not excited. And that’s good. I can do it another 20 years, but I don’t think I should.”¹¹

Appendix

COVID-19 CASES PER CAPITA: Somerville v. Massachusetts v. U.S.



Sources: Figures from City of Somerville and CDC, accessed June 2021.

Endnotes

¹ Sarah Betancourt, "Curtatone stresses boldness in addressing COVID-19," April 12, 2020, <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/health-care/curtatone-stresses-boldness-in-addressing-covid-19/>, accessed May 2021.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Quotes from Omar Boukili are derived from a Zoom interview conducted by the case writer in May 2021.

⁷ Domenico Montanaro, "Poll: Americans Don't Trust What They're Hearing From Trump On Coronavirus," March 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/17/816680033/poll-americans-dont-trust-what-they-re-hearing-from-trump-on-coronavirus>, accessed May 2021.

⁸ Quotes from Kristen Stelljes are derived from a Zoom interview conducted by the case writer in April 2021.

⁹ Diane Cho, Marc Fortier and Mike Manzoni, "Somerville Hopes to Enter 'Phase 3.1' of Reopening This Week," NBC Boston, August 31, 2020, <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/announcement-expected-on-somervilles-phase-3-reopening/2186731/>, accessed May 2021.

¹⁰ "Somerville's Health Emergency Will Remain in Place Beyond May 18th," City of Somerville, May 15, 2020, <https://www.somervillema.gov/COVID19HealthEmergencyUpdate>, accessed May 2021.

¹¹ Matt Stout, "Curtatone, Somerville's longest-serving mayor, says he will not seek reelection," March 1, 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/03/01/metro/curtatone-somervilles-longest-serving-mayor-says-he-will-not-seek-reelection/>, accessed May 2021.