

Small and Rural Local Governments:

HOW FEDERAL FUNDING CAN IMPACT YOUR CYBERSECURITY INITIATIVES

Dr. Robert Newell, CIO for Ardmore, Okla. shares the perspective of a smaller community IT leader when addressing IT priorities and building an environment for collaboration and partnership.

The Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act (IIJA) will provide \$1 billion for grants to improve state and local government cybersecurity. This funding is especially important for smaller and rural communities that lack current funding and resources. States are to pass on to local governments 80% of the federal IIJA funding they receive, with many smaller communities having to compete with larger communities for this piece of the funding pie. 25% of funding per state is supposed to pass on to rural communities.

Many states are predominately rural and, unfortunately, many smaller communities may not even have the resources to even explore or apply for the funds. Many of these communities rely on vendors coming in with a product and the paperwork filled out for them. They will be able to get new equipment but they run the risk of the infrastructure looking like a patchwork quilt and no long-range plan.

While rules for how the federal funding are just now being released, now is the time for smaller communities to have a roadmap in place. You need to assess what you have, what you need and where you are going. We all should let these criteria or tenets steer the spending.

IT executives should build on the lessons learned from how other, non-IT departments spent funds under the CARES ACT and ARPA funding programs. There are numerous stories of agencies buying technology tools without consulting the IT department. Then when the funding ended and the next year came around, there was no money for ongoing maintenance costs or licensing fees. It is necessary to look at the long-range effects of the acquisitions that are being considered.

Another take away: The IT executive needs to be in the room when tech decisions are being made. Local governments that have embraced the “we are all in this together” approach will have an overall greater success for the problems they are tackling

One suggestion is to look to your State IT as a partner and collaborator.

Work Together, Succeed Together

About 5 years ago Dr. Robert Newell, Chief Innovation Officer for the City of Ardmore, Okla., happened to be sitting in a meeting with the State CIO and simply voiced a desire to have better communication between city and state. This simple comment from the back chairs of the room led to emails which led to phone calls which led to a more collaborative approach to dealing with initiatives that could be shared by all. There was a major transformative shift in culture that seemed to happen.

According to Dr. Newell, “I don’t think there’s a week that goes by where my state partners don’t share intel or new initiatives that could be used at a local level and then the state aggregates the data and then that gets shared out. It all started with having the courage to voice a simple request in a non-essential meeting and having great leaders understand ‘servant leadership’”.

The things that happened through COVID-19 allowed IT departments incredible latitude. A majority of them proved they were up to the task and how amazing they were. As the dust settled people saw that:

- The old-time frames we used to give for projects were no longer valid in their minds
- IT is not the department of “No”. IT does know how to say “Yes”
- That IT is their partner, not their adversary

As things start to slow down now, a lot of IT Departments are having to go back and shore up holes left by a fast implementation. That is a good thing. The problem (or opportunity, depending who you talk to) is that end users still expect the high speed implementation they had during the emergency. There is no way we can keep up that pace. Something is going to break. I believe there is some middle ground but that is decided based on local resource not any general metric. In all honesty we proved we could do it.

Almost a decade ago, the City of Ardmore, Okla., saw the traditional network perimeter evolving and that drawing a line around what would be called our protected network could no longer be easily blocked out on a Visio diagram. The city pivoted (not abandoning the perimeter) and started to focus on the employee. They needed to become the firewall. Education became an important part of the IT department. Classes on programs and devices (Excel, Word, PowerPoint, PDF, Outlook, Apple and Android devices and apps) were made available. The city found that as users became more proficient, they also became more aware of things that shouldn't be.

According to Dr. Newell, "It was amazing to watch email boxes shrink because they were no longer being used as document storage. Watching end users report malicious email that snuck through filters. And then sitting in IT staff meetings and having technicians come with researched solutions that could be implemented to help other departments. It proved that working together can make all our jobs easier."

Call to Action

The next few years in IT do not have to be overwhelming if you are a small to mid-size community. Dr. Newell offers three concepts for IT executives to focus on:

1) Start Where You Are.

Inventory what you have and consider where you want to be. This includes meeting with the departments you partner with and provide services to.

2) Use What You Have.

Take time to ask questions and build relationships. Relationships are just as important as the equipment and applications we service. Find other communities and develop relationships with their IT staff. Reach out to state counterparts and see if they have resources you can utilize or share. Remember, you do not have to reinvent the wheel.

3) Do What You Can.

As cited above, communication with internal stakeholders is key. Also, meet with your vendor partners so that they can share their solutions; It may not be something you need today but this could provide ideas for future consideration and discussion. And please don't forget keeping current with the professional and essential skills needed to be successful – both for yourself and your team. Consider leadership programs like the CompTIA PTI / Rutgers University CGCIO certification. You were hired for your abilities and you should be constantly honing them.

IT's response to the pandemic proved what IT can do. Now, IT needs to build on that success and the trust that IT developed to move forward.

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