

COVID-19 Local Response Initiative Session Eleven

“Leading Through a Crisis: Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead”

This handout reviews key points on crisis leadership from session eleven of the Covid-19 Local Response Initiative for city leaders with Juliette Kayyem, Dutch Leonard and Jorrit de Jong.

LOOKING BACK: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Time has been behaving strangely for many of us over the past few months. It is hard to believe we have done all we’ve done and been through all we’ve been through in such a short span of weeks. In our sessions together, we have thought and learned together about:

- [Establishing agile problem-solving processes](#) for effective crisis response;
- [Communicating cold, hard facts with empathy](#) and grounding hope in reality;
- [Building community resilience](#) even as you respond;
- [Attending to your communities’ mental health needs](#)—and your own;
- [Managing conflict and collaborating](#) across boundaries;
- [Continually redefining your mission and taking responsibility](#) for team morale;
- [Generating ideas and managing risks](#) in innovation;
- [Budgeting and fiscal management](#) in a time of extreme uncertainty and scarcity;
- [Engaging in “teamwork on the fly”](#) to learn as you execute and plan as you learn; and
- [Envisioning and planning for multiple possible futures](#) to manage ambiguity ambidextrously.

Certain themes and refrains have become integral features of your daily response: communicating with **hope and numbers**, making decisions based on **data not dates**, finding **credible messengers**, prioritizing the needs of **the most vulnerable**, taking the **“now” normal** one day at a time, and continually **learning as you go**.

But with much still unknown, the virus still very much alive, and political fights simmering, you are probably looking to the next phase with no small amount of trepidation:

- *How can you pivot to other priorities while this crisis grinds on?*
- *How can you make sure community members understand their interdependence and look out for one another?*
- *How can you sustain and leverage the partnerships you’ve built?*
- *How can you provide the ongoing supports needed without any money coming in?*

REORIENTING: THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE

You have worked valiantly to flatten the curve. The losses are real and painful, but the effort has not been in vain. Unfortunately, now comes the hard part: figuring out how to coexist with this virus—**how to begin to recover and respond at the same time**.

This will be a time of ongoing innovation and reform. You’ve been building your resiliency muscles—and probably discovering some you didn’t know you had. **Teaming, experimentation, and, above all, communication will only be more important** as you venture into this uncharted territory. Prepare for surprises.

Continuing to build trust with the community is essential. The people you serve must be able to rely on you to provide clear and credible information, a rational basis for hope, and empathetic leadership.

However, it may be time to **transition from an emergency response to more of a steady-state, maintenance-level response**. Whether it begins today or next month, think through how to orchestrate this transition:

- Start to bring in more voices.
- Amplify your most effective messengers.
- Give these messengers more airtime.
- **Establish a new “battle rhythm”**—every other day, then twice a week, and so on...
- **Gradually remove yourself from the center of the action**, but don’t stray far.
- Remember that you can always step back in (and you may need to).

As you move toward recovery, make sure you are working with a team that can handle uncertainty:

- Think carefully about how to maximize and sustain the productivity of the teams and people you lead.
- Ask them what resiliency muscles they have been finding and building over the past several months.
- Think together about how to **continue to improve your capacity to innovate and respond**.
- The answer to the questions you will face will continue to be **an agile, iterative process**.

Learning as you go means creating **time and space for reflection** on your own and your city’s response thus far. What did you overestimate? What did you underestimate? What took you completely by surprise?

If being a part of this **community of practice** has been valuable to you, consider whether you might be able to build and/or support similar models at the local or county level.

LOOKING AHEAD: MUDDLING THROUGH THE MESSY MIDDLE

There’s no way around the messy middle. In all likelihood, flare-ups if not outbreaks—blips if not waves—are coming. Testing and contact tracing at current levels may not be sufficient to contain the spread of the virus in your community. Surveillance testing and tracing, even if you have adequate capacity (which most places currently do not), is a tough sell. There will be more cases—and deaths. Misinformation and conspiracy theories will live on. Strive to maintain your credibility as a source of accurate, timely situational awareness and guidance for your community.

The best you can do under the circumstances is **remain vigilant and prepared**:

- Figure out the **metrics** to watch and stay in close contact with the people who hold information that can act as an **early warning system**.
- Have a plan in place with **concrete steps** you will take in the event of a resurgence

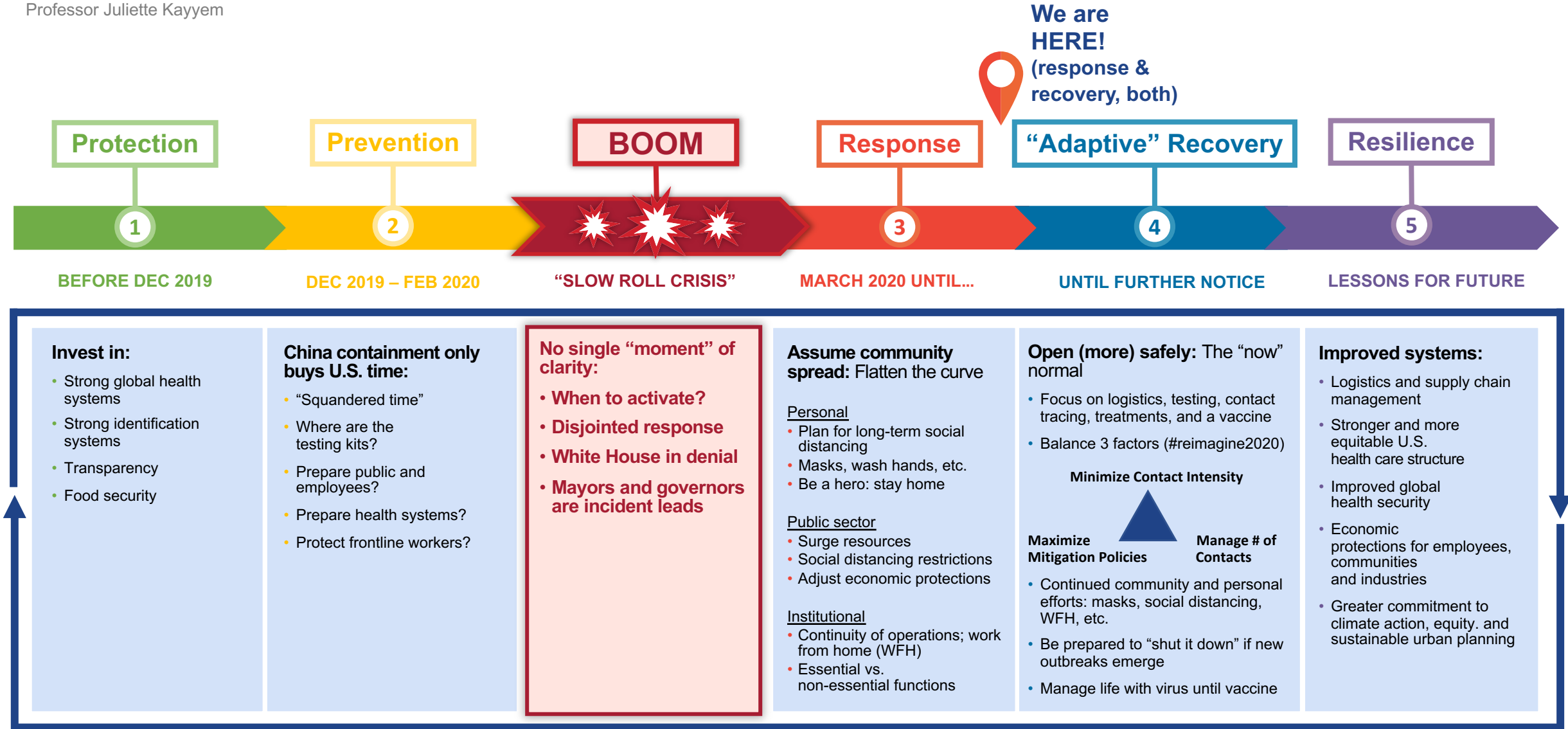
Our best hope for a final exit from this crisis lies with an effective **vaccine**. The timeline remains uncertain, but whenever a vaccine does become available, there will be an initial shortage. You and your team can get to work now on:

- Thinking through the logistics of distribution.
- Establishing an ethical approach to prioritization.
- Developing a communications strategy.

Finally, this virus has exposed and exacerbated **deep inequities**. At times, it feels almost engineered to exploit our weaknesses, but it also has much to teach us about ourselves and our capacity for resilience—and we cannot afford to waste the opportunity it presents to **build back better**, to try and fail and fumble and learn our way towards a more **sustainable, equitable, and just** social order.

The Five Stages of Crisis Management: Coronavirus (COVID-19) in U.S. Cities

Professor Juliette Kayyem



"A CRISIS HITS A CITY AS IT IS, NOT AS IT WOULD LIKE TO BE"