

## A PATH FORWARD

## IS COVID-19 A CURE FOR FORMER SOCIAL DISTANCING?

BY STEVEN P. DINKIN

Could a global pandemic actually be making Americans kinder and gentler?

I have a faint recollection of the old me — how it used to be when I walked my dog. Downcast eyes. A hurried pace. My mind, seemingly, a million miles away.

Of course, this was “pre-coronavirus” — before the pandemic took hold.

Now when I walk Milo, I lift my head. When I pass someone, at an acceptable social distance, I smile and wave. Friends and colleagues tell me they’ve noticed the same change in their own behavior.

What a stark contrast to the panic-inspired hoarding of toilet paper. It’s as if a switch that was stuck in the “off” position — rendering us socially detached as we went about our daily routines — has been flipped “on.”

Now there is a feeling that we’re all in this together. When I

look your way, I am acknowledging a shared adversity. Just that simple action brings us closer and thus gives me comfort. Our human connection seems stronger. This is also a season for humility — the realization that we are small, not terribly significant, and no more or less valuable than any other person.

Dr. Jamil Zaki, assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University and a kindness researcher, talks about “altruism borne of suffering.” Social barriers go by the wayside at times of disaster, he observes. People are typically cooperative, orderly and protective of each other. Zaki insists that catastrophes like the coronavirus “shock us into a realization of our common fate and common identity with other people (and tell us) we’re all mortals being affected by horrible things.”

In this way, acts of kindness — which can be as simple as a smile

— bring us together even when we’re apart.

Here in San Diego, the Facebook page of the San Diego Community Volunteers for Coronavirus Response is already 400-plus members strong, providing information and inspiration to followers. Children are randomly drawing hearts and writing messages in chalk on neighborhood sidewalks, just to spread some cheer. Downtown residents are taking to their balconies at night to thank health care workers, a lovely gesture that began in northern Italy and has been exported to the United States.

We’ve seen this rash of kindness before. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, we all became honorary New Yorkers. A sense of solidarity and community swept the country, with people lining up for hours to donate blood. When Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans and the eastern Gulf Coast in 2005, hun-

dreds of volunteers showed up in boats to help with rescue operations.

This is the best of America, and it always appears at our worst moments.

But this raises questions that I almost hate to ask: Once we return to our ordinary lives, must we also return to our ordinary behavior? Or can we weave these moments of kindness into an enduring habit?

Doing so may require taming our competitive reflex — what psychologist Karl Albrecht calls narcissistic “me-first” thinking. Human beings are hardwired to try to demonstrate how valuable we are and to show off how much we know. We all strive to have a better story, provide a better example, or find a better solution.

And we yearn to be right. But when we have a different opinion from someone else, does there always have to be a winner and a loser, or can we just show respect

for another point of view? That ability is at the core of the communications training we offer every day at the National Conflict Resolution Center. Ideally, we want to go through life bringing folks closer to us rather than turning them away.

If this crisis has taught us anything, it’s that kindness comes naturally — if we let it. This is where human beings instinctively want to go. It’s in our DNA. And that is all the more reason to feel optimistic that, once this pandemic is just a bad memory, Americans will remember to be kind to one another.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based organization working to create innovative solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. NCRCC is nationally recognized for its conflict management and communication strategies. To learn about NCRCC’s programming, visit [nccrconline.com](http://nccrconline.com)

## FORCE

FROM B1

Those experts tap into their networks to provide Imperial Beach residents with the best available resources.

Dedina got the idea to form a task force from the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative. It’s a program that connects mayors from across the country to experts via weekly conference calls.

Those experts include former Presidents Barack Obama, George Bush and Bill Clinton, as well as former heads of the CDC and crisis management experts

at Harvard University. They stressed the importance of having a unified and proactive response, Dedina said.

“It was the first thing they suggested,” he said.

Apart from getting Sun and Sea Manor medical equipment, the task force has helped connect local businesses with federal loan programs, gotten 40 masks to workers at the local Grocery Outlet store, removed gang-related graffiti that popped up after the stay-in-place orders, and educated tenants about eviction protections available to them.

Imperial Beach was the first city in San Diego County to pass an eviction moratorium. Under the

city’s moratorium, tenants who provide written notice to their landlord that they are unable to pay rent because of the pandemic and show documented proof to back up their claim cannot be evicted during the state of emergency.

In a way, Imperial Beach was ready for a crisis because the city has already been facing one for years — cross-border sewage spills that routinely shut down the city’s beaches.

“I think it gave us the resources to understand why complacency is a giant sin for government,” Dedina said. “That’s why we were so proactive on this issue. Because we can’t afford to have

it devastate our community.”

Dr. Ramon Hernandez, who is a member of the public health subcommittee, is also the Sector Chief of Community Health at UCSD School of Medicine Department of Pediatrics. He has been hosting weekly video blogs on Facebook to keep the community updated on the latest developments.

Hernandez is the one who connected Sun and Sea Manor with the county health department for supplies.

One of the biggest benefits of the task force has been keeping residents connected even while they are

asked to stay at home.

While the focus is obviously on preventing the spread of the physical virus, it is very important to promote mental health at a time when people are helpless and isolated. Being able to do something about the pandemic through the task force helps people do that, said Hernandez.

“To be honest, the community piece is what inspires me,” he said. “I see our community do all of this work and it’s really beautiful. It shows that in the midst of a crisis we are coming together and it shows the strength of our city.”

It’s been particularly helpful in giving people a

sense of agency; that they have some sort of control over this situation.

Residents all over Imperial Beach have been doing that in their own ways.

At the Sun and Sea Manor, residents haven’t been able to get visits from their children. Staff has had to get creative.

“They’ve started shooting short videos that residents can send to their children, grandkids, and great-grandchildren.

“To feel so embraced by the community has just been so uplifting,” Owens-Stone said.

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## RESPONDER

FROM B1

Dallas Higgins is a fire captain on Engine 17 in City Heights, one of the two busiest stations in the city. He said that per Department instructions, firefighters are taking more precautions.

Gone are the days when a four-firefighter engine crew would enter a home or apartment at the beginning of a call. Now, if the patient can’t meet them outside, the crew’s firefighter/paramedic will enter first and begin assessing the patient, while the other three crew members maintain at least a 6-foot bubble, Higgins said.

Like the dispatchers, firefighters have their own new set of questions they ask each patient, Higgins said. They want to know if the person has had flu-like symptoms, including coughing and difficulty breathing; whether they have a fever of more than 100 degrees; whether they have traveled outside of the country, or been around anyone else who has traveled internationally; and whether they’re under quarantine or under suspicion of being COVID-19 positive.

“We all utilize surgical masks, gloves and glasses,” Higgins said. “If we rule the patient in (as possibly having the disease), we use additional personal protective equipment — a hair net, booties and a gown.”

Another big change for firefighters and medics: encouraging some patients to avoid the hospital. Beginning around the start of April, and under the guidance of the city and county medical directors, first responders are advising suspected COVID-19 patients in stable health to stay home.

While Higgins and the city’s other firefighters are the “boots on the ground”



COURTESY PHOTO

**Capt. Dallas Higgins (standing) takes a temperature reading from engineer Dylan Surprise at Engine 17 in City Heights.**

responding to the pandemic, it’s the incident management team that’s making the big decisions.

That March 13 meeting happened the same day President Donald Trump declared a national emergency. At the time, there were 19 confirmed cases in San Diego County. As of Friday, four weeks later, there were 1,693 confirmed cases in the county, with about half of those among city of San Diego residents, and at least 44 deaths countywide connected to the disease.

“When we first met, we started discussing the potentials, there were a lot of ‘what ifs?’” Gerboth said, noting that at the time, Washington state had the nation’s worst outbreak. “It was, ‘What if a lot of people get sick? What if our staffing levels are challenged? How do we decontaminate?’”

Gerboth said ideally, the department would have months to answer those questions, but now they’re doing it on the fly. That included finding new cleaning products for the self-con-

tained breathing apparatuses that firefighters use while battling a fire; the old cleaner did not kill viruses.

One of the newest safety directives, issued Monday, has firefighters wearing cloth masks at all times while at the station and out in public, while saving medical-grade surgical masks for use with patients, according to department spokeswoman Mónica Muñoz.

Among the other new programs or changes the incident management team has implemented across the department:

- Twice-daily screenings and temperature checks for firefighters
- Ambulances disinfected after every patient transport
- All equipment that touches a patient is disinfected
- A system to handle and provide care for those first responders who become sick, develop symptoms or require testing
- Daily written updates distributed to the entire Fire-Rescue Department, plus daily morning briefings

via a departmentwide conference call

- Decontamination and disposal guidelines for personal protective equipment
- New uniform guidelines, including extra uniforms, washing uniforms multiple times per shift, and arriving and leaving work in fresh, clean civilian clothing rather than a uniform
- Social distancing in fire stations, which Gerboth called a “total cultural change” from the familylike atmosphere fire crews build by working 24-hour shifts together

Gerboth acknowledged the worldwide shortage of personal protection equipment and said that is another duty of the incident management team — to procure, by basically any means necessary, more protective gear. “Our logistics section has members searching the planet for personal protection equipment,” Gerboth said. “Every day, they’re researching where we can get more.”

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## GRANTS

FROM B1

During the wildfires in November 2007, Palser was on an SDG&E crew working around the clock to restore power to hard-hit areas. When he finally got a week-end off, he headed out to Gordon’s Well, a desert four-wheel recreation area in Imperial County.

Palser said he was riding his all-terrain vehicle over the top of a sand dune when he spotted a friend coming up the other side. To avoid a head-on collision, he jammed the hand breaks and flew over the handlebars, landing on the sand in a seated position. Then his ATV hit him from behind, breaking his back and paralyzing him from the waist down.

“I was in the hospital for three months,” he said. “I remember feeling shock, sadness and frustration. I was 20 years old and had a pretty good trajectory going career-wise. Everything was taken away from me in one day.”

After a period of sadness, Palser said he moved on with his life. He played wheelchair lacrosse for a while but found that he preferred individual sports over team athletics. Around 2012, he rented a handcycle and competed in his first half-marathon.

The experience was thrilling and he wanted to do more races, but he didn’t feel comfortable purchasing a piece of adaptive equipment that can range in price from \$1,500 to \$9,000. So he stopped training and gained weight.

Last year, Palser was diagnosed with high cholesterol and other health problems related to his weight. Determined to get back into shape, he found a CrossFit gym that offers adaptive classes and he applied to CAF for a grant to buy a handcycle.

“Riding a handcycle is a different experience from a wheelchair,” he said. “You’re low to the ground and you get a lot of power from the cranks you’re holding in

your hands. It’s a little bit more exhilarating and a little more fun. And I like that it’s independent. It gives me the normalcy of what it felt like to ride before I was hurt.”

Palser, who works in SDG&E’s customer energy efficiency program, said his goal is to train on the handcycle for a 100-mile, three-day cycling race in Palm Springs that he hopes to do with some co-workers next year.

“Getting this handcycle is a great opportunity to improve and get outside,” he said.

Here are details on a few other San Diego County 2020 CAF grantees:

• **Andrew Campbell, 10, of Santee.** Born with proximal femoral focal deficiency that required a single below-knee amputation, Andrew received a grant for an Össur Cheetah Junior Running prosthesis. He enjoys football, basketball, baseball, tetherball, wallball, dodgeball, martial arts and gymnastics.

• **Albert “Albee” Granillo, 9, of Escondido.** Born with spina bifida, Albee has won several awards in Life Rolls On WCMX competitions in Southern California. WCMX is a wheelchair form of BMX racing. He hopes to be in the Paralympics someday if WCMX becomes a Paralympics-recognized sport. His family will use the grant to buy a Colours BC skate wheelchair.

• **Heather Foster, 45, of Solana Beach.** Foster lost both of her feet to gangrene while fighting for her life in a battle with the flu, double pneumonia and severe septic shock. Five months after being fitted with her first prostheses, she walked in a CAF 5-kilometer race. Inspired by fellow challenged athletes who are running marathons, snowboarding and climbing mountains, she will use her grant for two Össur Cheetah Xplore feet prosthetics.

For more information, visit [challengedathletes.org](http://challengedathletes.org).

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## SHUTDOWN

FROM B1

Oceanside, like cities across the county, is losing millions of dollars in sales tax and hotel room tax revenue because of the actions taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Local leaders have more of an incentive than officials at the county or state level to get their economy back on track, Rodriguez said, and most people are sensible about health precautions.

“Oceanside residents are responsible enough to take care of their families and themselves, and wash their hands and cover their face if they need to,” he said.

Restaurants could encourage physical distancing by only seating people at every other table, Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez suggested writing a letter to the county requesting an amendment to the health order, but

other council members said that might not be the way to go.

“We might be facing state legislation as opposed to just county legislation,” said Councilman Jack Feller.

Feller and others agreed that Oceanside needs to get its businesses open again as soon as possible, but asked for staffers to look for the best approach and report back at the next meeting.

“I’m not prepared to write a letter,” said Mayor Peter Weiss. Instead, he suggested the city first determine who has the authority to make the change.

“Let’s do some research to find out what we have to do, and then take those steps,” Weiss said.

Councilman Ryan Keim liked that idea.

“We can make it known ... that we want to be able to open up as soon as possible,” Keim said.

City Manager Deanna Lorson said Oceanside is developing a recovery plan

and that the council’s discussion will help inform the plan.

Novel coronavirus cases are expected to peak in San Diego County within the next week or two, but it’s unknown how long the distancing, stay-at-home recommendations and other precautions are likely to continue.

“This is unprecedented,” Lorson said. “I don’t know if anyone has a good idea when (the end) could occur.”

As of Friday, Oceanside had 36 confirmed cases of COVID-19, ranking it sixth among the county’s 18 incorporated cities. Oceanside has the county’s third-largest population.

Five city employees had been tested for the disease through Wednesday, and two of those were positive, Lorson said. One of the positives was a public safety employee.

Oceanside has 63 full-time and three part-time

employees working entirely by telecommuting, she said. There are 151 full-time and six part-time employees splitting their time between telecommuting and working on location.

The city has 599 full-time and 120 part-time employees working entirely on location, Lorson said. Many of those are police officers, firefighters, maintenance workers and others who could not do their work remotely.

So far, Oceanside has not discussed the possibility of any layoffs or furloughs as a result of the lost revenue, but those measures are not off the table in the long term, Lorson said earlier in the week.

San Diego and Chula Vista announced hundreds of layoffs last week, mostly part-time and seasonal workers. San Diego later rescinded furloughs for 800 workers after the union protested.

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## TODAY IN HISTORY

Today is Sunday, April 12.

## Today’s highlight

On April 12, 1861, the Civil War began as Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

## On this date

**In 1945,** President Franklin D. Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Warm Springs, Ga., at age 63.

**In 1955,** the Salk vaccine against polio was declared safe and effective.

**In 2009,** American cargo ship Capt. Richard Phillips was

rescued from Somali pirates by Navy SEAL snipers who shot and killed three of the hostage-takers.

## Today’s birthdays

Children’s author Beverly Cleary is 104. Jazz musician Herbie Hancock is 80. Rock singer John Kay (Steppenwolf) is 76. Actor Ed O’Neill is 74. Actor Dan Lauria is 73. Talk show host David Letterman is 73. Actor Andy Garcia is 64. Country singer Vince Gill is 63. Actress Shannen Doherty is 49. Actress Claire Danes is 41. Actress Saoirse Ronan is 26.

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