



INSIDER NJ

ELEC Still Doing its Job Despite the COVID-19 Crisis

JEFF BRINDLE | March 25, 2020, 11:42 am | in [Edward Edwards](#)

As government navigates through the uncharted waters of the Coronavirus crisis, the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) continues to operate, albeit mostly remotely.

To reduce social contact during the current pandemic, more and more businesses are transitioning to remote operations as employees are encouraged to work from home.

New Jersey's public agencies, including ELEC, have followed suit to meet the difficult circumstances we all currently face.

With little advance notice, they have managed to maintain most government services by equipping employees to work outside their offices. Government sometimes is criticized for being inflexible. Yet, New Jersey agencies have quickly achieved this unprecedented undertaking.

As for ELEC itself, its contingency plan is working well. It is enabling the Commission to operate remotely in order to fulfill its mission of disclosure. Almost all functions, including calls from the public as well as responses, continue.

Candidates, committees, lobbyists, and public contractors still can report electronically while the public will continue to have timely, online access to those reports.

Legal and investigative functions continue as well. Moreover, ELEC is looking into the potential for holding virtual commission meetings. If so, the public will be able to participate while not attending the meetings in person.

So, the Commission is prepared to not only ride out the storm but for the future as well.

While the Commission and other state agencies attempt to maintain customary levels of service to the public, we should be mindful of the fact that long after the crisis subsides, the effect on society and its social relations will linger.

The traditional ways by which we function as a society- in particular work-related functions and everyday person-to-person contacts- may well be altered.

Even before the current virus outbreak, technological innovations brought about changes in the way people communicate with each other. The young in particular have grown comfortable with texting and social media as a way of communicating rather than direct face-to-face conversation.

In addition, besides technological innovation, which in every age has been transformative, the last twenty years have witnessed truly life-altering events.

The biggest transformation came after 2001 when terrorists used passenger planes to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, while crashing another in the fields of Pennsylvania.

That atrocity changed America. Among other things, our traditional values of civil liberties, privacy, and free access to government buildings were curtailed. Long held freedoms were sacrificed for tighter security.

September 11th changed New Jersey's state capitol as well. Where once citizens had free access to the State house and other government buildings, access is now necessarily curbed. As is the case with airports and even sporting events, state government buildings require the public to walk through metal detectors and sign in with security guards.

So much has changed as the result of 9/11. Now society should be poised for more changes as we grind our way out of the latest crisis.

More and more businesses will continue on the road toward operating remotely. Employees will be further encouraged to work from home. Business will continue to try to improve efficiency. There will be some benefits to workers as well. Family life may be improved, and traffic will ease, leading to better air quality.

But not everyone benefits when society undergoes sweeping changes.

A less office-based work environment could mean shopping in malls and other retail stores could decline even further as people work from home. More online shopping would mean greater job losses in the bricks and mortar sector. More vacant malls and other buildings could mar the landscape.

To some extent, government will be influenced by these trends. As the result of the current crisis, government certainly has revved up its capacity to conduct operations remotely.

But let's hope the shift isn't too drastic.

Once the virus has run its course, government hopefully will return to something close to what traditionally has been the norm.

For me, it's hard to imagine government operating on an entirely impersonal, virtual model. Government and politics require some personal interactions to be effective.

Government exists to serve the public interest and it does so best, not through social media platforms, webinars, and the internet, but through honest to goodness face-to-face dialogue.

That's why ELEC will eventually resume in-person training sessions, continue to greet callers with real people and be ready to assist members of the public who prefer to visit its office.

Where electronic media serves the public efficiently, it is warranted. At times like these, the ability to carry on remotely is critically important and preparations for future crisis should continue.

However, for government to turn into a virtual reality show does not fit the best interest of the public.

Aristotle, the first political scientist, said that humans are "social and political animals" and that society is prior to the individual. In other words, the individual depends on society.

Since politics and government is integral to a well-functioning society it should not be done at a distance. 'Social distancing' is an important concept now during this crisis,

Hopefully this concept will not be carried too far once the crisis is over, particularly in government.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.