

# Torrance: The value of resilience and agility

## How a smaller city tackled multiple disruptions

**Torrance, a city of 150,000 inhabitants located in Southern California, illustrates the need for cities to be agile—and able to swiftly adopt digital technologies—at a time when disruptions can hit suddenly and cascade quickly.**

On March 1st, 2020 Torrance experienced a cyber incident that had an adverse impact on city operations. Just two weeks later, Torrance declared a local state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic.

### Going fully virtual

Faced with two major crises, city leaders scrambled to set up a virtual emergency operations center (EOC) through Slack, a cloud-based messaging platform hosted by Amazon Web Services. The city used Google Drive for all its forms and documents instead of email, as it was both safer and more efficient.

Within a week, the city had transitioned from brick and mortar, paper and pencil, to virtual operations. It was then able to connect area hospitals, the local school district, the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and business groups to the EOC for real-time information sharing. And when Torrance and Southern California experienced civil unrest—yet another disruption—a few months later, Slack allowed the city to flatten the information curve and share data, internally and confidentially, for increased awareness about the events.

The city was able to funnel live pictures of events directly into Slack where everyone involved in the management of

the response could see and better understand the situation. “There were no longer silos that could form because the departments were all dissolved,” said Jeffrey Snoddy, emergency services manager for the city.

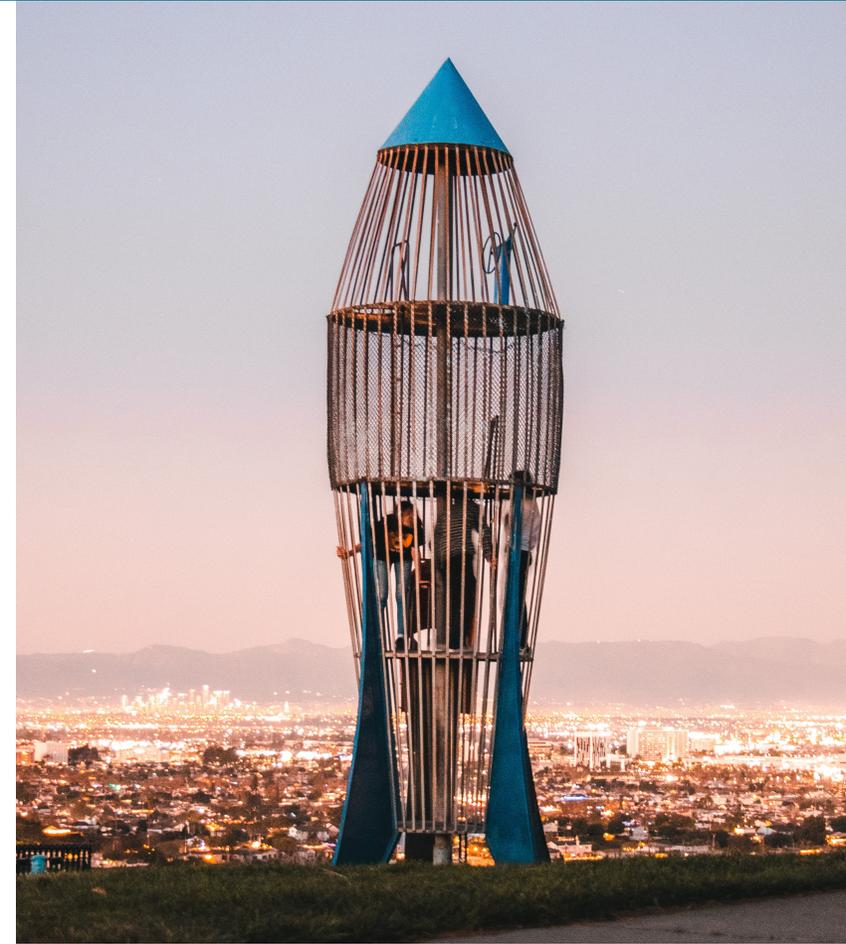
### Lessons from the cyberattack

The experience was an eye-opener and the city has since developed a cybersecurity plan. Reminders are sent to staff regarding practices to shore up security, such as changing passwords regularly and connecting from home with city-issued devices only. The city also does routine self-risk assessments of its vulnerabilities.

### The value of forward planning

Forging partnerships with private- and public-sector entities ahead of time was key to enabling Torrance to tackle these multiple challenges. The city’s IT department had started to assess the strength of its network and cybersecurity years ago and had established relationships with the federal government’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the Department of Homeland Security.

“They did an assessment for us. We had all their names, contacts, and recommendations, so when the cyber incident occurred, it was a simple phone call and they knew our systems,” said Snoddy. “They knew our strengths and weaknesses, and they were able to provide instant care for the city. That’s because the city was very forward-leaning.”



“Resilience and agility are a must to survive and to thrive. Governments move at a slower pace because we have fiduciary responsibility. We have oversight by our elected officials and the public. We don’t have the luxury of time. It’s not if, it’s when we’ll have another crisis and it’s all about creating a state of readiness.”

–Aram Chaparyan, City Manager, Torrance

## Pandemic and post-pandemic challenges

**The cyber incident that clobbered Torrance was traumatic enough, but then the pandemic took disruption to a much higher level.**

Besides its terrible toll on human life, COVID-19 was a big blow to Torrance's economy. The retail and hospitality industries shut down, unemployment levels rose, and tax revenue shrank. The city lost \$26 million in revenue in the last fiscal year—or close to 15% of its general fund.

Torrance is already on a slow burn to recovery, but its reserves were depleted. Hotels, one of its more significant revenue sources, have yet to return to normal operation.

### A catalyst for transformation

Yet the city's leaders remained upbeat and saw the pandemic as an opportunity to make positive changes.

"As horrible as the pandemic has been, it's given us an avenue, a window of opportunity to create new systems, such as the virtual emergency operations center. It was a wake-up call. Previously we were reliant on that traditional big room with all the monitors. We now

connect virtually, and we accomplish just as much," said Chaparyan.

### How cities will change

Looking ahead, Chaparyan foresees a range of new demands on municipal governments as urban economies and city life continue to evolve in the post-pandemic period. He notes that the reliance on sales tax as a revenue stream will diminish as more consumers shift to online purchases. The retail and office footprint in the city will also change as many people continue to work from home.

With green energy becoming more prominent in California, cities will move towards electric fleets, solar panels, and "one mile, one charge" systems. Torrance's own one mile, one charge project, designed to facilitate the expansion of electric vehicle infrastructure so that a driver is never more than one mile from a charging station, has been successful, with 94% of the city covered.

Cities will look more holistically at issues like homelessness and the demands of an ageing population. And diversity and inclusion are square in their cross hairs.

### Torrance's biggest lessons from the pandemic

Operational continuity planning and agility are critical in today's fast-changing world

Flexible and remote working can improve employee productivity and engagement

Our city needs to ensure that employees have the devices and digital access for working from home

Crisis management and emotional intelligence are vital skills for city leaders and workers

Business and government need to collaborate more closely to address today's issues

[Watch here](#)

**"Sustainability, environmental stewardship, fiscal responsiveness, homelessness, affordability in housing, social equity, and injustice—those issues will carry on into the next 10 years. We have to plan and adapt to ongoing changes."**

**—Aram Chaparyan, City Manager, Torrance**