Government leaders often talk about engaging in a “whole community” approach for disaster preparedness and recovery. Nothing typifies that more than public-private partnerships, which offer immense opportunities for state and local governments to maximize budgets, reduce risk, speed implementation, and leverage private sector expertise and infrastructure in support of public sector projects and services. Particularly for communications and connectivity, these partnerships have played a crucial role in equipping governments with much-needed technology.

With ongoing revenue uncertainties and supply chain challenges at historic highs, public-private partnerships, or P3s, became indispensable in helping state and local governments respond to the initial needs of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leveraging P3s enabled public health agencies, for instance, to stand up case-tracking dashboards in a matter of days. And private companies including Google, Intel and T-Mobile® pooled their resources to deliver laptops and connectivity to tens of thousands of students across the country when schools were shuttered.

Traditional P3 efforts have generally been public-to-private models, in which a government function is essentially outsourced to a private provider. A new generation of P3s, typified by three programs at T-Mobile, has helped shift the concept to public-with-private and even private-with-private.

The urgency of the global health crisis highlighted the importance of private sector integration into emergency response operations, says David Bezzant, vice president of T-Mobile for Government. “Everything had a huge time clock on it,” he says. Now, as governments turn their focus to the post-pandemic future, they can further improve the management of these initiatives. “P3s can be more thoughtful,” Bezzant adds. “They can be better planned and better executed.”

It’s clear that P3s will be an important enabler of government technology investments in the years to come. These partnerships will help public sector organizations navigate fiscal uncertainties by bridging the skills, technical experience and implementation expertise of the private sector with the demands of public service.

Public-Private Partnerships Take Different Forms.

Government technology partnerships can follow various models. In terms of mobility and connectivity, T-Mobile runs three programs that illustrate what different types of P3s can achieve:

1. **Connecting Heroes®** supplies free, subsidized, and low-cost smartphone connectivity and technology assistance to state and local first responders.

2. **Project 10Million™** aims to sustain education and bridge the digital divide by offering free wireless service to 10 million U.S. homes with eligible students.

3. **The T-Mobile Emergency Response Team (ERT)** focuses on enabling resiliency by partnering with government and industry to plan and prepare for, respond to and recover from all-hazards events, whether planned or unplanned, disaster or non-disaster, natural or man-made.

The Connecting Heroes initiative, part of a 10-year commitment by T-Mobile, is delivering high-bandwidth smartphone service to under-resourced agencies that manage police, sheriff, fire, emergency medical services, 911 telecommunicators (PSAPs) and other first responders in cities, counties and states. Many of these departments are in rural
locations, where slow, spotty connections have previously delayed their response to incidents such as house fires and vehicle crashes.

“Our previous carrier worked about 50 percent of the time,” says Andrew Surritt, the executive director at Rescue 101 Search and Rescue in South Salem, Ohio, a village about 85 miles east of Cincinnati.¹ Upgrading to 5G connectivity on the T-Mobile network made his rescue team much more efficient because the internet connection is more reliable and five times faster than cell service in the nearest town, he says.

Additionally, thanks to the Connecting Heroes program, first response teams like Rescue 101 have access to a broad suite of smartphone capabilities, including video and location services. This strengthens their ability to leverage digital and mobile tools in real time. In many places, that’s a major step up, says Bezzant. “Many first responders in America today are still operating with only a two-way radio.”

As governments seek to improve service delivery in the coming years, mobility and connectivity will be of utmost importance.

P3s can sometimes help governments deliver services when funding is a challenge — especially in times of crisis. That has been the case with Project 10 Million, which is helping governments and educational institutions close the digital divide.

The effort proved especially important in the early days of the COVID pandemic, when many students’ households lacked the connectivity they needed to participate in class remotely. Some districts responded by setting up wireless hotspots in school parking lots, but that still required students to travel in order to connect. Project 10 Million provides connectivity that helps students learn no matter where they are.

T-Mobile’s Emergency Response Team (ERT) provides another example of private investment in support of public interests. Working together across government and industry, the ERT helps ensure first responders remain connected and communities stay safe. In the wake of an earthquake, hurricane or some other form of natural or man-made disaster, reliable telecommunications infrastructure is critical. The ERT uses deployable assets like COWs (cell on wheels), COLTs (cell on light trucks), SatCOLTS (satellite cell on light trucks), microwave and satellite capabilities to rapidly set up vital voice and data wireless networks. The ERT can also bring other equipment, including emergency mobile phones and charging stations, to maintain cell phone service when widespread power outages cause communication breakdowns. The ERT program serves as a crucial part of enhancing government response to crisis events.

Follow These Best Practices for Implementing a P3.

To help ensure a P3 achieves its goals, governments leaders should keep these best practices in mind:

- **Set the right vision.** Define the outcomes you want — and the metrics for measuring progress — from the beginning. Then work backwards from there. It’s also important to include all necessary stakeholders at the outset, says Bezzant. “You’ve got to have clearly defined goals and identify people who can really come in and make a difference in a short period of time.”

- **Focus on inclusion.** Think broadly about which stakeholders to engage. Cast a wide net across multiple organizations and government agencies that might contribute while exploring different project types with varying degrees of community impact.

- **Establish governance.** A successful P3 should clearly delineate the goals, expectations, boundaries, timelines, and metrics for both public and private sector participants. Agreements should also outline any tertiary expectations of private partners such as environmental practices or policies for diversity and inclusion. Include legal review for policy and procurement compliance.

- **Collaborate on new ideas.** Staying connected with private sector partners can sometimes lead to new opportunities for P3s that government leaders may not have even considered. Organize routine collaboration sessions with trusted partners, says Bezzant. “Come and open the book with your top initiatives, and let industry help solve those challenges.”

As governments seek to improve service delivery in the coming years, mobility and connectivity will be of utmost importance. And with the right private partner, state and local organizations can pursue partnerships that will leverage connectivity to improve crisis response efforts and help ensure digital equity for all constituents. “Connectivity will become a digital currency,” Bezzant says. “It’s absolutely critical that people have access.”

This piece was developed and written by the Government Technology Content Studio, with information and input from T-Mobile.

Endnote