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Provide effective & equitable relief with stimulus funding using the right community engagement strategy

On Thursday, March 11th, the historic American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 was officially signed into law. The $1.9 trillion aid bill is the largest federal relief program in US history and is intended to help Americans better cope with and recover from the economic and health impacts of the pandemic.

What the $1.9 trillion aid bill means for local governments

With about $350 billion in direct funding earmarked for state and local governments, the stimulus package is largely considered to offer tremendous and much-needed relief to cities and counties nationwide.

In comparison to the federal support provided via the CARES Act in 2020, this bill is much more flexible and thought to be better designed to ensure that communities of all sizes receive support, as opposed to just states and the largest cities. State and local governments have, for the most part, broad discretion in how to use the funding, and as disbursements begin, local leaders will start to double down on revitalizing local economies, supporting community members experiencing homelessness, clearing debts, re-investing in "basic" services, and building back equitably.

Although the relief package authorizes significant flexibility in spending, the resources it offers are still limited and the need is immediate. Tensions are already emerging between local governments' medium and long-term growth allocation strategies, and what their residents would like to see funded today.

Moving forward, local governments that have a robust civic engagement strategy in place will be able to better measure the impact of their spending decisions; will be able to get residents and council on board with medium and long term growth funding strategies; and will also be able to allocate funding more equitably and with the biggest impact by better understanding expressed community needs and priorities.

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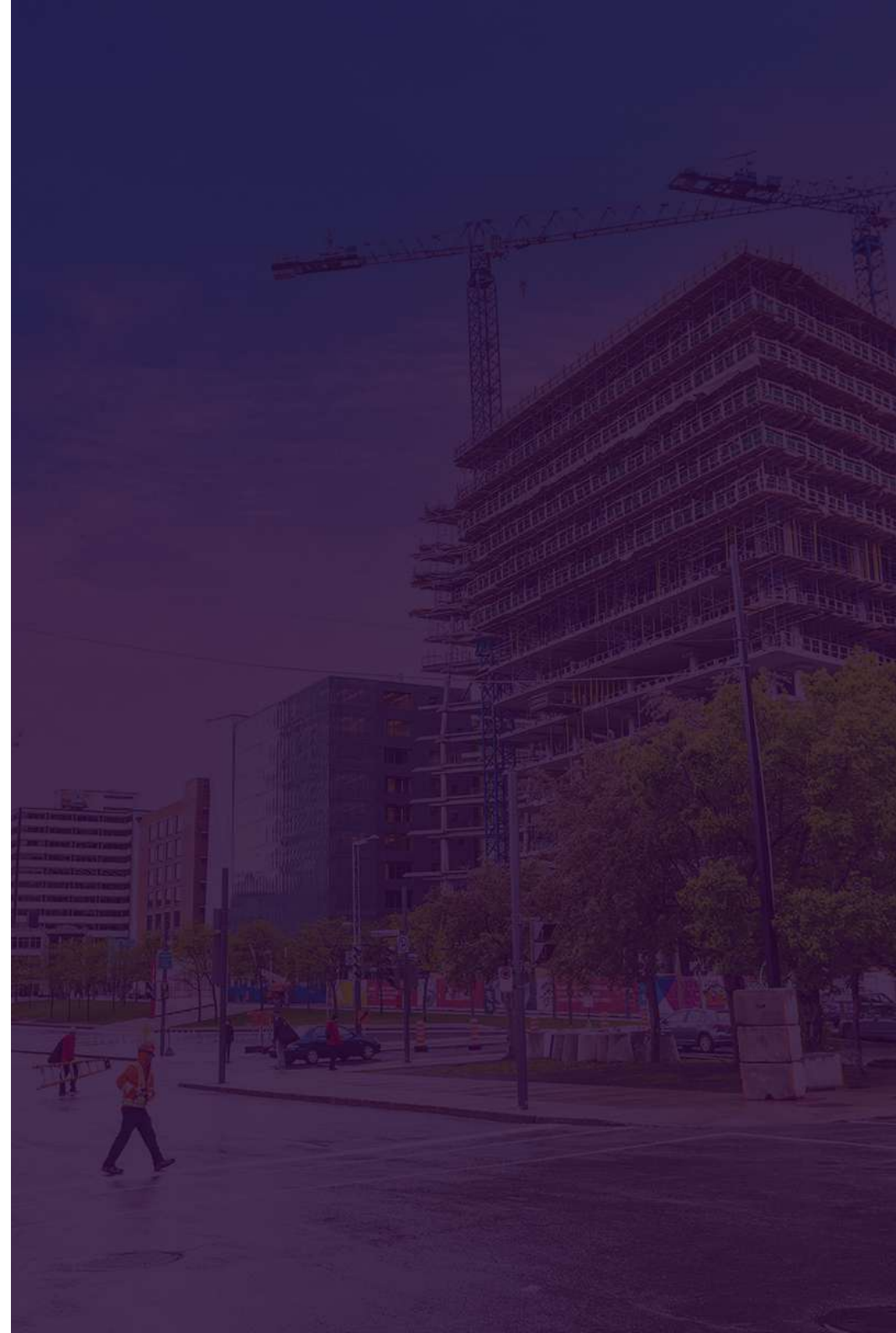
Good civic engagement is timely, broad-reaching, and representative

How local governments decide to invest in their communities is dependent on a few factors, but one of the turnkeys to effective funding allocation is their ability to continuously understand their community members' needs, as expressed by residents, both broadly and immediately.

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of being able to connect with residents in a remote world and meet them "where they're at," as well as the importance of timeliness when integrating resident input into high-stakes decision making.

COVID also taught local governments how dynamic community priorities are, and how local government agencies must be able to quickly adapt as realities shift - whether its a new strain of COVID, evolving CDC guidelines, the sudden availability of vaccines, or the run-of-the-mill civic crisis like a hurricane or tragic incident.

Good data is the best ally for this kind of work (and the best ally for maximizing limited budgets). Luckily, there are a number of types of community input data that measure resident sentiment - wants and needs - that can help guide strategic relief efforts.

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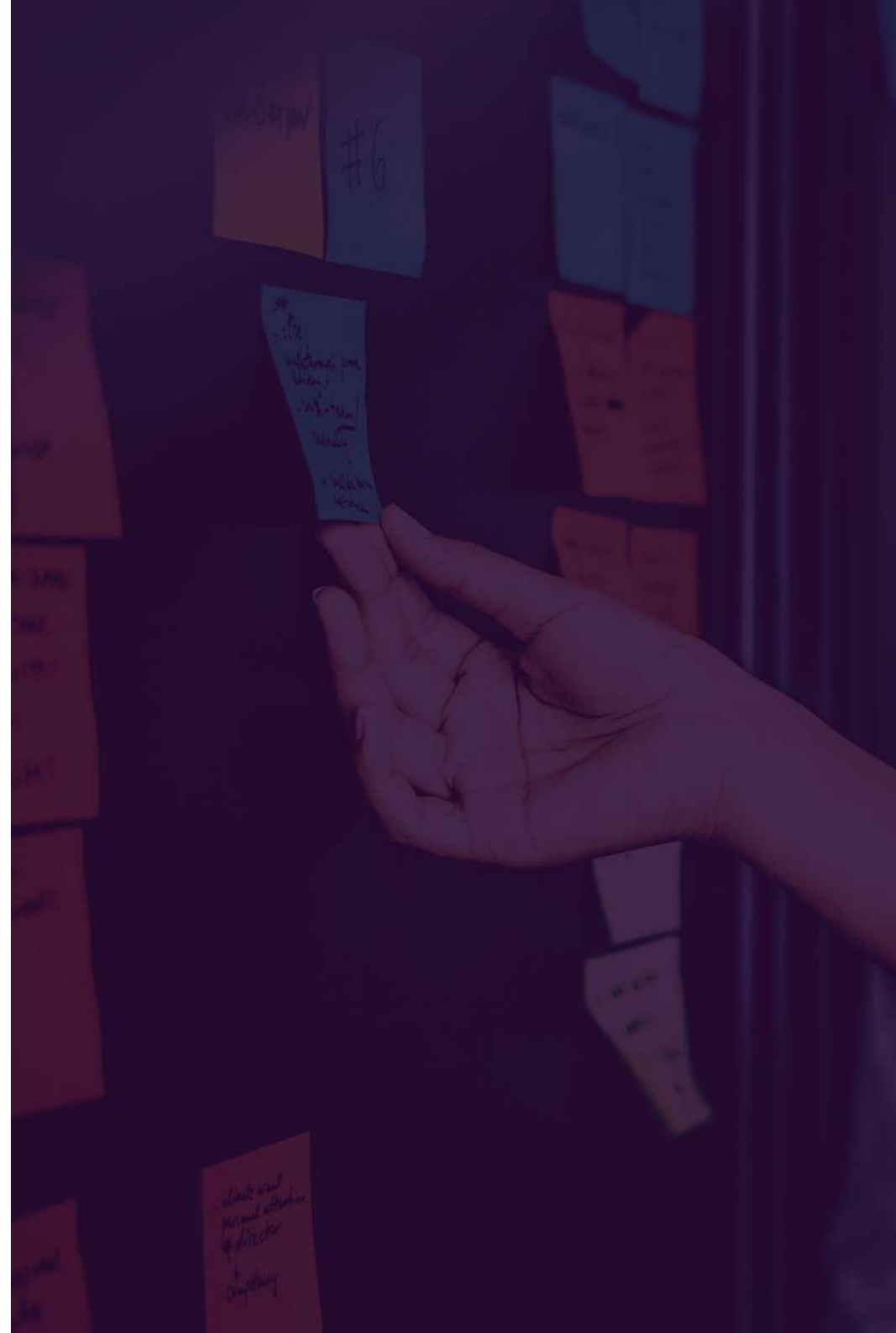
Data-driven stimulus funding allocations

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Incorporate community input into allocation decisions to ensure all community members' needs are met and that funding is spent equitably and with the biggest impact

Ensuring that all corners of the community are being heard from when it comes to allocating resources is impossible without a set civic engagement strategy that consciously accounts for voices beyond the STP (same ten people) - more active and engaged stakeholders. Additionally, good resident feedback data about either specific topics - ranging from infrastructure to local businesses; or from specific communities - is invaluable when allocating funds.

Organic feedback is broadreaching and can give a sense of residents' most pressing needs and priorities - what are community members discussing on their own? What are they expressing about civic life that local government agencies either aren't aware of or aren't specifically asking about? In parallel, there are survey and polling technologies that target specific topics, demographics, or neighborhoods so that if there are voices that aren't being heard, or local leaders want to understand feedback around a specific topic for nuanced resource allocation, they can ask the right people the right questions.

Understanding directly from residents what they need enables local governments to drill down accurately on how and where to invest resources so that stimulus funding can be distributed to programs in a nuanced and not blanket way, addressing the different needs different community members have. A good community engagement strategy that allows for ongoing feedback will enable government leaders to follow trends and shifts in needs, as well as ensure feedback is there when it's needed at different stages of the strategic spending process.

Case Study

In 2020, the City of Decatur, IL, ran very specific community surveys in order to build a nuanced and well-informed grant program around the allocation of its CARES Act funding – including setting specific parameters for business relief grants that reflected the expressed needs of its residents. After the City announced how it would be distributing grants - based on survey responses - the City tracked organic discourse to measure how its allocations were met by the public. By honing in on what residents needed, the City confidently allocated funding - with 57% positive feedback on its federal spending decision making.
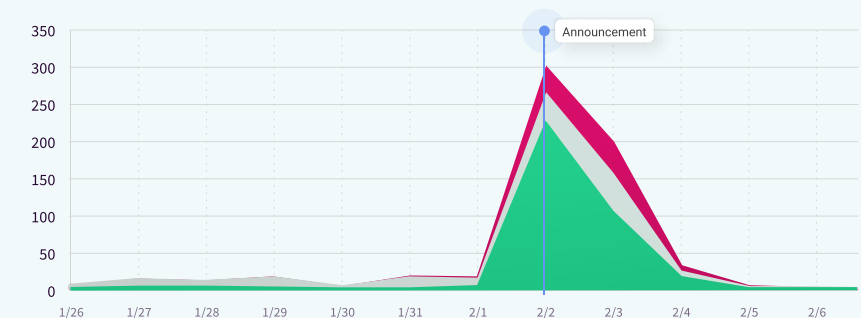
Residents' input regarding further steps and measures

Number of related comments
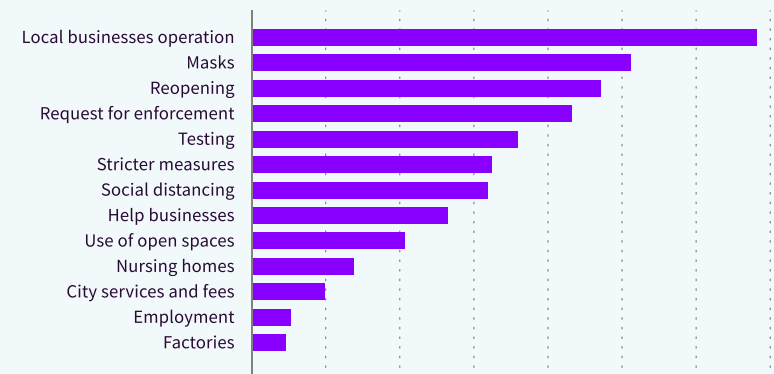
Discourse trends around the City's announcement of its CARES funding grant allocations

Score over time

Getting residents aligned with investment decisions

Understand and measure resident sentiment around funding decisions, monitor and adjust communications around complex topics, and ensure residents understand their local leaders' decisions
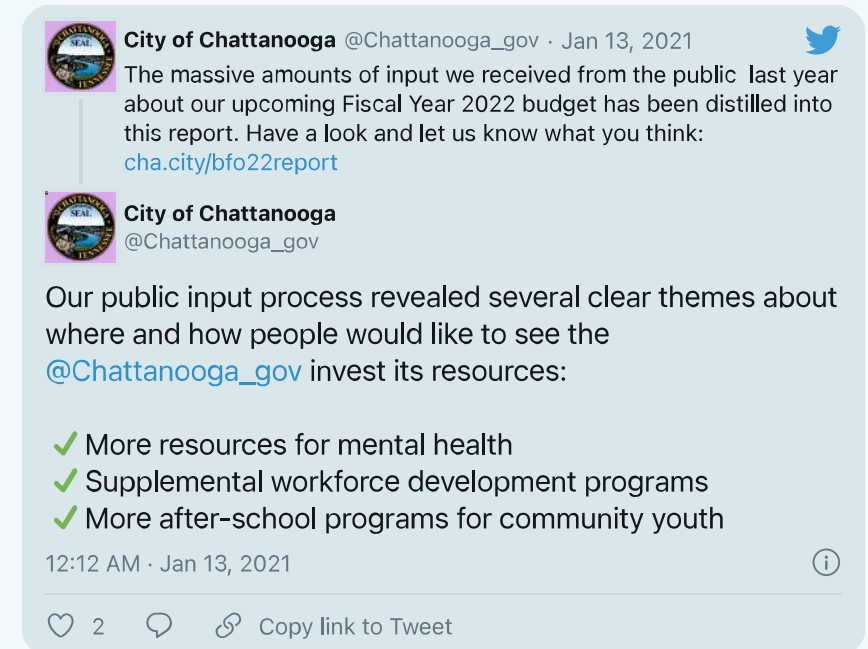
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Local governments will certainly be making some funding allocation decisions to invest in medium and long-term growth that don't necessarily seem to align, on their face, with residents' immediate needs. Examples might be investment in infrastructure projects, data tools, plugging budget holes (a spend CARES Act didn't allow for), or improving basic services, which may have been neglected during the pandemic. An agency that has the foresight and knowledge on how it needs to prioritize stimulus funding must still be able to effectively communicate both the what and the why.

Tracking organic resident discourse, measuring levels of resident satisfaction, and understanding why residents may be pushing back as local governments begin disbursing funds will help local governments better respond to their community members and get them on board with allocations.

Keeping the pulse of the community can help local government leaders adjust and refine messaging and communication, and reassure residents during the tough year(s) ahead. A continuous feedback loop will help increase transparency as well as confidence in leadership and assurance that the community will bounce back and that local government leaders have their community members' best interests in mind.

Case Study

The City of Chattanooga, TN, did an exemplary job of using resident feedback both to make budgeting decisions and communicate effectively with residents about its FY2022 Budget strategy. In order to understand resident feedback and satisfaction levels towards the City's spending, budget lines, and Mayor's priorities, the City tracked ongoing organic resident discourse and gathered specific input using surveys (paper and online) and community meetings via zoom. Its civic engagement and resident feedback processes culminated in a comprehensive executive report it then shared back with residents ahead of the Mayor's State of the City address via social media and other channels.

City of Chattanooga @Chattanooga_gov · Jan 13, 2021

The massive amounts of input we received from the public last year about our upcoming Fiscal Year 2022 budget has been distilled into this report. Have a look and let us know what you think: cha.city/bfo22report

City of Chattanooga
@Chattanooga_gov

Our public input process revealed several clear themes about where and how people would like to see the @Chattanooga_gov invest its resources:

✔️ More resources for mental health
✔️ Supplemental workforce development programs
✔️ More after-school programs for community youth

12:12 AM · Jan 13, 2021

♡ 2   🔗 Copy link to Tweet

The best community input combines both organic feedback and feedback based on proactive engagement

Resident feedback can help local governments understand needs, evaluate performance by measuring community satisfaction, and increase accountability. The use cases for community input are clear, but accessing this input is another story. By being in tune with both organic, unsolicited input on the one hand, and actively engaging residents on the other, local governments have the best chance of ensuring that they have widespread and useful community input.

1. Organic Feedback

If cities and counties were already having trouble widely engaging residents beforehand, then now, more than ever, residents don't have time to attend virtual council meetings or provide feedback through traditional channels. But, there is a tremendous opportunity here: as people went remote, they excelled at the existing trend of moving online. There is an enormous amount of data out there where your residents are already engaged and sharing. Citizen feedback happens everywhere on the web: in Facebook groups dedicated to a specific neighborhood, issue or event; on local news' platforms; on the social media channels of local organizations and businesses; on public Twitter feeds; and of course, on official city and county channels.

By leveraging what residents are already, organically saying, local governments are more likely to be hearing from a broader swath of residents and not just the STP (same ten people) or engaged stakeholders. When funding allocations are at stake - it's imperative that invested and resourced stakeholders are not the only ones given a voice. **Don't wait for your already-overwhelmed residents to come to you, make sure you're listening to more voices than just invested stakeholders so that your community as a whole guides your stimulus strategy.**

2. Feedback from Proactive Engagement:

The other side of the organic feedback coin is actively seeking feedback by engaging with residents. Running statistically valid, representative surveys and polls is one of the best ways for civic engagement around stimulus funding strategies, thanks to technology and the fact that residents are online. Online surveys also increase trust and accountability. When residents see their local leaders making an effort to seek their input they are more likely to provide feedback and engage in civic participation. Surveys can also be something ongoing - which enables government leaders to follow trends and shifts in needs, as well as ensure feedback is there when it's needed at different stages of the strategic spending process

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Getting council members on board with spending recommendations

The power of data-backed recommendations

03

Data - in all its forms - can be a powerful tool in aligning council with policy and budgeting recommendations, and resident feedback data is no exception. Council members often hear from a smaller non-representative slice of the community, so using broader community input - like the types of data mentioned above - can play a pivotal role in helping council members see the bigger picture.

Broadreaching and representative resident feedback data can also provide context for pushback from certain community members or parts of the community. Pushback in context can help council members see what the right decisions for the community as a whole are, or what the better long-term decisions are, even if their particular constituents aren't aligned.

Local governments who understand how to leverage resident sentiment and surveys can not only provide better recommendations to council, they can also back up these recommendations with great data. In the case of relief funding, local governments must be able to work well with council members to move forward with allocation programs and policies - and aligning allocations with real community input is the golden standard of how to do this.

Case Study

The City of Decatur used Zencity data to back its CARES Act funding recommendations when it proposed them to Council - and got the recommendations approved!

"Data is so important, in large part because we're constantly competing against a personal story. There are individual stories our council hears and that has a tremendous amount of impact. So how do you use the data you gather to make the case for that particular story or to prove your story or disprove it? We leverage data and the multiple media modalities out there to ensure we have a broader perspective. We use Zencity on a daily basis to get a barometer of the public view on specific issues."

Jon D. Kindseth
Deputy City Manager
Decatur, IL

Measuring the impact of funding decisions with good performance management

How resident satisfaction data can help in oversight metrics to ensure funds are being spent effectively and equitably

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Finally, impactful and equitable stimulus allocations require oversight metrics. Good performance management is about more than just measuring dollars and cents - it's also about resident sentiment. A continuous resident feedback loop can help local governments measure the effectiveness of programs in the year ahead.
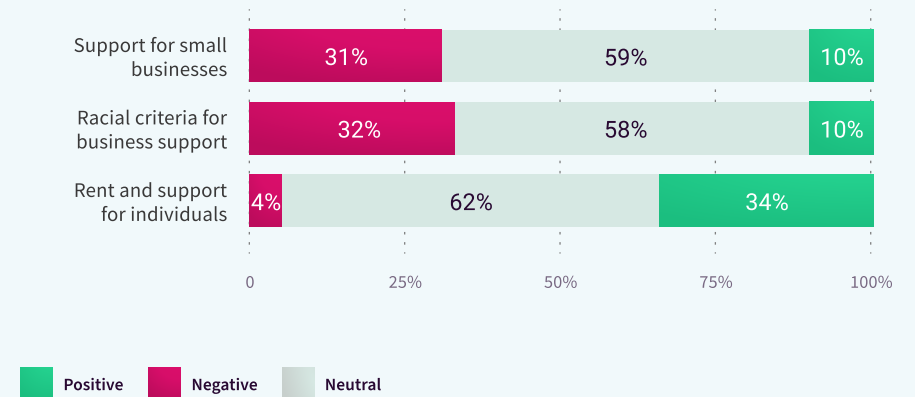
Sentiment trends about both topics - like specific services - as well government policies and initiatives will help local governments adapt when necessary. Measuring resident sentiment and satisfaction levels is also key for understanding not just if local agencies are moving the needle, but also if residents are aware that the needle is being moved. Resident sentiment trends are also good indicators about the levels of confidence in the prospects of the community and what's to come.

Ultimately, for resident sentiment to be useful for performance management, it must be timely and there must be a consistent way to measure it. Local governments that can continuously track resident sentiment levels and adapt to results - whether adapting means improving messaging or shifting funding, will be more impactful and be better positioned to stretch limited budgets effectively.

Zencity Data Insight

### Tracking the performance of CARES Act expenditures thus far over a 2 month period

Negative feedback: **support for local businesses**
Positive feedback: support for individuals

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Support for small businesses	31%	59%	10%
Racial criteria for business support	32%	58%	10%
Rent and support for individuals	4%	62%	34%

0   25%   50%   75%   100%

Positive   Negative   Neutral

The good news!

[Zencity](#) is a community insights and analytics company used by local governments to collect and understand resident input. Over the course of 2020, we worked with over 200 cities and counties to help them better connect and serve their residents including aiding them in effectively allocating CARES Act funding. From our work we have two pieces of good news on the subject of citizen engagement.

The first is that resident sentiment data - how community members feel about current events, policies, and local initiatives - as well as the ability to engage with residents, especially online, has become easier with technology. The second piece of good news is that in the pandemic, as local governments really took to the frontlines, residents who may not have previously sought out or directly been in touch with their local leaders, [began relying more heavily on local government for information and critical services](#). This means that city and county leaders are perfectly poised to leverage community feedback on how to allocate stimulus funding resources.

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Collect Resident Feedback

Analyze

Deliver Actionable Insights
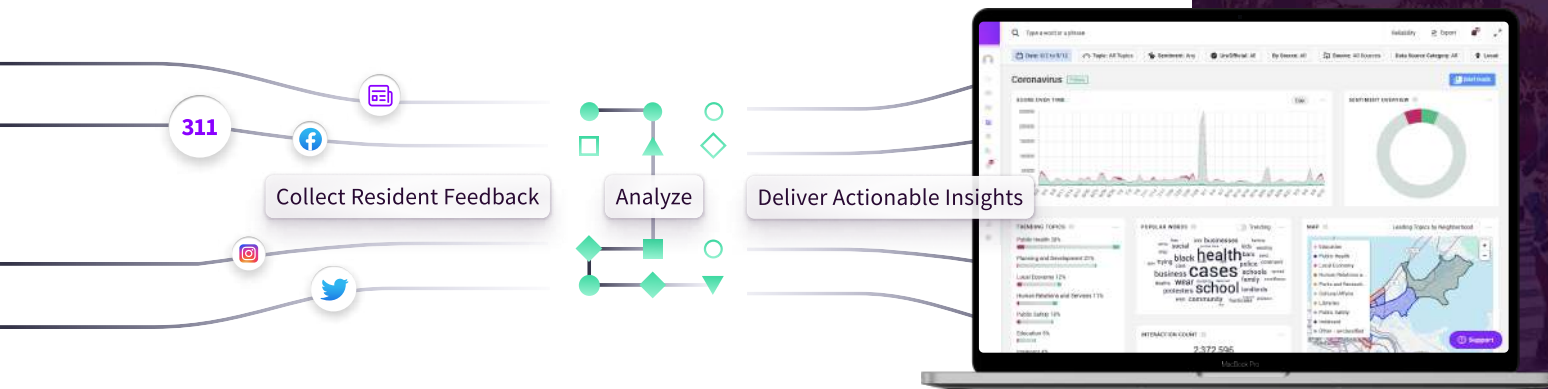
Zencity is here to help! [Get in touch to find out how Zencity's community insights & analytics platform can help ensure your stimulus funding strategy has the biggest impact.](#)

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