Concentration contributes to coronavirus. Nationally, COVID-19 struck worst in certain “hot spots” or corridors with concentrations of travelers and other people, including those in urban areas. As one would expect, when people are crowded together, the likelihood of person-to-person transfer is greater. That is the point of social distancing. No place is immune – all states have had coronavirus deaths – and not all big cities have suffered as much, but New York, for example, was especially hard hit.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 1,062,446 cases in the U.S. as of May 1. Nearly 30% of those, or 299,106 cases, were found in a single state: New York. (This is far from New York’s 6% proportionate share of the nation’s population.) The grim death toll is even worse. At that time, of the nation’s 62,406 deaths, 23,211 – or 37.2% - took place in New York, with many of those in New York City. More recently, the numbers of cases in other states are catching up.

As of June 26, 2020, those states with the highest COVID-19 incidence were New York, California, New Jersey, Illinois, and Texas. The continental states with the lowest COVID-19 incidence were the rural states of Maine, Montana, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. Many rural areas had low COVID-19 incidence, except for those communities with large meat-packing plants where workers were operating in close proximity. Was the high incidence of urban COVID-19 because, as is the case with many trends, the coasts got it “first and worst” before it came to the heartland? Is it because the grim experience in New York informed the states in the west about the importance of staying home and social distancing, providing advance notice to put in place those practices before the pandemic spread so drastically? Is it because uncongested rural areas, by their nature, allow for social distancing?

In general, evidence suggests that concentration of the population - especially when complicated by other societal factors - means a higher risk of coronavirus.

We grieve for the tragic death loss in New York and the disproportionate impact on urban and black
Americans. We must also consider what this means for the rest of the nation and what lessons may be applied from the impact of coronavirus. We believe that rural America can offer a positive alternative for our citizens in the future. Here are three key points.

First, working remotely has been demonstrated to be a workable strategy for many people. COVID-19 and the resulting policy response were a huge shock to the American system. In a matter of weeks, people transitioned to working from home instead of at the office. Constant video conference calls and webinars became the order of the day. We learned, by necessity, that we do not have to be in physical proximity with our colleagues. Using the tools of technology, we can connect virtually with coworkers, bosses, employees, customers and stakeholders. While not always ideal, remote work is certainly a useful strategy for continuity of business operations given our current circumstances.

Whatever the state of the coronavirus disease, will we return entirely to the old way of doing business? We don’t think so. The COVID crisis merely accelerated the societal trend in favor of remote work. Businesses know that the key to success is recruiting and retaining talent, and a degree of flexibility may be important in attracting such talent. Potential employees want the flexibility to have time for family and other pursuits and to live where they choose. Employers will need to allow remote work to attract such top performers, and they will find concomitant positive results. Remote work is a growing trend, and the coronavirus crisis has demonstrated these benefits to a world-wide audience, even though literature on the subject has been explaining the advantages since the 1970s. We believe this innovative practice has value for employees, employers, and rural communities where remote workers can live and flourish.

Utah State University Extension has been a leader in the development of helping people work remotely. In 2017, many of Utah’s rural counties were experiencing double the state’s average unemployment rate. In response, the Utah Legislature approved funding for USU Extension to develop a remote work education program. The Rural Online Initiative (ROI) was then created and its first product was the Master Remote Work Professional certificate course which was designed to provide Utah’s rural workforce and businesses with specialized training and services for online opportunities in remote employment, freelance work, and e-commerce. Participants from other states, including Extension faculty from Purdue, North Dakota State, South Dakota State, Missouri, Washington State, and Kansas State University, also enrolled in these classes.

As a result, 109 rural residents have been placed in remote jobs, creating an economic benefit equivalent to 3,894 jobs in urban counties. Furthermore, this saved an estimated 2,340 commuting miles driven per month, which saved workers $192.70 in fuel costs and equated to 0.70 metric tons less of carbon emissions per month. When the COVID-19 pandemic created a surge in telework, the ROI team at USU
Extension immediately responded. The program accommodated an 87% increase in the number of monthly training participants during April, May, and June. This helped thousands of business leaders and employees stay connected and function effectively. Such education and outreach are important amid the rapid adoption of remote work.

Secondly, high-quality, rural broadband is vital. Remote workers must have high quality broadband if they are to communicate with employers and clients. In some cases, rural telecommunication companies and/or cooperatives have worked more aggressively than investor-owned companies to enhance their service, even providing fiber-to-the-premise infrastructure. Rural access to broadband is a mixed bag.

As agriculture becomes increasingly high-tech, the need for broadband increases. Precision agriculture helps producers and the environment, but it is also data-driven. Telemedicine applications, which have also been necessarily spurred onward by the COVID-19 crisis, need Internet capacity as well. Main Street businesses, entrepreneurs, and independent workers need high-capacity Internet to be competitive and effective. Improved access to rural broadband would have both economic and health benefits.

Third, rural America’s lifestyle is more attractive than ever. Rural America can offer wide open spaces, scenic natural vistas, less crime, less pollution, less congestion, less commute time, less traffic, access to natural amenities, and safe streets and neighborhoods. At their best, rural areas are an ideal place to raise a family. Rural communities can offer more personalized attention to schoolchildren and more time for families. Now is the time for individuals and families to recognize that moving to rural America may be a good option.

But rural community leaders must also respond to this challenge. It has been said that technology now makes it possible for a person to live wherever they choose. If that is the case, community leaders need to ask, why would a person choose to live in my community? Is my town clean, vibrant, and active? Are we open to new ideas, new cultures, and new people? Do we welcome volunteers? Do we celebrate with community festivals? Would our community attract former residents? Do we create opportunities to engage youth? Communities which embrace these concepts and work together to make themselves better can be wonderful places for people to live and work.

In summary, we believe that the COVID-19 crisis has changed our lives. Things will never be the same again. It has caused us to live differently. The crisis will pass, but the lessons learned will continue. We can and will do more remote work as a society. We must invest in rural broadband so that our society can fully benefit from the tools of technology. And in light of coronavirus, we should consider rural America as a model for future living.
The Western Rural Development Center collaborates with western land-grant universities and public and private sector partners to promote excellence in research, education, and extension for the prosperity of western rural communities. The COVID-19 BRIEFS are published by the Western Rural Development Center to deliver timely, research-based information on topics of importance to the western United States in relation to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) is one of four regional centers funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to strengthen the capacity of local citizens to guide the future of their rural communities. Each Center links the research and Extension capacity of regional land-grant universities with local decision-makers to address a wide range of rural development issues. The Western Rural Development Center is hosted by Utah State University and receives support from Utah State University Extension and the Utah Agricultural Experiment Station. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or other funders. The Western Rural Development Center does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability or veteran status. This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number 2019-51150-29875. For more resources and information, visit the WRDC’s website at https://wrdc.usu.edu.

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