

An Interview with Councilwoman Michele Fiore

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas
The Lincy Institute
2024

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The following interview was a part of the “Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada” research project. The recorded interview and transcript were made possible through the generosity of The Lincy Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The goal of the project was to understand and document how Nevada organizations and leaders responded to the myriad challenges that the pandemic engendered. The interviewees thank The Lincy Institute and their supporters for the opportunity to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of the project: Dr. John Hudak, Dr. Makada Henry-Nickie, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Taylor Cummings, Peter Grema, Kristian Thymianos, Saha Salahi, Madison Frazee, and Katie Lim.

Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Councilwoman Michele Fiore, Justice of the peace for Nye County, City of Las Vegas, and was conducted on 7/28/22 by Magdalena Martinez. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Councilwoman Michelle Fiore

Date: 7-28-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Michelle Fiore

Magdalena Martinez [00:02] All right. So I am here today with Councilwoman Michelle Fiore. Today is July 28th, and I just want to ask you if I have your consent to participate in this study and to record this.

Michelle Fiore [00:15]
Absolutely.

Magdalena Martinez [00:16]
Yes. And then once the transcript is complete, if I have your consent to use your name and your quotes, once you receive any final transcript. You will have the right to strike out anything, but is it all right to attribute your name?

Michelle Fiore [00:32]
Absolutely.

Magdalena Martinez [00:33]
Okay, thank you. So we'll get started. And so if you could tell me, Councilwoman Fiore, if you could describe your role throughout the pandemic, and then the role of the City of Las Vegas Council?

Michelle Fiore [00:45]
So the pandemic was the first of its kind here, in our state and our city. And the state rules – the municipalities have very little home rule. So, once the governor creates certain boundaries, we basically have to follow them. And so within our city, the City of Las Vegas, which is the largest city in Nevada, it was rough. So the pandemic and the shutting down of businesses, churches, and picking and choosing winners and losers was inappropriate, in my opinion, and we're seeing a big fallout from that right now. We have a company that has produced 98% of their results to be false. And I just have to tell you that the way the pandemic was handled in the State of Nevada was not impressive.

Magdalena Martinez [01:59]
Now, you said that choosing winners and losers, and you said that the company – could you tell me? I'm not sure I know what you're referring to – the company; the test results were inaccurate. Could you give me a little more context?

Michelle Fiore [02:14]
Yes. I can actually – if you email me your email – or I'm going to write it down. I can actually give you the company's name and the owners of the company. They were licensed to perform

thousands and thousands of COVID-19 tests, and they were all fraudulent. The test results weren't accurate, and they were just putting them out there.

Magdalena Martinez [02:37]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [02:45]

And it's been all over the news and the media. Yeah. So that's a big issue. Because when we're in a state of emergency, and the state contracts with companies, these companies need to be vetted. And obviously, this company wasn't vetted because it was someone that they thought they knew.

Magdalena Martinez [03:13]

And you said that the way it was handled, at the state level – I don't remember your exact words, but you did not approve. Could you say a little bit more about that?

Michelle Fiore [03:24]

Yes. So Governor Sisolak was at the helm of our state, and he had to get sued in order to open up churches. He let casinos open up at 50%, but not churches. So when you pick winners and losers like that – and thank goodness, our Supreme Court ruled in favor of our religious freedoms and opened the churches against his direction.

So just incidences like this, and our unemployment system was horrific. In the State of Nevada's unemployment system, all of the computer systems are antiquated and out-of-state.

Magdalena Martinez [04:06]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [04:09]

So we had so many people out of work, and not able to receive an unemployment check. We have animals at the Animal Foundation that had to be turned over because when people couldn't pay their rent and couldn't stay where they were – they were staying with family and friends – and sometimes their animals couldn't go and stay with their family or friends, which was heart-wrenching. Heart-wrenching. Because I have two dogs, and they're like my kids. They're part of our family. I have seven grandkids, my two dogs, and my mom, my kids, and my sons-in-law.

So looking at the way this situation was handled was not okay for Nevadans, for the Constituency of Nevada. I have to tell you – we just really disobeyed Governor Sisolak, the city, and the council because we were not shutting city hall down because he said to. We stayed open. We continued business as usual. We kept people employed, whether it was at home or in the city. We gave them a choice of vaccination. We didn't force vaccination on them. And we believed that adults can rule their lives.

Magdalena Martinez [05:35]

Okay. I'm just writing down some notes. Okay, very helpful. Thank you. Could you tell me, a

little bit, about how you worked with or observed groups that were hardest hit by the pandemic? Who were these groups, in your opinion?

Michelle Fiore [05:55]

I worked a lot with individuals. And so, when we had folks calling, I would send my staff out to literally go food shopping. We would find out how many people were in their family, and what was going on. This was so new, so new to people. They didn't know – they got tested for COVID. They'd never ordered food online. But my kids, because they have kids, they order food and they drive up to the grocery store, and they load the car up, right? I'm old-school, so I go, and I pick my fresh produce, and I check the date on the milk, and I like to – I'm hands-on. But I'm also going to be 52 tomorrow.

So we had our constituency call us, and they tested positive for COVID; they needed to go food shopping, but they knew they weren't allowed out of their houses. These were some of the dilemmas we came across, and this is what we said: "Stay still. How many people are in your household?" And then we would shop for like two weeks. We would ask them, number one, are they diabetic? So we wouldn't – that's really the only thing – did they have any allergies, or are they diabetic? And then we wouldn't take people's grocery lists because there's just too many.

Magdalena Martinez [07:20]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [07:22]

So we would go to Costco, Smith's, and Albertsons, and we would literally drop the boxes off. So, knock on the door – leave; so we weren't interacting, and just call them from the car and say, "Did you get the boxes?" and they would say, "Yeah."

Magdalena Martinez [07:39]

Mm-hmm. Wow, that seems like a lot of work.

Michelle Fiore [07:45]

It is, but you've got to think about it. Because just literally – what's today? Thursday?

Magdalena Martinez [07:51]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [07:53]

Today's Thursday. Monday, I got a phone call from a woman, and she had left a message, but she also messaged me on my Facebook in those "Private Messages." And she said, "My address is this. I don't feel good. I can't go get food from a charity. I don't get my check 'til Tuesday, and I'm out of everything." So, literally, I said, "Kersan, she lives on Fremont. It's not in my ward. It doesn't matter. It's there in Nevada." Krisanne went and got eggs, bread, butter, milk, spaghetti, spaghetti sauce, rice, and beans, a case of water, and a case of toilet paper – and dropped it at her apartment on Fremont Street.

Magdalena Martinez [08:42]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [08:44]

You know what I mean? Because listen. It was Monday. She gets a check on Tuesday, maybe Wednesday. She's out of food, she's sick. I'm not going to tell her to call FourSquare, if they call me and reach out to me, our office – my personal policy, in any office I hold, is we help. Period. We help.

Magdalena Martinez [09:09]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [09:10]

And we don't say anything. We're not going to put them through the rigamarole go call FourSquare, go call charity." "No – you need food for a couple of days, we'll figure it out."

Magdalena Martinez [09:17]

Okay. How do you balance that with the work of governing?

Michelle Fiore [09:27]

Well, let me tell you. As someone who is part of the government, our true job is to protect the governed, not the government. Let me be crystal clear. Some of my peers don't feel that way; some of my peers are all about government, government – I'm not. I'm in these positions to make sure that our constituencies of Nevada are protected, no matter what. It doesn't matter rich, poor, Democrat, Republican, white, or Black – it does not matter. And I think I've proven that over the years. I've served with the city for five, prior to that, an assemblywoman defending cowboys against the government. Those cowboys weren't Republicans, you know what I'm saying? It's like it's not about your party. If you're a true servant, you serve.

Magdalena Martinez [10:24]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [10:26]

And so, when someone calls for help, we help. Now, we did get a little overwhelmed during COVID, and I got volunteers to help me; because I have a staff of four, and it was a little overwhelming. But together, we did it, and there wasn't one call unanswered, or one family that went without, that called us for help.

Magdalena Martinez [10:50]

Mm-hmm, very helpful. Thank you. I'm wondering if could you walk me through a timeline, as you remember it, of COVID, March 2020. What happened? What did you do?

Michelle Fiore [11:05]

So, what would be better for me? Because I think this can go for at least an hour. What would be a lot better for me and my schedule is – because this is a very important question that you're asking me, and I don't want to miss one thing. So what I would prefer is for you to email me

these questions, so I can literally give you the timeline and go through my calendar, and you should see all the things we did. Because it wasn't just the City of Las Vegas and Ward 6. It was the State of Nevada.

Magdalena Martinez [11:40]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [11:42]

We went to police stations, and the hospitals, delivered our first responders food, and so it was really a big task.

So I would prefer, Magdalena, if you would email me these questions so I don't miss one thing. Because there's so much that we did, and we went above and beyond. And I wasn't a "Zoom girl." I showed up everywhere in person; if I had to wear a mask, I wore the mask. And that's it.

Magdalena Martinez [12:18]

Okay. So do you prefer that I send you the rest of the questions?

Michelle Fiore [12:23]

Would you? Because I've got to say, there's so much that happened through the pandemic that you need to know.

Magdalena Martinez [12:30]

Okay.

Michelle Fiore [12:31]

What do I do?

Magdalena Martinez [12:32]

May I ask you the very last question, which is, are you hopeful for the future, and if so, what are you hopeful for?

Michelle Fiore [12:41]

So I live in hope and optimism, just so you know. I live in hope and optimism. I always think today is still a new day. We have so many hours left in the day, and tomorrow is a new day. And with my hope and optimism, I hope that we learn from our mistakes, so we don't repeat – I don't want to call it bad behavior – but we don't repeat mistakes, right? Shutting small businesses down – we just – I'm sorry, but this pandemic, in my opinion, was not controlled appropriately. A lot of people lost their businesses. They're not in business. Lost family members. Lost, with their animals, you know.

And here's the other thing, and nobody wants to talk about this, Magdalena, and it's so important. You know, humanity, sometimes the things that I see and hear are extremely disturbing, especially when it comes to abusing another human; whether it's your mate, your child, a senior in your home. And the pandemic, what it did was, it forced abused children to be in the abuser's presence for eight hours a day. When they were in school, the school was their sanctuary.

Magdalena Martinez [14:22]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [14:24]

When they were in school, from 8:00 until 3:00, that was their safe zone, where they weren't getting yelled at, beaten, sexually abused, or mentally abused. And so putting folks, children, and seniors in that position, to where, let's say, the abuser of the house is in that house all day long just abusing everyone. These are scars that we could never fix.

Magdalena Martinez [14:48]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [14:50]

And so I just pray that we never have an administration that doesn't put people first. No matter what, you've got to put people first. We have children that are not up to par in their grade level because of all of this Zooming and school-missing, and it's not the same when you're not in the classroom with the teacher.

And we are evolving into not in-person, and I don't know how healthy that is either. So I think human contact is extremely important.

Magdalena Martinez [15:37]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [15:39]

There wasn't one day, through the pandemic, that I took off. Not one day. So we worked seven days; I was in contact with many people. I never got COVID. And I never was fearful if someone was coughing near me, right? Maybe because I have seven grandkids that put boogers on me all day long. So it's – I just have a different view of humanity and human beings, and I just – I love my fellow human beings, and I don't ever want someone in my presence to ever feel, if they have to cough or sneeze, that I'm afraid – because I'll wipe their nose. Do you understand what I'm saying? I just love my people, and I don't want them to ever think – because a lot of times, since COVID-19, people will look at others strangely, like prejudice almost, if they cough or sneeze.

Magdalena Martinez [16:42]

Mm-hmm.

Michelle Fiore [16:44]

And I think it's gotten way out of control.

Magdalena Martinez [16:47]

Mm-hmm. Very helpful, thank you. I will email you the rest of the questions.

Michelle Fiore [16:53]

Thank you. And then – yeah. And is it okay if I get them back to you by Monday? Because

we're preparing for a 12-year-old's birthday party, and I'm having 15 boys sleep over at my house.

Magdalena Martinez [17:05]

Okay. (laughter) Enjoy your grandson's birthday party.

Michelle Fiore [17:09]

Thank you so much. And your hair is beautiful.

Magdalena Martinez [17:14]

Thank you. Take care.

Michelle Fiore [17:15]

Bye-bye.

End of audio: 17:17

Questions were emailed. As of the printing of this transcript, no additional responses were received.