Access
Oral History Interview with Tiffany Webber
Conducted by Nicholas Johnson on July 16, 2021

Nicholas Johnson [00:00:01] Okay. So, today is Friday, July 16th and my name is Nick Johnson. This interview is being conducted as part of a project by the National Humanities Center in conjunction with the University of Washington. Our goal is to collect, preserve and share the stories and experiences of health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, the first question is just to tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do professionally.

Tiffany Webber [00:00:26] My name is Tiffany Webber. I am an associate degree RN [Registered Nurse], not a Bachelor's RN. And I got my education here in Montana, actually up on the reservation at Saint Louis [inaudible] College is where I finished my schooling. I came to Public Health in 2018. I have been a clinical nurse for the last 20 years, working in hospital clinic settings, and I was roped into coming to public health, because there was a real need for a public health nurse here in Ravalli County. And so, I thought, Okay, why not? I'll give it a try. And it was a pretty big learning curve. It was a lot different type of nursing than I'm used to in clinic nursing. As you probably know, being a clinic person, we focus on the individual, where public health, we we don't focus on the individual, we focus on the population as a whole. And so, yeah, it was a bit of a learning curve. I started out as the immunization nurse and the disease surveillance nurse, and I moved up to disease surveillance and emergency preparedness. And then, last year when the pandemic hit, there was a director of nursing here at the time – as the director of Public Health, who was a nurse – and myself, who's a nurse. And we had just brought on another third nurse, Kristin. And just the way things panned out, the director quit and there was no one to move up. So, I, after just a very short time, was moved up to director – interim director, and then last fall, I was named director after a lot of turmoil and search. You know, didn't really exactly want to be the director during a pandemic. But that's a battlefield promotion for you. I'm from here, I think that's important to note, because I think a lot of our success here in Ravalli County has to do with understanding our culture here in Ravalli County. And I'm from here, I'm a third generation Bitterrooter. And yeah, that's my story. Okay.

Nicholas Johnson [00:02:40] What was a typical day like at work before COVID-19 started?

Tiffany Webber [00:02:48] So, when I began here, there was a nurse director that was a new grad. She had been here about five years and it was just her. And so, I was the other nurse that worked and I wore a lot of hats. As I said, I did immunization and disease surveillance. And the program here in Ravalli County is not a very robust public health program. We have just a very few grants. And so, a typical day was – come in, check our disease surveillance logs to see if there's communicable diseases that we need to follow up on. Certain days a week we did immunizations, and so, I think two days a week we did scheduled immunizations. And one afternoon we did walk ins. And it was – gosh, now you almost have to tell people the difference between whether they were regular immunizations or COVID immunizations. But since it was pre-COVID, it was just regular immunizations, mostly people without health insurance is what we saw. And there was a lot of downtime, a lot of trying to figure out, you know, where we're going. The director that was here at the time was also kind of struggling to see where – what was the path. It seems like her and I spent a lot of time sitting down and brainstorming about what does our

community need, where are we going? You know, public health has changed so much and that we don't go to schools anymore and do scoliosis checks and lice checks and that kind of stuff. We have grants that we apply for and then we try to meet those deliverables, you know, whatever that looks like, generating numbers. And so, we spent a lot of time just trying to brainstorm with, you know – so, it wasn't terribly busy and we were absolutely under the radar. Nobody knew what we did. You know, even the HR [Human Resources] director at the time who hired me said, You know, the majority of us here in the county know about, you know, next to nothing about what you do. And with you coming on board – and I'm kind of a strong personality – I was told, You need to stay within these parameters. This is what is expected out of you, stay in these parameters. So, yeah, we were just a very insignificant piece of the puzzle back then.

Nicholas Johnson [00:05:09] Okay. Yeah, that feels like it's kind of going somewhere else though, with that story, so, could you talk about how that started to change once COVID started becoming a thing in Montana?

Tiffany Webber [00:05:21] Yeah, so, here in Ravalli County, we are in a bubble. I like to think of it as a bubble. You can find yourself just 45 minutes down the road in Missoula with an absolutely different mindset, nothing at all like ours. And so, like I said, when I was brought on board, I was told that I have some flexibility in what programs we want to do or what we want to pursue, but within a certain context, because, you know, the commissioners don't want to field a lot of phone calls about stuff that might be making people upset. So, yeah, it was pretty limited on what we could do. And so, we were trying to look for things that we thought the community might need. And so, I remember kind of starting to canvass around places and talk to businesses and – you know, one night I went in and talked to a bartender I know that's been working here for years and years and years, and I'm like, What do you see? What do you think the community needs? And then it seems that in November I got the first HON [Health on the Net Foundation provides reliable medical information to providers] just before I left – I went to Ireland. That's a whole other side – I lived in Ireland for five years and was married to an Irish guy and I still needed to go home and move my stuff over. And I was just getting ready to leave to go back to collect my things. And I – the first HON came about the virus out of Wuhan, China, and I was – I remember thinking, Oh, that's just a thing in China. I didn't give it any thought. Nobody knew that it was going to blow up the way that it did. And I would say here for us, the first – let's see, I would say our first case was in March. It was a student coming home that was in school abroad and it pretty much was met with, It's not real. The majority of the feedback that we got – I mean, I don't know how most residents felt in Ravalli County, but the majority of feedback we were getting was that it's not real, it's a hoax, you know, we don't believe in it, we're not going to do anything. And so, I would say – having to try and figure out how we were going to address that attitude, you know, I get it, I'm from here. I have that same mindset as well. I always find myself going, What's the conspiracy here, you know? And then, I have to say, Oh, wait, hold on. I went to college. That's right. I've got education. I can see the science. I understand. So, how do we meet these people halfway, you know? Because butting heads wasn't working. For us in our department, we had a new director and she had been in public health for many, many years, transferred from another – from Missoula down to here. She was from the Bitterroot. And I don't

– I can't really speak to what she was going through. I think she was thinking she had a nice cushy job that she was going to ride out through retirement. Do you know what I mean? Because I just – I don't want to bash or say anything bad, I don't know what she was going through, but I will say that she absolutely wasn't prepared for what happened and the pressure that came with it. And so, when things really heated up in the middle of July, she just quit. She just quit and left us in a real turmoil. Also with that at the time – it's so funny, because it all centers right around this day. It all headed on this day, this very day last year – we had just done that swabbing clinic and the nurses were exhausted. We were just overheated. We'd all been on our feet for a long time. And the following day, some of us had the day off – had been given a day off, and we hadn't had it in a while. And I was one of those nurses. And when I came back from my day off, three of the nurses who'd come in to work that next day had quit, the health officer had resigned, and the director was ill. The director hadn't quit, but it wasn't long after that that she quit as well. And it just sort of decimated us and left, you know, me and a couple other nurses holding back, so to speak. And I've never been a boss. I've never been the leader of anything, you know, I've always worked for a position. So, you know, it was – excuse my French, but it was a shit show. Just, you know, I'm new to public health and I've only just gotten disease surveillance under my belt. And our emotions here for us were really high in that we spent a lot of time sometimes crying, if that sounds crazy. But I mean, not knowing anything about COVID. Nobody knew. We had no idea what it was going to do to our community. And like I said, I grew up here and when I grew up here we knew everybody. You knew everyone and I felt a personal responsibility to do everything I could. I mean, I knew we were going to lose people. But when you were seeing what was coming out of the cities – body bags and trucks full of bodies and what was happening in Europe. Meanwhile, on a side note, my husband was stuck in Ireland because he's an Irish citizen and it just took that all to a halt. So, we were separated the entire time, you know, he's over there, I'm over here. We can't get to each other, you know. And yeah, it was so emotional. We had to call in help, of course, because it was just me and another nurse. So, the past – there was a past director, who just coincidentally lived across the street from me. I just rented a house and she lived across the street from me. She came back to work. A retired director from Public Health, she came back to work. And a school nurse, who felt very compelled – we roped her in. And Kirsten, who's working for us now, she had just gotten here from Minnesota. We got her roped in and we worked long days, such long days, because every night you'd go home and you'd be thinking, Who's the one person that I can afford not to call tonight? You know, when you're tracking and tracing things? Sometimes you'd spend all day tracking and tracing, only to find out that you're working on the same case. Does that makes sense? You hear this person calls and says, I had an exposure. I think an exposure or I heard this or I have that going on. And then this person over here has called and this nurse is working on this. And then throughout the day, as we're talking to each other, we realize, you know, this is the cousin or the aunt or that the boyfriend that was visiting over here. And you'd realize you've been on the same case all day, just trying to track and trace – felt a little bit like a Nazi in the beginning, because I just couldn't let anything go, you know? If I even thought for 1 second you were exposed, I was going to quarantine you. And that's a hard thing for people – when you talk about your freedom, and that's at the heart of all of this for us in Ravalli County. I feel like this bubble is the fringe of society. We are the fringe. We are the wild west down here.

Nobody wants to be told what to do down here. You know, people pack guns and knives and, you know, I feel like I spent a lot of time trying to do what was right, trying to protect my community and not get shot. I truly was in fear for my life sometimes. I mean, I got pepper spray, I stopped wear my badge in town, my public health badge. You know, we had no relationship with the sheriff's office, no relationship with our commissioners. I don't know why we didn't have those relationships. I was new in public health, so, I don't know why we didn't. But certainly, when I got moved up to director, I realized that I don't have any physical authority – of paper authority. I can call you on the phone and say, You've been exposed. You have to stay home. Please don't come into town. Please don't go see your grandma. Please don't do these things. I feel very strongly about that. And I could be talking to someone on the other end that's like, Well, you socialist pig. You don't tell me what to do. This is Ravalli County, you can –you know, the language! The hate that we got out of people. And then I'd have to go over to the sheriff's office and say, According to this statute right here, MC-code blah, blah, you have to help me when I ask you. You have to, or we can have you removed from office. We didn't do that kind of stuff, but I'm aware that that happened all across the state of Montana, which ended up resulting in some legislation that came up. So, I have to go to this sheriff that I don't know. I have to try and build a rapport and a relationship with him. You know, he doesn't know me. I mean, we do actually, we went to high school together. But, you know, there wasn't the rapport or the trust where, you know, if you've worked together years and years and you have that banter and rapport outside of work, when you come to somebody with a problem, they know you. They know you're not asking for something that's unreasonable. And same with the commissioners. We didn't have any rapport with them, you know, and they each had their role to play, you know. So, I don't know. It's funny talking about it now, because I feel like I never realized how much PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] I have from the entire thing, you know, of just being so in it and so locked down. We didn't – me personally, did not engage in any social activities whatsoever. I sequestered in my home with my 19-year-old, who also didn't go anywhere. You know, I came to work and I went home and my days were long and weekends were longer. And when I would get home, I would be on my phone, still tracing, still answering questions, still trying to, you know, – and then, finally, 9:00, 10:00 o'clock at night you'd cut it off and be like, I got to sleep. I got to sleep, you know? I look back on it now and I realize, Well, you know, we did okay, we did all right. But there were times when it was – we got to enjoy some freedoms down here that other people didn't get to have maybe in other places, in other cities, because, A) our population is small. We tend to stick to ourselves and spread out anyway. It's kind of our nature. And because – I'm sorry, we worked hard, we worked our tails off, we followed every lead. Every lead. And we appealed to people's sense of decency. You know, please don't come into town. Don't go here. Don't go to work. Please quarantine. And most people listened. And I thought – when in July things opened up a little bit and we were able to sit in a restaurant with our masks on, I was like, This is because we did our job. Now, nobody else in the county will say that. They'll be like, We can do this because this is Ravalli County, and the whole thing's a hoax anyway! But it was because of the women that came here and put in these long days, not just me, but, you know, there were a handful of retired nurses that came and just really gave their heart and soul.

Nicholas Johnson [00:17:44] That's incredible. That is a lot to go through. And I'm so sorry that you had to deal with that response, especially the negative ones so much from the community that must have been –

Tiffany Webber [00:17:57] It was mind blowing to have people call me up, get me on the phone, and when school was getting ready to start last fall, have parents say, Just where the hell do you think you're going to take my kid? We were told that public health is going to come and quarantine our kids if they have exposures at school. Just where do you think you're going to take them? I'm like, Nowhere! You're going to quarantine in your own home, in their room, give them the Nintendo or whatever, buy a microwave popcorn. You know, we don't have any of ICE's [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] cages that we got from Texas, where we're going to stick kids in. Just the unreasonable, outrageous things that people thought we were going to do, and the names that they called us, the hate mail we got after the health officer had to close the fair. She shut down the fair and said, We're not going to have fair this year. And the fair – the person who runs the fair decided that maybe she couldn't take the heat, I don't know. Decided to put on the reader board – if you have a problem with the decision that was made, here's their phone number and their email address. And the hate mail started flooding in. Of just haters. And some of those were – some of those haters were political representatives of our county that I just find disgraceful behavior. Not my county commissioners or anything, but other political enemies from our county. I don't know if you're aware of the legislation – legislative changes that have happened because of the pandemic. Do you know about House Bill 702 and all those bills?

Nicholas Johnson [00:19:36] Yeah, a bit of it.

Tiffany Webber [00:19:37] Majority of that shit was sponsored – sorry, I'm a bit of a swearer. The majority of that stuff was sponsored by people out of Ravalli County, from our county. It's just a very, like I said, it's the Wild West and nobody wants to be told what to do. I know that for the last eight months, every month I report to the Board of Health, my activities. And every month there is a group of extremists – I think they're extremists, and I won't say what their name is, but they come to the Board of Health every month and grill me with questions, just like, You won't tell me what to do. You don't tell me where I can go. You don't tell me where I can stand. It's none of your business. Don't you call my house, don't you come to my place of business, don't you – you know what I mean? And pointing, like this [gestures] – just really in our faces. And I'm, you know, flabbergasted – I don't come down to your work and tell you how to put the fries in the box, you know, or how to put the cone in there or whatever. You know, like, Ugh! I don't know how I got through that, it was so horrible. And then, at one point, the sheriff, after I started to develop that relationship and get him on board with what we were trying to do – at some point he started escorting me to any of my meetings that I had to go to that were off campus. So, for Board of Health, he would take me to Board of Health. If I was getting verbally assaulted, he would just take me out of there. I ended up putting together an advisory committee to help advise me on what we were doing. And it was several key structures to try and help advise because I can't think of every single possible scenario. I can tell you right now, I wasn't prepared for any of it and I never saw any of it coming and it was all reactionary. So, we put together this public health advisory

committee. The sheriff called it the support group – Public Health Support Group, because he's kind of sarcastic and a stinker. And we were meeting at an off campus site that would allow for the social distancing. And I think it was the second meeting we ever had – this was last fall. The second meeting somehow got posted on the commissioner's schedule, because the commissioner was going to be there. And when he got down there, there was a massive protest group there. There must have been 50-some people there that wanted access to that meeting, so that they could protest about how, You don't have to wear a mask. They don't work. You don't have to quarantine, because it's fake. You don't – you know what I mean? They'd get their phones out and be like, Let me read somethin' to ya. It's right here. I'm like, Did you go to college? Don't know how to cite a source? You can just pop open your phone and say, Well, trending on Instagram right now, it says, You don't have to. Gosh. And you just feel like you're in la-la land. Am I crazy? How is this being offered up as science? How is this being offered up as a valid, you know – and when I would be asked these questions and grilled on this stuff, I would be like, You know, I work for a government agency, but I'm from here. I went to school here and I'm doing what I'm doing, because I love my community. All of that aside, even if I thought for one minute that what we were doing wasn't real, I can't imagine if something were to happen – even one person, one person was hurt. One thing happened. I can't imagine standing up there defending my license going, Well, I graduated from Salish Community College with an associate's degree and I googled it! And what I found was, This is all fake. I'm not going listen to the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] or the experts on this. I think I'm just going to go with my search. Are you kidding me? You can't offer that up. You can't offer that up. So, it's, you know – we just had to stick to our guns and golly, I don't know how I got through it. I have no idea. I have no idea.

Nicholas Johnson [00:23:50] I was going to ask, because you mentioned that the last director just quitting and getting – so much of the other employees leaving.

Tiffany Webber [00:24:01] The health officer resigned. That was a sh – shame. That was so horrible. And she had to go before the Board of Health, because we had to sort of work something out where she would stay on as interim to advise public health. And all these people came out of the woodwork and they all wanted to have a comment. And there was this picture in the paper that came out. It was the most horrible picture I'd ever seen – of Carol sitting in the hot chair, looking off one way, looking very, you know – and me sitting in the background, also looking terrible, looking in the other direction. And we were just getting hammered with people that had no idea what they were talking about. You know, they'd get up and say, Well, I think that Carol has been a good nurse, but you don't even know that she's a physician or what she does for a living? You don't even know what public health does. You're getting up and you're passing comment on somebody's career, their job that they're performing for the county and you don't even know what their credentials are or what they do? You know, like, She should be prescribing hydroxychloroquine for everybody. She should be doing this, she should be doing that. You know, it was horrible. It's the weirdest thing I ever saw. I wasn't director yet. I was being groomed to be the director. And I was just like, I can't do that. I just told the commissioners, I can't. There's no way. I cannot sit in that chair and listen to those people do that. The Board of Health was hard enough sitting there waiting for my turn to give my report,

listening to people sitting directly behind me, talking shit about me, talking shit about Dr. Calderwood, and how we're lying about the numbers and fabricating this. And just – I don't have time, I don't have time, I'm still contact tracing. I'm still the person who's calling everyone. So, last fall, when cases hit 800, there's no way we could call all those people. There was no way. And so, I had to develop a program. And like I said, I don't know how to do any of this. I'm a clinic nurse and all of a sudden, I have a zillion cases. All these people have to be called. I know a handful of cases was taking me hours, because of all the contacts you have to call and all the paperwork involved. So, everyone's like, Well, just get more contact tracers. Well, they don't grow on trees. Where do you find a contact tracer? We're going to have to get some. And then, how will they do it? Our office is small. Where are they – we're trying to social distance as it is. How are we going to bring in ten people to contact trace? So, I had to write an entire protocol program. Who are these people? How are they certified? I mean, are they just Joe Schmo off the street or did we have some sort of certification? And then, you know, we had to provide them with a computer and provide them with a phone and provide them with access and an email and then train them on how, you know, Ravalli County is going to do all this stuff. And it was insane, and I can't say that all my ideas worked every single time. Sometimes, it would just be all I could do to come up with an idea and start trying to piece it together. And then it would backfire, and, you know, when your ideas backfire – the way you know that is, you get to hear it from every resident who has an opinion, every person who has an opinion about what you did or what you're doing is going to call. Oh, my God, it was so awful. I don't think I hardly ate any of those months – I lost twenty pounds during COVID.

Nicholas Johnson [00:27:59] What do you think helped get you through? I can't imagine being in that position and managing to make it through the whole pandemic like you have, that's incredible.

Tiffany Webber [00:28:12] There were a few golden tickets that appeared. I call them the golden ticket. One of them was Director Eric Hoover from Office of Emergency Management. He just stepped up. And because – and what I didn't know at the time, but I know now – what I was going through are things that someone like him – during a bad fire season – go through. It's not new to him. He's been in the hot seat before and he's been doing it a long time. And developing a relationship with Sherriff Holden, and getting him on board, getting him to see – I don't know when it happened for him or when he – but at some point there was a turning point for him, when – I think when COVID blew through the sheriff's office like a dose of salt, I could get a little more respect for what I was trying to do. And I think some of their people got real sick. Real sick. He came on board and started helping. And at the time, my commissioner liaison, Chris Hoffman, I got him to understand what I was trying to do, what I was saying. We're not here to shut anyone down. That's not my position. I don't choose to shut anything down, because I absolutely understand that when you're talking about there's a chance I might be exposed, there's a chance I might get sick – if I don't run my business, if I don't make any money, if I don't – I'm definitely going to lose my house. I cannot feed my family. I understood those things. And so, we didn't – we weren't trying to do that. We were just trying to make people understand that nobody's had this. We have no idea how it's going to affect people. None. I'm asking you to take this handful of control measures. It's a handful of

control measures. It's not like I'm asking you to jab something in your eye. It's a mask to cover your face. It's not foolproof. It's not 100%. Wash your hands, keep your distance, act like you have it. Cover your face, so you're not passing it on to anyone. Have that mindset, you know. And then, you're going to make some choices about who your cohort group is. And that was our big platform. This is our cohort group. I accept that you could have it and I could have it, but this is my group of people that I don't mask around. And so, that was my son that I live with, my parents and occasionally my brother from time to time who's a contractor, you know? But everyone else, we mask, we keep our distance. We don't sit close, you know, we stay back. We wash our hands. We act like there's a chance they can have it. And so, we tried to push that and help people understand that your business is going to shut down when you don't follow those, because everyone got sick at the same time. You know, you're all sick. Everyone got sick. Guess how? Guess how they all got sick? Because you all chose to not follow any of the control measures. A lot of people don't like those words – That's my civil liberties! You're stamping on my civil liberties. I'm like, Oh, my God. They say, You could get sick, don't you know? You could get Legionella disease or whatever by covering your face. I ski every winter and I ski with my face covered and I've never once gotten Legionella or pneumonia or anything from skiing with my face covered.

Nicholas Johnson [00:31:57] You mentioned there became kind of a switch you felt in the sheriff's office, with how that went and their perception – how seriously maybe they were taking COVID. I was wondering if you ever – were you ever able to get through to other places in town or businesses or other people?

Tiffany Webber [00:32:16] Sometimes. I mean, there was – for the most part, it always seemed like an uphill battle that we were never going to get on top of. I know that [inaudible] went through several, several incidences up there. And I would just – every time I would say to the general manager, Look, I get that rich people want to come here and they want to act like everything's normal. But now you don't have any staff at the pool or the restaurant. And now your staff has figured out by the third time, when somebody is positive, everyone cops too: Yep. We were around them. We were around them, because guess what they get? They get two weeks paid to be off. I'm like, That's on you. All you have to do is follow the control measures. If your people were masked, they wouldn't have to quarantine. If they were masked, there's less likely that they were spreading it. And that I saw through actual physical evidence, that it gathered from contact tracing. I have a group of lads, they all have COVID. One of the lads works over here. But these lads, they don't wear their masks – but this guy does, because he doesn't get sick from any of these kids that he works with. And what happened was, he ended up getting COVID because he was part of this cluster. This was a family – it was a large, large migrant working family. And he got COVID because his cohort group was sick. None of these lads got sick. And why? Because the sick guy was masked all the time. He never passed it. And we saw that, over and over and over again. And that's why I said it's not 100%, but it's better than nothing. It's like going into a fight, you know, carrying a fork and a spoon, you know, something! So, and I think, slowly and surely what happened – and the way some people turned and began to support us was because – when they found themselves in the thick of it. And I'm very proud of our department. We never judged people, even though we might be upset about the – we've been trying to help you

and you haven't been listening and now, you're in turmoil and that's causing us extra added pressure and stress – not to mention, the pitchforks come out. And all of a sudden it was, He was near me, and he coughed. He didn't cover his face. And, you know, all of a sudden, everyone's got a pitchfork and they're ready to hang somebody. And we had to come in and protect those people. And we were super protective with information. We wouldn't even tell you where the cases were as far as zip code. People would be like, What zip code was it in or what – ? We wouldn't give anything. We took a lot of pressure from the community about that, but – we can't, we can't. We absolutely can't. I have to protect that person's, you know – and that was one of the things I went to war with the sheriff over – is that 911 wanted that information. I want that information. If somebody calls 911, I need to know if that's a house in quarantine or I need to know if that's a house in isolation. And I'm like, You don't need to know that from me. You need to do your job and ask, Are you a house in quarantine? Are you a house in isolation? If I give you that information, I have no idea who's looking at that. And nobody over there is bound by HIPAA [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act]. That's a medical thing. HIPAA only applies to me. If the sheriff breaks HIPAA, you can't slap the sheriff with a $50,000 fine and take away his license to practice medicine. But you can do that to me, so, I take it very seriously. And so, we really struggled with that information sharing, you know, and it was only until – and even the state wasn't any help with it. Even the state was no help with it! You know, the two conflicting – and the governor saying, You have to give that information. And I have the Department of Health and Human Services saying, Don't you dare. Don't you dare. And I have my director at the time going, Go ahead and give them that information. And I'm like, You can go give them the information. I'm thinking, that's not fair. I can't imagine standing in front of a [inaudible] saying, Well, my director said I had to! Nuh-uh. That was horrible. Somehow we managed to slip through that. We worked out a – we worked something out where it was just like, Okay, this feels like a safe way to pass the information and protect everybody involved.

Nicholas Johnson [00:37:10] Kind of a question connecting it sort of – right now, I'm curious how the vaccine being available and showing up in county and being able to get people vaccinated – how you perceive that starting to sort of change the whole dynamic?

Tiffany Webber [00:37:31] It has. There's two parts of pandemic COVID. Or maybe even three. There was waiting to see if we were ever going to get cases and having this feeling of maybe we won't get any, maybe it'll pass us by. Maybe it's nothing, because I'm a Bitterrooter too, I'd like to think it's this conspiracy. And then, there's when it hit – those first cases and seeing Gallatin County – Gallatin County has 30 cases! We had one and we were freaking out – to the mass outbreak last fall. We got through that just in time for Christmas and vaccine. And I remember – I'm telling you, we cried a lot in this office. Actually, I cried a lot in the beginning. And then through the mid-summer and fall, there were days I wanted to cry and I went, Oh my God, that's it. That's the final straw, I'm losing my shit right now and I'm going to start bawling. And then the tears wouldn't come. I just didn't have anything left. We got that first hundred doses of Moderna at Christmas time and the office vaccine manager, she came in and was so excited. And, you know, I don't know what we were expecting, but she pulls out this box – and it looks like this [motions] And we're

like, Oh, you know, it's a little disappointing, I thought it would be a brick of gold. I had no idea what it was going to look like – it was this teeny little box. And we were so excited about it. And one of the media outlets came down and did a little story and we were so tearful about our first 100 doses of Moderna. The tide is going to turn right. The tide is turning. We have a vaccine. And we had done some polling to see who wanted it, because we figured lots of people would want it. Nobody wanted it. I couldn't believe it. Everybody was like, Oh, I'm not going to take it. I'll wait and see what happens with somebody else. So, I went – with that and with the help of my advisory committee, we determined that what we were going to do with our first hundred doses was try to hit as many of our critical structures that we couldn't afford to be without during the wintertime. So, that was the sheriff's office, local police, first responders, of course, health care workers, they were all doing it. Yes, we were in phase 1A, but it wasn't quite so strict yet. And we were struggling. We couldn't give the stuff away. And so, we hit our county attorneys. We hit the road department, because it was snowing – if they had an outbreak in the road department, how would we get around? You know, we were just trying to think of things to try and protect the structure. That's where my thoughts were. We're like, Okay, how are we going to keep this afloat? And we got a lot of key people. And within that first two weeks, I started getting a lot of push from the media and people in the community going, Have you had a dose of Moderna? And I'm thinking, No. I mean, I wouldn't think to get a dose of Moderna. I mean, I'm young and I'm healthy. I don't have any underlying things. And God damn it, I could use the time off. I really could. I could use some time off if I got COVID and I just wasn't planning on getting it. And then, this attitude came that was like, Oh, I see how it is. You're going to experiment on everyone else, you know? And the state came out with, We need some of your key people to get dosed here and lead by example. Some of our political people, some of our leaders, the community. You need to stand up, make a statement, get dosed, etc. Okay. That's what we did. We took our dose of Moderna and two weeks – and I remember, it was over New Year's Eve and my brother and a lot of my family were like, Are you crazy? Don't take it, please. Dear God, Jesus, don't take the don't take the dose, don't do it. And I'm like, You can't say this to me. I've already given out 40 doses. I mean, if you tell me this, that would be like me accepting that I knowingly dosed people that I thought was something that was dangerous that could hurt them. I can't do that. Could you, as a medical person? Could you give somebody a shot of something that you thought, Shit I really hope you'll be okay. I can't! I have to believe in the science. I have to believe that there's no conspiracy, there's no microchip that was in the flu shot. You know, that this is what's best for that person. And I gave them the information and we're going forward with it. And I got my dose. And two weeks later, the county came out and the media came out with, you know, the director has dosed herself and all of her friends – self, self, self. It's all about protecting themselves and the good old boys gang. And I was just like, I can't win. I cannot do anything right. All of a sudden, everybody wanted vaccine. And that morning, I'll never forget, there were 2600 and some calls. And it's the first time I've ever seen my office manager – she was pushed away from her desk, just numb. And the computer was just all phone calls, just lines ringing. Ring, ring, ring. And she just – and she's been, you know, she's a strong lady. Very strong lady. Was a juvenile detention officer for a long time before she came to public health. She's a no nonsense, tough as nails lady. And she looked gob smacked. And then we knew, Okay, now what? Now what do we do? People wanted to be on a waiting list. We

didn't have enough doses, you know, there wasn't enough. And all of a sudden we can't get any. Everybody wanted to be on this waiting list thing and it's like, Well, how do you do that? How do you create a waiting list? Piece of paper? Start writing everyone's name down? And then, how are we going to make it fair? Because now we're getting told, Okay, there's hardly any vaccine. We need to start with phase 1A, which was health care workers, first responders. And we had to try and come up with a plan. And this was Director Hoover from Office of Emergency Management – came up with a great idea for filling out a notice of intent that we put into a resource pool that we randomly drew from. Because the other complaint we were getting is, Well, my grandma is 80. She can't get on the Internet and fill out a notice of intent or, you know, my person doesn't have Internet or we couldn't get –or the spots opened up at the hospital and they were snapped up like that. We couldn't get in. So, we were trying to figure out how can we make it fair for everybody in that age group, in that bracket. How can we make it fair? We worked with city council and they came up with a flyer that they sent out to people to try and see who wanted a vaccine and get that information and put that in the resource pool. And that, of course, went through a bunch of different belly flops where, you know, you thought you had something that was working and then it wasn't working and then people were mad and then you tweak it and you try to offer up something else. And, you know, there were just so many steps to figuring out how we were going to make it fair, you know? And then, in the meantime, we still had this group of people coming down every month, the Board of Health, to protest the propaganda. They were there. I had Board of Health this Wednesday, and I couldn't believe when I got down there. And there's all those people. And thought, What now? What can you possibly have? What do you want from us? You know, what could you possibly have to bitch about now? Well, apparently, President Biden made some remark about sending Feds into the count, into the local public health to help us go door to door, knocking door to door. Oh, no, they weren't going to have that. Nope, they came down to protest the door to door. I said, We're not going door to door. We've not done anything extreme in this county. We've done nothing but – in fact, I feel bad, because I feel like we've been almost a little more the other direction in that we've worked so hard to try and meet people halfway. We are an extremely independent culture down here. People are very independent. We don't want to be told what to do. We want the right to make our own choice. And I respect that. I absolutely respect that. And we tried to stay true to that, too. But with the exception of – if you choose not to isolate or quarantine from your family or your grandma, whatever. We're not coming down there with the cops. Please don't come into town. Please don't make that choice for me or for other people, you know? Try to have some respect for the choice. And the same thing goes with vaccine. We have not one time pushed vaccine. We have not pushed it. We have offered it and made it available. And when vaccine became readily available, we gave vaccine five days a week. We had an alternate offsite building and we set nurses up in there and we gave vaccine five days a week to anybody that wanted it that was in that category. And then when the categories all opened up, even now, we give vaccine. We give vaccines on Tuesdays here. And we also have – we did go door to door, but not door to door to people's houses. We have tried to reach out to local businesses throughout the county and offered to come out and vaccinate anyone at their site that wants it. We're not pushing it. You don't have to have it. I respect if you don't want to have it. I understand when an old man comes to me and says, I'd rather get COVID. I just don't want that. I don't want it. I want to take

my chances. I respect that. That's fine. That's a choice you get to make. You know, I like to drink white wine and sometimes I drink a lot. That's a choice that I make, and I would not want anyone to come tell me that I shouldn't have it. You know what I mean? I get that. So, yeah. It was – I think we're pretty good. I mean, I'm taking a minute right now to breathe this month. And I've had a couple of afternoons off. I'm not working weekends currently [laughs]. But I realize that I have to gear up for schools. We do have Delta here. It's here in Montana, it's out here in Ravalli County. And I think we're going to have to get the schools on board with people promoting is the correct word: vaccination for students, especially around athletic and those sorts of things. Because last year we dealt with a lot of, you know, It's football divisionals, they can't be quarantined. That's our star quarterback. Well, if he was vaccinated, he wouldn't have to, you know? Or – My daughter bought a dress for prom, and she's being punished, you won't let her go to prom! I'm not saying she can't go to prom. It's not me – it's because the choices you've made that now you're quarantined. If you were vaccinated, we wouldn't have this conversation. And I think that that will come better from the school than it will from me, since I seem to be the government. It cracks me up that I'm the government. I'm like, I'm so far the government is not even funny. So, yeah, we actually made it through. And now, I'm looking at other agencies going, Okay, I thought it was the worst thing ever. And I didn't think anyone could understand or comprehend what we went through. And then, I see when there's disasters, you know, around me – like Eric having to deal with the fires right now. And about a month ago, Sheriff Colton and his boys had a standoff in a residential neighborhood, which ended in the guy killing himself and his dog. But for 72 hours, they were sitting on a house, you know, and I'm sure there's protocol involved, of what you're supposed to do or how you deal with that and safety of the community. And you got to do it. Everyone's two cents – Why don't you just do this? Why don't you just do that? Everybody seems to know how to do it and it's like, It's not your responsibility. It's his responsibility. And ultimately, if anyone gets hurt, that falls on the sheriff. I understand now what that means, when it's your responsibility. Ultimately, it's not mine, there should be some Board of Health people in there that help me, but it isn't quite what happened. I don't know why. I did not get any guidance from my Board of Health. I got quizzed by them just as hard. Oh, I always hated the math questions, What is the rate of positivity? How did you figure that out? And I'm like, Oh, I was told there would be no math! I hate math – look it up. By the end, I was like, I'm going to wear a T-shirt to my next Board of Health that just says, Google it, Google it [laughs].

Nicholas Johnson [00:51:19] Wow [laughs]. Well, I want to be respectful of your time. I'll stop recording there.