

## Chapter 4

# Applying the Viable System Model to Local Government in a Post-Pandemic Context

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The pandemic has challenged local government organizations to respond to highly dynamic environments involving health, social, educational, and economic changes. Recognizing local government organizations as systems optimizes them to respond and excel in their ability to serve the public. The purpose of this conceptual chapter is to assess the viable system model's (VSM) efficacy as a vehicle for evaluation within the context of local government organizations, and to determine what enhancements to the model might be needed for post-pandemic application. The viable system model may benefit from the integration of complementary enhancements that may humanize the VSM for use in a post-pandemic context. Ultimately, the new reality of the post-pandemic era calls for systems thinking to reveal ways to structure service delivery reliably and innovatively.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the pandemic, service continuity has been a major challenge for local government organizations such as counties, cities, and public school districts. The global pandemic exemplifies a new reality that calls for systems thinking to elucidate ways to structure service delivery reliably and innovatively in local government organizations. As political, social, economic, and physical environments change, the need to create new services and explore adaptive opportunities emerges.

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Recognizing local government organizations as systems optimizes them to respond and excel in their ability to serve the public, especially in times of crisis. Such structuring and innovation of public services may begin by evaluating the local government systems that provide them. The purpose of this conceptual paper is to assess the Viable System Model's (VSM) efficacy as a vehicle for evaluation within the context of local government organizations and to determine what enhancements to the model might be needed for post-pandemic application.

As local government organizations embrace the need to evaluate their capability to deliver social services in a consistent and reliable manner, the Viable System Model (Beer, 1972) is worthy of consideration as a framework. The VSM provides a basis for flexible evaluation to ensure service delivery during and following the pandemic. Two questions guide this chapter's conceptual assessment of the Viable System Model as applied to local government organizations: 1) To what extent could the Viable System Model inform the effectiveness of the delivery of social services by local government organizations? 2) What, if any, enhancements to the Viable System Model might be needed to serve local government organizations in a post-pandemic context?

Stafford Beer, an operations research theorist and cybernetician, developed the Viable System Model. The Model is based in part on cybernetics, a form of systems thinking that emphasizes communication and control (Wiener, 1961). The Viable System Model has served as a vehicle for understanding organizations as systems since its introduction in Beer's (1972) seminal book *The Brain of the Firm*. The Viable System Model (Beer, 1972, 1979, 2007) represents a framework for evaluating a system's ability to sustain itself to perform according to its purpose. In the model, Beer (1972) identified several critical functions of an organizational system to guide the understanding of how functions can interact to establish and reinforce the strength of the organization as it continually evolves to serve its purposes.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant challenge to local government organizations whose mission is to provide social services to people in need. Researchers have applied the Viable System Model to state and federal government organizations to address issues during the pandemic. These issues include social equity and mitigation of economic inequality (Deslatte et al., 2020; Kobayashi et al., 2021; Rauhaus & Johnson, 2021), public health (Greer et al., 2021; Haim et al., 2021), public education (Chernick et al., 2020; López-Santana & Rocco, 2021), economic and workforce development (Mahboubi & Moyaya, 2022), and election services (Pichhio & Santolini, 2022). While each is important in itself, services such as these are inherently interconnected, and people depend upon them for support at the local level. The nature of this support and its relationship to the health and prosperity of communities offers a reminder of the systemic nature of local social service delivery.

Such substantial, ongoing crises as the pandemic call to mind the importance of investing in the strength of social systems. How organizations ensure that their functions are defined and interconnected is part of a systemic reality (Beer, 1979). We assert that shared understanding of the nature of a system's structure and the authorized mission of a local government organization are imperative to effective service delivery, particularly during crises.

This chapter is organized as follows: The next section will briefly introduce the Viable System Model; this will be followed by a more detailed discussion of the six functions of the VSM. Next, we will discuss using the VSM to evaluate organizational systems. This will be followed by a conceptual application of the VSM to local government organizations, and then specific applications of each of the six functions will be reviewed. We will subsequently discuss our reasons for adding complementary features to the model, identify issues in government social systems during the pandemic, and then discuss our recommendations for enhancements to the VSM. Finally, we will conclude the chapter.

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