**Audiocast Conversation with Marc Ott, Executive Director of ICMA**

Kerry Hansen ([00:01](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=cuq3U0dsJdMS07u--IpCdi6g2HgDW_aN8CPNO4pMRaBDFsZH_7sdvj2QWpk9VZd3FMqE2EiPd_dGFvTjK6tDJMQPj0s&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1.14)):

Hello, and welcome to the next audiocast of our new series Racial and Social Injustice, Continuing the Conversation. I'm Kerry Hansen, I'm the editor of Public Management Magazine for the International City/County Management Association, also known as ICMA. Joining me today is Marc Ott, executive director at ICMA. Marc, thank you so much for speaking with me.

Marc Ott ([00:21](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=xZc7-F6yip4nLJpjRrhey-8vBa0_VW9b6O-77kiWt7a_C6tOMcWDyUOKh0HMwtf2JBqjbx2qMRSNZc1tXYjYCdrpNNg&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=21.24)):

Thank you, Kerry. It's a pleasure to be here with you today.

Kerry Hansen ([00:26](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=yEEiMDCI3U1N1l9ebAIsefNb0NSxqOCF6GHhmbp8_QtK7_aqLXPh9XkaOZABV0YZ7zSMNPZJokshf0OOL1yidLM26Q4&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=26.03)):

So a little more about your background. As executive director, Marc supports more than 12,000 members in advocating for professional and ethical and local government management. Before coming to ICMA, Marc served as city manager of Austin, Texas, and his award-winning career has included leadership roles in a number of other cities as well. Marc, I think it's safe to say that 2020 has been an interesting year so far, given everything that's happening in the world. Pandemic aside, looking at the civil unrest in the wake of George Floyd's death, the demand for racial justice that we're seeing across the globe, it's really unprecedented. So for you, personally, in your role as ICMA executive director, as a former city manager, who has dealt with many of the issues coming to light today, and as a person of color, can you tell us how you're feeling during this time?

Marc Ott ([01:14](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=zkRRgbbYVugX6PuXbeKWfgnp4LUAtCN_JuPgW79znvbOvabe1WicpU-qIhXKAUkL_3ZCbh39wAE4EQ3IVjhi7SrM5Eg&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=74.03)):

Well, that's an interesting question. I guess rather than speaking to it in terms of at this time, I would tell you that over the period. As we all know, towards the beginning of the year, when we all really realized that we were dealing with a pandemic, I've had many few feelings. Certainly, about the suddenness of the pandemic, at least that's what it felt like showing up on the scene. It was stunning, I think is a good word for it, for everyone. And as pandemics do, how pervasive it was, how it moved so quickly, not just here in the United States, but, of course, we know all over the world and then the mounting deaths that was associated with it all over the world.

Marc Ott ([02:09](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=R-XSDG126GaPuczM38X99u5mV8N_dloDp5asSXQy1wAwwaOVdc_zvcNMD5gmY8tk3RjnWrGgurqTmIMUzFgXaC_u9hk&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=129.82)):

And certainly what has seemed to be our inability to here in the United States, even at this point, to really gain sufficient control over it or managing it more effectively. And, of course, a derivative of it was the, again, sudden and almost immediate impact that it has had on the economy. And, again, not just here in the United States, but the global economy. So those two things, a bit of a cause-and-effect relationship. But if that wasn't enough, of course, then has been the case throughout our history in America, tragically. We had to come to terms with yet another killing, murder of an African American through law enforcement. And it was funny because on the one hand I'm reacting to some of what I've just described as the executive director of ICMA and immediately shifting into a gear and shifting the organization, took focus on, given those dire circumstances, whether the needs of our members and reallocating resources, such that we could meet those needs in terms of generating all kinds of content and programming and so on and so forth and do it rapidly.

Marc Ott ([04:11](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=awRvjEmqq1ckGmJOJK2Q6AHus6lHSQePJnqY6P4EHJHeSVSXxICo4p0OWdumrQx2YvtcQI2sD91UNy5Fk750qXRSmzM&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=251)):

And through methods and agility that we just should not having a reason to deploy. And at the same time we transitioned to remote working, albeit it, our culture was somewhat familiar with that anyway, that some of our workforces, obviously, that way, but transitioning to that and at the same time, and doing it in a way that we didn't want to impact our ability to the serve the members and such trying times. And then we have, as I said, the murder of Mr. Floyd, and, at first, and I guess I'm kind of responding both professionally and personally, obviously, as an African American, as a black man, I can't avoid the personal side, nor will I want to, but I do remember the day that I saw it on the news, almost in passing.

Marc Ott ([05:24](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=nXS6EcpDfgowUkaSSug3SVhj_o9S-VSEnD1WDtmAT4fsLnodWoKQnQLwCPQjjy16n8Uw7UfkZBb1BpCjuJ-Cnc-XSQo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=324.49)):

And initially my reaction was I saw it. I understood, from a distance, in passing, what it was. And here it's happened again, another African American man in America has been shot, has been shot down, killed by the police. And it's tragic because I almost passed it by like that. It had become so frequent that the images were readily recognizable, but then, like everyone else, because we were all hunkered down in our homes, trying to carry out the appropriate protocols in regard to COVID, I don't know, I may have focused on it in anyway. I focused on it because it continued to be on the news. And as I focused on it and watch the images on TV, and as I read about it, first it was just a, and this is personal, a feeling that a sense that this seemed different.

Marc Ott ([06:39](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=WktTPJ6cOg_UUbN-tQypzSHL7FcM7a03Vx3J6-QhhqFJ24rfyS6dpkEdfNfztNmlPRnY5cvOClYpU5YNnz8ATpfJ8j0&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=399.13)):

And I remember thinking that in my head long before anybody was actually saying it, and I couldn't even explain why I felt that way, initially. But there was something about it. Maybe it was subliminal, but as I paid more attention, and I guess the most poignant occasion I happened to be back in Austin, as I am right now, as I'm talking to you, and I was watching the local news. And, of course, like in so many other cities around the country, and by that time, it was spreading around the world and transitioning from some of the initial reactions that have become familiar when these kinds of events occurred, the violence and the looting and the confrontations between the police and protestors, it was transforming into what started to be characterized as a movement and Black Lives Matters.

Marc Ott ([07:50](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=npPGxabylW2L1h-Tll0yDtpHhkk9yL4UO29BpcK-F0_STgvqbJui9y4xArlnS_aeaI6p6iJe6RObDPQQ-PBiChCumrc&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=470.11)):

And all of the things and the images we saw. And I was looking at it here on the news when I was in Austin. And as I looked at the massive crowd of people, they were moving in marching and protesting back and forth between the State Capitol and city hall, all of which is very familiar to me. I was looking at that massive crowd and I found myself struggling as I peered at the screen to identify black people. And that was striking to me that I was having to work that hard to identify African Americans in that crowd. And that was definitely different. And as time passed on and noting that there were frankly more white people out there protesting this issue of systemic racism, in general, and relative to law enforcement and oppression and all of these things. That was different and some of the reasons why it felt different to me.

Marc Ott ([08:59](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Vg08wJLow6KJj-zzpfsfShUh353psHuRyGeYB8U6cttieW6YraF1W9LuUVWkTr7A8OLWlxS1eabD_zu7ccqYFEGcR28&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=539.9)):

And there were other things that were different about all of this. So on the professional side, there are the questions that have always been there with respect to law enforcement and systemic racism, institutionalized racism, all of those things, things that I too had to wrestle with as a city manager, but I've also had to wrestle with those issues all of my life as a black person in America, as an African American. And I will tell you all from a personal standpoint, when I watched, when I had the opportunity to watch those, what it was, eight minutes, and I don't know, so many seconds of Mr. Floyd's encounter with the police where he essentially was murdered. It took me back to an occasion when I was a college student and coming back from lunch one summer day and found myself confronted with the police, myself and a friend of mine.

Marc Ott ([10:19](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=mmQjKLQJtKxCxzT-WDAEcy481SgUqX6o-hYzWr0LXxOFTw-EG0yMEAEyYOZ7QeVOOfwhNNXaSGeAF3wgQCqmzbiwNNw&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=619.85)):

Surrounded by the police, forced to get out of the car, face down on the street, without being given any explanations. Officers standing over us with their weapons drawn, ransacking my car. And when they were done those guys holstered up and we're headed back to their car, without explanation. And I asked them and they said there was a robbery in town where we have gone to have lunch and you guys fit the description. And they turned and started to walk again and I stopped them and I said, "Well, wait a minute." I said, "Officers," I said, "What do we do? I don't want this to happen again, go through it again." And I remember the officer turning and looking back and saying, "Well, boy, I don't know what to tell you. Just don't drive for a while," was the response.

Marc Ott ([11:15](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=JbPiuWG24bu61EI0fSr0b8LKD6QLh7UQECuRuLgNUIw0JhflDY6w6pYqhv4maRxdpRy3XGJaKYHU4BoTgGGNezXWSSY&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=675.32)):

So you ask me how I'm feeling at this time. During this period, I've had lots of different feelings. I've had reaction to it as the executive director of a ICMA and in that context, and having been a city manager, recognize the challenges that it all represented for our members. And so in this position, along with the entire ICMA family, mobilizing in such a way that we can provide for their needs. Their needs are critical on a lot of different levels. That's part of what I felt and how I reacted. And then, likewise, with respect to the confrontation between law enforcement and communities and issues of systemic racism and so on, again, part of me reacting in the context of serving our members.

Marc Ott ([12:20](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=1yg0ppGqwC719aE-NT2Croup9UGfQpwaoOHfOmYyn2NGcOnNg5Qdj1KiJclXcu16m9xf3E1SDPTiWrLxY3EPOyrXGFY&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=740.56)):

But it was also very personal for me because I've had to deal with those kinds of issues all of my life. And it took me back, those eight minutes of watching Mr. Floyd on the street, in the gutter with the officer's knee on his neck, took me back to that occasion when I was in school. And I realized that on that day, it could have been me. It could have been me and it could have been Richard, if we had simply moved in a way that got misinterpreted, it could have been us. And that was a long time ago. And here we are today. Here we are, even as recently as a week or so ago, we're still having these incidents of black people and predominantly African American men being killed. They're killing us. And it has to stop and systemic racism and the oppression, it has to stop. We all know what's wrong.

Marc Ott ([13:32](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=jSpBN3dpxD4ObUl8PRrnFO8rFSFGfI-_YOr8Bg5Idcjk5oF_af5WhobBg78V1LJKPlDn05hbt47xiCt7bIJsi93ewSA&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=812.2)):

And it's not just an issue here in the United States. It's an issue around the world. I think that's why it transcended our boundaries because those elements of society, as tragic as they are. And I've seen it since I've been executive director of ICMA, because I've had the privilege of traveling to various parts of the world. It exists. And even though it was happening here, it resonated with people all over the world. And that is why they hit the streets as well.

Marc Ott ([14:03](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=iwoxQsh90klY-PPO_OG-XMaO6cFDDEcP9cnl8QqVDrFHWx7r8UKrH21LJ93Lg_zZHrDNzMUvElU0N3_eS3Qzm-DjBNo&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=843.42)):

So to end where I began, I've had lots of feelings during this period. Your question couldn't be more appropriate. I've had feelings as the executive director of ICMA, as a former city manager, because I could understand what our members were going through. And as a black man in America, as being one of many who we walk around, as I said in the article, when you feel like you have a target on your back. Every day I have some reason to have to think about taking into account the fact that I'm black.

Kerry Hansen ([14:53](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=aiXIqjToQ9fapTM9dX9yClsU92PIQ9D19apJw5Kb9YPplOxs_xObxgFfFrXNS_W4XM8OLRcOVstnBcj04ZlxO6hVoQU&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=893.65)):

Wow. Thank you.

Marc Ott ([14:53](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Q5_4t2i3ozaKEBxaZjd_KDlr3ljJhjjjYyKLLz9VC9fhntdkXihwcL8b-OK7PpEE5efOaCZox8wdfyCW_O1kaB8k8qY&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=893.96)):

I hope that answered your question?

Kerry Hansen ([15:01](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=mcbdm-kx1mCpvnQk26MZy__TMkjSipShBM5pcboF4DgdzgMRWX7QkFnuhC85w8LZGR94XKVPIzgHskD7-mo_VC9Gwao&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=901.77)):

Yes, absolutely. Thank you. So what advice do you have for local government leaders and how do we build on this momentum now that we're seeing with the protests and people speaking out and really making this a moment. How do we build on the momentum and then use it to shape our future?

Marc Ott ([15:23](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=qCtAedoAF6mBMtH1M50hSvKn28SATXHVf0IJnLeDbX79PwlAWTwEzoetHC1kDRZpN5jkBrmU1lkj1aHMOeEyC1p8YMk&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=923.35)):

What's always been true about this profession, those of us that serve as city managers and county managers and administrator, as much as the job is about managing and administering, it has always been about leadership. And I would argue probably more today than it's ever been before. And I say leadership, and I want to say at the same time courageous leadership. And I think it's absolutely necessary in these times at this moment. I recall many years ago, I was young in the profession. One of my mentors, a manager, saying to me that you can't do the job out of fear and you can't fear to do it.

Marc Ott ([16:29](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=hZ2vzbrqVvwepa5BtIzZRWjzeNeZ7X5pd51zkKEGGOy-5avGwu1cfRgkRzyHybJ7GL1aZNT9vvIJr2hNctotfoO0Fg8&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=989.72)):

And if there ever was a moment about courageous leadership for us, it's now. We sit in these seats and we have authority and we have power and we have influence. And it matters how we choose to use it. I believe that in our cities, in our government, in our nation, in our society, and even around the world, that we are at an inflection point. We have the opportunity to choose a path that has great promise, hope, and opportunity to finally address systemic racism. Oppression, ethnic and gender bias in ways that we never have before, because this occasion, as I said to your other question, it not only feels different, it is clearly different.

Marc Ott ([17:43](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=ZeAd6hmcNVuZASlHMGOwp_-gPUVbbbpCnLGdzLK0LQt7VzZ_PyF0EnJS3nf2RtNYTE9BsOf-iOyvo0p5RfXjGBs4zGg&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1063.53)):

And so we have to grab on to this opportunity as leaders, one, and make sure that we don't go back, that we don't regress. We don't regress this time, like has been the case so many times in the past. And that we work hard to try and have the capacity to see beyond where we are. And recognize that we really can't. If we work hard, if we have those tough conversations, if we're willing to convene, if we're willing to facilitate, if we're willing to be courageous, if we're willing to stand in the round in authenticity and have conversations with people about what really matters, then we have the opportunity to change the world and to create a world and environment where all people, equitably, have the opportunity to flourish, wherever they are, whatever they look like.

Kerry Hansen ([18:53](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=4FtLyUdrdIi10oR8obFuEmf0BgjnhClCoZCCy4Ik4dC96hanFig6LMQ1DEYvc5MwXJNYsfTqu1vi7jOf1qlmJh7YPRk&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1133.36)):

So this is clearly an important moment in history and hopefully the sort of meaningful, lasting change. So thinking to the future, what can the next generation of liberal government leaders learn from this moment of time?

Marc Ott ([19:10](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=ZYL8oR7YcTN0J2a4doDRyhRsZLQNqYZ3IkR36FGhHCqYCPff_D1tmIEablKQ4SUTril2vAjAqN2tlmO6EdDVrBtH8UI&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1150.37)):

Kerry, that's an interesting question because my initial response would be to say to you that they're already doing it. When I look out into that crowd, that masses of people, I am seeing young people. They understand the fundamental nature of what we're talking about here. And the immorality associated with systemic racism, oppression, and the biases often directed at gender, sexual orientation. All of those things, they're out there. It reminds me of an exchange with my daughter, Carly, she's 21 years old and she is here in Texas, in Austin. And I was back in Washington at the time, but there was a family text message exchange. And there was protests at that time going on down in Austin. My daughter had two other young ladies as roommates.

Marc Ott ([20:28](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Er84li6xIizQWrvQMvsLeY1jxrxlOAd-LgeB6ABdBosWd8sybYJgEceHDP4vl11vTwNKSBPVzlXHa2OyhaHLW_UH93M&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1228.71)):

And she was saying in this text message to her mother and me and her younger brother that they were planning on going downtown to participate in the protest. And I saw a response from mom offering some caution about doing that. You know, parents, a little nervous about doing that kind of thing. And I didn't offer a response or reaction in the text message exchange, but the next text that we've got from Carly was a text with a picture of her and the crowd behind and her girlfriend, and they're holding up a sign and it said, "I can't breathe." And we've all seen those signs amongst all of the other signs that the protesters have been carrying. And I was proud of her that she had the courage to go out there, but it was in the next text message that she sent her mother and seeing the picture and all of that, I also apparently had seen something on the news that had concerned her and said something about it in the text to Carly and, again, about being careful.

Marc Ott ([21:47](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=_Iesvyv-ij_c_ocmbsPc9Ay1AUA_q3No48zuDByznXQ_mVOaKo9iVYlqwwzj_LurfJ_Eb0JZcyJsksdMmzWy36iUf9c&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1307.59)):

And Carly's response was she said, "It didn't feel right not to go." And that was powerful to me because she, like so many of the other young people that have been out there protesting, transforming this into the movement that it needed to be, many of them do that without having the historical context that I have. And so many other African Americans of my generation have. But they know and understand at the most fundamental level of a human being about right and wrong. And if you're operating out of that, there's no better place. So I think that young people should continue to do what they're doing now. I think the young people that we're talking about, they are in fact the future leaders in our profession and otherwise, and my hope is that they bring those fundamental instincts and passion about right and wrong and social justice and equality and resistance and defiance in regard to systemic racism and all of the other biases, that they bring that to the leadership positions that they have, and that they're going to have in the years ahead.

Marc Ott ([23:37](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=j3Xb-SG068SJq7b5onhqeq4iSn8EsFM-1MdH5fRodWXhPH8gonaCJ-t-1z-g6tqxWzu5aJXal1sObO7RhRo075FP38I&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1417.19)):

And because of that feeling I had initially, because of the things that I've seen since early part of this year up till now that seem different, that are different from the things I saw in the past when it was just one more time and then we fell back. Because of what's been occurring, as I've talked about it, I'm probably more hopeful now about the future and more optimistic about the future than I have ever been. Young people and what they're doing. Their voices, what they're saying, what they're demanding, their courage is the reason that I feel that way. And so long as we have that. And so long as they carry that with them into these leadership positions in government and in otherwise, then I think the future is bright.

Kerry Hansen ([24:35](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=Dh5vcGptu6IL08nYFAtoPFScBgoiPzzhAQ6eMUWCNwX4N1rZHtzxL1FWcYiypEuVpMtXKqGM8zsK_dyIberLT7KUHDM&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1475.22)):

Wow. That's great to hear. Well, Marc, this has been great. Thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Marc Ott ([24:41](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=wP0D6s6cFSXAzGGNuE5BtalpxjDRpoZVyJWL1JHDknk7Wv1aAtckkuc0yJgn5DellZijpzvUhI4SCLnqMHZEhWG1e48&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1481.73)):

Yes. It's been a pleasure to spend time with you, Kerry. I appreciate the invite.

Kerry Hansen ([24:45](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=5yuDCOV7AlxYvtHN8t5VDXDWwuCPNT4QDBFK1jrX-7T6RTU2LPauCU6IVRihp-F_23bKPNO5zZNvn_391b0hp8D78fM&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1485.01)):

Absolutely. And we greatly appreciate you joining us. And for those listening, thank you for tuning into ICMA's new audiocast series, Racial and Social Injustice, Continuing the Conversation.