

County commissioners declare health emergency

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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More screenings, limiting staff, sending people home

After both the United States and the State of New Mexico declared health emergencies over the growing pandemic of COVID-19, McKinley County has followed suit.

During their March 17 meeting, the McKinley County Board of Commissioners moved to declare a health emergency for the county. County Manager Anthony Dimas Jr. said the county will be eligible for funding that may come from the federal government or state government after the declaration.

The declaration also gives the county manager's office authority to delegate work schedules and hours to get through the emergency, Dimas said.

County Attorney Doug Decker said part of the catalyst for the declaration was gaining the ability to tap into federal monies. The decision was also based on the directive issued March 15 to all state offices by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to limit their staff in the office and push for an increase in telecommunication.

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The move to reduce the number of people inside buildings and to keep adequate space between staff members is part of a general strategy called “flattening the curve,” where the goal is to lower the peak number of positive cases of COVID-19 to minimize the strain an influx of patients could place on local hospitals.

The floor was opened to public comment, and a number of county department managers spoke about what is being done to reduce the number of staff in the office while still maintaining essential services for the community.

“Metro Dispatch and 911 has limited access to their building,” Metro Dispatch Director Georgene Dimas said. “Staff will go to the door and call in before they are allowed in, which will reduce the contact in the building.”

Georgene Dimas suggested giving county employees the ability to send documents electronically, which could cut down on employees having to move between offices.

“I have to go back into my facility and make contact [to deliver documents],” she said. “If we could eliminate that, I think it would reduce the [risk of] exposure to staff.”

She also said if Metro Dispatch staff either test positive for the virus or come into contact with a known carrier, the department plan is to have more administrative staff work from home when part of the department has the ability to perform their duties from home.

James Maiorano, undersheriff for McKinley County Sheriff’s Office, said their crews have been meeting over the past week to strategize because new information is constantly coming in.

“We’ve outfitted our guys with Purell and disinfectant wipes to clean out the back of their units and transports,” Maiorano said.

Maiorano also said since school is out, the sheriff’s office expects calls for service will increase,

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as will property crimes. He also said the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases will increase, and the numbers will depend on whether McKinley County residents can follow the safety guidelines to stay home if they are feeling unwell.

“We understand [cases will increase], we’re prepared for it,” Maiorano said. “We’re also prepared to lose one-quarter of our force, which will leave us with three people per shift.”

Services like fingerprinting will continue with regular contact because there is no other way to do it, Maiorano explained, while services like background checks and reports can be done without direct contact. This means the department will be able to limit the administrative staff they have working at one time.

Tony Boyd, warden for McKinley County Adult Detention Center, said since inmates are more susceptible to the virus because of the confined spaces in the facility, the detention has stopped all non-contact visits for inmates and limited attorney visits to non-contact or phone conversations.

Boyd also said the county is looking into video conferencing for arraignments, which would reduce the need to transport inmates from the court to the detention center.

“We do have to allow some people in,” Boyd said. “We’re looking to change our shift schedule and we’re sending home anyone who shows any signs of illness.”

Cleanliness in the facility is also an issue, Boyd mentioned. This includes wiping down door handles and sanitizing areas where people will meet.

This area also showed the detention center is suffering from the same problem a lot of urgent shoppers have encountered in the past week.

“We have no toilet paper,” Boyd said. “There is none available right now. You can’t find any

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hand sanitizer anywhere. For sanitation wipes, unless you can get to places like Walmart when they stock it, you're out of luck."

Boyd said if their supplier is unable to provide what they need, the department can make the trip to Albuquerque to buy directly from a manufacturer.

As part of a contingency plan, if inmates start showing symptoms, one of three areas in the detention center will be used as an isolation center, Boyd said. They are also planning to have testing kits available to inmates, so they do not have to be transported to local hospitals to be tested.

Commissioner Bill Lee reiterated advice that is being given from nearly every major news outlet and medical professional to minimize the risk of catching or spreading COVID-19.

"As much as you can, I would encourage everyone, and I mean everyone, not just employees, to limit the amount of travel they take," Lee said. "If you don't have to travel outside our area, don't do it. It's that simple."

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