

Jails, law enforcement adjusting in era of COVID-19

Written by By Dominic Aragon Sun Correspondent
Friday, 24 April 2020 08:33



Employees in law enforcement and at our local jails say they are doing everything they can to stay safe on the job and protect the inmates they serve amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

After government officials announced the first cases of novel coronavirus in New Mexico and Gov. Michelle Lujan-Grisham issued a stay-at-home order in March, officials in McKinley and Cibola Counties have had to adjust how they do their daily jobs.

Unlike other jurisdiction that have released inmates due to contamination risks, one McKinley County official says the risks outweigh the benefits.

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“There’s no way we could just turn the doors and empty the jail,” said County Attorney Doug Decker, spokesman for the McKinley County Adult Detention Center.

Through various judicial processes, the facility has taken steps to reduce the amount of people housed at the jail.

Additionally, arrestees are vetted with health-related questions before being booked. If they need to be tested or are COVID-19-positive, the jail will “probably not accept” them at the facility, Decker added.

The 328-bed facility employs over 50 people. The essential workers are utilizing personal protective equipment and the jail has adjusted shift schedules to give employees relief as needed.

Jailers housed have had to keep as much distance between each other as possible.

“The biggest thing is keeping control, keeping the supplies up to make sure the inmates have access to what they need to keep themselves clean, enough soap to wash their hands often and various other things that we should all be doing,” Decker said.

Decker also said he thinks the jail is doing an “above average” job in the execution of following protocols, but notes there is room for some improvements.

“We can always use better and more personal-protective equipment,” Decker said.

As of April 14, no employees of the jail or inmates have tested positive for the virus.

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The Gallup Police Department, slotted for 62 officers, is close to fully-staffed numbers and the department is making sure their officers are utilizing protective gear, including face covers, and handing out masks to homeless people. The department is accepting donations for masks.

No officer with GPD has tested positive for COVID-19 as of April 16, but six officers have had to self-quarantine at some point after all had been exposed to individuals with the virus who had been picked up.

“All tests have to come back negative, and our officers are good, we don’t have anyone right now in quarantine,” GPD Capt. Erin Toadlena-Pablo said.

Calls for service by the department are down in April, compared to the last two months, and are on track to be down more than 25 percent compared to March and April.

“The best thing is to stay home, however, our officers don’t have that luxury,” Toadlena-Pablo said. “As a department, we try to limit contact with the public as much as we can, but try to do our best to serve the community.”

The department is also encouraging the public to fill out forms online, including non-emergency incidents and self-reporting accident forms. Phone calls and emails are recommended for records requests.

“Everyone wants to get back to their normal routine and normal lives but whatever’s passed down, I think we need to educate people on that,” Toadlena-Pablo said.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Cibola County to the east, the Cibola County Sheriff’s Office — who also help manage the county’s detention center facility in Milan — remains “business as usual” when it comes to fighting crime and executing warrants.

The detention center contracts with private prison CoreCivic in Milan, and it can hold over 250

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inmates, per Cibola County Sheriff Tony Mace.

“Our booking process with the detention center is the same, nothing has changed, other than the fact that when these individuals come in, the facility themselves have a different protocol that they’re following,” Mace said.

“Now for us, when we’re on the street, we’re using discretion and good common sense,” he said “I’m not going to take somebody that’s showing signs of sickness, whether they’ve got a virus or not.

“If they’re sick, I’m not going to take that chance and expose my officers to that individual nor are we going to take the chance of exposing that into the facility,” Mace added.

The Cibola General Hospital located in Grants gave the sheriff’s office N95 masks and protective suits along with organizations and individuals in Grants giving the law enforcement agency hand sanitizer and more masks for its deputies.

The department is also the law enforcement of the Cibola County courts, and the sheriff said the biggest change amid the coronavirus pandemic are his deputies having to transport inmates and extraditions less frequently thanks to video arraignments.

“We’ve seen a decline in that, which is great, because it gives my deputies better opportunities to get out to the rural communities,” Mace said.

Mace also shared some advice for the residents of Cibola County.

“Take the time right now to enjoy your family and enjoy the time with them as much as possible,” he said. “Call your neighbors, call the elderly and check on them, say hello, see how they’re doing.

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“If you can, if you’re a well-abled healthy body and you’re able to help somebody out, help them out,” Mace added. “If you’ve got an elderly person that can’t make it out to the store, call them and see if you can get them supplies. Get them what they need, put them in a box and leave them on their doorstep, you really don’t have to have direct contact.

“This is something I see our community really doing, and coming together on, is looking out for each other, and we always have as a small community,” Mace said.

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