The inconvenience of a lockdown

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
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A lockdown has some particularly difficult aspects beyond the expected everyday boredom.

One of those can be taking care of vital needs, such as refilling medications, lab drop offs and laundry. In White Cliffs resident Karen Nieto's case, she and one of her daughters are essential workers. Nieto works at U. S. Renal and her older daughter works at Red Rocks Care Center.

She says she has been in numerous arguments with state police and Gallup police because she needs to get her scrubs washed.

New Mexico State Police Officer Dusty Francisco looked into Nieto's complaint May 4 and said essential workers can go in and out of Gallup with a letter from their essential workplace and documents to verify their residence.

"For people who have doctor appointments and those who are picking up prescription medication, they are allowed to enter Gallup. They, too, must provide documents to verify the doctor ['s] appointment and or prescription that needs to be picked up," he said.

Any person requiring emergency medical treatment is allowed to enter into Gallup.

Nieto said in her experience, one state police officer refused to read her essential papers and told her older daughter that he didn't believe that she worked at Red Rocks Care Center, after she had just finished a 12-hour shift there.

When Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham announced the first lockdown, Gallup's new mayor, Louis Bonaguidi told the Gallup Sun, "As a businessman, I definitely don't like seeking it…I see the need for it."

In talking with people in the health care professions, "It seemed there was nobody that I talked to that said not to extend it [the lockdown]," he said. That was on May 3, just before the first lockdown was set to expire.

Bonaguidi is the owner of City Electric Shoe Shop (230 W. Coal Ave.) and Zimmerman's Western Wear (203 Rte. 66). He looks at the lockdown from the point of view of a businessman, as well as a mayor.

He said that he's been told that if the COVID-19 numbers don't break in the next two to three weeks, the virus threatens to ravage the area all summer long.

After a fire on May 2, during which the fire department was unable to acquire provisions for the firefighters, Bonaguidi took the step of proposing an extension of curfew hours to 8 pm during the second lockdown.

Nieto said that she sees cars all over Gallup. But while the lockdown has been in place, her ability to manage necessary activities has been dependent on the mood of police officers staffing the checkpoint near where she lives.

Nieto and her two daughters live on the east end of Gallup in a trailer park that is considered part of the city. Nieto and her oldest daughter both work with COVID-19 patients.

Her younger daughter has several medical conditions and is on immunosuppressants. So when Nieto and her oldest daughter return home from work, they bag their scrubs and take showers before entering their home, in order to keep the younger daughter from contracting anything.

One morning, Nieto's younger daughter needed an over-the-counter product from Walmart to treat a toothache and the older daughter drove her to the checkpoint. When they arrived, the officer stationed there would not let them through.

Nieto said her older daughter showed her papers and her badge and the officer would not look at them and laughed. "He said, 'Orajel is not an essential item'," the older daughter said.

Keeping to the rule of two people per car, the daughters returned to the checkpoint. This time they said they were headed to the emergency room at the Indian Health Service. The officer let them through.

When Nieto arrived at the checkpoint a little later on her way to work, she mentioned that he had not even looked at her daughter's papers. She asked for his name and badge number. He did not provide them. She said he told her, "Your daughters lied to me. They wanted to go to Walmart."

Nieto explained to the *Gallup Sun* that while Orajel is an over-the-counter product, it was for a physical ailment and that often doctors suggest people try over-the-counter preparations before making appointments. That's what she was trying to do.

She added that checkpoint officers look for slips of paper in connection with doctor and pharmacy visits and that IHS uses automated telephone messages rather than slips for appointments. She said that the officer would not listen to the automated message on her phone.

Nieto contacted the New Mexico State Police to explain her dilemma. She also told NMSP that she received a similar response when she wanted get her scrubs washed.

After that call, Nieto said the officer waved her through when he saw her again in a different vehicle. Then she started seeing different officers at the checkpoint and stopped having the problem.

Nieto told the NMSP supervisor about her daughter's illness; about how as essential workers, she and her eldest daughter cannot stop going to work or it is considered abandonment of the job; about how important it is to launder their scrubs to protect her youngest; about her residency status in the city; about getting her supervisor to put her name on her papers; about the lack of slips from the doctor and pharmacy.

"Obviously these people don't know IHS. They've never been through the system. The

hospital's not giving us the paperwork, to show it to the police officers," she said.

Nieto added that the lock down seemed disorganized and when it was put in place, it did not allow for people who weren't prepared or were working long shifts, to get out and take care of basic needs, like groceries.

"They should have given us time," she said. " I feel really disrespected. They should give us a little bit of leeway.

"It feels like…you're nothing," she said with tears in her voice.

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