

Letter to the editor: Are we opening Pandora's Box?

Written by Gallupsun Staff
Friday, 10 April 2020 06:10

A conversation by letter between Ina Burmeister , Kitty Mason

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March 30, 2020, Gallup, New Mexico - A task force has put into place an initial solution to address the need to house homeless respiratory patients needing to self-isolate while waiting for COVID-19 test results. The task force includes representatives from the State, County, City, Gallup Indian Medical Center (GIMC), Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services (RMCHCS) and Community Outreach and Patient Empowerment (COPE).

While the local task force first began meeting, the Governor's office was also grappling with this issue at a statewide level. The local task force and the Governor's office contacted the El Rancho to see if they might help. The hotel has a separate building located across the parking lot from the main hotel called the Ranch House Motel. The El Rancho offered this as a place that could house up to 20 homeless individuals who have either tested for the coronavirus and waiting for results or who have symptoms that need daily monitoring but are not sick enough to be hospitalized.

The Ranch House Motel housed the first patients last Thursday. To qualify, patients must have a medical referral from a RMCHCS or GIMC provider. The patient must be independent with their activities of daily living, not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs nor unlikely to withdraw from alcohol or other substance.

The task force arranged for transportation from the hospitals to the Ranch House Motel. Nurses or providers will check in on the patient by phone on a daily basis to assess their symptoms as test results are pending. They will be released when they are no longer considered infectious.

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While the El Rancho is open for business, no one will be in contact with the patients. The rooms are completely separate from the main hotel and each room has its own outside entrance. When a provider refers a patient, the provider calls the hotel and registration takes place through the phone. El Rancho's security is ready to open the door of the room when the patient arrives. Patients are not given room keys and the El Rancho has hired extra security to watch the rooms at all times.

The El Rancho provides the meals, leaving them outside the door. A phone call and a knock on the door lets the patient know the meal is there. When a patient leaves, the room remains vacant for 24 hours and then cleaned thoroughly. The El Rancho has a strict cleaning protocol for the entire hotel, using CDC guidelines. These same guidelines apply for cleaning patient rooms. .

While no solution is perfect and without its bumps, it is a workable solution for now. The most important thing is to keep the patient safe and to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. The task force continues to meet to make plans should the number of patients exceed the number of rooms available.

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I am a 67 year old Native American (Osage) woman who has lived in Gallup for 42 years. Last Thursday I was aggressively panhandled by 3 men as I was walking from my car into Albertsons. They surrounded me, not taking no as my answer and I had to push my way through them to get into the store.

To hear via an email that our community will be used to house "homeless respiratory patients" while they await the results of their tests is beyond belief! They'll also be provided with meals. Why were the citizens of Gallup left out of this process? We live, work and spend our money in Gallup.

If we get sick we pay to be seen by a doctor and if we become possible "respiratory patients," we self isolate in our own homes, provide our own food and wait for the results.

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The majority of the homeless in our community have a home. They either don't want to be there or they've burned all their bridges with their family. Why don't we encourage them to return home, self isolate and wait for their results, like the rest of the people of Gallup and surrounding communities?

Instead, once again, Gallup is being used to provide food and shelter to people who choose to come into our town instead of staying home. The Navajo Nation has been very proactive in setting up facilities where possible patients can receive good care in their communities. Instead of encouraging people to return home and stay there, we are providing them with a means to remain homeless in Gallup, where they will continue to panhandle and harass both citizens of Gallup and the many tourists who visit here.

People who know me know that I am a person who has always helped in our community to care for those in need. But this time I'm mad that I could have been infected, after weeks of being so cautious, by people wandering our streets. And I'm upset that so many people, including our State, County, City officials and those who run the health care options in Gallup seem to be prioritizing the less fortunate over the wellbeing of everyone in our community.

We were not given a voice on this task force and that by itself is wrong. Those on the task force who came up with putting people, who are used to roaming the streets, in hotel rooms in the middle of town, close to liquor stores and other commercial outlets where there is significant panhandling weren't thinking clearly.

I'm sure that if the possible respiratory patients test negative they'll be back on the streets where they can be infected by others and spread it on to the good citizens of Gallup.

We all have great compassion for people who struggle in this world, but the leaders in our community, have a responsibility to all of us and, at the very least, should have the people of Gallup's input when making these types of decisions.

Kitty Mason
Gallup, N.M.

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