

Updates on COVID-19 and the new Public Health Order

December 03, 2020: Message from Council Chair Sara Scott

Hello – I hope this note finds you, your family and friends well as we approach 2021 but I understand that is not the case for everyone. We’ve had a surge in the number of COVID-19 infections in the County and we have individuals and businesses that are struggling. In this note I’ll provide a summary of the most recent distribution of federal CARES Act funding in the County and a few updates regarding the Los Alamos Medical Center and Los Alamos National Laboratory operations. But I’ll start by focusing on recent changes to the Public Health Order and how we need to keep working hard together during this public health emergency to limit the spread of the virus and create opportunities for fewer operational restrictions on businesses, public schools, and other services in the County.

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Starting Dec 2, New Mexico began using a red-yellow-green framework to determine the public health measures in place on a county-by-county basis. The two criteria that are being used to determine a county’s risk level are (1) the new COVID-19 case incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants and (2) the average percent of positive COVID-19 test results. These criteria will be calculated and updated on the state’s website every two weeks (<https://cv.nmhealth.org/public-health-orders-and-executive-orders/red-to-green/>). To achieve the green “medium-risk” level a county must have no more than 8 cases per 100,000

inhabitants and an average of 5% or less of positive tests; the yellow “high-risk” risk level reflects a county meeting one of these criteria and the red “very high risk” level results from a county meeting neither of the criteria.

Los Alamos County is currently at the red level with a COVID-19 case incidence rate of 20.8/100,000 inhabitants and an average test positivity rate of 6%. As we know, by staying home as much as possible, frequently washing/sanitizing our hands, wearing our masks and distancing ourselves when we must be out, and avoiding large gatherings we can reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus, which will in turn reduce our risk level within the state’s framework. Also, please recall that anyone who wants a COVID-19 test can get one at the Los Alamos Public Health Office (call 662-4038 for an appointment). By taking these actions we can have a significant impact on the level at which businesses, schools, and other services can operate.

For example, at the red risk level close contact businesses can operate at 25% of maximum occupancy or 10 people (whichever is less), non-essential businesses at 25% of maximum occupancy or 75 (whichever is less) and outdoor recreational facilities at 25% of maximum occupancy; at the green risk level those numbers increase to 50% of maximum occupancy with no other restrictions. Other specifics can be found at <https://cv.nmhealth.org> – please see “Nov 30 press conference” under the newsroom & updates tab.

For our schools, Los Alamos County needs to move to the green risk level to create the opportunity for our elementary schools to return to hybrid model operations (they are currently operating using 100% remote learning). Specifics regarding the timing of decisions relative to the release of County risk level information from the state are still being clarified. Separate from risk framework considerations, the Los Alamos Public School system is facing the challenge of a shortage of substitute teachers; anyone that would like to apply is encouraged to do so (<https://laschools.net/careers>).

With respect to the County, essential services will continue at the red risk level. At the yellow risk level, County recreational facilities and the Library and Arts Center can open at 25% capacity; at the green risk level this will increase to 50% capacity. Because there may be changes in services and facility operations pending each two-week update to the County's risk status, community members will be notified of changes through press releases and Facebook posts. Specific operational information will be updated regularly on the County website (please use the COVID-19 button on the County website (<https://losalamosnm.us>) to access this information).

The Los Alamos Medical Center continues to maintain a 45-day supply of Personal Protective Equipment and has beds and staffing to address both general medical-surgical and COVID-19 patient care to date. The Governor's Nov 30 press conference highlighted concerns regarding the statewide availability of health system resources when infection rates surge; working together to lower the County's risk level will help contribute to continued availability of needed health services both locally and around the state. The Medical Center is currently limiting elective surgeries to conserve inpatient beds and Personal Protective Equipment to ensure they are prepared to address any additional surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Los Alamos National Laboratory has significantly increased testing for COVID-19; for the week of Nov 14, testing doubled from approximately 400 to greater than 800 tests/week. While not all Laboratory employees live in Los Alamos County this does contribute significantly to the number of community members that have been and will be tested for the virus. It is my understanding that the Laboratory will continue to take a conservative approach regarding operations and on-site staffing as they monitor data regarding the progression of the pandemic.

The County is finalizing distribution of the federal CARES Act funds we received from the state. A second call for individual grants was made and the County received authorization to distribute remaining funds to previous applicants for business grants. As a result, the County is now in the process of providing an additional \$480,000 to community members and businesses.

I know how hard folks have been working to keep each other safe – this means continued focus on using the tools we have to limit the spread of the virus. It also means helping those that are struggling – we are a community that cares and we'll continue to demonstrate our capacity in this regard. If you know someone that needs help and can't find needed resources, please direct them to the Customer Care Center at 662-8333. We can and will keep moving forward together – let's keep after it.