



Prevent • Promote • Protect

Administration

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## Memorandum

To: Jill Hunsaker Ryan, MPH, Executive Director, CDPHE  
Mara Brosy-Wiwchar, Chief of Staff, CDPHE

From: Susan Wheelan, MBA, Public Health Director, El Paso County Public Health

Re: El Paso County COVID-19 Mitigation Plan

Date: July 13, 2020

### El Paso County Public Health COVID-19 Mitigation Framework

Metric used by CDPHE to re-evaluate El Paso County variance allowances due to exceedance of >5% positivity rate and threshold of 100 cases/100,000 population.

### Community Goals

El Paso County is unified in responding to the threat COVID-19 poses to our community. Since February, we have been working with partners across our community to plan for, respond to, and mitigate the impacts of this global pandemic on our community. El Paso County Public Health (EPCPH) began monitoring COVID-19 in late 2019 as it was emerging in China, we formed an incident command in February 2020 and in March 2020 partnered with the Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management to form a Unified Command and Emergency Coordination Center. The goals of this response effort include:

- Promoting a safe community where disease transmission is contained and hospital capacity to treat our residents is maintained
- Sustaining a vibrant economy with opportunities for business and labor to succeed resulting in families maintaining housing, health insurance and capacity to meet basic needs
- Returning to in-person learning to support intellectual, social and emotional development of youth, as well as capacity of parents to engage in work while children are in a safe environment
- Improving mental health and well-being of El Paso County residents supported by engagement in civic life and community activities
- Avoiding long-term consequences of a prolonged Stay-at-Home phase that may include reduced economic stability; increases in negative outcomes such as domestic violence, child abuse; diminished mental health; loss of housing and/or businesses and diminished capacity for community recovery

## **Disease Trends**

Between May 25<sup>th</sup> and June 16<sup>th</sup>, El Paso County (EPC) experienced a steady decline in cases and achieved a low incidence threshold of less than 25 cases per 100,000 residents. In late June, cases began to climb and in July EPC has moved into a medium-high threshold. On July 7<sup>th</sup>, EPC notified the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) that our positivity rate was anticipated to cross the pre-determined variance threshold of a 5% positivity rate and sought guidance regarding the mitigation process and proactively began messaging the need for a stepped-up mitigation action plan with partners. On July 8<sup>th</sup>, we surpassed the variance threshold and sought guidance from CDPHE while beginning implementation of mitigation efforts. As expected with increased testing positivity rates, EPC incidence has increased as well. There has been a steady upward trend and on July 10, the threshold of 100 cases/100,000 population was breached. Recognizing that these are signals of pervasive community burden of disease, EPCPH has been following other implications that are intertwined with these developments. We continue to monitor hospitalized cases, PPE supplies, testing capacity and turn-around times of tests. EPC also reviews national and state trends for local impact and local data to understand demographics and points of impact.

## **Mitigation Steps**

1. Maintain and increase partnerships: EPCPH recognizes the need to reverse the upward trajectory of disease trends in our county and state. Over the course of our response we have forged strong partnerships across El Paso County and these partners are committed to supporting our community through this period. Strong partnerships are critical to engaging all sectors of our community in this response.

Below are our partners and steps we are taking together to mitigate disease spread:

- Partners: Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management, Penrose-St. Francis Hospital, UCHealth Memorial Hospital, Children's Hospital, Peak Vista Community Health Center, Matthews-Vu Primary Care, OPTUMCare, Colorado Springs Chamber & EDC, Economic Recovery Council, Pikes Peak Workforce Center, Pikes Peak Small Business Development, Colorado Springs Fire Department, Pikes Peak Chapter of the Colorado Restaurant Association, University of Colorado Colorado Springs, NAMI Colorado Springs, Community Health Partnership, University of Colorado School of Medicine, Springs Rescue Mission, Ascending to Health Respite Care, Pikes Peak United Way, Superintendents of the Pikes Peak Region, COSILoveYou (faith-based communities), and Pikes Peak Library District.
2. Increase collaboration with business community:
    - Partner with El Paso County Economic Development and Small Business Development Center to organize a webinar series on contact tracing, outbreak investigations and communicable disease to help businesses understand the value in partnering with public health and best practices that can be implemented
  3. Increase capacity to quickly isolate and quarantine:
    - Finalize agreement with Pikes Peak Workforce Center and Discover Goodwill to hire 30 contact tracers and case investigators from the community.

- Update July 20: The agreement with Pikes Peak Workforce Center (PPWFC) and Goodwill Staffing has been finalized, and the applicant screening and onboarding process has begun. EPCPH is set to onboard 11 staff on July 21, with more expected to be hired and onboarded in the following weeks. One of the 11 newly hired staff is bilingual in English and Spanish and PPWFC, Goodwill and EPCPH continue outreach to encourage more interested bilingual applicants to apply.
- Hire and train six additional epidemiologists and three additional disease intervention specialists to support contact tracing, case investigations and lead outbreak investigations  
Update July 20: Five of the six epidemiologists and all three disease intervention specialists have been hired. Two of the epidemiologists are pending background checks but once that process is complete, will be able to begin the onboarding process and can start as soon as they are able.
- Continue suspension of many EPCPH services to leverage staff for disease investigations

4. Increase community-based testing:

- As cases began to rise in El Paso County, EPCPH partnered with YMCA of the Pikes Peak Region/Southeast and Armed Services and Servicios de la Raza to bring community-based testing to Southeast Colorado Springs in a setting that serves an immigrant population that often does not seek services elsewhere.
- EPCPH continues to discuss opportunities to expand testing elsewhere; however, current limitation in laboratory capacity and delayed turn-around times make expanded testing a less meaningful intervention at this time.

5. Increase supports to high-risk settings including long-term care facilities (LTCF), homeless shelters and county jail:

- Early in our response, we identified priority populations for intervention due to the risk of disease transmission in congregate settings. EPCPH formed steering committees for LTCF, homeless and dedicated technical assistance for our county jail.
- These teams will continue efforts to include assistance in planning for PPE needs, technical assistance regarding cohorting and prevention planning.
- EPCPH efforts to support LTCFs has included mental health support to facility staff via BrainWise training. These efforts recently garnered attention in the national BrainWise Newsletter highlighting the innovative application of this program in the LTCF setting and positive results in staff morale while fighting COVID-19 within the facilities. Helping staff cope and remain in their positions is critical to the ability of these facilities to prevent future outbreaks.
- EPCPH also facilitated a letter-writing campaign from school children in May and the faith community via COSILoveyou to staff and residents of LTCFs in July-August to reduce their feelings of isolation and increase staff and resident morale.

6. GRIT (Greater Resilience Intervention Team)

- EPCPH has partnered with the renowned Dr. Charles Benight of the University of Colorado Colorado Springs to launch GRIT (Greater Resilience Intervention Team). GRIT offers free resources with information and supportive video content that empower individuals and communities to expand their capacity to build resilience.
- GRIT provides resilience support coach training, a free opportunity for volunteers to learn to be a GRIT coach to be a resource for support and education in the community.
  - a. The five-hour course provides information and skills on general and COVID-19 related stress, resilience, disaster recovery skills, support, and small interventions to educate, support, and motivate individuals and communities to be as resilient as they can be in the wake of COVID-19.
- Additionally, a proposal is currently in review to allocated \$200,000 of CARES Act funding toward collaborative efforts with GRIT, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and AspenPointe to address the behavioral health impacts of COVID-19 on our community, with particular emphasis on health equity as it pertains to access to mental health resources for disadvantaged areas of our community.

## 7. Communication Plan

- As part of COVID-19 response efforts, the Joint Information Center (JIC) has been engaged since early March to provide accurate, credible and reliable information to keep the public informed and empower them to make the best decisions. The JIC includes experienced communication professionals from Public Health and City and County government. The JIC also regularly engages other public information officers (PIOs) through the regional Crisis Communication Network, as well as field PIOs from agencies such as schools, health care, business community, law enforcement, fire, emergency management, as well as communication entities from other municipalities.
- Given recent sharp increases in COVID-19 cases, the JIC is increasing its efforts around proven prevention messages to help promote them among the public and gain buy-in to limit the spread of disease in El Paso County.
- **Communication Objectives:** Increase awareness in the community about upward trends in COVID-19 cases; increase engagement in preventive messaging and activities; mitigate the spread of disease in El Paso County.
- **Key Messages:**
  - Encourage the consistent voluntary use of masks – focus on emphasizing wearing a mask when in public and in close proximity to others (and when social distancing isn’t possible)
  - Practice social distancing (six feet of distance) as much as possible
  - Wash hands frequently with soap and water
  - Stay home when sick
  - Keep gatherings small
  - Minimize the frequency and number of personal interactions to decrease complexity
  - Education on various activities and associated risk of viral spread
- **Communication Strategies:**

- Utilize mass media channels in English and Spanish to reach a broad audience to raise awareness, combined with targeted community outreach efforts
- Leverage partners to maximize grassroots efforts to reach community members, gain buy-in, achieve broad sector-appropriate messaging
- EPCPH is also directly addressing the doubts that are raised about COVID-19, preventive measures and data to mitigate false messages, complacency and division of mission
- **Target Population(s):** Residents of El Paso County
- **Communication Tactics:**

**Messaging efforts to promote the importance of face coverings**

Though there are several different critically important preventive measures, in particular, the use of masks has proven to be a divisive topic among El Paso County residents; therefore, we have stepped-up prevention measures around this topic to educate people why it's important, and help gain understanding and voluntary compliance:

- #MaskUpCOS Campaign – Public Health partnered with the City of Colorado Springs to launch a strength-based campaign called [#MaskUpCOS](#) to encourage our community to wear masks. Participants in the campaign highlighted why they personally believe it is important to wear a mask, and were intentionally selected from diverse sectors of our community:
  - Mother and her immuno-compromised child
  - ER doctor
  - Oncology nurse
  - Speech pathologist at a skilled nursing facility
  - Business leader
  - Faith-based leader
  - Paralympic athlete
  - Veteran
- The campaign launched with a press conference to promote it on June 26
  - Speakers and participants at the press conference included:
    - Campaign participants
    - Public Health
    - Local hospitals
    - City of Colorado Springs
- Public Health is running paid social media ads to promote the campaign for the next eight weeks. Each graphic will be specifically targeted to different audiences to enhance efforts to provide messaging that will resonate with more specific demographics:
  - As an example, local faith-based leader, Pastor Ben Anderson, is highly respected in southeast Colorado Springs, a community that faces higher levels of disparities exacerbated by COVID-19. The ads featuring his graphic will be specifically geo-targeted to zip codes in Southeast Colorado Springs.
- The City of Fountain asked to join the campaign after seeing its launch.
- The City of Manitou Springs has also asked to join the campaign.

- Lamar Advertising generously gave us placement on six digital billboards around the city. Here is [a map of the locations](#).
- Very soon, the ads will be up on 9 “Creative Outdoor” posters throughout downtown Colorado Springs.
- Eleven local organizations, including the entire Harrison School district, have asked for posters and/or postcards to display in their places of business and/or on their social media outlets.
- We are in the process of having a local graphic design firm (Design Rangers) design some stickers and window clings which will be targeted toward the younger demographic who frequently use this type of swag, and it will incorporate the Olympic value of respect (wearing a mask is respectful).
- Local news outlet KOAA will begin to run a PSA featuring Agatha and Zander (mother and her immuno-compromised child): <https://vimeo.com/434452040>
- A press conference featuring members of the business community is scheduled for July 14. This is an effort to emphasize the importance of preventive measures (such as wearing a mask) to keep our business community open and help our economy to thrive. The goal is to have this message come from many different business partners. Speakers/participants in the press conference will include:
  - The Colorado Springs Chamber & EDC
  - Local business owners, including Brother Luck, a famous local chef/restaurant owner
  - Visit Colorado Springs
  - Public Health’s medical director and local hospitals will be available for medical questions
  - The Mayor will also be available for questions

**Messaging efforts to promote the importance of all preventive measures**

Public Health and partners continue to promote the importance of prevention measures such as social distancing, frequently washing hands with soap and water, staying home when sick, and keeping gatherings small. We recognize that in order to mitigate spread of disease in our community, we need people to engage simultaneously in all of these important measures. Efforts to that end include:

- Frequent social media messaging (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) on the big 3:
  - Wear a mask
  - Practice social distancing
  - Wash hands frequently
- Providing residents the tools and information needed to empower them to make the most informed decisions:
  - Frequent data updates to educate the community on local COVID-19 trends and numbers
  - Design Rangers created a risk graphic, which explains in an easy-to-understand manner the levels of risks associated with

certain kinds of activities (e.g., going to a bar is a higher risk activity than biking outdoors by yourself)

- Encouraging people to get tested if they are experiencing symptoms and making testing locations and information readily available
- Regularly filming and sharing on social media PSAs on timely topics from medical directors and epidemiologists. As an example, a recent PSA featured one of our epidemiologists discussing ways to celebrate 4<sup>th</sup> of July safely
- Regularly updating County and City leadership, and issue news releases to share highlights from the presentations
- Diversifying local messengers so that Public Health is joined by the voices of local partners and trusted individuals in promoting prevention and containment of COVID-19 to help EPC thrive.

## 8. Timeline

**July 7:** Proactively self-reported increasing positivity rate to State Epidemiologist and anticipation that EPC would cross 5% threshold. Convened partners to discuss mitigation needs.

**July 8:** EPC positivity rate of 6% reported to state and guidance sought regarding mitigation process.

**July 9:** Convened with City, County, Business, Hospital and public safety partners to discuss mitigations steps needed in partnership to reverse trends. Planned news conference regarding a call to action to increase awareness of the #MaskUpCOS campaign and disease trends with city partners, conducted multiple interviews to discuss rising trends and continued outreach plan. Develop plan to leverage school partner PIOs to increase mask campaign reach into the community.

**July 10:** Met with school PIOs.

**July 11:** Discussed mitigation plan with CDPHE Chief of Staff and she confirmed that it was appropriate to submit our plan on Monday July 13.

**July 13:** Submit mitigation plan to CDPHE

**July 13-27:** Two-week implementation of mitigation phase

**July 27:** Check-in with CDPHE regarding mitigation process and progress.

**July 27 to August 10:** If indicators do not resolve to pre-trigger levels, two-weeks at the medium threshold

On or near **August 10** decision from CDPHE regarding variance allowance continuation

## 9. Guide for Mitigation Process

