To: Board of Health  
From: Susan Wheelan, M.B.A., Public Health Director  
Date: May 2020 (reflects April current activities to date)  
Re: Director’s Report

The past month marked a major milestone in the course of the COVID-19 response with Governor Polis’ Safer At Home order on April 27, easing restrictions that were issued in March to stem rising cases of COVID-19 and outbreaks among vulnerable populations in the state. Leading up to this order, and continuing to date, El Paso County Public Health (EPCPH) has been engaged in a multi-pronged effort to support individuals, businesses, schools and other entities within the County as we transition from Stay At Home to Safer At Home phase. These efforts have been focused in the following key areas with the goals of continued disease mitigation and community resilience and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

**Epidemiology**

A critical element in our arsenal for disease prevention is epidemiologic investigation. Over the past several weeks, we have increased our team for contact tracing to assure that we are able to identify possible clusters or potential spread of COVID-19 and bolster our investigation capacity for possible future surge. The team consists of our base team of EPCPH epidemiologists and other agency staff assigned to case investigation, along with additional support from the Coroner’s Office, UCCS student nurses, and Medical Reserved Corps volunteers.

Recognizing the vulnerability of Long-Term Care Facility (LTCF) residents and staff to COVID-19, EPCPH Immunization Program staff members have been activated to work with LTCFs, providing infection control recommendations and collecting pertinent data on symptomatic individuals. The team has also worked to become experts on state guidance coming out for LTCFs, so they can be a resource for providers and facility administrators as questions arise. During the first week of May, the team saw its first success. A facility with a COVID-19 outbreak which affected many residents, made it 28 days without a new case, effectively ending the outbreak.

Concurrent to the Governor’s issuance of the Safer At Home order, the Epidemiology team developed a COVID-19 Suppression Plan detailing how the County will work to detect new cases and contain the threat of future outbreaks. The plan is an integral component of variance requests to the Governor, including the County’s recent requests to allow alternative high school graduations, which was approved, and to permit restaurants and similar facilities to offer limited capacity on-premises dining, which is currently under consideration by the Governor at the time of this report.

As more person-to-person interactions occur in the community with continued easing of restrictions, a key objective for the Epidemiology team over the next several weeks will be to improve the ability to gather information from COVID-19 exposed individuals by educating the public on the process and intent of contact tracing as a vital disease prevention strategy.
Testing
An important component to the success of the Safer At Home phase is the ability to perform widespread testing. Public Health and health care partners throughout the County have collaborated to increase the availability of local testing, primarily for symptomatic individuals. The gold standard for testing is 152 tests per day per 100,000 population. With the present testing scope, the County has met this goal with community testing capacity approaching or exceeding 1,100 tests per day. In coordination with local hospitals and other health service providers, Public Health is developing a strategy for long-term and sustainable testing in El Paso County that offers balance between effective surveillance and containment and more aggressive mitigation measures. A draft testing strategy document has been created and will be submitted to a subgroup of the COVID-19 Policy Group for input and refinement. Guidance from the state will further inform the testing approach.

Data Analytics and Research
In our commitment to data transparency, in early April EPCPH’s Data Analytics and Research team launched the agency’s COVID-19 Data Dashboard, which is available to everyone in the community to access via the EPCPH website. The data compiled by the team has been invaluable in our ability to discern emerging trends and communicate this information to the public and stakeholders (hospitals, business community, County and City leadership, schools, churches, and other community entities) who have come to rely on this data in its decision-making process.

Over the past few weeks since the launching of the data dashboard and development of a multitude to statistical analysis tools to track the progression of COVID-19 in El Paso County, the Joint Information Center (JIC) team has added a new feature to the data website – epidemiology video updates that explain in English and in Spanish the data presented on the dashboard and provide a brief overview of weekly trends. The first of these video updates earlier this month covered the topic of contact tracing. The plan is to continue production of these videos on a periodic basis.

Recovery
Public Health is united with partners around the shared goal of protecting the health of the community and the health of the economy. We are doing all we can to encourage the reopening of businesses, but we will do so in a careful, planned and methodical manner. With this objective we have initiated a partnership with the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Council, Pikes Peak Workforce Development and other community entities to create a Recovery Council (aligned with the State Council on Economic Stabilization and Growth) to help businesses and organizations navigate the complexities of the COVID-19 environment. A significant part of this effort entails consultation with establishments on solutions for re-opening of certain parts of their operations in a limited, responsible and medically-sound manner that minimizes the risk of transmission of COVID-19 while enabling these establishments and employees to start on the path to financial recovery. A subsequent outcome of these discussions was
the recent variance request to the Governor for limited re-opening of on-premises dining for restaurants in El Paso County, the decision of which is currently pending as of May 20.

With extensive medical and subject matter expertise, Public Health created guidance for Superintendents to be able to plan graduation ceremonies for the 2019-2020 school year and we subsequently submitted a variance request to the Governor which was approved earlier this month. This guidance allows schools, students, families, and the wider community to celebrate the accomplishments of graduates in a medically sound way that limits the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19. Ceremony plans will be evaluated based on several criteria for approval by EPCPH. We anticipate substantial staff activity on this front for the next several weeks as individual school districts make plans for commencement activities for the remainder of May thru June and present those plans to us.

Plans for additional variance requests will be determined based on ongoing detailed analysis of COVID-19 trends within the County and as further guidance and directives are issued from the state over the next several days and weeks.

**Health Equity**

Applying a health equity lens is a priority in addressing the needs of our communities experiencing the greatest disparities that are amplified by the impacts of COVID-19. These health inequities existed prior to this pandemic but there is now a unique opportunity to provide further coordination of health equity integration and community-based collaboration to not only highlight the needs of our marginalized populations, but to also work with multiple community partners in closing the gaps, especially among our communities living in southeast Colorado Springs. With the provision of CARES Act funding, as outlined later in this report, EPCPH has been afforded the opportunity to increase our presence in this area.

**Communication and Education**

The Joint Information Center (JIC) enables routine communication to community partners, including hospitals, first responders, and primary care physicians. The JIC also provides frequent updates and information to the public and our media partners. Key JIC objectives during the agency’s COVID-19 response (which are central goals of our Communication effort at all times, notwithstanding this crisis) has been to provide timely, transparent, and credible information to the public and to educate the community and stakeholders on what state and local public health orders mean and suggested measures to stay safe. Much of JIC’s time over the past several weeks has be spent engaging media (broadcast, newspapers, social media) to provide access to content experts for interviews, articles and fact-checking, as well as to correct misinformation that sometimes can occur as events and developments unfold on an almost minute-by-minute basis.

Over the next several weeks, the JIC will be working with a graphic design firm and a consulting firm to augment efforts related to community engagement and education, and
communication strategy, both in the immediate and the long-term. Some of the initial priorities will include:

- Explaining contact tracing and clarifying what it is and why it is important
- Strategizing how to best explain in lay person terms what Public Health does
- Working to correct misinformation and provide education and clarification
- Improving strategy for rapid response and provision of information

**Behavioral Health Support**

EPCPH has forged a partnership with UCCS National Resilience Institute and Greater Resilience Intervention Team (GRIT), COSILoveYou, NAMI and other community organizations to offer free resources and access to supportive services to help empower individuals and our local communities to expand their capacity to build resilience, and ability to cope with traumatic events, such as COVID-19. Among the opportunities we are currently promoting through our COVID-19 Joint Information Center is the GRIT Resilience Support Coach training, a free opportunity for volunteers to sign up as a GRIT Coach to be a resource for support and education in the community. 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.

A virtual session on Resilience and Wellbeing by Dr. Charles Benight, Professor of Psychology at UCCS, head of the UCCS National Institute for Human Resilience and founder of GRIT, was offered to Public Health staff on May 20 as an opportunity for staff to gain helpful insights on the emotional impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and strategies to cope with and manage challenges they may be experiencing personally and professionally. We will plan additional sessions for Public Health staff as a support during our continued COVID-19 response.

In addition to the GRIT initiative, our Health Services Director has been assigned a Behavioral Health Liaison role within the Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) to help coordinate and streamline multiple behavioral health efforts related to the COVID-19 crisis.

**Response and Recovery Funding**

On May 19, the Board of County Commissioners approved allocation to El Paso County Public Health of $8.3 million from funds that the County received from the Federal Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. This funding will be applied in the following areas to meet ongoing COVID-19 response and recovery objectives outlined above:

| Staffing and supplies including current staff and increased staff | $4,000,000 |
| COVID-19 Communications | $100,000 |
Behavioral Health (community and staff) | $200,000
Building facility for presence in SE Colorado Springs/FTN | $4,000,000

In early April, the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) stood up a Recovery Section that has served as the main point of contact for recovery efforts and grants related to COVID-19, especially funding pertaining to FEMA and HHS. The team fields questions from local jurisdictions, the City, and the County, offers guidance pertaining to FEMA/HHS plans for eligible reimbursements, and provides support for acquisition of funding from these sources. A member of Recovery Section sits on the COVID-19 Policy Group and works in close collaboration with the County Finance team to coordinate processes and information pertaining to COVID-19 funding.

**Compliance**
Public Health and local law enforcement, in consultation with the County Attorney’s Office, have developed general guidelines for addressing establishments that are not complying with Public Health Orders related to COVID-19.

The agency’s compliance objective is not to shutter businesses and incarcerate business owners, but rather to achieve voluntary compliance and education which has yielded positive outcomes thus far. Involvement of law enforcement is a last resort.

**Continuity of EPCPH Operations**
During the COVID-19 response, the following programs have remained partially or fully operational via telework arrangement and/or intermittent on-site staffing.

**Vital Records:** Online orders for birth and death certificates are steady. The State Vital Records office resumed in-office operations week of May 18 for adoptions and corrections by appointment only. EPCPH Vital Records office is currently discussing options for resuming in-office operations awaiting the Governor’s guidance later this month.

**Maternal Child Health (MCH)** has made significant progress on health equity data collection and internal/external partnerships in the last few weeks. HCP (A program for children and youth with special needs) care coordination has been ongoing with the option to use telehealth when appropriate.

**Lab:** Business is steady – heavy volume of water testing especially at the beginning of each month. Pretrial drug and alcohol testing resumed week of May 18.

**Environmental Health (EH):** All EH services have been offered during the COVID-19 response. The team has been providing in-person appointments, which has been helpful
for industry members and other customers. In addition to standard EH operations, the office has served as the primary contact for business- and organization-related inquiries pertaining to COVID-19. During the Stay at Home and current Safer At Home phase, the team has fielded an average of 70-100 inquiries per day. The following chart provides an overview of recent inquiries during the current Safer At Home phase:

![Safer at Home Inquiries Chart](chart.png)

**Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)**—NFP nurses held 314 telehealth visits over the month of April which is 50 visits more than March’s monthly average. Meeting clients via telehealth has helped continue client engagement as well as meet the needs of the most vulnerable during COVID-19. NFP has received feedback that the clients appreciate the positive support and guidance during this unprecedented time.

Reducing infant mortality and helping clients with self-sufficiency are two outcomes for which the Nurse-Family Partnership program is renowned nationally. Our NFP team had at least two examples of these outcomes in the past month:

- An NFP Nurse received a call from her client in the evening and learned that the client’s water had broken in the morning. She had not gone to the hospital, and there were signs that she was in danger of losing her baby. The client initially wanted to wait to go to her OB appointment in two days. Due to her relationship with the NFP nurse, she agreed to go to the hospital immediately, underwent an emergency C-section, and she and her baby were discharged home in time to celebrate their first Mother’s Day together. The OB informed the mother that if she had not gone to the hospital when she did, her baby would not have survived.
- An NFP Nurse helped a client obtain a laptop so she could finish her high school education. The client graduated from high school this spring and is applying for college in the fall.
Women, Infants and Children (WIC)
The caseload for April was 12,801. This is an increase of 183 participants from March. Staff continue efforts through social media and consistent follow-up with the online WIC referral form to reach those in our community who are eligible but not enrolled. WIC staff work to retain client caseload by reaching out to all who miss their scheduled appointment by providing phone and on-line education options and by assisting clients to fully utilize their food benefits. Over half of the staff are teleworking. WIC staff continues to retain a physical presence at each of our three clinic sites and can provide breast pumps to clients who require them. All appointments are conducted via phone. Zoom and Teams are being utilized for breastfeeding consults. Clients receive nutrition education via phone, email and access to WICHealth.org. Clients report that they appreciate the ability to have virtual appointments, removing transportation as a barrier to services during this time.

Return to Work Preparation - Employee symptom screenings:
While a large number of agency staff continues to telework, the agency has put measures in place to ensure the safety of employees and visitors at Citizens Service Center (CSC). Earlier this month, an employee screening process that has been developed by Public Health’s Emergency Preparedness and Response team was implemented. Employees entering CSC are screened for temperature and a list of COVID-19 symptoms before they report to work. The current screening location is Aspen Pointe Café and the southwest entrance by the CSC security station. If a staff member has a fever over 100.4 degrees or two or more symptoms, they are asked to leave work, return home and contact their supervisor. They are also provided with contact information for Benefits, a list of recommendations and return to work guidelines. Instructions for field staff have been provided (self-testing and reporting) and the two satellite WIC locations are being trained on how to do the screening for WIC staff.

Grants Coordination

April Grant Awards:
- Colorado Health Foundation, $33,000 for COVID-19 response (unsolicited)

April Grant Denials:
- Harm Reduction SB19-008 – feedback requested, awaiting response from funding agency

Pending Grant Decisions (as of 5/5/20):
- CODPHE RFA# 29606, Family Planning, application submitted 2/10/20; requested $672,644
- SAMHSA-Strategic Partnerships for Success, application submitted 3/6/2020; $300,000/year for 5 years

April Grant Research Activity Summary (current through 5/5/20):
- Total number of funding sources researched in April using all available data: 73
  - Pending approval to submit grant application/proposal: 10
  - Unclear County eligibility: 8
  - Not eligible/not a match for EPCPH: 62