

## **Honoring the unsung heroes working in community health**

**By Colorado Springs Fire Chief Ted Collas**

As a firefighter and member of the first responder community for the past 35 years, I have found it heartwarming to see the way our community has come alongside healthcare workers, showing support and gratitude, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firefighters in agencies across the county have received food donations, care packages, cloth facemasks, and a variety of other items in recognition of their work as front line care providers. We even had one group place signs in front of fire stations proclaiming, "Heroes Work Here." For all of these efforts, I am personally and professionally grateful.

However, I would like to draw attention to another group of healthcare professionals who have, in some cases, been overlooked and in rare cases maligned during this crisis. I am speaking of the men and women working in public health. During the pandemic response, I have had the privilege of meeting with many of these individuals several times each week as part of the Policy Group managing this crisis. My role in that group is small, and often I listen silently and take notes as they discuss the state of the virus and the progress of our efforts to contain the illness. I've been overwhelmed at their desire to educate the community, show compassion and understanding to the businesses most affected, and continually respond to the moving target of national and state public health orders.

Recently, I have watched these professionals work with community leaders to develop variances to get businesses open in a safe and thoughtful manner. At times, when they could have taken a heavy-handed approach to forcing compliance, they have elected to educate and come alongside businesses and individuals to find a safe way to achieve a common goal. The overarching objective in all of their work is the safety and wellbeing of the people of El Paso County. They, more than anyone, want to see us back to normal, with the novel coronavirus in check, and our community safe. However, until we get there, they have a critical job to do.

I would like to urge everyone to consider the difficulty of the job our public health professionals are facing. They have been tasked with keeping men, women, and children, all of whom enjoy their freedom as Americans, safe from a brand new virus that is plaguing our world. I have heard criticism stating that they are making it up as they go. Well, to be honest, there is some truth in that statement.

Experts across the globe are learning more and more about the virus, testing, and treatments every day. And, as new information is discovered, tactics are altered to address the threat. We do the very same thing while fighting fires. We establish a plan based on the information we know, and as we gather intelligence, we often employ new tactics as necessary to protect whatever is at risk.

Please join me in acknowledging the great work and tireless effort being done by the unsung heroes of the healthcare community. They deserve our gratitude rather than our criticism, because their work is dedicated to keeping us all well, and ushering us toward a safe and healthy future.

