

County prepared to reopen with caution

By Dr. James Terbush, M.D., M.P.H., President of the El Paso County Board of Health

It's time for El Paso County to begin to get back to work.

As we move from the Governor's "Stay At Home" to "Safer At Home" this week, it's good to reflect back on where we are and how far we've come already with our response to COVID-19 here in El Paso County. Our County is in better shape than many places in the nation and in fact, better than many in Colorado. Hospitals are working to have additional bed capacity available. Testing went from approximately 150 per day with an extended turnaround of more than five days to approximately 1,000 tests available per day now, and 24-48 hours turnaround (on average). Testing for immunity will be coming along as the science (and the supply chain) catches up. Cooperation between and among County and City offices, the Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management, first responders, hospitals, community agencies and the private sector has been remarkable. Our business recovery council is planning for a detailed re-opening, sector by sector, with the help of subject matter experts (both Public Health and business) using best practices. Strategies for personal protective equipment are expanding.

It's also important to reflect on where we were a month or so ago at El Paso County Public Health. Under the leadership of Public Health Director Susan Wheelan, we've been able to build a small army of contact tracers with our cadre of epidemiologists, nine specialist investigators from other the Coroner's Office (including the Coroner himself who is acting as Public Health's Deputy Medical Director), and 35 student nurses and six faculty from the Beth-El College of Nursing at University of Colorado Colorado Springs. Currently we are addressing a few hotspots in long-term care facilities and vigorously monitoring others. We instituted the Incident Command System (ICS) very early on and Public Health leads the County's response in close coordination with the Pikes Peak Office of Emergency Management (OEM). We've received additional funding set aside specifically for emergency response. Our new Office of Data and Analytics has responded with rapid and accurate data and analysis of the situation, which is updated daily and can be found by visiting the [data dashboard](#) on El Paso County Public Health's website.

No one can forget or minimize the losses we've suffered in terms of lives lost, illness endured, businesses suffering, employees furloughed, or jobs lost entirely. There are the additional social costs of school closures, delayed graduations delayed or missed entirely, and a myriad of other activities associated with a vibrant (and normal) lifestyle. We should note, however, that our resilient community has adapted to these facts in many creative ways by "sharing and caring" for each other.

In some ways this next period may be even harder as we rejoin other community members, some of whom may not model best practices when it comes to wearing face coverings, practicing social distancing and other preventive measures. It is still everyone's personal responsibility to continue to do their part. The tendency will be to throw off the restraint we've all demonstrated so well and resume normal activities. The results of that may unfortunately be a return to more social distancing requirements to avoid overburdening our health care system, imperiling ourselves and our most vulnerable citizens. I know that some may say that it is too soon to begin to re-open our County, motivated by an abundance of caution and concern that we may have additional COVID deaths in our community and have to return to previous levels of social distancing. Robust mechanisms are in place

with monitoring, reporting, and increasing testing and contact tracing to avoid going backwards and allow us to slowly open back up. I think we are all looking forward to that; I know I am!