

# Restaurants join ‘Let Us Serve’ protests

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Staff members from 66 Diner on Central join the “Let Us Serve” protest Monday asking Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to reverse a newly reinstated ban on in-person dining at New Mexico restaurants and breweries. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

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New Mexico restaurant workers and owners took to their parking lots and social media pages Monday in a “virtual protest” against a new public health order that once again bars indoor dining at restaurants and breweries.

The New Mexico Restaurant Association, which organized the protest, asked restaurants to gather staff to stand outside their establishments with signs asking Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham to reverse course and allow indoor dining in restaurants. The organization has indicated it will request a court order Tuesday morning allowing restaurants to continue offering dine-in services.

The ban on indoor dining took effect Monday. The governor announced the measure Thursday in response to a rising number of COVID-19 cases in the state. Patio dining is still allowed in limited numbers.

Photos on the association's social media sites show participants from a wide range of restaurants participating in the event across the state, including in Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Gallup and Clovis.

Several restaurant owners said that they felt the new restrictions were unwarranted.

"I feel like this order singles out small local businesses and allows chains to continue to exist," Broken Trail Distillery and Brewery owner Matt Simonds said. "This isn't some faceless company. This is me and my family, the family of my bartenders, the family of my brewers."

Simonds said the uncertainty surrounding closures has added to the stress he and his employees face.

"They're upset that there's no clue from one day to the next," he said.

Aside from the uncertainty of the closures, Simonds said he and other restaurant owners feel that the governor has not provided sufficient data to justify the ban on indoor dining.

Carol Wight, CEO of the restaurant association, echoed this sentiment and said there is no evidence that restaurants are causing the spread of coronavirus.

The Governor's Office said the newly reinstated ban on indoor dining at restaurants is about safety, not punishment.

"We're not placing 'blame' on all restaurants," office spokeswoman Nora Meyers Sackett wrote in an email. "The blame falls on the virus itself and any New Mexicans who are not taking every precaution to limit the spread of it, because as the virus continues to spread, prolonged exposure without face-coverings – like in high-contact indoor settings, i.e. restaurants – becomes an even more significant risk factor."

The Governor's Office didn't cite any specific studies in response to questions raised by restaurateurs. On Thursday, the World Health Organization said there have been reports of outbreaks linked to indoor crowded spaces from airborne transmission in restaurants and gyms.

“This virus does not discriminate,” Lujan Grisham said in a Monday statement. “But we know prolonged exposure without face-coverings – as is the case in high-contact indoor settings – is a significant risk factor.”

### **‘Hundreds’ of eateries**

On Monday, the NMRA posted dozens of photos of restaurants participating in the protest.

NMRA spokeswoman Toni Balzano said she’s heard of “hundreds” of restaurants participating across the state.

“They just want to have their voices heard,” she said. “They’re busy running their businesses and trying to take care of their employees.”

Staffers at Albuquerque’s 66 Diner on Central were among the protesters. Owner Tom Willis said the latest change to the public health order is “disappointing at best.”

Willis said that it was difficult to weather the initial closure and that moving to takeout brought in only a fraction of usual business.

The 66 Diner will be abiding by the latest order, and Willis said he has hopes that takeout will be more lucrative this time around.

In Uptown, Fork and Fig owner Josh Kennon was supporting the protest despite being closed Monday.

“I believe that the whole closing down the restaurants to in-person dining is basically targeting restaurants, and I feel that that’s unfair,” he said.

Kennon said that the restaurant lost nearly all its business during the first closure and that takeout does little to recoup the sales that come from in-person dining.

“It was awful – we were down 97% in sales,” he said.

Several restaurants in the state took the protest a step further and openly flouted the public health order by welcoming customers into dining rooms Monday.

Michael Dennis, licensed owner of the Santa Fe and Farmington locations of Weck’s, was one of the business owners who welcomed diners Monday morning.

The Facebook page associated with the Albuquerque Weck’s posted what appeared to be a message from Dennis encouraging other restaurant owners to “band together and stay open” Monday but the Albuquerque location sought to

distance itself from the move, noting that Dennis' decisions are "independent from all other Weck's locations."

"ALL Weck's ABQ, Rio Rancho, Los Lunas and Las Cruces locations are NOT affiliated with the decisions he is making for his restaurants," the post said.

Dennis did not return calls for an interview Monday.

The Trinity Hotel in Carlsbad said it would remain open and encouraged customers to come in as a "protest."

"Participants in the protest will be buying food and sitting in the restaurant as act of protest against a health order, and to exercise their right to free speech," the restaurant said in a Facebook post Sunday.

In Hobbs, the Pizza Inn also chose to open to dine-in customers, and said customers would be "protesting" the current health order.

Balzano said she had heard of around a dozen restaurants in the southern half of the state that planned to stay open Monday.