

Gov. extends emergency order to May 1

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Six mobile morgues were parked near the Office of the Medical Investigator in Albuquerque on Monday. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

SANTA FE – New Mexico’s spring of social distancing might stretch into the summer.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham on Monday extended a public health emergency order through the end of this month, with a coronavirus outbreak rippling through nearly all parts of New Mexico and hitting some regions particularly hard.

The extension, which Lujan Grisham had previously telegraphed, means a ban on public gatherings of five people or more will remain in place and all businesses not deemed essential will stay closed at least until May 1 – and perhaps even longer.

“We must carry on undaunted in our fight against COVID-19,” the governor said in a statement. “These measures will help us prevent a sudden spike in infections that would overwhelm our health care system. This virus is still spreading, and we must remain vigilant about physical distancing from one another.”

She also said state agencies will ramp up their enforcement efforts in an attempt to ensure residents and businesses comply with the orders.

Lujan Grisham's initial emergency order was issued March 11, the same day the state's first confirmed cases were announced, and had been scheduled to expire Friday. Several other orders issued by Health Secretary Kathy Kunkel were also tied to that date and were also extended Monday.

Meanwhile, the governor's amended order issued Monday also levies several new requirements and mandates additional closures.

Specifically, it stipulates that retailers allowed to remain open as essential businesses – including grocery stores – limit the number of customers inside their stores to no more than 20% of maximum occupancy. The governor said last week some big-box stores were not heeding state officials' call to follow social distancing measures.

In addition, hotels and other lodging places are, as of Tuesday, ordered to operate at no more than 25% of capacity – down from the previous 50% threshold.

And payday lenders, automobile dealers and liquor stores, which had all been allowed to stay open, will have to cease in-person business today under the governor's amended order.

The governor acknowledged the measures represented an “enormous sacrifice” for New Mexicans, but she called them a necessary part of a “social contract” to slow the spread of coronavirus.

“These orders are not friendly suggestions; heed them and protect yourselves, your families and your communities,” Lujan Grisham said. “If these directives are not heeded, further restrictions will be enacted. The difference between a worst-case scenario and a best-case scenario for our state depends on your actions and the actions of those around you.”

‘Dangerous’ increase

The coronavirus has spread rapidly in New Mexico – and much of the rest of the country – during the past month.

Top state health officials announced 62 additional confirmed cases on Monday, bringing the statewide total to 686 cases. Of the new cases, 25 were in northwestern New Mexico's San Juan County, where state officials have been warning of a spike in positive test results.

And three of the new positive test results – one resident and two staffers – came from La Vida Llena, a retirement community in Albuquerque’s Northeast Heights where two elderly residents died of COVID-19 last week after a rapid flare-up of infections.

In all, 12 people have died in New Mexico of COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, with most of them being elderly individuals with underlying health issues.

However, no new deaths were reported Monday, and the Department of Health said 133 individuals are now designated as having recovered.

Forty-eight people are hospitalized, though state officials did not provide a county-by-county breakdown of hospitalizations.

“Despite proactive measures taken by the state and our citizens, these numbers are increasing at a dangerous rate and COVID-19 is expected to continue its spread in New Mexico,” Lujan Grisham wrote in her Monday extension order.

Despite the ominous forecasts, the governor and other state officials have said social distancing strategies – including the ban on large public gatherings and the closure of businesses – appear to be helping slow the spread.

The state has also ramped up its testing capacity and last week expanded testing to certain individuals with no symptoms, including all nursing home residents.

Up to 4,700 deaths

Most people who test positive for coronavirus have only mild to moderate symptoms – including fever, cough, fatigue and shortness of breath – and do not require hospitalization.

Some develop more severe symptoms, and Lujan Grisham has said the state’s death tally will increase in the coming days and weeks.

Human Services Secretary Dr. David Scrase said last week that COVID-19 will kill between 2,100 and 4,700 New Mexicans over the next 12 months, depending on how well people heed state instructions to stay home and engage in social distancing.

On Monday, six mobile morgues were parked next to the Office of the Medical Investigator in Albuquerque, serving as a morbid reminder of the potential toll of the virus.

Similar refrigerated trailers have been used outside hospitals in other places around the country, including New York.

Two such trailers were parked south of OMI, which is a program within the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, and four more were in an adjacent parking lot.

“UNM Health Sciences is operating under its pandemic influenza plan,” Mark Rudi, a UNM Hospital spokesman, said in an email. “As part of this plan, we are making adjustments should we need extra space at (OMI) for decedents.”

BY THE NUMBERS

Number of negative tests: 21,139

Number of positive tests: 686

Number of reported recoveries: 133

Number of deaths: 12

SOURCE: NMDOH