

Editorials

Editorial: NM needs a marathon strategy for this corona world

BY ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL EDITORIAL BOARD

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One size does not fit all.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham missed an important opportunity to recognize that on Wednesday when she announced her statewide shelter-in-place edict would be extended through May 15 – even while acknowledging the state has flattened the curve for coronavirus infections to the point there is little reason to fear our health care system will be overwhelmed with a flood of patients.

Despite that, what the administration has deemed as nonessential medical procedures are still prohibited. And most of the businesses the state has deemed nonessential will remain shuttered – even in places where the outbreak has been minimal. Many are already past the point they will ever reopen. That total grows by the day.

This makes absolutely no sense for places like Otero County, with only two cases of COVID-19; or Eddy County, four cases. Recall that it was Eddy County with an early confirmed case and concern about a flood of COVID-19 patients. It didn't happen.

As Senate Republicans pointed out in a letter to the governor dated April 22 (published in the Friday Journal), nine of New Mexico's 33 counties have seen fewer than three cases. Six haven't had any. The Department of Health provides that information on its dashboard.

A ZIP code examination of cases and deaths in Albuquerque, Rio Rancho and Santa Fe also presents evidence for careful reopening with social distancing, masks and other precautions in place – especially when you factor out hotspots like the La Vida Llena retirement home, where 16 have died. It doesn't mean the virus isn't here, but it puts the outbreak and risk in perspective.

Indeed, the outbreak among Native American populations in San Juan and McKinley counties is serious and tragic. It would not be smart to roll back restrictions there.

But Colorado Gov. Jared Polis – like Lujan Grisham a liberal Democrat – made an important point last week when he announced his state would move from a policy of “shelter at home” to “safer at home,” allowing many businesses to reopen with precautions: “In a big diverse state,” he said, “there should not be one statewide approach.”

Polis laid out a plan to reopen retail starting Monday with precautions and allow companies to bring more people into the work environment while focusing on social distancing, mask wearing, protecting the vulnerable population and targeting hotspots like nursing homes where the National Guard has been participating in amped-up testing. There will be testing and contact tracing. But it will vary locally, with local hotspots getting special attention.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, also a Democrat, plans to start reopening his state on a regional basis based on numbers of cases. With cases below a certain level, shelter at home will be lifted and in-person retail allowed.

If there are flareups, they will pull back.

Polis gets something else that seems to be lost on our governor. He acknowledged Colorado's plan involves calculated risk, personal responsibility and informed decisions. People still need to be "safer at home" when they can "but be able to live life in a sustainable and fulfilling way – psychologically, emotionally and economically for the long haul."

People, he said, still need to be able to earn a living. He's not ready to reopen bars and restaurants yet, but you should be able to get a haircut from someone wearing a mask.

As of Friday, Colorado had more than 11,200 cases and 552 deaths, around 9.6 per deaths per 100,000 people. New Mexico had just over 2,500 cases and 84 deaths, 4.0 deaths per 100,000 people. Sadly, more than 40 percent of New Mexico's cases are Native Americans, though they make up approximately 10 percent of the population.

Polis also announced the Colorado state order prohibiting elective medical procedures – a term he acknowledges isn't really accurate because, as he put it, in most cases these are things people really need – would be lifted. Dental offices would reopen for nonemergency care with even receptionists in masks.

The letter from New Mexico's Senate Republicans asks Lujan Grisham to do that here. She banned the procedures to conserve supplies and hospital beds. Now, our hospitals are far from capacity, their revenue streams have dried up and many people who need procedures can't get them. Even surgical cancer cases are down 20%, the letter said. Pap tests, mammograms, colonoscopies and other important "early detection" procedures aren't being done. In some cases, people suffering from mild strokes or heart attacks aren't going to hospitals because they are afraid to.

While the governor's slogan is "stay home, save lives," her health procedures ban ultimately could lead to emergency conditions and deaths, not to mention the disturbing rise in domestic violence arrests. Somehow, that doesn't seem to figure into her calculus. Meanwhile, Texas (2.1 deaths per 100,000 people) and Arizona (3.8 deaths per 100,000 people) have opened up on medical procedures.

The governor and her team have been working off their own models and projections, but they haven't shared them with the public in enough detail to allow New Mexicans to track their accuracy or compare them to other models. Most importantly, actual cases show a flattening of the curve.

New Mexicans generally have responded to the shelter-in-place and social distancing orders. But it's time to move forward knowing there is no guarantee there will ever be a vaccine and that at some point half the population could get this virus (and almost certainly many thousands already have and didn't even know it. Colorado estimates that number between 65,000 and 75,000.).

Our policies have been designed to keep everyone from getting it at the same time so hospital care will be available for those who do contract it. Hopefully, we've finished the sprint phase of

this deadly race. Now, it's time to settle into the marathon and figure how to manage the virus rather than have it manage us.

Or, as Polis put it, come up with a “sustainable way of life for the future.”

New Mexico needs the governor to allow its residents to do just that.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.