

Retailers, churches to reopen at partial capacity

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Published: Wednesday, May 13th, 2020 at 3:38pm

Updated: Wednesday, May 13th, 2020 at 9:00pm



New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham speaks on Wednesday about the status of the state's coronavirus response. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

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SANTA FE – New Mexico will relax some restrictions on businesses and churches – starting Saturday – as testing capacity continues to expand and coronavirus infection rates fall.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, during a news conference Wednesday, said retailers throughout most of the state will be allowed to reopen at 25% of their maximum capacity and that houses of worship can operate at 10%. Big-box stores will remain at the 20% level.

New Mexicans, meanwhile, will be required to wear face masks in public settings – a mandate the governor said was necessary to help limit the spread of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus.

It's too soon, she said, to allow dine-in restaurants, gyms, salons and movie theaters to reopen, even though some of them had previously been included in the first phase of her reopening plan. Restaurants might partly reopen, she said, in early June.

"We're going to demand in New Mexico that science guide every decision we make," Lujan Grisham said during the briefing from the state Capitol, streamed live and watched by more than 24,000 people. "We don't want to go backwards and shut everything down."

Human Services Secretary David Scrase said research shows that mask-wearing is incredibly effective at reducing the spread of the disease, which has so far killed 231 people in the state.

"All of us wearing masks could save thousands of lives," he said. It's critical "to learn to live in a COVID world."

Lujan Grisham said everyone, including children, should wear masks when leaving the house, except in a few circumstances, such as for exercise, eating or drinking.

She demonstrated during the news conference how to make a face covering out of a bandanna. It doesn't have to be pretty, she said, just good enough to cover your nose and mouth.

"If I can't get folks to do this," Lujan Grisham said, "we can't stay open."

Starting Saturday, individuals who refuse to wear a mask in public may face stern words from a police officer, she said, but the state doesn't intend to take a punitive approach to enforcing the mandate.

She said she hoped "positive peer pressure" would encourage people to wear face coverings but urged New Mexicans to refrain from "negative attacks" or anger at police officers. If you're mad, she said, express your anger to her – not public employees.

"I can take it," Lujan Grisham said.

Governors of several other states – including New York, Massachusetts and New Jersey – have implemented similar face covering requirements, though enforcing the mandates has proved to be challenging and has sparked confrontations in some locations.

Lujan Grisham on Wednesday also announced changes for nonessential workplaces, such as offices and call centers. They will be allowed to operate at

25% of their pre-crisis staffing levels, though employees who can work from home should continue to do so.

Testing expanding

In the two months since New Mexico's first confirmed coronavirus cases, the state's death toll has reached 231.

That includes 12 additional deaths that Lujan Grisham announced Wednesday – tied for the most in one day.

New Mexico's testing capacity for COVID-19 has ranked among the nation's highest, on a per capita basis, and the state Department of Health announced this week that all state residents can now get free tests to determine whether they have the disease, regardless of whether they have symptoms.

But top state officials say they're still concerned about possible virus outbreaks stemming from New Mexico's borders – with other states and with Mexico – and said testing sites are being set up in strategic locations.

"If you can't come to us, we'll go to you," Health Secretary Kathy Kunkel said Wednesday.

In all, New Mexico has now conducted more than 115,000 tests and has 5,364 confirmed cases, including 155 new cases that were announced Wednesday.

That means about 4.7% of all tests yield a positive result.

Testing has also been expanded in the last week in New Mexico's prison system, with the goal of testing all corrections officers and at least one-quarter of inmates.

But such testing will have to be done on a recurring basis, likely weekly, to ensure the virus is kept at bay, Lujan Grisham said.

'Tightrope walk'

With New Mexico's unemployment ranks swelling to more than 117,000 people, some business owners, local leaders and Republican lawmakers have pushed Lujan Grisham to reopen more of the state's economy.

State GOP Chairman Steve Pearce said Wednesday that the governor's latest plans infringe on New Mexicans' civil rights and unfairly target certain business owners.

“Our position has been to safely and responsibly get New Mexico back to work,” Pearce said in a statement. “The Democratic administration has not only destroyed our economy, but peoples’ lives and livelihoods.

“By her continuing to favor national chains over our small business, the governor has inflicted economic and personal hardship on hundreds of thousands of her constituents.”

In contrast, Marg Elliston, chairwoman of the state Democratic Party, said the governor is taking a balanced, science-based approach to navigating the pandemic.

“Thanks to her steady and prudent leadership,” Elliston said, “New Mexico has successfully begun to flatten our curve, and we’re able to safely reopen the small businesses that are the backbone of our economy.”

The governor’s current emergency health order, which expires Friday, urges New Mexicans to limit their trips outside the house to essential outings only.

While the order is expected to be revised, a ban on large public gatherings will be extended, and Lujan Grisham said she still wants people to stay home if they can, especially if they feel sick or are particularly vulnerable to the disease.

The new rules “are not invitations to unnecessarily leave your home,” Lujan Grisham said.

People who go out, she said, should always maintain 6 feet of distance from other individuals – or even more.

The new guidelines will cover most of New Mexico. Three northwestern counties – San Juan, McKinley and Cibola – that have been hit hard by the coronavirus will lag behind.

They can now allow curbside pickup for retailers and open golf courses for limited operation, catching up to the rest of the state on those functions. But they cannot allow stores to operate at 25% capacity or participate in the looser rules announced Wednesday.

Future revisions to the state’s public health orders, Lujan Grisham and Cabinet secretaries said, will depend on whether the state hits certain targets for limiting the spread of COVID-19, testing capacity, the supply of medical resources and other factors.

“I think we can do this, but it is a tightrope walk,” Scrase said.

Transmission rate key

One key goal is getting the state's coronavirus transmission rate down to 1.15, meaning each infected individual transmits the virus to 1.15 other people.

The state's overall transmission rate now stands at 1.16, according to the state's statistical modeling.

Three of New Mexico's five regions have reduced the spread rate below the 1.15 standard. But the northwestern and southwestern regions of New Mexico are above the target.

In response to a question, the governor said schools might reopen earlier than usual in August to help students catch up, after the closures this semester and restrictions on summer programming.

But she said that there's much to consider and that the state hasn't made a decision.

"I think these are going to be high-risk areas until we get a vaccine," Lujan Grisham said Wednesday.

Scrase said New Mexico is experiencing an increase in the percentage of children with coronavirus infections. He urged parents to pay attention, in particular, to any abdominal illnesses in their kids.