

New Mexico restaurant group: 'We don't feel listened to'

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Though another legal showdown with the Governor's Office looms later this month, the New Mexico Restaurant Association is pleading its case to the public in the interim.

A day after a flurry of action placed Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's indoor-dining ban before the state Supreme Court, restaurant association CEO Carol Wight again made her arguments on behalf of the industry, asserting indoor dining in June and early July wasn't a significant source of the surge of COVID-19 cases in the state.

"It was never dine-in restaurants that was the problem," Wight said Tuesday. "I really hope to drive home it's not making a difference [to shut down dine-in]. The [statewide overall] spike is still going up. We don't think what the industry is doing has anything to do with the spread of coronavirus."

The fight over indoor dining reached the state Supreme Court on Monday when a District Court judge in Carlsbad issued a restraining order that temporarily stopped the governor from enforcing a renewed ban on dine-in options. Hours later, though, lawyers for Lujan Grisham requested a stay from the Supreme Court, which ordered the parties to file legal arguments in the next several days.

For now, the ban remains in place.

The state has about 3,300 restaurants, with about 200 permanently closing since the pandemic started, Wight said.

Wight insisted New Mexico restaurants are sticklers when it comes to the state's COVID-safe practices and complained the restaurant association is being unfairly

targeted and was left out of the picture in shaping policy that could protect the fragile industry.

A spokesman for the Governor's Office wrote an "open line of communication" exists with the association and discussions have taken place "since the outset of the implementation of pandemic-related restrictions."

"As far as there being an open line to the governor, we are not feeling that," Wight responded. "Yes, I can email the secretary of environment and secretary of tourism, but we don't feel listened to."

The Greater Santa Fe Restaurant Association sent a letter Friday to the governor specifically seeking a seat at the table.

"Would you consider inviting one or two of these long-standing Santa Fe restaurant owners and operators to participate in your team of advisors?" the letter asks. "We feel we can bring a wealth of first-hand experience and care to foster both the physical and economic health of Santa Fe and by extension, New Mexico."

In an email, Tripp Stelnicki, a spokesman for the governor, acknowledged receipt of the local restaurant group's letter, but he said the Governor's Office is "a bit reluctant to change the makeup of the Economic Recovery Council at this stage."

He added senior staff members "are planning to reach out to some of these folks individually to respond to their concerns and hear them out. We want to hear everyone out and do as much as we can on that front with as many hours in the day as we have."

Meanwhile, University of New Mexico assistant professor of sociology Eli R. Wilson says the impact of the pandemic on restaurant workers across the country has been catastrophic.

“Among restaurant employees, undocumented workers find themselves in particularly dire straits,” Wilson wrote in a piece titled “Pandemic Inequalities: Assessing the Fallout in the Restaurant Industry” for LA Social Science, an e-forum published by the University of California, Los Angeles. “Without proper work authorization, these individuals cannot seek federal assistance, including funds from the federal aid package, despite being laid off and having paid into the taxes that are funding that aid.”

Just as vulnerable for different reasons, Wilson wrote, are restaurant workers in the dining room who rely on tips for the bulk of their earnings.

The pandemic has rendered jobless 28 percent of the 74,000 food preparation and serving-related occupations that were in place in the fourth quarter of 2019. The New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions reports 20,841 of these employees as claimants of unemployment benefits as of July 13. Restaurant workers made up about 8.8 percent of the total workforce in the fourth quarter, according to department statistics.

Wight said the association is fighting for the life of the state’s restaurants and will continue to press its case. When asked how she expects to build a collaboration with Lujan Grisham, Wight turned philosophical.

“We have nothing to lose with confronting her,” Wight said. “Honestly, restaurants are desperate right now.”