

City plans ‘enforcement blitz’ as COVID-19 cases surge

BY JESSICA DYER AND ELISE KAPLAN / JOURNAL STAFF WRITERS

Published: Wednesday, October 21st, 2020 at 4:17pm

Updated: Wednesday, October 21st, 2020 at 9:45pm



Presbyterian medical staffers work with patients at a COVID-19 testing site on San Mateo NE in Albuquerque on Monday. New Mexico has seen a spike in cases in the past few weeks. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

Copyright © 2020 Albuquerque Journal

Albuquerque’s mayor wants residents to forget about that Sunday softball game and postpone their weekend parties, saying the city is ready to crack down.

With Bernalillo County’s COVID-19 case counts doubling last week as part of a statewide virus surge, Mayor Tim Keller said the city is planning a “targeted enforcement blitz” to ensure residents are following state public health orders instituted to limit spread. Those include rules that require wearing a mask in public, ban gatherings of more than five people, and restrict capacity in restaurants and other businesses.

“We are going to be drastically ramping up enforcement ... under the existing public health order,” Keller said during a media briefing at City Hall. “There’s nothing new here; we have just got to make sure we do a better job of actually following that public health order.”

Keller revealed the plan early Wednesday afternoon, just hours before New Mexico officials announced 827 new COVID-19 infections statewide – the largest single-day total of the pandemic. The seven-day average of 633 is also a record high.

Bernalillo County, which includes Albuquerque, reported 292 new cases, one of its highest daily counts yet.

The county's numbers have been soaring; last week's infections totaled 1,185, compared with 589 the week before, according to Ryan Mast, director of the city's Environmental Health Department. He said numbers are rising elsewhere around the country, too, something he blamed in part on public complacency with regard to mitigation measures.

But he said the timing is problematic, and encouraged people to stay home as much as possible and make essential trips outside alone, not in pairs or family groups.

This is “not where we want to be and definitely going in the wrong direction as we enter into the colder months,” Mast said. “(That's) where there's going to be more indoor activity, as well as the holiday season, when there's the risk of more larger gatherings occurring.”

The city's enforcement blitz will likely occur this weekend, Keller said. While he did not outline the strategy in detail, he said the city would use ZIP code case data to “inform” its proactive effort, noting that some areas of the city are hotter spots than others.

Albuquerque has used its fire department, code enforcement personnel and Environmental Health staff to aid in enforcement, which Keller said has focused on compliance and education rather than citations. The Albuquerque Police Department has issued only four citations to date regarding public health order violations, but various city personnel have given 227 “notices of violation,” the equivalent of a warning.

The mayor defended the city's approach, saying it has included 4,500 interactions related to health order compliance.

“Basically, we have been enforcing this more than literally any other city in the state,” he said.

The forthcoming blitz will focus on higher-traffic spaces and large gatherings, Keller said, citing big-box stores and chain restaurants, sports bars, parties at the parks and even outdoor sporting activities.

“When we’re having these competitive softball games and things like this, absolutely we are not going to tolerate that anymore,” he said.

The city is also considering a way to use the city’s “red” or “green” restaurant inspection system to rate businesses on COVID-19 regulation adherence and looking to limit access to city buildings to in-state residents only.

The state already has a list of 44 “high-risk states” from which travelers to New Mexico are required to quarantine for 14 days. The list, newly amended by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham’s office, moved California and Washington, D.C., to “low-risk” and Washington to “high-risk.”

The high-risk states are those with a 5% positivity rate or more over a 7-day rolling average, or a positive test rate greater than 80 per 1 million residents.

Bernalillo County’s latest surge has included outbreaks at the county jail and the city’s homeless shelter.

The Metropolitan Detention Center announced 48 new virus cases among inmates and two among staff, which puts the facility at 354 active cases among inmates and 49 infected staff members out of work.

On Wednesday, a detention oversight board meeting was canceled as a result of the ongoing outbreak.

“Right now, it’s more important for MDC to use all its resources to continue caring for inmates and staff impacted by the coronavirus pandemic,” said Rick Miera, chairman of Detention Facility Management Oversight.

Since Oct. 1, the jail has been besieged by COVID-19 – recording 67% of the jail’s year-to-date total of 526 cases over a few weeks.

But Bernalillo County isn’t the only county reporting high numbers.

Doña Ana County reported 172 new cases. That’s a daily record, according to the Las Cruces Sun-News. Thirteen counties reported double-digit numbers, with 64 new cases in Santa Fe County, 42 new cases in Eddy County, 36 new cases in Lea County and 28 new cases in Curry County.

The Governor’s Office also reported eight additional deaths from COVID. Those who died were a Bernalillo County man in his 80s who was hospitalized and had underlying conditions; a Chaves County woman in her 90s who had underlying conditions and was a resident of an assisted-living facility in Roswell; a Curry County woman in her 70s who was hospitalized and had underlying conditions; a Doña Ana County man in his 80s who had underlying conditions and was a

resident of a Las Cruces senior living facility; a Grant County man in his 40s who was hospitalized and had underlying conditions; a Luna County man in his 60s who was hospitalized and had underlying conditions; a Sandoval County man in his 70s who was hospitalized and had underlying conditions; and a Santa Fe County woman in her 80s who was hospitalized and was a resident of an assisted-living facility.

There have now been a total of 950 deaths and 38,715 cases reported statewide.

As of Wednesday, 202 people are hospitalized in New Mexico for COVID-19. The Governor's Office said 80% of adult general beds and 71% of adult intensive care unit beds are occupied in hospitals throughout the state. This includes those who are hospitalized for COVID-19 and other illnesses.