

NM to tighten restrictions amid surge in virus cases

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In this file photo from August, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham gives an update on state efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

SANTA FE — Facing an explosion in new virus cases, New Mexico will impose a 10 p.m. closing time on establishments that serve alcohol, prohibit gatherings of more than five people and tighten other restrictions, starting Friday.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham announced the changes Tuesday in a written statement.

“The crisis is not over,” she said.

The changes come as the state slips out of compliance with a variety of standards set by the Lujan Grisham administration to address the coronavirus pandemic.

The share of tests that come back positive has climbed to 5.3% — more than doubling since late September — and the state is now averaging more than twice as many new cases a day as its goal.

Hospitalizations are also climbing, though deaths haven't seen a corresponding increase. The statewide death toll stands at 915 residents, with about three new deaths a day over the last week.

Among the changes set to start Friday:

— Any food or drink establishment serving alcohol must close at 10 p.m. It's the first statewide curfew-like restriction so far in New Mexico.

The change is aimed at restaurants that essentially turn into bars at night, "where spread of the virus is not inhibited," Allan Affeldt, hotel and restaurant owner and member of the Economic Recovery Council, said in a statement distributed by the Governor's Office.

— Occupancy for hotels will be reduced to a maximum of 60%, down from 75% in the current rules. Hotels that don't complete a safety-training program face even more strict limits.

— Individuals arriving in New Mexico from high-risk states will be required to quarantine for 14 days, even if they have a negative test, eliminating a previous exemption in the order. High-risk states are determined by how many new cases they have on a per-person basis and other factors.

— Gatherings of more than five people will be prohibited, a change from the current 10-person limit. The restriction applies to public or private gatherings, including organized events and sports.

"We have got to turn it around and fast," Lujan Grisham said in a written statement. "So I once again urge, with my whole heart, that New Mexicans in every corner of the state, city leaders, county leaders, business leaders, community leaders all take up the mantle of fighting this invisible enemy, of requiring and encouraging safe behavior, of asking more of ourselves to protect New Mexico."

Virus cases have surged over the last month.

The average, by the state's calculation, now stands at 333 cases a day over the most recent seven-day period, far above the 168-case target.

The number of cases reported to the public each day is higher on average now than it has been at any point in the pandemic.

The share of tests that are positive is also climbing — to an average of 5.3% in a recent seven-day period, or more than twice the 2.6% average on Sept. 25.