

# State imposes crisis standard; governor touts lockdown impact

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SANTA FE – Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said Thursday a two-week lockdown had helped douse a recent explosion of COVID-19 cases in New Mexico, even as a top state health official issued emergency orders activating crisis standards of care in the state’s nearly full hospitals.

With New Mexico set to get its first limited batch of a coronavirus vaccine by as soon as next week, the governor said a return to a more normal life is on the horizon – though she cautioned that face masks could be necessary for another year.

She also said the state faces urgent challenges in the present, with 916 coronavirus patients hospitalized in New Mexico on Thursday and 159 of them on ventilators.

“We are still in an extreme risk situation,” Lujan Grisham said during a news conference broadcast online.

The governor said health officials had recorded 23 more coronavirus deaths, pushing the statewide death toll to 1,846 residents since the pandemic began in mid-March.

But Human Services Secretary David Scrase suggested the COVID-19 death rate could decline in coming days, since New Mexico’s virus spread rate has recently dropped.

Specifically, the spread rate – it measures how many other people will be infected by each infected resident – had declined from 1.3 about a month ago to 0.77, the lowest rate of transmission of the pandemic so far.

In addition, the share of COVID-19 tests that come back positive fell to about 13% in a recent two-week period, down from 24% on Nov. 24.

Both the governor and Scrase said the trends validated a decision to impose a two-week shutdown order that required gyms, barber shops and some retail shops to close and restaurants to halt in-person dining. The lockdown order ended last week, though some restrictions remain in place.

“That was exactly what we were aiming for when we did the two-week reset,” Scrase said.

Since the lockdown expired, the Lujan Grisham administration has imposed a new red-to-green system that ties business restrictions to county-level virus spread benchmarks.

Lujan Grisham said several more counties may hit the statistical targets necessary next week to slightly relax their public health restrictions and allow indoor restaurant dining at partial capacity.

But she said the disease is still widely prevalent throughout the state and that New Mexicans should try to stay home as much as possible, avoid gatherings and get tested if they have any concern about possible virus exposure.

“The best Christmas gift we can give New Mexico’s economy” is for more residents to be tested, the governor said.

And Scrase said the state’s case data shows one area of potential concern: New cases had been falling after the two-week order but may be ticking back up again.

“We are watching that very closely,” he said.

## **Emergency orders**

Since early in the pandemic, New Mexico officials and top hospital administrators have expressed concern about the possibility of the state’s health care system being overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the recent spike in cases leading to record-high hospitalizations statewide, the acting secretary of the state’s Department of Health issued two emergency orders Thursday.

One of the orders – set to remain in effect through Jan. 4 – prohibits surgical procedures that aren’t essential and can be safely delayed for three months without “undue risk to the patient’s health,” a move intended to conserve medical resources during the pandemic.

A similar ban on nonessential medical procedures was also in place in the pandemic’s early stages, but was later relaxed.

The second order recognizes the establishment of crisis care standards in hospitals – a step that could involve the rationing of health care if the demand for ventilators or other care exceeds the supply. The crisis standards also mean doctors and nurses may be called on to perform duties outside their normal area of expertise, such as a pediatrician who’s asked to treat adults.

“New Mexico’s health care system, and everyone working within it, will continue to work toward the best possible outcome for our state,” acting DOH Secretary Billy Jimenez said in a statement. “It’s so important for all of us to step up for those dedicated health care workers, to recognize the sacrifices they are making to protect our neighbors, to understand our own actions can and will make a difference.”

The crisis care order is also designed to offer some legal protection for physicians caring for COVID-19 patients outside the doctors’ normal scope of practice. It’s in effect through Jan. 5.

## **Staying in NM**

The Thursday news conference was the first held by Lujan Grisham since news broke that she would not be joining the Cabinet of President-elect Joe Biden as secretary of the U.S. Health and Human Services Department.

The governor, who is a co-chair of Biden’s transition team, declined to address reports she had turned down an offer to be Interior secretary, but she said staying in New Mexico was ultimately the right move.

“I’m staying,” Lujan Grisham said, adding she intends to run for reelection as governor in 2022. “I wanted to stay from the very beginning.”

While many top state Democrats have praised the governor’s handling of the pandemic, Republicans have argued her administration’s policies have hurt small businesses and taken authority away from local leaders.

Some GOP lawmakers have suggested New Mexico’s aggressive response – the state’s travel and business restrictions are among the nation’s strictest – could have eventual political repercussions.

“The reality is, Democrats own businesses too,” Sen. Cliff Pirtle, R-Roswell, said in a recent interview.

### **Vaccine plan**

Meanwhile, the Department of Health also sent letters Thursday to 37 different New Mexico hospitals that are to receive an initial allotment of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer. The letters asked hospitals to affirm their readiness to deal with vaccine distribution and storage challenges.

New Mexico health officials have said they expect to get 17,550 vaccine doses in the initial batch that could be shipped by as early as Tuesday, although the timing will depend on when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration gives its approval.

Per a state COVID-19 vaccine distribution plan, the initial doses will be targeted at front-line health care workers statewide.

Shipments of a different vaccine, developed by Massachusetts-based Moderna, would be directed to patients and staff at nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, Lujan Grisham announced Thursday.

Eventually, all New Mexicans who want to receive a COVID-19 vaccine would be able to get one, although that might not happen until the vaccine is more widely available.