

County prepares for spread of new disease

By Jenna Hunt and Jené Estrada Hi-Desert Star - Mar 10, 2020 Updated Mar 13, 2020



Misook Choe, a Laboratory Manager with the Emerging Infectious Disease branch at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, conducts studies in order to find a solution for the Coronavirus, March 3, 2020. The Emerging Infectious Diseases branch, established in 2018, has the explicit mission to survey, anticipate and counter the mounting threat of emerging infectious diseases of key importance to U.S. forces in the homeland and abroad.
Courtesy photo

JOSHUA TREE — Though no cases of the new coronavirus have been reported in San Bernardino County, the county declared a public health emergency Tuesday morning in preparation for COVID-19 spreading into the county's borders.

"You can't go anywhere without talking to your neighbor and hearing about the coronavirus and how it's affecting people across the country," 4th District Supervisor Curt Hagman said at a county board of supervisors meeting Tuesday, March 10. "The county is prepared and is doing a lot of different actions behind the scenes. If and whenever it reaches our borders, we're prepared."

New guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that older people and those with severe chronic medical conditions stay at home as much as possible.

The county's public health, emergency services and fire departments are making plans for how to respond if COVID-19 starts spreading throughout San Bernardino County.

County Director of Public Health Trudy Raymundo led a presentation at the supervisors' meeting Tuesday, updating the supervisors and the public on the county's preparedness and the COVID-19 spread.

Raymundo said the fatality rate for COVID-19 is 2.3 percent overall and 14.8 percent in patients over 80. Those numbers come from the largest study of the novel coronavirus to date, looking at 72,000 cases in China.

"We feel that rate is absolutely over-exaggerated," Raymundo said. "In South Korea, the country that has done the most testing per capita, the mortality rate is only running at about 0.6 percent. As the denominator increases, that number will continue to go down."

She stressed that it is highly unlikely, at this time, that the general public will be exposed to the virus. Those who are at high risk include health care workers and others who have been in contact with a COVID-19 patient and those who have traveled to countries where the virus is spreading: China, Iran, Italy, Japan and South Korea.

Many of the people who traveled to these countries are being monitored, including 52 people who came into San Bernardino County from a reparation flight from Wuhan, China, that landed at the March Air Force Reserve Base.

The county tested three people who could possibly have COVID-19 on Friday, March 6, at a public health lab. All three tests came back negative.

Based on those tests, the Public Health Department believes they have the capacity to run up to 30 tests a day, but they are still waiting on additional testing kits to come in from the state and federal government.

However, if they do run out of kits, private labs Quest and LabCorp announced Monday that they are able to test patients as well.

911 operators and firefighters get new protocol

The San Bernardino County Fire Department is also training staff on ways to reduce the spread of disease as they respond to medical-aid calls for people experiencing possible COVID-19 symptoms.

San Bernardino County Fire Division Chief Kathleen Oplinger said 911 dispatch operators have a new list of questions to ask callers who have flu-like symptoms.

“Notes are put into the call and transmitted over the air,” she said. “One employee will go into the residence to minimize exposure.”

If that employee could have been exposed in any way to the virus, he or she will be quarantined until the original patient can be tested.

“We don’t want employees to bring anything back home to their families or on a call to someone who may be of a higher risk,” Oplinger said.

Although the county declared a public health emergency and Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency to help California prepare for the broader spread of COVID-19, the health risk to the general public in San Bernardino County remains low at this time.

Morongo Basin Healthcare District Director Joseph Sullivan said it is essential to have the facts and not let people be overwhelmed with misinformation or fears.

“This is one of those things that scare people to the core,” Sullivan said.