San Bernardino County declares public health emergency due to coronavirus

By **SANDRA EMERSON** | semerson@scng.com |
PUBLISHED: March 10, 2020 at 12:17 p.m. | UPDATED: March 10, 2020 at 6:18 p.m.

San Bernardino County still has no confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, but county officials have declared a public health emergency to ensure they have what they need to prepare.

On Tuesday, March 10, the board of supervisors ratified a public health emergency declaration from Dr. Erin Gustafson, the county's acting health officer, that was made earlier in the day and the board also declared its own. The board also voted to allow emergency purchases.

The declaration will help the county get state and federal money, buy equipment and supplies and make other decisions more quickly, board Chairman Curt Hagman said.

"Obviously the preparedness level goes up, our expenses go up, personnel time goes way up," Hagman said. "We don't have any problems right now, but we want to be at that level of preparedness so if something does happen, we're ready to go."

The declarations were added to the agenda Tuesday after hearing from county public health, hospital and public safety officials. They were added late because of the new cases reported in Riverside County since the agenda was posted Friday, Gary McBride, county chief executive officer, said.

Sandra Emerson @ReporterSandraE

Raymundo is joined by other health and public safety officials.

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There are still no cases in the county, but 52 people are under active surveillance. They are U.S. citizens who returned from China, said Trudy Raymundo, director of the county's public health department.

"For the general public it is highly unlikely that you're going to be exposed to this virus," Raymundo said. "For the general public, the risk continues to be low."

However, people living in areas with a high rate of community spread, healthcare workers caring for patients, people who have been in close contact with those infected with the virus and travelers from areas where there are many cases, are considered to be at higher risk.

The county started testing for the virus, known as COVID-19, on Friday, March 6, and anticipated being able to run 10 to 15 tests daily, Raymundo said. However, that number could increase to 30. The county is waiting on more tests to arrive, Raymundo said.

The county is developing testing criteria and is focusing on higher-risk populations, she said.

The county-run Arrowhead Regional Medical Center has a three-level response plan. Currently, the hospital is in the first level, which is the preparation phase, Dr. Mark Comunale, patient safety officer, told supervisors.

The first level includes screening patients with respiratory symptoms, retraining staff on hygiene and use of personal protective equipment, assessing the hospital's inventory and identifying isolation rooms. More rooms can be made available as needed, he said.

The hospital will move into level 2 when there is a suspected case and level 3 when there is a confirmed case.

"Things are fluid and we are adjusting," Comunale said. "We've been here before when we had Ebola. This is the second time around for us. Things are functioning much smoother, so I think we're well prepared."

In neighboring Riverside County, the board of supervisors Tuesday OK'd a declaration of a local public health emergency. Four people in that county have tested positive for coronavirus, all in the Coachella Valley. Three had traveled to an area with COVID-19 or had known contact with the disease. In the fourth case, officials do not know how the person became infected.

In January, county health officials prepared a space at Ontario International Airport for a flight of Americans evacuated from Wuhan, China. The plane was instead rerouted to March Air Reserve Base in Riverside County, where the evacuees remained under

a federal quarantine for 14 days. None tested positive for the virus and they were released Feb. 11.

 "We were ready for it. We didn't, luckily, bring it in, but we also have those experiences and those expenses for going through it," Hagman said. "This will allows us to move resources, move decision making capabilities to certain key players in the organization as well as go after state and federal grants so we prepare for our residents."

PERSONAL PRECAUTIONS
Here are some things that residents can do to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom, before eating and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not readily available
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth, especially with unwashed hands
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces with regular cleaning sprays or wipes
- Stay away from work, school or other people if you become sick with respiratory symptoms, like a fever and cough, to avoid spreading illness. If symptoms become severe, call your healthcare provider
- N95 masks are not recommended outside a healthcare setting. Sick individuals can wear surgical masks to reduce the likelihood of spreading germs to others