

## Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters, March 12

## Your actions will protect vulnerable people during a pandemic

By Lisa Hatfield

Public health and emergency managers from El Paso County explained current knowledge of COVID-19 to members of the South Central Region of Voluntary Organizations in Disaster (SCR VOAD) on March 12 at the Red Cross offices in Colorado Springs.

Speakers included Kevin Madsen, Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management (PPR OEM) deputy director; Kara Priscock, program coordinator, South Central Healthcare Coalition; Lisa Powell, Regional Emergency Preparedness program manager at the El Paso County Department of Health and Environment; and Sally Broomfield, Red Cross Senior Disaster program manager.

**Note:** This article is based on what was known March 12, but much of this that follows is out-of-date information now. By March 13, for example, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended postponing events for more than 250 people, and recommendations became more strict as the days went by. See related *Hindsight: It's a Small World* column on page 21.

**Why are we worried?**

- COVID-19 is a brand-new disease to humans (so it is a "novel" strain of coronavirus) and needs to be treated more seriously than the seasonal flu because humans are a "naïve population" with no immunity to COVID-19.
- Researchers are learning more about how this new virus behaves every day, which is why officials might need to give different advice from one day to the next.
- We don't know if there are people out there with no symptoms who are shedding virus, so washing your hands and social distancing are still the best practices to protect vulnerable people.
- It's a constantly moving target, monitoring contact tracing and expected additional cases, continual changes with what the governor is saying, and coordination with the health department and OEM.
- We are actually fighting four epidemics: COVID-19, misinformation, fear, and stigma.
- Social media and mainstream

media can spread very incorrect information to the public without being vetted by scientists first.

- We are taking steps sooner than in other communities and countries as we try to avoid the exponentially increasing cases seen elsewhere around the world. (From El Paso County health officials.)

**Protect other people by taking individual responsibility**

Washing your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds really is the best way to prevent the spread of this and other diseases. "It's easy. It's not sexy. It's not a secret," said Powell.

If you want to have more control over your life than that, call local community support organizations to see if they need extra volunteers. This will help make sure that those who may go into preventive isolation because they are more susceptible to illness can still get the physical and emotional support they need.

- The vulnerable population includes those with chronic health conditions such as heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, those with compromised immune systems, or people over age 60.
- If you are in the vulnerable category, you really should consider if you need to go to group activities – church, conferences, meetings – or not! (Note: as of March 18, the governor recommended no gatherings of more than 10 people. See *Hindsight* column on page 21.)
- Washing your hands is the best prevention and also best for not spreading the disease to susceptible people.
- Save the hand sanitizer only for when you can't get to a sink. Soap and water are more effective, and it's not in short supply.
- Practice 6-foot social distancing.
- Avoid handshakes.
- Sneeze/cough into a tissue and toss it.
- Wipe down surfaces using soap and water.
- Transmission of the virus occurs much more commonly through respiratory droplets than through non-living objects. SARS-CoV-2 may remain viable on surfaces from hours to days.

- Don't touch your face if your hands are not washed.
- Quarantine yourself at home for 14 days if you have symptoms of cough, fever, or difficulty breathing. No work, no shopping, no dinners out, no meetings.
- Hospitals and nursing homes are already taking precautions about visitors.
- Call your primary care doctor with any questions.

**What to do if you might be sick**

- Symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, cough and shortness of breath.
- Symptoms tend to build gradually for eight or nine days. For 80% of those infected, symptoms stay mild.
- For 20% of cases, in the vulnerable population, symptoms become very serious, including bilateral pneumonia.
- The death rate is about 2% of those infected. This is why it is critical to keep the total number of infected people low.
- If you are symptomatic, just stay home –from work, school, parties, stores, everything—don't pick and choose!
- Call your primary care provider for advice if you have reason to believe you are infected. Do not just walk into the doctor's office. They need to take several kinds of precautions before you arrive.
- If you are still in the process of being tested, stay home.
- If you have tested positive, stay home.
- Officials are watching other communities to see what is working best for them. This is why we are taking some actions earlier than they did, to avoid exponential increases in cases.
- Other counties in Colorado are being as proactive as El Paso County.
- Let's make frequent handwashing be our new cultural norm! (This is more effective than the mask-wearing cultural norm in Asia.)

**Practical advice for event planners and volunteer organizations**

- The Department of Public Health will not tell groups to close their doors.
- It is up to each organization to set

its own event cancellation trigger.

- Churches and other community groups should do continuity planning in case the services they provide need to be interrupted.
- See the CDC website for advice for event planners. Start planning now in case it is needed later. [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html)
- Self-quarantined community members really need socialization and support.
- Establish a network within your group to check on vulnerable members, offer to deliver groceries to them, and visit with them.
- Agencies that support the elderly or vulnerable people that normally receive food at home, or may need to start doing so, may need extra help from volunteers soon.
- Look around your own neighborhoods to see who else might need assistance with supplies, information, or company.
- For more about how to organize and connect your own neighborhood, see the Ready and Resilient Neighborhood Planning Guide at <http://epccert.org/>.

Get your information from credible sources:

- As of March 12, El Paso County had one confirmed case of the virus, which came in from out of state, and the patient self-quarantined immediately when he became symptomatic. He called medical professionals, and it is contained (as this is being typed).
- No "community transmission" of the virus has occurred yet within the county, but we are on the verge of it. Prevention measures such as canceling events will help.
- See [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/index.html) and [www.elpasocountyhealth.org](http://www.elpasocountyhealth.org) for daily updates and factual information.
- County emergency planners are in touch with fire districts, school districts, etc. to help them make decisions.

It's not all about you:

- Stay home if you are sick.
- Yes, this may be inconvenient for some people.
- You may not be at risk, but consider how your actions affect other people.
- Don't buy more than you need, because other people really might need supplies for medical reasons. Give stores time to restock their shelves.
- Share your calm, correct information from credible public health sources with friends and neighbors.
- An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of response later. Some people are saying we have overreacted, but our goal is for our numbers to not get as big as they would have otherwise.

Any volunteer group that wants to help out in a disaster is encouraged to join SCR VOAD's email list so that in times of disaster response, they could fill specific needs requested by officials to help the public. SCR VOAD covers Chaffee, El Paso, Lake, Park and Teller Counties in Colorado. If your organization wants to ramp up its capability to help right now or in future human or natural disasters, write to [COSCRVOAD@gmail.com](mailto:COSCRVOAD@gmail.com).

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