

Health officials to region: Don't panic over COVID-19, but prepare
written by Newspark Team | March 12, 2020



Social distancing was not on display when more than 100 people packed into CitySpace on Thursday afternoon for a briefing on COVID-19 prevention and resources.

Kathryn Goodman, public relations officer for the Thomas Jefferson Health District, one of 35 statewide that fall under the Virginia Department of Health, briefed city and county staff, nonprofit leaders, emergency responders, community leaders and health workers from around the region as central Virginia braces for the impact of the pandemic.

"We want everyone in the public to be aware so that we can all take the appropriate precautions, but we don't want people to panic," said Goodman. "We don't want people to stigmatize or cause additional problems when someone is confirmed positive with the case. We're working closely with many individuals and making sure that we're monitoring the situation very quickly."

Gov. Ralph Northam's declaration of a state of emergency hit phones in the middle of the 90-minute event, and it was clear as the day progressed that local government and school leaders were anticipating the possibility of major disruptions.

The main takeaways:

- Don't panic, but prepare
- Keep taking preventative measures like hand washing, coughing into elbows and staying home, if you can
- TJHD has a hotline, (434) 972-6261 and encourages people to use it for questions and concerns

TJHD's coverage area includes about 250,000 residents within the city of Charlottesville, along with Albemarle, Fluvanna, Louisa, Nelson and Greene counties. As of Thursday afternoon, there were 17 reported cases in Virginia; the closest to TJHD was in Spotsylvania. Thursday night, there was a presumptive case in Harrisonburg.

Goodman informed the crowd that TJHD has an informational hotline that operates between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and that TJHD has been in the hiring process that would enable them to extend the hours with potential for weekends, as well. The number is (434) 972-6261.

Goodman and fellow presenter Ryan McKay, a policy analyst for TJHD, also walked the crowd through the process for testing individuals who may show symptoms of the virus.

If someone suspects they could have COVID-19, they should contact their primary care provider to be screened for the influenza virus or other respiratory viruses to rule those out and determine next steps.

McKay cited the past experiences of his department working with local governments and partners during other outbreaks, like the 2009 H1N1 outbreak, as having been good practice for handling this latest pandemic.

"I think it's really important to understand that this is a whole community response. You are here, because of that you understand the implications for the people that you work with and the people that you serve in the community and we're looking to everyone to help with some of the answers," McKay said. "The information that we provide today tomorrow in a month is rapidly going to change from one minute to the next one day or the next we're not going to have all the answers directly but we're going to look to you to be partners with us in making decisions and finding those."

He spoke of the term "flattening the curve," and pointed to a graphic from this Vox article. As many local events and national ones have been canceled or postponed and telework or staying home has been encouraged, the concept is to reduce person-to-person contact, which can limit the virus spread as well as the number of patients within the health care system's capacity.

For Charlottesville and Albemarle, our primary responders are Martha Jefferson Sentara and University of Virginia Health.

"All the actions that were taking all of the things that we're seeing particularly in the last 24 hours ... we've cancelled tournaments and canceled concerts and minimized the number of people who are in enclosed spaces," McKay said. "All of this is in an effort to flatten the curve. We are going to see the numbers. The goal is to make sure that we see them over time and not within such a short time frame that we're overwhelming the entire system."

McKay explained that combating the virus is not just altering personal habits, but workforce policies as well — mentioning telework in particular.

"Determining whether or not that's a possibility all depends on your mission essential function," McKay

said. "What are the things that you can do to alter the way you provide services? How you can reallocate staff to meet changing needs."

Charlottesville Tomorrow will be following up with these groups to learn what measures they have in place as our community responds to the coronavirus threat.

In the meantime, we have created a resource page with continuous updates and information for Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

COVID-19 Hotline: 434-972-6261

Virginia Department of Health website