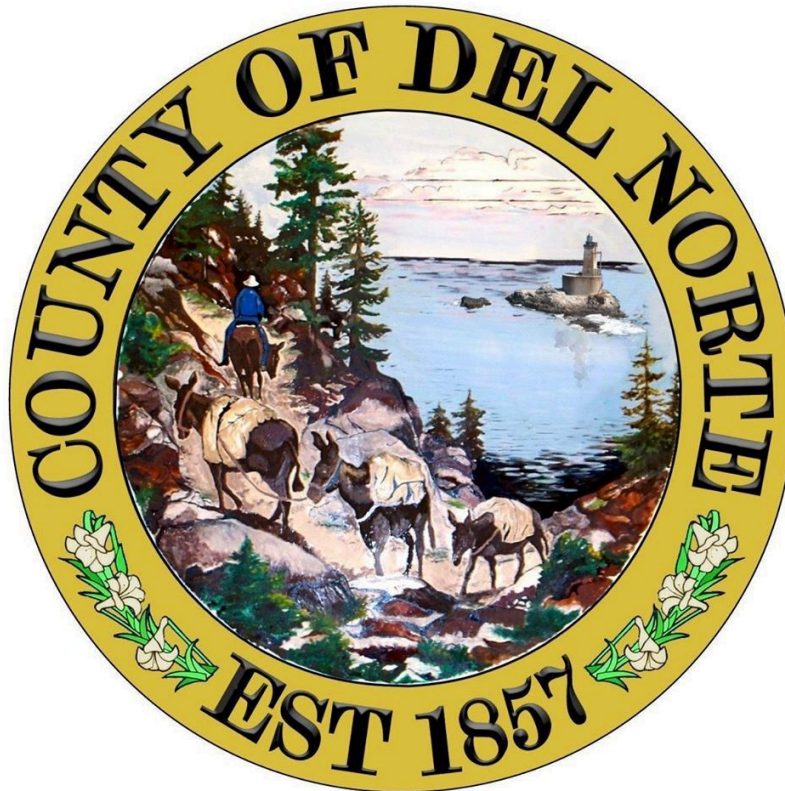


County health officer urges residents to practice social distancing

March 24, 2020



As you know, I and the county administrator jointly declared a local emergency last week, which is in effect and most likely will be ratified by the Board of Supervisors at their meeting this week. The reasons are obvious, and we are in fact, one of the last counties in California to do this in response to the coronavirus pandemic outbreak. We are still waiting to detect our first case, but the strain on our hospital and clinics is already growing, simply by the demand for testing.

Part of the declaration included an order from me for businesses and individuals to follow state of California and federal government guidelines. I worded this as an order under my authority as health officer, to maximize compliance. The state and national strategies of containing a virus of this type depend on universal implementation.

There can be no exceptions, even for counties that do not have proven cases of the virus, such as ours.

It is well understood that we cannot expect to detect the very first case of COVID-19 in our county; the first case that we identify may represent dozens of cases already in progress. We may have the virus here and have simply not had enough tests done to detect it.

All counties in Northern California are operating under this assumption, and all public health departments are implementing similar and sometimes even more stringent restrictions. California was one of the first states to have community spread of this virus, and the progression of cases turning positive in the state has been alarming to medical facilities and health officials at all levels.

Mandatory social distancing, by closing dine-in features of restaurants and closing bars, is one major part of the strategy. It simply has to be done, no matter how hard it may be.

At the same time, we have seen churches close services, public gatherings shut down and social groups that draw people together realign their programs.

At the Health Department, we have gone to conducting meetings by phone or computer, and emergency planning groups that have been active are doing the same. We are doing everything that we can to minimize contacts that can spread the virus, and people need to be doing this now, whether we have the virus in our borders or not.

We have heard reports locally and there are stories shared by other counties similar to ours (small, rural and still not reporting COVID-19) that we have become “destinations” for persons trying to leave their state or county where COVID-19 is active. If we have no restrictions on dining and bars, we become even more attractive as a refuge, and people traveling to avoid the virus in their home would likely bring it here. We do not want that.

I encourage people to be patient and be vigilant, and if they are sick to stay home, to isolate themselves from their family members as much as possible, and wait until they are completely better. Nobody should assume that they will know if what they have is COVID-19 or not. And, nobody should assume that they need a test. Testing is still very limited; we hope that the situation will be changing in the next few weeks, and if it does, we may be changing our message about this, but for now, people with cold or flu symptoms should stay home, and get better.

One more comment about that: We want everyone who has had a cold or flu anytime this month, and going forward, to mark it on their calendar, and make some notes about their symptoms at the time. We are hoping that we can ask people later on in this outbreak to have blood testing done to confirm if they had the coronavirus at some early time in the outbreak.

Useful for us in Public Health to know how many have been infected and recovered, and useful to everyone to know that they had it without knowing it at the time, and don't have to worry so much about the future. We are only beginning to make this plan because the testing for this is not yet available, but when it becomes available, it will help us a lot to know this kind of information.

