

Notes from South Coast Teleconference on the Covid-19 Virus

Held March 27, 2020 on Join.me

Panelists:

- Barbara Brittell**, Physician's Assistant, RCMS
 - Gregg Warner**, Chief, South Coast Fire Protection District
 - Nancy Gastonguay**, Executive Director, Coastal Seniors
- Moderator: **Tom Murphy**, GMAC Member

(The following summary of the call was drafted by Tom Murphy for those unable to attend and for GMAC's records. It is not a verbatim transcript of the call, except where "quote marks" appear. A recording started shortly after the speakers began their presentations. It will be posted as soon as feasible.)

The meeting began with a broad overview of the Covid-19 crisis, including symptoms of the virus, vulnerability, the effort to slow the advance of the virus, and the "Stay Home" requirement. Most of this memo below is devoted to the specific steps that RCMS, Coastal Seniors and the Fire Department are taking locally to slow the spread of the disease and address an anticipated surge in cases during coming days or weeks.

Symptoms: Symptoms include a dry cough, temperature, aches, and difficulty breathing. Local residents with these symptoms should call RCMS for guidance. As explained below, not every suspected case will be tested and most patients will be asked to stay home until symptoms clear. The most serious cases will require hospitalization.

Risk: Much is still not known about the virus, and there is no proven drug therapy for it. Globally, there were 594,000 known cases with 27,000 deaths (4.5%); nationally, there were 102,000 cases with 295 deaths. (By Sunday, the US cases topped 135,000 as more cases were confirmed.) About half the known US cases were in New York, but the virus is likely to spread rapidly across the country. It is already in all 50 states.

Vulnerability: Because this is a new virus, nobody is thought to be immune because nobody has the antibodies. It is particularly dangerous to seniors and to those who are compromised by an existing condition. However, anybody or any age can get the virus and most of us are likely to be exposed. Some patients will show no symptoms and the virus will resolve itself, but anyone of any age could also develop very serious cases that require intervention and hospitalization.

Status: At the time of the conference there were 2 confirmed cases in Mendocino Co. (including one known case in Gualala) and 41 in Sonoma Co. However, because so few people are being tested, and because some patients may show no symptoms or mild symptoms, it is likely there are more cases that have not been identified or confirmed. (A third case was confirmed Saturday in inland Mendocino Co.)

Stay Home Order: All panelists agreed it is critical to follow orders in Mendocino and Sonoma counties to stay at home in order to slow the spread of the disease. We know the cases will build in our area and that they will very quickly overrun local resources. They may also exceed the capacity of hospitals in Fort Bragg and Santa Rosa, preventing RCMS from forwarding patients to those facilities.

Flatten the Curve: The goal of staying at home is to slow the spread of the disease so that cases are spread out over a longer time frame. This will help reduce the likelihood that local cases on the South Coast will overwhelm the limited capacity to treat them. This was emphasized several times throughout the conference as noted in the summaries of the individual presentations below.

Barbara Brittell, Physician's Assistant, RCMS

On Friday, RCMS initiated second state of emergency response plan. The entire Gualala building has now become urgent care so that it can handle both respiratory cases from the virus plus regular emergency services like broken bones or heart problems. The respiratory patients are now seen in the old primary care section to protect non-respiratory patients from other urgent care patients. RCMS is also analyzing its ventilation system to assure safety.

There are now triage tents outside to see every patient who arrives. "They can hold potentially 8-14 patients, depending on how we put patients in there. We're not exactly sure what we'll be using those spaces for, but we're trying to prepare to have extra space in case we need it," said Brittell.

RCMS is still operating the Sea Watch clinic and the clinic in Pt. Arena, still providing primary care for non-urgent conditions like diabetes, birth control, immunizations and such. Patients can go to those clinics despite the Stay at Home orders. Patients will be screened at the door and directed to the Gualala clinic, if they have a temperature. RCMS is also offering primary care through telemedicine over Skype and other online services.

If there is a large number of patients that overwhelm hospitals in Santa Rosa, the Gualala facility could become a holding facility. If that became unmanageable, RCMS would turn to local or state authorities for additional help.

RCMS can't screen asymptomatic patients, and the clinic still has very few test kits. If patients call saying they're sick, they'll be told to stay in their home for 14 days, using a single bathroom. "There's nothing more we could do for you anyway, even if you tested positive," she said. But if people come in "sicker," they may be tested, but that test can take eight-10 days before the results are known.

If patients test positive, the clinic will contact the patient and the county Health Department. The county would then start a contact tracing protocol to identify anyone the patient contacted. Due to privacy laws, RCMS is not allowed to talk about test results, but the county authorities are mandated to speak to the patient and their contacts.

Nancy Gastonguay, Executive Director, Coastal Seniors

Coastal Seniors (CS) works with seniors and disabled residents from Irish Beach to Stewarts Point and Annapolis. There are 2,700 potential clients over 60 in that 60-mile stretch. CS' normal focus is on nutrition and transportation, but on March 18 closed its dining rooms and started providing meals to go on Monday, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays to seniors and to other who need them. "We've been cooking as we normally do, but doing it from our Pt. Arena location, the Veterans Building," said Gastonguay. "On Tuesday (3/31), we're going to start providing meals to go from our Gualala building."

Coastal Seniors also serves Meals on Wheels and has expanded that program by one-third to compensate for those mobile seniors who are now homebound by the virus. Drivers wear protective glove, use sanitizer on bags, and in the facility to reduce any potential for transmission.

Finally, the organization continues to operate its food bank for newly unemployed and others who need assistance. The next distribution will be April 14, and Coastal Seniors is actively seeking donations of food from restaurants or others who suddenly have a surplus.

Coastal Seniors is also organizing volunteers to shop for groceries and deliver them to the homes of seniors. "Our role is more of a matchmaker of sorts," she said. "We are working with the volunteers, managing the volunteer list, and then connecting the volunteers with seniors and disabled adults looking for those services."

Gastonguay said Coastal Seniors wants to ensure its clients can get to where they want to go, so it's still operating two buses providing rides to medical appointments, vet visits, the post office, and grocery stores. On-call service is available "on a flexible basis" when working with partners like RCMS and the Mendocino Health Alliance (MHA).

"We're encouraging seniors to stay home, but for those who want to leave home, we're providing transportation," she said. "In addition, we're providing out-of-town transportation to Santa Rosa, Fort Bragg, and Ukiah for medical appointments only. There's no shopping."

Many seniors in the area rely on firewood to heat their homes, and Coastal Seniors delivers free wood and delivery to seniors and disabled people in need. Arrangements can be made by calling the Point Arena office at 707- 882-2137.

Gregg Warner, Chief, South Coast Fire Protection District

If you're not hearing many sirens along the highway, it's partly because there's less traffic and partly just to keep people calmer. "Typically, during fire season, when people hear sirens, they freak out. There's no need to alarm them," said Gregg Warner, Chief of the South Coast Fire Protection District (SCF). "Our call volume is actually down right now. We've had very few Code 3 calls. We normally don't run lights and sirens unless we need to."

SCF has 28 first responders working part-time, full-time, and on a volunteer basis, including ambulance crews. Warner said his team has actually slowed down its response to "worry about our health first, because if we become contaminated, we're no good to this community."

The responders have been dealing with many renters on the North Coast, but Warner said “I think it’s finally starting to sink in that this is serious.” The sheriff is now asking homeowners not to rent to tourists.

SCF has three calls with the county each week, including emergency services workers and, sometimes, firefighters. Warner said the department is “dealing well” with the much-publicized national shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE).

“We’re working vigilantly with CLSD (Coast Life Support District) and RCMS, however we can help,” he said. “We’re getting questions all the time from volunteers who ask ‘How can we help?’ ...Right now, for the fire service, we’re in pretty good [shape.] The seniors are the crucial ones because they’re at the highest risk for Coronavirus. I know we’ve been taking food, pets to the vet, whatever it takes to help them out.

“We need to really be careful with our seniors and people with medical needs. We can’t infect them with any part of this virus because it would be very devastating on their families,” he said. “The big plan is one day at a time. The county has only got so much stuff, and we’re a small population. With what we do have here, we can take care of the population as long as everyone maintains their six-foot distance and keeps this risk in hand so that it doesn’t spike. If it does spike, it’s going to be all-hands on deck and we could be very limited for treatment. I know RCMS, CLSD, all the fire agencies will be maxed out.”

QUESTION SESSION:

SHOPPING:

“The most important thing for people to do is to remain sheltered at home. That means not going to the grocery store repeatedly, trying to minimize your time in the grocery store, trying to have a big plan for shopping – like for a month – and you’re done,” said Brittell. That means “not have friends over to your home for a dinner party, not having people coming over because they’re your neighbors, etc. [It means] really minimizing your engagement with every other human being right now – especially our elders.”

Virus sits on services, including packaging for foods, for 7-plus days. “If you touch it and you get it in your eye, you get it.”

“We’ve really, really been discouraging seniors from calling us for rides to the grocery stores. We’re pointing them to volunteers who can do that shopping on their behalf,” said Gastonguay. “I’m hoping the seniors are heeding our warning and that more of them will stay at home more often.”

HISPANIC COMMUNITY:

In addition to having several bilingual team members, Brittell said RCMS has a dedicated staff member whose job is to help get information out to the large Latino community.

VOLUNTEERING:

Janet Kukulinsky, formerly director of the Action Network, asked: What can volunteers do to help RCMS, Coastal Seniors and others? Make masks, make calls, offer rides?

Brittall: RSMS implementing a program with a button. Volunteers should identify the area where they may have expertise – no matter what it is:

- Medical Volunteers with any sort of medical background
- People who have any kind of specific skill that may be of help, like fixing medical equipment
- Contractors who may be able to help with skills like electricians, cement workers, etc.
- People who are strong and vigorous, and may be able to help with very basic medical tasks like bearing litters, taking blood pressure, putting regulators on oxygen tanks.

“We’re collaborating with CLSD to train people over their computer to do certain medical skills or other skills so that we can know you’re available if we need more people to stay in tents overnight, etc, etc.”

We ask that you go to the website and put your name there along with what you think you’d be able to help.

RCMS has no kitchen, but may need to cook meals for people if they have to stay overnight.

Gastonguay: “We really need volunteers who are willing to drive to our clients and to our seniors homes, to deliver meals that would have been eaten in our dining rooms, to deliver Meals on Wheels, to deliver firewood, to deliver food bank boxes. As more seniors are staying home, we’re going to have to deliver to more people in the community. “

VENTILATORS?

“We absolutely might need to have a patient on a ventilator, especially if we can’t push a patient forward to a receiving hospital,” said Brittall. “If we don’t have a ventilator, I can tell you our plan has always been that we will cycle our staff through and we will breathe for you every six seconds, even if it takes all night. That’s what we’ll do.”

RCMS has some ventilator-type systems that run off our oxygen tanks, but none of the suitcase-sized ventilators you may see on TV.

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