



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

2020 COVID-19 IN REVIEW

Sterling, Colo. – April 2, 2021: To say the least, 2020 was a year to remember in public health. So it's only natural, as we celebrate National Public Health week, that the Northeast Colorado Health Department (NCHD) takes a look at all the challenges tackled and our role during the first full year of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

"This has been an unprecedented year and has affected our lives in almost every aspect. I'm incredibly proud of the work that our employees have done during the pandemic—switching roles quickly and taking on new duties and responsibilities, all with the uncertainty of how the pandemic would evolve. I don't think any of us could have foreseen the length of time we'd be working on this response and I'm so thankful for the commitment from not only NCHD staff, but also our many community partners and the public that we serve to work together to get through these challenging times.

In early January 2020, even before the first confirmed case in Colorado, NCHD began closely monitoring news and information that was developing about the novel coronavirus and by early February, both the state and NCHD were engaged in daily

communication with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In early March, as the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was announced in Colorado, our emergency preparedness and communicable disease staff began implementing the Disaster Preparedness Plan ensuring all systems were in place and communications were updated. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. Two days later, because of an increase of concerned calls from the public; NCHD activated our Incident Management Team (IMT) with Mike Burnett, NCHD Response Coordination Officer, designated as the Incident Commander taking the lead on NCHD's COVID-19 response.

The IMT was comprised of Command, Operations, Public Information, Planning and Logistics. The Operations section was the largest with three groups. The first, coordinated phone triage, staffing and the modification of regular NCHD programs. The second group was comprised of nurses conducting contact tracing, case investigations, and follow up. Finally, the third group of environmental health professionals conducted communication with businesses and community outreach. The Public Information team developed and disseminated response communications and incident case data to partners, news affiliates and the public through press releases, social media, webpages and radio. The Planning section monitored phone calls, media, and situational awareness as well as daily planning. Logistics managed and disseminated Strategic National Stockpile supplies, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other resources to authorized organizations as needed. Between March 16th and May 8th, NCHD processed 57 orders for PPE going to our local hospitals, long term care facilities, law enforcement and EMS agencies, and others, totaling almost 11,150 individual pieces of PPE. Without having the ability to facilitate distribution of these critical supplies these organizations simply may have been forced to do without. As it was, we are fortunate

that no organization in our six counties ever ran completely out of these important supplies.

“Emergency response is something we have been training and preparing to do for years,” said Mike Burnett. “Our staff went into this with a lot of experience from real-world incidents in the past and from numerous full-scale infectious disease drills over the past 15 years; therefore implementing a response was seamless, but just because of the length of time we have been dealing with this pandemic, the work has been draining.”

On Wednesday, March 18th Northeast Colorado Health Department (NCHD) was notified of positive COVID-19 test results in both Morgan and Yuma counties. Additionally that same day, local assisted living centers and hospitals restricted all non-essential visitors and began actively screening all employees under state and local health guidance. Only four days later, Logan County received notification of its first positive case. It wasn't until later in March that Washington and Phillips saw their first cases while Sedgwick County announced its first case almost four months later. After each county saw its first case, northeast Colorado saw a slow but steady climb of COVID-19 cases and outbreaks. On March 23, the NCHD Board of Health signed a resolution declaring a local public health emergency for the special district of the Northeast Colorado Health Department.

“This is the first time the NCHD board has signed an emergency declaration,” said Trish McClain, Director of NCHD. “We are taking this important administrative measure to ensure our rural public health district is eligible for state and federal funding that may become available for the COVID-19 pandemic response.”

Three days later, on March 26, one of the most significant actions taken to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was announced, when Governor Jared Polis issued a mandatory stay-at-home order for all residents of Colorado to begin April 1 lasting almost a month. This shut-down meant that everyone was encouraged to stay at home and limit travel to essential trips, while only critical businesses and health services were able to operate, but with restrictions. At this same time northeast Colorado saw a sudden increase in the number of positive cases because of several factors, including a high number of essential workers and critical businesses in our region as well as an increase in testing. During this time and throughout the year, NCHD continued to work closely with businesses to provide technical support and guidance to improve staff protection from infection so that they could safely remain open. The middle of April brought our health district's first deaths associated with COVID-19 and NCHD began tracking detailed case data for each county.

Summer revealed a slowdown of case numbers for all counties as activities stayed outdoors. Then, preceding the beginning of the school year, a statewide mask wearing order was announced and the county-level dial was introduced. NCHD improved case data with the introduction of the COVID-19 data dashboard. Fall began a second acceleration of COVID-19 cases which lingered into the winter months, outbreaks became more common and deaths continued to climb into the 100's. As December approached, NCHD began preparing for vaccinations with clinic planning, as well as logistical preparedness. The week of December 14, marked the introduction of COVID-19 vaccine to Northeast Colorado and on the 28th, NCHD held the first vaccination clinic in Washington County beginning our ongoing goal to provide vaccine to everyone who wants it.

As local public health, NCHD leads the COVID-19 response for Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick, Washington and Yuma counties. Throughout the year of 2020 and continuing on into 2021, our responsibilities include public information, business communication, contact tracing, case investigation, outbreak investigations, testing and vaccinations. To date, NCHD has conducted about 45 separate COVID-19 vaccination clinics across the district. Along with the help of other providers in the area, almost 27,000 doses of life-saving vaccine has been administered to people who live within our six counties. By any measure, this has been a monumental undertaking and we can't thank everyone enough for their help and patience. As we move into the second quarter of 2021, NCHD will continue our commitment to our communities.

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