

A note to the citizens of Bastrop County about COVID-19

Concern over the Coronavirus known as COVID-19 is understandable. This virus, new to humans, started late last year with many unknowns. The good news is that we are beginning to understand it better and can take appropriate measures to minimize impacts and protect public health and safety.

Today I participated in an hour-long conference call with Governor Abbott, Department of State Health Services Director Dr. John Hellerstadt, Chief Nim Kidd of the Texas Department of Emergency Management, and Commissioner Mike Morass of the Texas Education Agency. Also on the call were county judges and mayors, and state-elected officials from around Texas.

Governor Abbott's message is that we are steadily and calmly addressing the virus, with public health and safety as priority one. State and local health authorities and emergency management personnel are being pro-active to slow the spread of the virus and care for those impacted.

At this time, our primary objective is to slow the spread of the virus, particularly to at-risk populations. Anecdotal evidence is that the elderly and those with compromised immune systems are most susceptible to the virus. Everything we do should be to slow the spread of the virus to these people.

Local emergency management teams are reviewing incident response protocols and checking on availability of response and care supplies. In addition, we are reviewing our Continuity of Operations Plans to assure that essential governmental services will always be available.

The medical profession is preparing to meet the possible influx of infections and hospitalizations. Specimen collection and testing supplies are being sought and secured. Preparations are being made to respond to any additional community spread outbreaks, wherever they might happen. The Texas Health and Human Services website has a wealth of useful information. Drill through the information at dshs.state.tx.us/coronavirus/ for more details.

Our school superintendents and their staff are extremely vigilant regarding this public health event. Each district is in regular communication with our emergency management office as well as students and parents about best practices and ways to prevent infection. With spring break approaching, we need to be especially aware of ways to protect ourselves from illness and to protect those we love.

The Centers for Disease Control are discouraging non-essential travel. If you and your family travel to a community-spread area, it is advised that you take extra precautions. When you return, you may need to self-quarantine for up to two weeks to be sure you didn't contact the virus.

It is also recommended that we all avoid long exposure in close proximity to others. The virus spreads through droplets of moisture in coughs and sneezes. Being with a lot of people for more than a few minutes at a time increases the chance of the virus spreading. Dr. Hellerstadt put it this way, "it's a matter of time and space". The less time you are in contact with others and the greater the space between you and others, the better your chances of avoiding illness or spreading it.

It is particularly imperative that those with the highest illness risk avoid crowds. Although we do not have a local epidemic, I recommend that elderly folks stay at home for the next few weeks until this settles down. The less exposure you have to others, the better. We are working to be prepared for the worst, even as we hope for and pray for the best. As grandmother often said, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." So exercise good judgement and good personal hygiene as we fight this challenge together. God bless. Judge Pape