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State announces tiered ‘Red to Green’ system for N.M. counties in next phase of COVID-19 response

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Framework enables counties to reopen further when meeting key health metrics

SANTA FE – In an effort designed to provide local communities the flexibility to operate more day-to-day activities, the state of New Mexico will transition to a tiered county-by-county COVID-19 risk system on Dec. 2, enabling local communities to shed burdensome restrictions as soon as public health data show the virus is retreating within their borders.

The shift in the state’s “reopening” framework will come after a two-week “reset” period, in which state health officials enacted the most heightened level of statewide public health restrictions upon places of business and day-to-day activities in an effort to blunt the spread of COVID-19 all across New Mexico.

“The county-by-county framework enables counties, and the businesses and nonprofits within their borders, to operate with fewer restrictions when they slow the spread of the virus and drive down test positivity rates,” said Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham. “It’s been a difficult year and an especially difficult past month. We must remain as vigilant as ever to contain and beat the virus; we also must look for

ways to lessen the burden on our communities wherever possible, while never swerving from our top priority – protecting New Mexicans and saving lives."

An amended emergency public health order will be executed Monday, Nov. 30, installing the new framework with an effective date of Wednesday, Dec. 2. The current operative requirements of the state's two-week "reset" will be in effect through that time.

The spread of COVID-19 remains a statewide emergency. Hospitals and health care providers all across New Mexico have reported great strain in responding to the escalating illness and mortality caused by the continued spread of the virus.

The county-by-county framework will permit counties – and the businesses and nonprofit entities within their borders – to operate under less restrictive public health measures when health metrics demonstrating the extent of the virus' spread and test positivity within those counties are met.

In order to prevent and mitigate the effects of the spread of the virus, and to ameliorate the unsustainable resultant strain placed upon the state's health care system and personnel, counties where the virus is more prevalent will operate under more restrictive public health measures.

Likewise, counties where the virus has been or is being suppressed will operate under less restrictive measures.

Counties will operate under one of three levels: Red, signifying very high risk; Yellow, signifying high risk; and Green, signifying medium risk.

The New Mexico Department of Health maintains an official map displaying each county's current level on its designated COVID-19 webpage, cv.nmhealth.org. To capture an average over a period of time that accurately conveys the state of the spread of the virus in each county, the agency updates this map every other Wednesday.

When a county fails to meet the specified metrics for a given level upon the biweekly update of the map, it will begin operating at the next most restrictive level within 48 hours. When a county meets the specific metrics for a less restrictive level, the county may begin operating at that level of restrictions upon immediate effect of the department's biweekly update of the map.

The two key health metrics that will used to determine where a county sits within the tiered framework are pulled identified within the state's gating criteria, the set of public health data points tracked and measured by the state Medical Advisory Team and others: The **per-capita incidence of new COVID-19 cases** and **average COVID-19 test positivity** over a statistically meaningful period of time. These are also the same metrics the state has used to classify counties for the purposes of

gauging the risk level for limited public school reopenings and limited nursing home visitations.

As of Friday, Nov. 27, 32 of the state's 33 counties are at the Red Level. At this level, almost every category of business or nonprofit entity may operate – but with limited capacity and reduced operations, owing to the very high risk of viral spread.

The map will next be updated Wednesday, Dec. 2, and every other Wednesday thereafter.

The public health requirements for each level – and reminders about definitions of businesses and other entities within the state's emergency public health order – **can be found here**.

"Nothing about this virus has changed," said Gov. Lujan Grisham. "And what we can all do to fight it – and to help members of our local communities avoid infection and get back to more safe day-to-day activities – hasn't changed either. Avoid gatherings. Wear a facemask. Avoid spending time with non-household members. Stay at home whenever – whenever – you can. These are best and indeed our only tools as we seek to prevent and minimize the illness and suffering and death so many of our neighbors in this state continue to grapple with."

No matter a county's level, the following requirements remain in place statewide:

- Facemasks are required to be worn in public.
- Businesses that accrue a significant number of positive COVID-19 cases within their workforce in a two-week span are subject to temporary closure by the Department of Health.
    - An essential business may be permitted to continue operating if the Department of Health and Environment Department determine the business is a necessary provider of goods or services within the community in light of geographic considerations.
    - Businesses that test each employee every two weeks and regularly provide contact training data to the Environment Department shall not be subject to closure under this framework
    - This applies only to food and drink establishments; close-contact businesses; places of lodging; retail spaces; and other other businesses which members of the public regularly visit.

    - The closure process is triggered if four or more rapid responses occur within a 14-day period.

- Businesses and nonprofits must adhere to the state's COVID-Safe Practices.

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