PUBLIC HEALTH MATTERS
By Rick Ritter, Public Health Director
Crowley and Otero Counties

Hello to all. Yesterday (3/10/2020) around 5:30pm I received a call from our epidemiologist, Dr. Maier, and she informed me that a traveler very recently came through La Junta and later, after she left Colorado, this person tested positive for COVID-19. For the brief period of time that this person was in La Junta, our current information suggests that they were very well insulated from the community, and their contacts were limited and identifiable. I will provide more detail on this below. Now, do not stop reading here, please read this entire message. First and foremost, this is not cause for alarm. I figured this was a question of “when”, and not “if” this would happen. We live, after all, in a very mobile civilization.

Now for some details. Otero County Health Department (OCHD) staff began working last night, and this morning I activated our Department Operations Center (DOC) and assigned my staff to positions in the National Incident Management System (NIMS). This is all a technical way of saying we are formally providing structure to our response to this incident. Last night, and even as I write this update, close contact investigations are happening. In fact, in cooperation with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and thanks to the very competent and professional response of the Arkansas Valley Regional Medical Center (AVRMC), a number of people have already been identified and quarantined. Obviously, due to very strict federal laws on confidentiality, I cannot and will not release the names of individuals, so please do not ask.

Some may wonder, “if you got this information last night, why did you wait until now to release it?” My first priority is, unhesitatingly, to give all my attention to disease control and containment, and this takes time, sometimes A LOT of time. This is the process called epidemiology, and there is a lot involved. Right after I felt satisfied with the local disease control response, my very next task was to write and release this update.

So, what are some things that you can do right now to protect yourself, your family, and help with this situation? Here are some answers:
✓ Because of this positive COVID-19 case, should we alter the course of our daily lives? I and my family are not, this morning I and my wife went to work and our four kids went to school. If we need to go out tonight, we will, and we will not be wearing masks. If the time comes (please notice I said “if”) when we all need to change our normal routines, I will let you know. I am very committed to being transparent with the communities we serve. Once again, the reason for this message is disclosure to you, and most certainly not to raise alarm.
✓ If you have no symptoms, please do not show up to the AVRMC Emergency Department and ask to be tested. This does happen, and it is a phenomenon known as the “worried well”. You, ultimately, have to decide what is an emergency, but generally emergencies have two very important components, which are as follows:
  o Life threatening &
  o Time sensitive
When people go to the E.R. and it is not an emergency, this takes vital resources, such as time and staff, away from any true emergency that may show up. Additionally, the state health department has clearly and repeatedly said that people without symptoms and that do not meet certain other criteria will not be tested. This is done to conserve testing supplies for those that meet the testing criteria. This is HUGELY important, because we will be isolating those that are positive.
✓ If you have symptoms (such as fever, cough, shortness of breath) and truly believe you have a COVID-19 infection, please call your medical provider BEFORE you go to their office, tell them your symptoms and possible exposure so they can appropriately prepare for your arrival.
✓ CDPHE has a line available to give information on COVID-19, here is that info straight from their website: “CO-HELP is Colorado’s call line for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). People who have general questions about COVID-19 can call CO HELP at 303-389-1687 or 1-877-462-2911, for answers in many languages, or email them at COHELP@RMPDC.org for answers in English.” Give them a call that is why they are there.
✓ PLEASE turn to trusted sources to get accurate information. Already, social media sites are abuzz with opinions, speculation, etc. Your trusted sources are as follows:
  o CDC: https://www.cdc.gov
  o CDPHE: https://www.colorado.gov/cdphe
    ▪ The CDC and CDPHE websites have great information on ways to protect yourself and prevent illness, please visit these sites often, as information is constantly being updated.
  o Crowley County Website: https://www.colorado.gov/crowleycounty
  o Otero County Website: http://www.oterogov.com/
    ▪ Both county websites have links to local COVID-19 updates that I have been sending out.
  o The Otero County Health Department Facebook page.
  o The La Junta Tribune Democrat, the Rocky Ford Daily Gazette, the Ordway New Era, and the Fowler Tribune. These great local print media companies are running my updates as Public Service Announcements (PSA).
  o Our local radio station, KBLJ (1400 AM) / KTHN (92.1 FM). For the foreseeable future, I am going to be giving regular updates on Monday mornings between 8:00am and 9:00am.
  o Now and through Friday, 3/13/2020 (at least), I am going to set aside between 5:00pm-6:00pm to answer my phone. If this is still troubling to you and you need to talk, please give me a call at 719-383-3045. If I am on the phone with someone else, leave me a message and I will return your call when I am able. Please remember, my time is very limited now and we can only stay on the phone a few minutes, especially if there is a large volume of calls. Please be patient.

I can honestly say that after reading this, and with the exception of not providing specific names (which would be a violation of federal privacy laws), you now basically know what I know.

Stay tuned for more updates, and remember to be prepared, not scared.