



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Task force developing drive-thru COVID-19 clinics

HOT SPRINGS – Preparations are being made for drive-thru clinics for patient evaluations, as well as a local COVID-19 hotline, in Hot Springs and Garland County as a part of unified efforts to locally mitigate the nationwide outbreak.

More than 20 first-responder representatives with the area task force met again today, Tuesday, March 17, at the Central Fire Station. The group includes Garland County Health Officer Dr. Gene Shelby; City Manager Bill Burrough; Garland County Judge Darryl Mahoney; Bo Robertson with Garland County Emergency Management; Chris Rowland of the Garland County Health Unit; as well as representatives from CHI St. Vincent, National Park Medical Hospital, LifeNet, Hot Springs Police and Fire departments, United Way and others.

Preparations for multiple drive-thru clinics are being established, including in Hot Springs and Hot Springs Village, to evaluate patients who are experiencing respiratory and flu-like symptoms. These triage clinics are for informational and evaluation purposes, helping lessen the spread of this highly contagious virus.

As the drive-thru options are made available, more information will be distributed regarding location, hours and services being provided. Providers wanted to stress the importance, however, of those with mild to moderate symptoms to self-quarantine and stay at home. Health-care providers at such clinics will be limited to checking fever and other vital signs and symptoms associated with possible respiratory illness. There are currently no on-site tests available for COVID-19.

“An important question to ask yourself before you come to the hospital or your doctor’s office is, ‘How sick am I?’ COVID-19 is a virus with no cure, so in most cases it is just supportive care,” said Dr. Ross Douglas, president of CHI St. Vincent Hot Springs. “We have emergency plans for these types of situations, and our plans are working well. But it is important that we limit exposure and protect our health-care providers – nursing staff, doctors, and so on – particularly as Hot Springs is an access point for many of the smaller communities in southwest Arkansas.”

Dr. Shelby shared the statewide COVID-19 hotlines as another option for area residents to get answers to questions regarding the virus. The Arkansas Department of Health hotline is 501-661-2136, and the number for the hotline at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) is 800-632-4502. The task force laid the groundwork for the establishment of a local hotline.

The health of area citizens is taking primary importance, yet as Hot Springs is the state's most popular tourist destination and relies on income from events, conferences and travelers from across the U.S., it is impossible to not recognize the economic impacts.

"As we support the ongoing health crisis, we must also work on the economic crisis at the same time, and it's a tight rope," said Judge Mahoney, who signed a Disaster Emergency Proclamation on March 13 in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The proclamation will help the county qualify for reimbursements on qualifying purchases for personal protective equipment (PPE) and other coronavirus-related expenses.

Robertson encouraged all area businesses to respond to a request for losses related to the virus, which will be coming through the Greater Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce email list soon with a link to a spreadsheet to submit to the state. The more who participate, the clearer picture the state will have as far as the impact thus far from the coronavirus.

"Our first priority is the health and safety of our community, and we are working to that end. However, we are very concerned for the economic health of our local businesses and City government as well. March is the busiest month of the year for Hot Springs, which equates to higher sales tax revenues to allow the City to fulfill its services to our community," said City Manager Burrough. "We have no property taxes, so we rely primarily on sales tax revenues, but this certainly is not just effecting our City government. Many of our businesses are already experiencing huge losses from the decline in visitors and patrons."

Of course, the economic impact will effect owners and employees alike. The United Way of the Ouachitas (UWO) hosted a meeting Monday, March 16, to discuss how area organizations are collaborating to assist those in need as our community traverses the coronavirus outbreak. The Hot Springs online resource guide (<https://hsresourceguide.org>) and the Charity Tracker (<https://ouachitas.charitytracker.net>) were both promoted as great tools for the organizations and members of the public to utilize.

"I think Charity Tracker is going to be very important as we begin to navigate the aftermath of COVID-19," said Sarah Fowler, UWO executive director. "If you are a non-profit, city, county, school, church entity, HR manager, and you are not already on Charity Tracker, you should strongly consider becoming a part of this tool. We are more than happy to set up appointments to train and get anyone up and running."

Fowler also reminds everyone to call area organizations in advance before possibly making an unnecessary trip as many organizations are currently working with smaller staff and are open shorter hours for virus mitigation. She also encourages anyone experiencing hardship with paying utility bills to reach out to their providers and work out a payment plan.

As a reminder, public health officials continue to stress the importance of washing hands often, keeping social distance, staying home when sick and disinfecting surfaces often. For more information, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus>.