

June 24, 2020 ... Press Conference Comments

Good afternoon.

On Monday this week the Governor held a news conference and said this :

"To state the obvious, COVID19 is now spreading at an unacceptable rate in Texas."

The Governor then pointed to some large charts showing trend lines for hospitalization, daily new cases, and positivity rate across the State. All of the charts showed some flattening until about Memorial Day. Then, after Memorial Day, spikes were depicted on all three charts.

Then the Governor added the following statement: "If those spikes continue, additional measures are going to be necessary."

I, like many of you, have been watching and monitoring the numbers here in Bell County. I have been doing so since the beginning of this pandemic. Bell County Public Health District COVID19 Dashboard for yesterday had the following numbers on the board: 819 confirmed cases ... 23,278 tests ... 86 ever hospitalized ... 38 ever admitted to the ICU ... a 7 day average, as of yesterday, of 26 new cases a day (on May 23rd, our 7 day average new cases a day was 7).

I have had one physician send me his audit of our testing and positivity rate over the past 60 days. By his calculations, our May positivity rate, which is the number of positive cases to the number of tests, was 4.5%. In June, our positivity rate is now 9.3%. In other words, people are now testing positive at almost double the rate they were a month ago.

But, here is probably the most concerning data point that I have seen and that is for our region, which in the State system is called 'Trauma Service Area L', out of 1,027 total staffed hospital beds, 79% of those beds are occupied and there are only 13 ICU beds available as of 3:50 pm yesterday afternoon. As most of you know, Trauma Service Area L is comprised of several counties across Central Texas. But, Bell County makes up the vast majority of the hospital bed capacity for the region.

I have been advised by the largest private health care provider in the County that they know have, in the hospital, the largest number of COVID patients that they have had since the pandemic began.

This is concerning to me, on several levels and I will come back to those concerns in a moment.

I also asked that institution if there were concerns about hospital capacity and their ability to continue to operate 'business as usual'. The answer was ... yes... they do have concerns about hospital capacity at this point in time. This is also concerning to me.

As I have shared with you in the past, our health care industry, nationally and locally, operates on razor thin margins when it comes to available beds. 'Normal business operations' at the hospitals means operating with the beds mostly filled...all the time. A surge in COVID patients is disruptive to 'normal business' and could cause the hospitals to take some backward steps in terms of deferring elective surgeries in order to free up bed space and re-allocating resources that would otherwise go toward non-COVID health care. This is not a direction the hospitals want to go. It is also a direction that I don't want our area health care providers to go.'

When the Governor first announced the re-opening of the State under his plan, he indicated that his concerns were trying to balance competing interests...that of commerce and economy and re-opening the State with the health concerns that the COVID pandemic has presented. He has been very consistent about pointing to the things on the charts he had behind on Monday as the health indicators he watches to see if this balance between re-opening and restricting is in fact balanced.

I think both statements he made on Monday are very telling to us ... that COVID19 is spreading at an unacceptable rate and that 'if the spikes continue, additional measures are going to be necessary.'

I think the message he is sending us is that if we don't see the numbers turn around, he is prepared to step back in and issue more mandates. In fact, I think the message is we will see a return to some measures that none of us want to see return.

3 things the Governor stressed ... washing your hands, maintaining your social distancing and wearing of face coverings.

The Governor has also indicated that a 'one size fits all' approach to dealing with COVID 19 around the state is not appropriate. I applaud the Governor for allowing local authorities to assess their local situations and take measures that are appropriate for their community. What may be necessary in Harris County may not be necessary in Bell County. What may be necessary in Bell County may not be necessary in Llano County. I think this approach, from both a health and a policy perspective, makes the most sense.

So, in line with the Governor's Orders and comments, and after reviewing our local situation , and discussing the matter with area cities, chambers of commerce, our health care providers, our Public Health District, I am today issuing Directive #7 relating to the wearing of face coverings.

The short version of Directive #7 requires all businesses that provide goods or services to the public to implement a health and safety policy which mandates the wearing of a face covering when on the business premises where social distancing is not feasible.

Directive #7 strongly encourages the wearing of face coverings when in public places where it is difficult to maintain social distancing.

This Directive is intended to mitigate the spread of COVID19 in our community. The Directive is intended to help stem the trend lines we are now seeing in the number of new cases in Bell County and to help us maintain our hospital capacity.

I do not issue this Directive lightly. But, with the numbers we are seeing, the trends that we are seeing, I issue this Directive in the hopes that it will help stave off additional Directives, or Orders from the Governor that will be much more intrusive.

I don't think any of us, me included, want to see us going back to a point where businesses are closed again. By implementing this measure, at the local level, I think it provides us with the best opportunity to balance the re-opening of our economy and flow of commerce with the health concerns associated with the COVID19 pandemic.

