How City and County Will Enforce Governor’s Stay-Home Order

Local law enforcement and public health officials have established a procedure for enforcing an order issued last week by the governor to help stop spread of COVID-19.

The governor directed people to stay home through April 10, except to conduct essential activities like working in an essential businesses, grocery shopping, caring for family members, and recreating outdoors while keeping a 6-foot distance from others.

The governor also ordered all “non-essential” businesses to close except for “minimum basic operation” as defined in the order. The order specifically defines essential businesses.

“We’ve been getting calls from the community about businesses that are open and that don’t appear to be essential,” said Drenda Niemann, county health officer and director of Lewis and Clark Public Health. “We’ve been working with law enforcement and the county attorney’s office regarding enforcement of the governor’s order, and we all think it’s important for the community to understand that we take this order seriously.”

Niemann said the enforcement process will look like this:

- If the health department gets a complaint about an individual or business, staff will call to learn more about the situation and to educate the individual or business about the requirements of the governor’s order.
- If the health department gets additional complaints after the phone call, the health officer will issue a written warning, which will be delivered by a law enforcement officer.
- If these efforts aren’t successful, law enforcement will issue citations, and an individual or business may be fined up to $500 for each day of non-compliance.

“We have no desire to be punitive,” Niemann said, “but we do have a legal obligation as well as a personal mission to protect our citizens by following the social distancing directive of the governor. Social distancing is the best tool we have at this point to try to stop COVID-19.”
“We also think it’s important for community members to understand the consequences if they choose to violate the order.”

Enforcement will be complaint-driven. Law enforcement officials said they won’t stop individuals on the street to find out whether they’re in compliance with the stay-at-home order, nor will they ask employees of essential businesses to verify their place of employment.

“This really is about making sure we all understand and follow the governor’s intent, which is to use social distancing to stay healthy,” Niemann said. “I know all of us want to see this pandemic end as soon as possible.”