Local Public Health to Adopt, Augment Governor’s Directive

Lewis and Clark County Health Officer Drenda Niemann announced Friday that the county will adopt a directive issued by the governor and begin lifting some restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19.

The City-County Board of Health discussed the directive during its regular meeting Thursday and voted to move forward in concert with the state.

“Our residents and businesses should be commended for the sacrifices they made to limit the disease in our county,” Niemann said. “It’s because of their efforts that we’re in a position to meet the governor’s criteria for a limited reopening.”

Only 16 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in the county so far – fewer than all but two of the state’s seven most populated counties. No cases have been confirmed since April 9, and no deaths have been attributed to the disease.

“We’re cautiously optimistic moving forward,” Niemann said. “The responsibility for keeping our community safe continues to lie with each of us as individuals.”

She urged people to continue practicing social distancing, good hand hygiene, regular cleaning and disinfecting, and use of cloth face masks when in public. People should continue to avoid gathering, especially in groups larger than 10.

Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH) is developing guidance specific to types of businesses to help them reopen. The documents will provide a summary of the governor’s requirements, as well as health department recommendations for additional protection. These will be available on the LCPH website at www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19. Guidance for places of worship and “main street” retail businesses, which are allowed to open in the next several days, are available now.

Niemann said her staff also is available to provide technical assistance to businesses where needed.

“We encourage businesses to develop a written plan to guide them as they make sure they offer a safe environment to customers and employees,” Niemann said. “That can really serve as a roadmap when issues come up, which they most likely will.”
“The governor’s directive sets minimum requirements,” she added. “We hope local businesses will want to go above and beyond. This is all about preventing disease, not trying to find loopholes.”

Niemann encouraged businesses that are uncomfortable about opening safely to consider staying closed.

“Just because you’re allowed to open doesn’t mean you have to,” she said. “Choosing not to reopen in an effort to limit community risk is a good public-health-based decision.”

Niemann said the health department will monitor the local disease situation closely and has the authority to reinstate restrictions if circumstances indicate a need.

An order of the health officer closing public and private developed campgrounds until May 31 will remain in place for now. Niemann said she’ll consider rescinding or extending the order depending on the status of other campgrounds, such as those managed by the Forest Service and state Fish Wildlife and Parks.

The campground order does not apply to camping in undeveloped camping areas or to people who live in developed campgrounds.

Niemann said the health department will continue to enforce COVID-19 requirements when it receives complaints. The three-step complaint process involves:

1. A phone call from the health department to educate a business about the requirements;
2. An order of corrective action from the health officer detailing steps that must be taken to comply with requirements; and
3. A citation and/or fine of up to $500 for each day not in compliance.

Residents can direct complaints to 457-8900 or publichealth@lccountymt.gov.