

Self-isolation on The People's Highway

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
Friday, 10 April 2020 06:20



Uncovering the mystery at the Ranch House Motel

Like an undercover operation, three reportedly homeless people awaiting COVID-19 test results moved into the Ranch House Motel March 26.

The Ranch House Motel sits east of the historic El Rancho Hotel, at 1000 E. Highway 66.

There were no media releases issued at the time to indicate that the motel was going to house the homeless awaiting test results – until Ina Burmeister, RMCHCS public information officer and executive director of the Western Health Foundation – sent a letter to board members of WHF March 30, briefly stating that a task force was set up between multiple agencies.

The email letter mentions that the task force includes representatives of the state, county, city, Gallup Indian Medical Center, Community Outreach and Patient Empowerment Program and Rehoboth McKinley Christian Health Care Services.

"I thought I'd give you an update on where we are with housing homeless respiratory patients who need a place to stay while waiting for COVID-19 test results," Burmeister stated in the letter.

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Sources close to WHF, including its president, Jay Mason, and the governor's office, seemed surprised by the letter and the arrangement.

When Burmeister was questioned about the internal letter on March 31, she responded with a press release on RMCHCS letterhead. In the press release she recapped information in the first letter with some additional details.

She explained that people sent to the motel must have a medical referral from an RMCHCS or GIMC provider to qualify for the program.

"The patient must be independent with their activities of daily living, not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs nor unlikely to withdraw from alcohol or other substance," Burmeister stated.

Additionally, she stated that the El Rancho Hotel would remain open for business, but no one would be in contact with the patients in the Ranch House Motel.

Burmeister also stated that there were meetings between the "local task force" and governor's office, and said both contacted the El Rancho to see if the hotel wanted to help.

El Rancho Hotel Manager Teena Carney says she first heard from the governor's office, then was asked to contact the New Mexico Health Department. Next, she heard from the hospitals.

When Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's office was contacted about the arrangement March 31, staffers said they didn't have immediate information, but referred the *Gallup Sun* to the governor's Deputy Legislative Director Ane Romero.

ROMERO'S VERSION OF EVENTS

Eight days after the COVID-19 emergency was declared by the governor March 11, the Department of Tourism was given the job of finding places around the state where people could isolate if they were sick, or showed symptoms of the virus.

The department issued a survey and sent it to all the hotels, asking if they would be willing to serve as a shelter for people who needed to: self-isolate, regardless of status; whether they were fleeing domestic violence; first responders; were waiting for test results; or tested positive for COVID-19.

A number of hotels responded, but according to Romero, the majority of those who said yes at first, backed out. One hotel that came forward was the El Rancho Hotel.

It was the only hotel in McKinley County that offered to help.

Romero explained the county's need based on the situation at the St. Joseph's Shelter and Soup Kitchen, which only recently reopened on March 30, and Na Nihzhoozhi Center

Inc., which is at full capacity.

So, when El Rancho offered a whole wing, separate from the hotel itself, the state agreed. Known as the Ranch House Motel, the wing features 20 separate rooms, each with an individual door to the outside.

Carney believes that it may have been easier for the El Rancho to work with the state because it has an active business in the hotel and a working staff.

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"This hotel has been in this community for 80 years," she said. "I think it's our civic duty to give back, even if it's a painful thing."

She said the hotel has been receiving an outpouring of positive responses from the community.

Per the agreement, the El Rancho charges \$47 per night plus lodging taxes, and \$23 per day for meals. Funds would be paid to the hotel via the health department from the state emergency funds allocated by Lujan Grisham in Executive Order 2020-008.

The agreement with the state does not have a termination date, but is restricted to a total number of nights, which the health department has forecasted at 300. That would cover all health department-sponsored guests being housed at the Ranch House Motel for an undetermined period.

"This basically started as 20 beds for 20 days," Carney said. "Whenever they don't need the beds anymore, then our relationship is complete."

She estimates that the relationship began around March 20 and she thinks it will need to be extended beyond late April.

"I don't think there's any timeline on keeping people safe," she said.

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HOW IT WORKS

When a homeless person shows symptoms that could be from COVID-19, a physician from RMCHCS or GIMC can do a test and contact the motel to arrange for the patient to stay in one of the reserved rooms until their results come back.

The local task force says transportation from the hospital to the motel will be provided and nurses or health care professionals will check on the patient by phone each day to assess their symptoms.

Residents of these rooms get their meals served by the El Rancho outside their doors. A phone call and a knock on the door lets the patient know the meal has arrived. There's around the clock security to discourage patients from leaving, and to keep anyone else from approaching the rooms.

Carney says that the security team members do not approach the patients. They keep to social distancing rules.

When COVID-19 tests results come back negative, the patient will be released. If they come back positive, medical professionals will determine the proper course of action based on the severity of the patient's symptoms.

City Councilor Linda Garcia, who represents District 1, says in that case, every effort will be made to locate patient's family members. But beyond that it is not possible to monitor the people who test negative.

In Burmeister's press release, she says when a room is vacated, it stays empty for 24 hours and is then thoroughly cleaned based on Centers for Disease Control guidelines for cleaning patient rooms.

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While this set-up comes across as an orderly, tidy process on paper, some members of the community have expressed concerns about the location, which is across the street from a liquor store.

Carney admits this is a concern for her and the staff, but they have a plan of action in place.

"If one of the guests leaves, they don't get to come back," she said. "They don't have keys to the rooms, so they can't physically come back in."

So, far the system has worked, but it's only as good as a patient's compliance with the program.

"Some have left and tried to come back. We just called the hospital or they call the police," she said.

Carney also said in those cases, the patients were picked up. But if someone takes off, and hotel staff knows which way they went, that information will be passed on to authorities.

For her part, Garcia also expressed concern about the nearby access to liquor. She told the *Ga Ilup Sun*,

"I'm concerned and I will be on top of it."

In Burmeister's press release, she stated that the task force will continue to meet to make plans in case the number of patients exceeds the number of rooms available. It makes no mention of the Western Health Foundation's involvement in the matter.

Ina Burmeister's press release is featured on page 15.

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