

Navajo Nation COVID-19 peak expected about May 10

Written by By Dominic Aragon Sun Correspondent
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The peak of cases for the COVID-19 pandemic is only days away. Dr. Loretta Christensen, the Chief Medical Officer for the Navajo Area Indian Health Service, told reporters on a conference call that the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to peak on the Navajo Nation about May 10.

“We anticipate that we are beginning our surge, Chinle and Northern Navajo have had rapidly increasing numbers. Those were both as predicted,” Christensen said. “We anticipate the other areas, within the next week or so will also see a significant increase in cases.”

Christensen oversees five service units and eight healthcare centers within the Navajo Nation.

“We expected a full peak by around May 10, and we are very hopeful that we have prepared our resources because that will get us to about our capacity at all of our hospitals.”

The Navajo Nation announced its first case of the novel coronavirus on March 17. As of May 2, there are over 2,300 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Navajo Nation with 73 reported deaths.

While the first COVID-19 cases popped up on the west side of the Navajo Nation, Christensen said both the east and west ends of the three-state reservation have been the hardest hit over the last two to three weeks.

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“We have been in constant preparation for some time, which has included expanding our in-patient capacity to almost double what it was prior to COVID,” Christensen added.

“We’ve also added three alternate care sites; one located near Gallup Indian Medical Center, one near Chinle Comprehensive Health Care Center and one near Shiprock Service Unit,” she said.

Additional medical staff and volunteers have been called upon to help with the pandemic on the reservation.

“We tend to see more high-risk populations among American Indians and Alaskan Natives,” Rear Adm. Dr. Michael Toedt said. Toedt is the chief medical officer for Indian Health Services.

When doctors talk about how underlying health conditions can worsen the effects of COVID-19, some of the diseases include asthma, COPD, diabetes and high-blood pressure.

“While the susceptibility to the virus is actually the same among the population, the risk of having more severe outcomes is higher with those conditions,” Toedt said.

Christensen said about 20 percent of COVID-19 patients in the U. S. require in-patient care.

“We are below that right [now] and we’d love to keep it that way, but we anticipate we may start getting that 20 percent or more over the next two weeks,” Christensen said.

“We are expecting, by modeling, across the area, including only federal sites, about 200 additional patients a day across the area, and over 100 ICU-level patients across the area, which will be our capacity - even expanding our ICU and critical-care capability - that will be where our resources will be full,” Christensen added.

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TIMELINE OF COVID-19 ON THE NAVAJO NATION

March 11 - Public Health State of Emergency declared.

March 17 - First confirmed case.

March 21 - Stay at Home Order goes into effect.

March 30 - Five total deaths related to COVID-19 reported, 148 total cases.

April 9 - Over 500 confirmed cases reported.

April 10 - First 57-hour weekend curfew goes into effect.

April 16 - Over 1,000 cases confirmed.

May 2 - Over 2,000 cases confirmed.

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