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—ALASKA NATIONAL GUARD—

1. GALLERY: Alaska National Guard initiates proactive response to coronavirus pandemic

Fox26News by Sinclair Broadcast Group/April 23

WASHINGTON (SBG) - The Alaska National Guard has established precautionary efforts despite having some of the lowest coronavirus contraction rates and death tolls in the United States. According to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, there are 337 coronavirus cases and a total of 9 deaths statewide.

The state has had some of the lowest concentrations rates and death tolls in the nation.

Gov. Mike Dunleavy, in early March, activated the State Emergency Operations Center under Alaska's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. The purpose was to create a network of resources for local communities and agencies across the state.

According to the Department of Defense, Joint Task Force Alaska also worked with the Alaska Organized Militia. Alaska Organized Militia includes the Army and Air National Guard, the Alaska State Defense Force and the Alaska Naval Militia.

"I can't help but be aware of the fact that we stand, once again, on the stage of history," said Army Capt. James Tollefson, a Joint Task Force Alaska operations plans officer. "The COVID crisis will subside eventually and be followed by landmark reforms and legislation, just like [Hurricane] Katrina, the Enron collapse, the Great Recession and 9/11 were. Each of us engaged in this response will have played a small but essential part of that historical drama."

In situations like state emergencies and the coronavirus pandemic, the National Guard is often a last resort to help fulfill missions "when other state, private and nonprofit resources are unavailable or unable to meet requests directly related to an emergency or disaster."

During this pandemic, the Joint Task Force Alaska, the Alaska National Guard and the rest of the organized militia have worked together to support the communities throughout Alaska that are dealing with the effects of this pandemic.

Link: <https://kmpb.com/news/nation-world/alaska-national-guard-initiates-proactive-response-to-coronavirus-pandemic>

More: <https://local12.com/news/coronavirus/alaska-national-guard-initiates-proactive-response-to-coronavirus-pandemic>

— NOVEL CORONAVIRUS/COVID-19 IN ALASKA—

2. Restaurants can open, but doing it safely is complicated, owners say, and many are taking it slow

Alaska Public Media by Lex Treinen/April 24

When Anchorage restaurants are officially allowed to reopen for dine-in service on Monday, not all of them say they'll be unlocking their doors. Instead, they are taking it slow and with caution.

The risks are high to employees and the public. Logistics are complicated. Rules and best practices are unclear. Safety gear is in short supply. Rushing it, they say, doesn't seem wise.

Middleway Cafe, 49th State Brewing, and Glacier Brewhouse are among those who say they're not planning on reopening for dine-in immediately

Bridget Tatalias, general manager of Simon & Seafort's, is also leery of opening back up too soon. She's awaiting guidance from the mayor before making a final decision.

"I really need to know what the rules of engagement are gonna be before we put a firm timetable together," she says.

But there are also other logistical issues that she needs to resolve even with a green light from the city. If disposable menus are required, will they be able to get them printed? And what about PPE for staff? She says corporate partners are working to secure a shipment she still isn't sure when she'll be able to have enough to safely reopen.

"They are working on a supply source for us and whether we can have them and have the appropriate amount available to the team by Monday is yet to be determined. Right now, I don't have them in the facility," she said.

And with dozens of restaurants vying for the same materials, competition to get enough will be tough. While she's hoping to open as soon as possible, Monday looks increasingly unlikely.

For Barb Whitney, a chef and part-owner of Red Chair Cafe, Monday can't come soon enough.

"If we were able to open tomorrow, we would be able to open tomorrow, so we are all set to open, our tables are all set to be spaced out correctly, we're set up for 25% capacity, we're stocked and prepped and we are ready to go," she said.

Whitney says that she's confident the sanitation and distancing procedures they've already come up with are enough to keep customers and staff safe, and is awaiting further guidance from the mayor. She understands the concerns about a hasty reopening. But she says that keeping the 6-year-old business alive and her tight-knit staff of 7 on the payroll is at the front of her mind.

"It's really emotional for me. The motivation is that we need to get back to work in order to survive. I understand people's concerns, and we are very sympathetic to that and aware of my staff and I. We need to get back to work," she says.

Glenn Brady, the owner of Silver Gulch Brewery, already has experience with dine-in service during the coronavirus. His restaurant in Ted Stevens International Airport is one of the few that's been allowed to stay open for dine-in service during the pandemic, and he says he's developed increasingly stringent cleaning protocols as the virus spread.

"Backs of chairs that you might normally do every day, now we're doing every customer. In addition to transitioning to entirely one-way packaging. No more dirty dishes or glassware coming back, everything is in single-use."

He says as a restaurant owner and board member of CHARR, the state's restaurant lobbying group, he's been pushing for strict guidelines for reopening. And he says he's not entirely happy with the guidelines released by Governor Dunleavy earlier this week, which he says he thought were rushed out without enough consultation with industry.

"Yes, that's actually a sore subject at the moment," he said.

Brady says he's was hoping that industry would have more than four days from the time the governor announced the reopening to prepare. He says that would have allowed restaurants to train staff in a way that would keep them safe, something he sees as a key to making sure statewide spread of the disease is kept at a minimum.

"It gets back to employee safety, customer safety, and safety of the community. We have to make sure we get this right when we reopen," he says.

Restaurants around town know that one mistake could be costly, not only to their own reputations but to the community as a whole.

Link: <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2020/04/24/restaurants-can-open-but-doing-it-safely-is-complicated-and-many-are-taking-it-slow/>

Related: <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2020/04/24/as-anchorage-hair-salons-prepare-to-reopen-some-say-they-wish-they-had-more-notice-and-guidance/>

<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/2020/04/23/questions-about-local-control-linger-as-alaska-adjusts-health-mandate-on-reopening/>

3. New DHSS graph shows Alaska may be flattening the curve, 2 new cases announced

KTUU bu Gilbert Cordova/April 23

ANCHORAGE (KTUU) - The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services reported two new cases of COVID-19 bringing Alaska's COVID-19 case count to 337.

Both cases are in Anchorage involving a man in his 60s and a young boy under the age of 10.

Over 200 people are being reported as having recovered across the state

DHSS says fewer than 10 of the cases reported in Alaska are "nonresident cases."

42 confirmed cases or persons under investigation are currently hospitalized according to DHSS data.

Deaths statewide remain at nine.

DHSS added new features to its website including the below Epidemic curve by onset date and a projected Cumulative case curve. The new section is called COVID-19 Modeling.

The graph shows a downward trend. DHSS says "the decreasing trend is likely a result of adherence to the many health mandates."

Despite the downward trend in the projected epidemic curve, the above graph which shows cumulative daily incidents shows a flattening of the curve with a possible increase as time goes on. In notes posted next to the graph, DHSS says "the flattening of our trajectory is likely a result of adherence to the many health mandates."

Municipality of Anchorage: 166

Anchorage: 151

Chugiak: 4

Eagle river: 8

Girdwood: 3

Kenai Peninsula Borough: 19

Anchor Point: 1

Homer: 2

Kenai: 4

Seward: 3

Soldotna: 6

Sterling: 3

Fairbanks North Star Borough: 79

Fairbanks: 63

North Pole: 15

Other: 1

Southeast Fairbanks Census Area: 1

Delta Junction: 1

Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area: 1

Other: 1

Matanuska-Susitna Borough: 20

Palmer: 9

Wasilla: 11

Northern Census Area: 1

Nome: 1

Southeast Alaska: 48

Juneau: 27

Ketchikan: 16

Petersburg: 3

Craig: 2

Bethel Census Area: 1

Bethel: 1

Kodiak Island Borough: 1

Kodiak: 1

Link: <https://www.ktuu.com/content/news/Two-new-COVID-19-cases-announced-new-graph-by-DHSS-shows-possible-flattening-569899931.html>

4. Food pantries report surge in demand as more Alaskans are laid off and furloughed

Anchorage Daily News by Aubrey Wieber/April 23

Food pantries across Alaska have been reporting a significant increase in demand as more Alaskans lose their jobs or have their hours cut due to COVID-19-related business closures.

Food Bank of Alaska CEO Jim Baldwin said his organization estimates that demand has increased by roughly 75%, but that's anecdotal — there isn't hard data to show exactly how many more people are relying on donated food.

But the increase in demand is undeniable, Baldwin said. He said the Food Bank of Alaska distributes food to about 150 partner organizations around the state, about half in Anchorage and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Those organizations are seeing unfamiliar faces who say they are in need due to layoffs, Baldwin said.

"They are hearing that," he said. "They know their regular clientele, the folks they would be serving on a regular basis."

Baldwin said so far, they have been able to meet that need.

"Right now, we are in a pretty good situation," he said. "We have had a tremendous outpouring of support."

About a month ago, he started sourcing more food from the Lower 48. In a normal year, the Food Bank of Alaska would receive about 1 million pounds of food from the federal government. So far in 2020, it has received 2 million pounds, and more is likely on the way, Baldwin said.

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Normally, 25% to 30% of the organization's food is purchased from the Lower 48, but right now it's about half. That means more food needs to be shipped up.

Matson and TOTE Maritime both donate shipping container space to the food bank, and they have increased that capacity during the pandemic.

Tote's increase went from one container per month to one or two per week. Each container holds about 43,000 pounds of food, according to Baldwin.

Baldwin said there is a little increase in competition to purchase food from the Lower 48, as food banks across the country are seeing a spike in demand. It forces him to plan ahead. He said the Food Bank of Alaska has about six weeks' worth of food on hand, so to keep that buffer, he needs food coming in as quickly as it's going out.

"The supply chain is still really good, but there is a strain on the system in the Lower 48," he said. "They are not able to turn around and meet our orders like they would regularly."

The food gathered locally is mostly donated from supermarkets and wholesalers, Baldwin said. That's expected to continue through the summer, which is generally a busy part of the year as children are out of school and lose access to school meals.

Baldwin said he's tuning in to the daily public briefings from Anchorage Mayor Ethan Berkowitz and Gov. Mike Dunleavy. Both laid out plans this week to begin opening segments of the economy slowly.

That will help, Baldwin said, but it's hard to predict the impact of a closed tourism season this summer.

"If we don't have the funds and the resources come June, July, August, that's where it's going to be a little tight," he said. "The need will be there."

Link: <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/anchorage/2020/04/23/food-pantries-report-surge-in-demand-as-more-alaskans-are-laid-off-and-furloughed/>

Related: <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/anchorage/2020/04/08/donors-asked-to-contribute-500000-to-feed-children-and-families-in-anchorage/>

<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/2020/04/22/more-than-60000-alaskans-have-applied-for-jobless-benefits-as-covid-19-closures-continue/>

— NOVEL CORONAVIRUS/COVID-19 NATIONAL GUARD NEWS—

5. National Guard COVID-19 Response

The National Guard/April 24

188th Wing Nurse serves on front line to battle COVID-19; West Virginia Guard conducts testing at state hospitals; Cal Guard helps run 2 homeless shelters in Long Beach; Polish military medical team joins Illinois' virus response; and more.

Latest news articles: <https://www.nationalguard.mil/coronavirus/>

6. Latest National Guard coronavirus update: Troop count at 41,600

Military Times by Howard Altman/April 23

The number of Guard troops mobilized in the effort to cope with the coronavirus pandemic continues to increase.

There are more 41,600 Air and Army National Guard professionals supporting the COVID-19 crisis response at the direction of their governors as of Wednesday afternoon. That's an increase of about 2,900 from Tuesday.

In addition, 39 states, three territories and the District of Columbia have now been approved for use of federal funds for state missions under Title 32.

As of Wednesday morning, 713 Guard troops had tested positive for COVID-19, according to the latest figures provided by the Pentagon. That was an increase of 31 from Tuesday.

Of those troops activated in the COVID-19 response, 28,700 are currently under orders authorized for Title 32 502(f) status, said Army Master Sgt. W. Michael Houk, a spokesman for the National Guard Bureau.

"As states amend orders and issue new ones based on their needs this number will keep moving," he told Military Times. "Also based on response needs, as determined at the state level, some orders may remain under state active duty."

The status, ordered by President Donald Trump, means the federal government is picking up 100 percent of the cost, with control remaining in the hands of governors. It also means that those troops — risking their health and that of their families by being on the front lines of the coronavirus fight — receive healthcare and increased housing allowance equal to active duty and reserve troops doing the same work.

There was an initial catch. Only troops on 31-day orders were eligible for the increased benefits. That problem, however, was since fixed by Trump and now states are going through the process of either initiating or amending those orders to meet the 31-day requirement for increased troop benefits.

Speaking at a press conference Wednesday afternoon, Army Col. Eric Allely, the Maryland Army National Guard state surgeon, said that while Guard troops in his state go off those orders on May 8, efforts are underway to extend them.

"It may not be every soldier and airmen," he said, but one way or other we will remain on duty."

Allely said that the MDNG would follow CDC guidelines for isolating troops coming off duty, but would not discuss the numbers of troops tested or testing positive for the virus, citing DoD guidelines.

In addition to those on Title 32 orders, there are also about 10,000 Guard troops across the nation on State Activated Duty who are not receiving increased benefits.

National Guard officials highlighted some of their efforts:

Health and medical specialists from the Maryland National Guard's medical detachment, 224th and 104th Area Support Medical companies have visited nearly 40 nursing homes and children's facilities. About 30 MDNG members are supporting the Maryland Department of Health in the state's COVID-19 mitigation and suppression efforts with multi-discipline assessment teams to help safeguard the citizens at nursing homes and other facilities across the state.

Allely, the MDANG state surgeon, said that, among other lines of effort, troops in his state are working to help skilled nursing homes with medical support, assessment and care teams.

When a skilled nursing facility reaches out to MDNG through the county health department to the state, MDNG gets a notification, Allely said.

The assessment teams find out the status of COVID-19 cases, the amount and types of personal protective gear the facility has and then conduct interviews with staff and administration and take a tour. That allows the teams to help the facilities fine tune their procedures and address any short- and long-term equipment shortages .

The testing teams bring test kits to the sites, and assist the facilities in the collection of the tests, which MDNG personnel collect and take to the state labs, where they are turned around in a day or two, depending on what time they are collected. They also bring along fit teams to help personnel make sure their personal protective gear fits properly.

The care teams, working with the Maryland Department of Health and major hospitals, helps the facilities set up quarantine areas and support efforts to treat patients in house, which can have lower risks than transporting and staying in hospitals.

For more on response missions and individual state efforts:

<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/coronavirus/2020/04/22/latest-national-guard-coronavirus-update-troop-count-at-41600/>

— NOVEL CORONAVIRUS/COVID-19 NATIONAL & WORLD—

7. Veterans Affairs records 400th death from coronavirus

Military Times by Leo Shane III/April 24

The Department of Veterans Affairs reached another grim milestone Friday with the 400th death of a patient from the fast-spreading coronavirus, all coming in the last 40 days.

As of Friday morning, 6,363 veterans in VA medical care have tested positive for the virus. Both of the number of cases and death have climbed steadily since mid-March.

So far, 71 VA facilities across the country have lost at least one patient to the illness. Nationwide, more than 46,000 Americans have died from complications related to the virus.

Among the VA population, about 8 percent of individuals who have been tested were confirmed to have contracted the virus. Testing has ramped up significantly in recent weeks, with fewer than 17,000 patients tested on April 1 and more than 78,000 tested as of Thursday.

The New York City area alone accounts for more than one-third of VA's coronavirus fatalities. Four VA sites near the metropolitan area — including East Orange, N.J. — have totaled 149 deaths, all in just the last few weeks.

The death rate among VA patients who have contracted the virus is more than 6 percent, a figure that has risen as high as 6.5 percent over the last few weeks. In early April, fewer than 4 percent of patients battling the illness eventually died from it.

Nationally, the rate of death among all patients who test positive for coronavirus has risen to more than 5.5 percent. That level was also about 4 percent in early April, according to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The VA patient population being tested and treated for coronavirus may be more vulnerable to the illness because it is significantly older and less healthy than the American population as a whole. Medical experts have said that elderly and infirm individuals are particularly susceptible to fatal respiratory issues connected to the virus.

The department's medical center in New Orleans continues to have the most active coronavirus cases, with 454. Three other New York City area VA hospitals have also topped 400 cases. Seventeen medical centers across the country have recorded at least 100 cases.

To date, 133 VA hospitals and health care facilities have recorded at least one case of coronavirus.

Until recently, VA had been reporting the approximate age of all department deaths. However, that information is no longer being made public. All but one of the deaths publicly reported have been aged 50 or older.

In addition, more than 1,900 VA employees have tested positive for coronavirus, and at least 20 have died. VA officials have said six of those individuals had direct contact with patients.

Union officials and department leaders have sparred publicly in recent weeks over the availability of personal protective equipment at VA facilities. Employee advocates have reported shortages and rationing among staff, but VA leaders have continually insisted that supplies are adequate to meet needs.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal this week, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie acknowledged that the department did face mask shortages in recent weeks but said he is confident staff has adequate supply levels now.

Link: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2020/04/24/veterans-affairs-records-400th-death-from-coronavirus/>

8. This is the plan to get all service members tested for COVID-19

Military Times by Meghann Myers/April 24

The Defense Department has set a goal to be testing 60,000 service members a day for coronavirus by June, but they won't get there all at once. The plan is to start testing the most at-risk and most essential troops first, then work their way toward the rest of the force as testing capacity increases.

Of highest priority are active and Reserve health care workers at field hospitals and other alternative care centers, followed closely by high-end counter-terror units and members of the nuclear triad, including bomber crews, submariners and ballistic missile units.

“It’s important to note that testing by itself ... does not enable us at this time to improve our readiness and availability,” Air Force Gen. John Hyten, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters Wednesday. “Testing alone does not do that.”

But as part of a protocol that includes screening for symptoms, tracking potential exposure and 14-day quarantine periods, it could be the key to deploying units and bringing in new recruits safely.

The ability to test 60,000 troops a day, which would cover all active duty troops in a few weeks, won’t happen all at once.

Instead, Hyten said, Defense Secretary Mark Esper has signed off on a four-tier scheme: tier one would include critical national capabilities, like nuclear forces; tier two includes deployed forces, tier three includes forward-deployed or redeploying forces; and tier four is the remainder of the force.

Tier one, along with all new basic trainees, will complete testing this month, Hyten said, adding, “and I think we’ll rapidly get into tier two and tier three.”

In simpler terms, special operations counter-terror units and nuclear triad units get first priority, followed by those deployed in support of operations outside the U.S., following by troops stationed abroad, including Europe or the Indo-Pacific — as well as troops heading home from deployments — and then everyone else who is currently stateside.

DoD is working with the White House, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Health and Human Services Department and industry to get enough testing kits and test analysis equipment, Hyten said, to take care of the supply problem.

Then the issue will be getting those supplies out to all of the remote locations where troops are deployed, but that will be the easier part.

“Because when it becomes a logistics problem, that’s something we’re really good at,” he said.

There will eventually be enough testing supplies, he added, but the challenge will be prioritizing where they go.

Meanwhile, doctors, nurses, respiratory specialists and medics working in Army field hospitals, aboard Navy hospitals ships or the Javits center in New York, for example, are considered more like “tier zero,” Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist told Military Times.

They, along with the symptomatic DoD employees and personnel already being tested, will continue to track their symptoms and exposures, along with testing.

For the more than 40,000 National Guard members who are doing pandemic response support in every state and territory, local medical staff will determine whether they should be tested, based on their exposure.

As of Wednesday, 713 Guardsmen have tested positive for COVID-19, including mobilized troops. Though they are observing social distancing guidelines where possible and covering up with protective gear otherwise, working in their communities — including staffing mobile testing sites — puts them at higher risk for contracting the virus from members of the public.

DoD is also looking into antibody testing, as more and more evidence emerges that coronavirus can be symptom-free in many of those infected.

Researchers are going to reach out to volunteers for antibody testing, Norquist said, including thousands of sailors assigned to the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt.

Of more than 700 who have tested positive, roughly more than half of those sailors were asymptomatic. And further, since crew members evacuated the carrier and began quarantine in Guam, previously negative sailors have developed symptoms and tested positive.

“By putting them in quarantine for 14 days, by the end of the 14 days — if they did, in fact, have it — it would most likely have developed to the point that either they’d have symptoms, or a test would catch them even if they were asymptomatic,” Norquist said.

The trick — for troops who are preparing to deploy, or who need to travel for training or other temporary assignments — will be the right combination of testing and isolation to catch any exposure and give the virus a chance to show up.

And while antibody testing will be part of the scheme, Hyten said, the research is still thin.

“Beyond the current diagnostic and screening tests, the science is not clear at this moment, exactly, [on] what we get from an antibody test,” he said.

While a test might tell someone that they have successfully fought off COVID-19, it’s not yet known how long that immunity lasts, or whether a freshly mutated strain could infect someone with antibodies again.

Link: <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/04/22/this-is-the-plan-to-get-all-service-members-tested-for-covid-19/>

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