



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Task force: Non-emergency callers should call COVID-19 hotline

HOT SPRINGS – Reiterating the importance of COVID-19 non-emergency callers using the local hotline, steps taken by hospitals in Hot Springs to prepare for the possibility of an increase in cases and the continued efforts to acquire personal protective equipment (PPE) were among the topics discussed at this morning’s Hot Springs/Garland County COVID-19 Task Force meeting.

The meeting, which was held via videoconference to ensure social distancing, included more than 15 first responder, healthcare and local authority representatives.

The Hot Springs/Garland County COVID-19 Call Center/Hotline is available at 501-760-4307, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, as a first line of triage in an effort not to overrun our hospitals. The hotline is also available for adjoining and nearby counties, for which Hot Springs serves as the regional healthcare provider. Another option for anyone exhibiting symptoms is to call their primary care physician. Calls to 9-1-1 should be solely limited to anyone requiring an emergency response.

For those possibly needing emergency medical assistance, both the local COVID-19 hotline and LifeNet have experienced a number of callers who have expressed concern about being transported to the emergency room in fear of possible contraction of the virus.

“I want our public to know that our emergency departments are taking every precaution with regards to mitigating the spread of COVID-19. The emergency departments are still operating and are available for emergency treatment, and people who are experiencing things such as chest pain or shortness of breath should go to an emergency department or call 9-1-1.” said Garland County Health Officer Dr. Gene Shelby.

Another concern discussed by the task force was regarding some local employers requiring a negative COVID-19 test result before allowing employees to return to work.

“Employers cannot require employees to have a negative COVID-19 test result before returning to work after any illness because testing is still limited and not available unless certain criteria are met,” said Dr. Shelby. “Employees should contact their physician or call the hotline for guidance about returning to work or whether and for how long they should self-quarantine.”

Local hospitals collaboratively made the move to cease all non-essential procedures in preparation for a possible rise in COVID-19 patients, which has translated into a significant decrease in overall patient volume. Also, the updated visitor restrictions have been accepted and supported by the community, they reported.

A concerted effort continues by health administrators and officials from the county and city to obtain PPE. Bo Robertson, Garland County Emergency Management Director, shared that the second shipment of PPE arrived this weekend into the state from the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS).

To help those locally who are already impacted by COVID-19, a number which is likely to grow in correlation to the probable increase in cases, the United Way of the Ouachitas (UWO) has established a COVID-19 Relief Fund. The funds will be restricted to those who can prove need based on COVID-19-related issues, such as loss or cut-back in work, household income drop because one parent is now unemployed, etc. Those who qualify could receive assistance for food, utilities and rent, based on available funds at the time. Donations can be made at www.bit.ly/UWO-COVID, by calling 501-623-2505 or by mail at 233 Hobson Avenue, Hot Springs, AR 71913.

Sheep Dog Impact Assistance of Central Arkansas is responding to the COVID-19 crisis by providing delivery of food and/or required medications to the elderly, disabled and other high-risk individuals by medically-screened and vetted drivers. The non-profit has been working with local authorities, medical advisers and local grocery stores to coordinate critical assistance following the guidelines provided by the CDC and federal and state officials to ensure the safety of volunteers and those they are assisting. For more information, call 501-712-5514, extension 707, or visit <https://podio.com/webforms/24273907/1766322>. For those interested in volunteering, visit <https://podio.com/webforms/24293465/1768386>.

Sarah Fowler, UWO executive director, said she is also working on two grant applications today to try and secure additional funding. She added that the Arkansas Community Foundation, in addition to their mini-grants, is looking to partner with Cooperative Christian Ministries and Clinic (CCMC) to provide grocery cards to those who have been impacted by COVID-19. The Salvation Army is currently setting appointments for assistance on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The UWO will be keeping their online resource guide page updated regularly, which will include day cares that are still in operation and that have openings. Sections with an asterisk (*) have updated information. The online resource guide is available at www.hsresourceguide.org.

A sentiment that was echoed time and again during the meeting was that the group as a whole is communicating very effectively, and that each entity has been working extremely well in response and preparation to COVID-19 locally.

“Everyone has been working non-stop to ensure our area healthcare system continues to operate at the high level to which we are all accustomed, despite these extraordinary circumstances,” said Hot Springs Fire Chief Ed Davis, who has been serving as coordinator of the task force. “Our healthcare providers and first responders are included in the group to acquire all the PPE and other equipment that will be needed as we move forward. They are doing so much with so little. It’s amazing.”

An important reminder that public health officials continue to stress the importance of washing hands often, keeping social distance, staying home when sick and disinfecting surfaces often. For more information, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus>.