



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 20, 2020

COVID-19 testing in Garland County continues to mitigate the spread

HOT SPRINGS – The coordinated efforts of the Hot Springs/Garland County Call Center, hospitals and clinics and city and county authorities who are acquiring testing kits and supplies continue to be the driving force behind the successful COVID-19 mitigation in our area.

At the virtual meeting of the Hot Springs/Garland County COVID-19 Task Force on April 20, Garland County Health Officer Dr. Gene Shelby shared more information about how Garland County is leading the way in regards to testing capacity across the state.

“Among the 10 most populous counties in the state, Garland County is way ahead,” he said. “As far as testing, we are the stars. The hospitals and clinics need to keep it up, and they need to keep getting the credit they deserve.”

Garland County has the eighth largest countywide population in Arkansas, but is only second in total number of tests to Pulaski County. As of April 19, Garland County had completed a total of 1,517 tests, with the number of total tested per 10,000 at 15.4. Pulaski County had done 2,192, and their total tested per 10,000 was 5.6. The county with the second-highest test ratio per 10,000 residents was Faulkner County at 7.8.

Bo Robertson, Garland County emergency management director, echoed Dr. Shelby’s sentiments about testing and added that the highest positivity rate in the county so far has been 9.3%. With it now at around 7%, the hope is that we are trending downward.

A downward trend in call volume was reported from the COVID-19 Call Center. It will remain open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week, but Robertson and the center are working on having the 501-760-4307 number forwarded to a cell phone for weekend hours moving forward.

Some callers to the area call center have asked about those with no insurance or no personal vehicle. Healthcare representatives encouraged those without insurance to still come for evaluation and

possible testing if they feel they may have been exposed or may be symptomatic. They will receive care, as well as be provided opportunities for financial assistance relating to the charges. Those without a vehicle are welcome to walk up to the tents at the drive-thru locations for service.

Robertson credited the call center staff for identifying and effectively taking care of a cluster of positive cases at a congregate facility off Highway 7 North on Walnut Valley Road.

The call center has been the first line of triage for possible COVID-19 cases, and will continue to be; but with the Arkansas Department of Health expanding the criteria for testing, the task force has decided to also publicize the county's drive-thru evaluation locations:

- 1629 Airport Road (Garland County)
- 4419 Highway 7 North (Hot Springs Village)
- 124 Hollywood Avenue (Hot Springs)
- 100 McGowan Court (Hot Springs)
- 4517 Park Avenue (Garland County)

Volumes continue to be low for area hospitals, as shared weekly by CHI St. Vincent and National Park Medical Center representatives on the task force. They want to ensure those in the region that the hospitals are available to take care of individuals in need. Area hospitals are not overwhelmed by the virus, as hospitals might be in the nation's hot spots. In fact, the number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients in Hot Springs has remained very low. Telemedicine has helped fill in gaps of health care during the pandemic, but there are instances where telemedicine is not effective. Residents should not hesitate to go to their doctor, or if emergency care is needed, to the hospital.

Both the Garland County Sheriff's Office and the Hot Springs Police Department shared a continuing of calls relating to domestic violence, mental health issues and breaking and entering, particularly of storage facilities and vehicles. Asst. Police Chief Walt Everton said that although call volumes in these categories are presently up, which match national trends, the annual statistics are still coming in lower than by this time last year. It was also mentioned that more people appear to be getting out and about, as opposed to the stay-at-home recommendations set forth by the Arkansas Department of Health and the Governor's Office.

City Manager Bill Burrough shared that the City is adding \$15,000 to the \$254,000 of Community Development Block Grant funds being allocated to the COVID-19 response, whether it be for testing supplies or reagents, PPE, homeless outreach, or other pandemic-related needs. The application process will begin soon for these funds, and may be used for past expenses to help the call center and drive-thru clinics.

The United Way of the Ouachitas (UWO) is continuing to update the online resource guide at www.hsresourceguide.org, including information on available homeless shelters in the area. Also included is information about available area daycares, along with the comprehensive lists of around 25 categories including health, mental health, children, food, etc.

The UWO COVID-19 Relief Fund is still available for donations. Those receiving aid are required to prove COVID-19-related employment issues. 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.

For those still needing to file taxes, UWO continues to offer assistance. UWO will process tax returns for individuals by appointment by calling 501-623-2505. More information is available at <http://unitedwayouachitas.org/> and on the UWO Facebook at www.facebook.com/uwouachitas.

Dr. Shelby reminded the task force that physician clinics can make requests for PPE by using the website of the Arkansas Medical Society, arkmed.org, as it is coordinating PPE distribution to outpatient clinics.

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>.