

# RIO GRANDE COUNTY COVID-19

## *What is Rio Grande County Doing?*

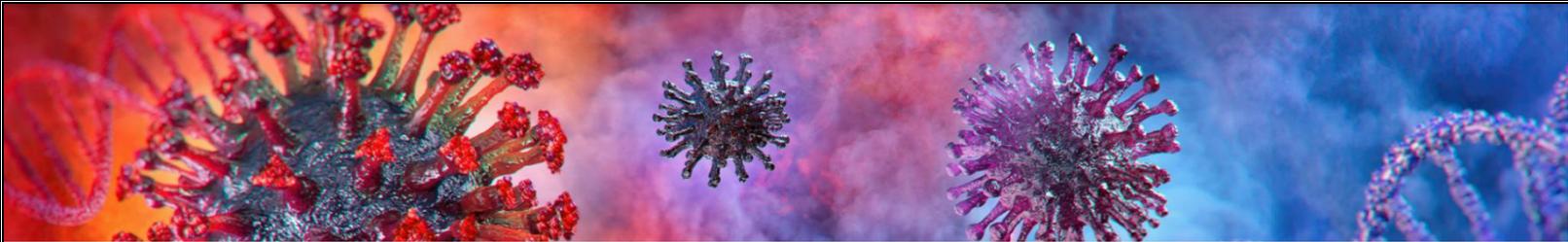
Rio Grande County departments are aggressively responding to this outbreak. On March 18<sup>th</sup> 2020 we declared a local disaster order and have activated our Public Health Emergency Operations Plan and are using the incident command system to allow for coordinated response efforts. We are working closely with the CDC, CDPHE, and our regional partners to prepare plans, procedures and mitigate during the pandemic. We are collecting resources and updating as much information out to the public as we can. We are here to lead you to the answers you need and connections you require.

The Public Health Department is continuing to monitor the health of individuals who are sick and contact those who may have been in contact with them. Our collaboration of efforts with Regional partners, our Emergency Manager and local hospitals allow us to remain up to date and ready for any new information.

Other departments and agencies within Rio Grande County are proactively updating their continuity of operations and continuity of government plans, ensuring that critical government services and functions will remain accessible if employees cannot continue to work in their regular facility.

Rio Grande County has taken the appropriate measure to ensure our county offices remain open. We are working with minimal staff, rotating shifts and promoting appointments and walk up windows.

Our competent staff and the government of Rio Grande County will continue to update and respond to the needs of our citizens. Plans are in place to ensure that we are prepared in the event of a natural disaster, severe storm or a public health crisis.



## Rio Grande County Requests Variance

In a special session Wednesday morning, Rio Grande County Commissioners voted unanimously to approve a request for a waiver to the “Safer at Home” state public health order.

Rio Grande County is requesting restaurants be opened up to 30% of seating capacity, churches be opened to 30% of seating capacity, gyms and fitness centers be opened up to 30% capacity and RV parks be opened with common areas at 30% capacity. Along with the openings, there would still be some restrictions. For each venue, there would still be conditions, but for each, there would be 6-foot distancing between people, sanitation requirements, you would still be asked to wear a mask when you are close to people and anyone who is sick will still be asked to stay at home.

This request is being made in light of the low incidence of COVID-19 in Rio Grande County. On March 23, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported and to date, there have been a total of seven cases. As of April 28, all cases had been released from isolation.

Requests to Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) have been taking about two weeks for a response. Until a response is received, Rio Grande County is still under the “Safer at Home” order. More information about this order can be found at [covid19.colorado.gov/safer-at-home](https://covid19.colorado.gov/safer-at-home)

The COVID-19 virus is still out there. As always, you should wash your hands often, cover any sneezes or coughs and be cautious about interactions with other people. It is still recommended that you wear a mask when you are around people and if you are high risk, take extra care. Above all, if you are sick, stay home and don't share it with others. Keeping our numbers low is how we will be able to get back to normal- in stages, of course.

**Rio Grande**  
  
**H O S P I T A L**

310 County Road 14  
Del Norte, CO 81132  
719-657-2510  
May 8, 2020

Jill Hunsaker Ryan  
Executive Director  
CDPHE  
4300 Cherry Creek, Drive S  
Denver, Co. 80246

Dear Ms. Ryan,

As CEO of Rio Grande Hospital, located in Del Norte, I would like to express my support of the Rio Grande County variance application as presented. Rio Grande Hospital serves the Rio Grande County population as a hospital and clinic, both of which are located in Del Norte. We have partnered closely with Rio Grande Public Health Department meeting daily and more often when necessary; and with the Rio Grande County Board of Commissioners; and I believe the proposal for lifting some restrictions is organized and allows for close monitoring if the COVID number of cases would change significantly. It is necessary at this point to consider the impact of the past 6 weeks' restrictions from a health perspective as well as a financial one. In a rural area, only a slight economic change will cause many hardships area-wide. Thank you for considering the approval to re-open some businesses slowly and for the other variances requested.

Please feel free to call me if there are questions from the hospital and clinic perspective.

Sincerely,



Arlene Harms  
CEO  
Rio Grande Hospital  
719-657-4104

**RIO GRANDE COUNTY**  
**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

[www.riograndecounty.org](http://www.riograndecounty.org)

925 6th St., Room 200  
Del Norte, Colorado  
81132

5-7-2020

(719) 657-2744  
Fax (719) 657-2514

Jill Hunsaker Ryan, Executive Director  
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment  
4300 Cherry Creek South Drive  
Denver, CO 80246

BOARD OF  
COMMISSIONERS

RE: Variance Request for Executive Order D 2020 044 and Public Health Order 20-28

John Noffske  
Chairman

Dear Ms. Ryan,

Suzanne Bothell  
Commissioner

Rio Grande County is respectfully requesting a variance from the provisions of Governor Polis' Executive Order D 2020 044 Safer at Home, and CDPHE Order 20-28. A variance, as outlined in CDPHE Order 20-28, III.V. and Appendix G, will allow Rio Grande County to implement its own reopening plans for Restaurants (CDPHE Order II.A.), Places of Worship (CDPHE Order II.B. and Appendix F.5), and Gyms (CDPHE Order II.A.4.) and RV Parks.

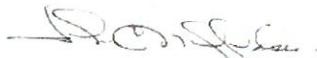
Gene Glover  
Commissioner

Administrator  
Tricia Slater

The Rio Grande County Commissioners, Rio Grande County Board of Health and the Rio Grande County Public Health Director have collaborated in the development of this variance request with the Rio Grande Hospital Administrator. Rio Grande County's local data supports a gradual re-opening, and will help our community restore the balance between community health and our economy.

On behalf of Rio Grande County residents, business owners, families and communities, we would appreciate your consideration and approval of our variance.

Sincerely,



John Noffske, Chair  
Board of County  
Commissioners and  
Board of Health



Suzanne Bothell  
Board of County  
Commissioners and  
Board of Health



Gene Glover  
Board of County  
Commissioners and  
Board of Health



Emily Brown  
Rio Grande County  
Public Health



**COLORADO**  
Department of Public  
Health & Environment

# Application for Variance

Name of County: Rio Grande County

Name of Submitter: Tricia Slater

Rio Grande County County requests a variance from the following restrictions in Executive Order D 2020 044 and/or Public Health Order 20-28.

List the sections of Executive Order D 2020 044 and/or Public Health Order 20-28 that a variance is being sought for:

Restaurants (CDPHE Order II.A.1. and Appendix F.4),  
Places of Worship (Appendix F.5),  
Gyms (CDPHE Order V.), and  
RV Parks (CDPHE Appendix F.2).

Summarize alternate restrictions being proposed to replace the above-referenced restrictions and indicate where in the Plan these alternate restrictions are addressed:

Restaurants - Limit the number of customers to 30% of seating capacity  
Gyms - Limit the number of clients to 30% of capacity  
Places of worship - Limit participants to 30% of seating capacity  
RV Parks - Restrictions on group gatherings and common areas, limiting gatherings to 30 % capacity.

Upload your county COVID-19 Suppression Plan and documentation demonstrating approval by the county commissioners, and confirmation from all impacted local hospitals that they can serve all individuals needing their care. Provide a brief summary of each of the following elements contained in the county COVID-19 Suppression Plan and indicate where in the Plan more information can be found for each element.

## 1. Prevalence of COVID -19 within the county

Rio Grande County's first 2 positive cases were reported on March 23rd and to date, we have had 7 positive cases. Our last case was closed April 28th, and currently have no cases under investigation. Of the 7 cases, we have had 3 hospitalizations, all have been discharged. This can be found on page 5 sec 1

## 2. Hospital Capacity

The one hospital in Rio Grande County, Rio Grande Hospital, has stated they have the capacity to meet the community needs. The three hospitals in the San Luis valley are also working closely together to partner on COVID response, with SLV Health in Alamosa being designated as the regional COVID hospital.



3. Local containment measures

New cases will be detected and contained by testing, isolation, and investigation. There are three healthcare facility nurse hotlines set up in the San Luis valley to provide screening and refer for testing. County public health nurses, along with regional staff and volunteers, will be utilized.

4. Conditions to determine the variance is not providing adequate COVID-19 protection and the triggers for tightening restrictions.

Rio Grande County currently has no active positive cases, and has only had 7 confirmed cases. There have been no positive cases active for over 14 days. The San Luis Valley Public Health Partnership is tracking case numbers, nurse triage data, and hospital and EMS capacity to monitor overall capacity needs.

 Confirm that the variance requested does not lessen or eliminate the protections for Vulnerable Individuals in the Safer at Home Order and PHO 20-28.

 Confirm that the county will collect and monitor data to evaluate the impacts of the variance. and make such data available upon request by CDPHE.

Additional information relevant to the requested variance

Notwithstanding the variances requested herein, the County is not only committed to adhering to the remainder of the applicable Public Health Orders of the CDPHE, but will also continue to promote the social distancing recommendations of the CDC to help further slow and ultimately stop the spread of COVID-19 within our community.

By signing below, I attest that I am authorized pursuant to the adoption of the COVID-19 Suppression Plan by the Board of County Commissioners to submit this variance request to CDPHE for consideration.

DocuSigned by:  
*Tricia Slater*  
E1B348DFC5294E2

2020-05-07

Signature

Date

For internal CDPHE use

CDPHE Executive Director

# RIO GRANDE COUNTY VARIANCE REQUEST & SUPPRESSION PLAN

May 6, 2020

## VARIANCE REQUEST

### VARIANCES REQUESTED

Rio Grande County is respectfully requesting a variance from some of the provisions of Governor Polis' Executive Order 2020 044 Safer at Home, and CDPHE Order 20-28. A variance, as outlined in CDPHE Order 20-28, III.V. and Appendix G., will allow Rio Grande County to implement its own reopening plans in a timeframe that best meets the needs of our communities for:

- Restaurants (CDPHE Order II.A.1. and Appendix F.4),
- Places of Worship (Appendix F.5),
- Gyms (CDPHE Order V.), and
- RV Parks (CDPHE Appendix F.2).

### ALTERNATE RESTRICTIONS

#### **Restaurants**

- Limit the number of customers to 30% of seating capacity
- Require signage on doors telling guests that are experiencing COVID-like symptoms not to enter
- Customers must wear face coverings when entering the restaurant until seated at their tables
- Customers must be asked prior to entering a restaurant whether they have any symptoms of COVID-19, and any customers reporting symptoms must be excluded
- Try to make accommodations for high-risk individuals (e.g. early opening, Senior hour)
- Group parties should be limited to six, ideally to members of the same household
- Bars shall remain **closed**, including those that are part of restaurants, except for preparing drinks for seated/takeout orders.
- Place markings on the floor to maintain at least six feet distance in customer lines

- In-room dining shall follow strict physical distancing (6 feet)
- Customers should make reservations online or by phone.
- Every effort should be made to notify customers via text or phone call when their table is ready so no waiting in a lobby is necessary
- Self-serving stations shall remain **closed** (drinking stations, bulk dry, etc.)
- Don't allow public sharing of utensils or condiments
- Buffets shall have an employee serving the food, no self-serving allowed
- Require employees and contracted workers to monitor daily for symptoms, using CDC symptom guidance.
- Employees who are symptomatic must be excluded from the workplace and be required to isolate until they are fever free for 72 hours AND other symptoms have improved AND at least 10 days have passed since their symptoms first appeared, per CDC guidance
- Employees and contracted workers must wear face coverings when in contact with the public and other employees
- Implement or maintain physical barriers for high-contact settings (e.g. cashiers) when possible
- Implement touchless payment methods when possible
- Stagger shifts if feasible to decrease employee numbers at the business
- Limit reusable items (i.e. menus, condiments)
- If possible, provide hand sanitizer at table or in highly used locations
- Frequent cleaning and disinfecting of all services and increased frequency of high touch items/areas

### **Places of Worship**

- Limit the number of participants to 30% of seating capacity AND spread people out so there is at least six feet distance between individuals or families throughout
- Require signage at doors telling guests that are experiencing COVID-like symptoms not to enter. Participants should be encouraged to wear a face covering both when entering and while present in the house of worship
- Participants must be asked whether they have COVID-19 symptoms at the door and excluded from the place of worship if symptomatic.
- Consider accommodations for high-risk individuals (e.g. online viewing)
- Place markings on floors to maintain at least six feet distance where lines form
- Implement touchless offering and communion options as much as possible
- Monitor employees and volunteers by checking for fever greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, asking if they have a severe cough that started or has gotten

worse in the last 48 hours, and by asking if they have shortness of breath that started in the last 48 hours

- Workforce (staff & volunteers) to monitor daily for symptoms, using CDC symptom guidance
- Workforce (staff & volunteers) who are symptomatic must be excluded from the facility and be required to isolate until they are fever free for 72 hours AND other symptoms have improved AND at least 10 days have passed since your symptoms first appeared, per CDC guidance
- Workforce (staff & volunteers) must wear face coverings when in contact with the public and other workforce members
- Perform frequent cleaning and disinfection of bathrooms and high-touch surfaces

### **Gyms**

- Limit the number of clients to 30% of capacity
- Customers must be asked whether they have COVID-19 symptoms at the door and excluded from the fitness center if symptomatic
- Post signs at entrances encouraging (or requiring if you choose) the public to wear cloth face coverings in order to enter the business and while in the facility, unless a face covering inhibits the participants ability to participate in the fitness activity
- Consider accommodations for high-risk individuals (e.g. early opening, Senior hour)
- Spread people out so there is at least six feet distance between individuals throughout
- Use of equipment in the fitness center must be limited to no closer than every other machine so that participants are not exercising right next to each other
- Smaller exercise rooms with poor ventilation should be discouraged from use
- Perform frequent environmental cleaning and disinfection of bathrooms and high-touch surfaces and between customer uses
- Require clients to disinfect equipment after every use
- Require employees and contracted workers to monitor daily for symptoms, using CDC symptom guidance.
- Employees who are symptomatic must be excluded from the workplace and be required to isolate until they are fever free for 72 hours AND other symptoms have improved AND at least 10 days have passed since your symptoms first appeared, per CDC guidance
- Employees and contracted workers must wear face coverings when in contact with the public and other employees

- Group classes are **not allowed**
- Sport courts shall remain **closed**
- Locker rooms shall remain **closed**
- Saunas, pools (indoor and outdoor) and shared spaces shall remain **closed**
- Food/drink bars shall remain **closed**

### **RV Parks**

- Restrictions on group gatherings and common areas
- Limit the number of people gathering to 30% capacity AND spread people out so there is at least six feet distance between individuals or families throughout
- Require signage at entrances informing guests that if they are experiencing COVID-like symptoms they shall not enter.
- Participants should be encouraged to wear a face covering.
- Participants must be asked whether they have COVID-19 symptoms at the door and excluded from entering if symptomatic.
- Place markings on floors to maintain at least six feet distance where lines form
- Monitor employees by checking for fever greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, asking if they have a severe cough that started or has gotten worse in the last 48 hours, and by asking if they have shortness of breath that started in the last 48 hours
- Workforce (staff & volunteers) to monitor daily for symptoms, using CDC symptom guidance.
- Workforce (staff & volunteers) who are symptomatic must be excluded from the facility and be required to isolate until they are fever free for 72 hours AND other symptoms have improved AND at least 10 days have passed since your symptoms first appeared, per CDC guidance
- Workforce (staff & volunteers) must wear face coverings when in contact with the public and other workforce members.
- Perform frequent cleaning and disinfection of bathrooms and high-touch surfaces
- Shower facilities, if applicable must be cleaned after each use
- Retail and food service on the park premises must follow all state and local Industry guidelines

## **SUPPRESSION PLAN**

The Rio Grande County Public Health Agency through the Public Health Director and the Board of Health, endorse this variance request. Rio Grande Hospital has stated they have the capacity to meet the community needs.

### **1. Prevalence of COVID-19 within the county**

- Rio Grande County's first two positive cases of COVID-19 were reported on March 23rd, and to date, we have had seven positive cases
- The number of daily positive COVID-19 cases has remained flat. Our last case was closed April 28th, and we currently have no cases under investigation
- Of the seven cases, we've had three hospitalizations, all of which have since been discharged. Among positive cases in Rio Grande County, two have been traced to a known source

### **2. Hospital Capacity**

Rio Grande Hospital has zero ICU beds, but does have access to three adult critical care ventilators for use in the emergency department. The San Luis Valley, through SLV Health in Alamosa and Conejos County Hospital in La Jara, has access to a total of 12 adult critical care ventilators, 6 ICU beds, and 7 negative pressure beds. Potential COVID patients are seen and initially treated in the Rio Grande Hospital Emergency room to include intubation and ventilator placement if needed. Once stabilized these patients are transported by ambulance to San Luis Valley Health Intensive care COVID unit. Rio Grande Hospital is not hospitalizing COVID patients until needing transitional care.

Rio Grande Hospital collects specimens for testing for all elective surgery patients and has been sending out testing for all healthcare staff, first responder staff, and patients at risk with symptoms, as well as all hospitalized patients. In the first month, 88 tests per month were performed at the local hospital with the ability to increase to 120 tests once surgery facilities are fully operational. None of the three hospitals are able to perform antigen or antibody testing due to reagents and/or equipment not being available to acquire or purchase presently. All testing must be sent outside of the Valley to other reference labs, but turnaround time for test results has been reduced.

Supply chains for PPE are currently still not fully open, but are improving. The San Luis Valley has a regional Public Health DOC (Department Operations Center) in operation. The DOC

Logistics section has a standardized process to accept 213RR requests for supplies to be filled regionally and to be requested to the State Emergency Operations Center through WebEOC.

### 3. Local Containment Measures

#### Rio Grande County Public Health Investigation Capacity

- Rio Grande County has two public health nurses who are currently able to do contact investigations on every positive case
- Our county works closely with the SLV Regional Epidemiologist, CDPHE's communicable disease staff, and if needed, from other SLV public health staff for information, coordination and support
- Case investigations are initiated within 24 hours. Contact tracing is also performed with people who were in direct contact with identified positive cases
- Outbreak Risks in High-Vulnerability Settings are Minimized
- Rio Grande County has a public health nurse who is in contact with the nurse at the Rio Grande County jail
- Rio Grande County has a public health nurse assigned to provide CDPHE and CDC policies and guidance to county-based nursing homes and assisted living facilities
- Rio Grande County relies on the San Luis Valley Regional Environmental Health team to work with child care facilities, and provides additional guidance as requested. Several facilities have a contract with Rio Grande County Public Health for Nurse Consultant services, and that nurse can provide more guidance within the contract

#### Workplace Preventive Measures are Established

- Rio Grande County is currently utilizing the state's Safer at Home guidance for business reopening. If Rio Grande County's variance is approved, public health will update guidance for the specific areas of the variance requested.
- Rio Grande County Public Health will partner closely with our Regional Environmental Health Program staff to best ensure consistent messaging across retail food establishments, as well as to align with state guidance once it becomes available.
- Guidelines for addressing COVID-19 prevention from CDPHE and the CDC have been distributed to schools, workplaces, and other stakeholders affected by state orders.

## Communities are Engaged

- Partnership between the County and High Valley Community Center to safely provide meal boxes to families throughout the County while promoting social distancing recommendations.
- Cooperation between the County and Faith community to inform the public
- Qualified community members have been identified and are willing to assist in expanded case investigation.
- Rio Grande County Public Health has been an active partner in the SLV Public Health Department Operations Center (DOC) (and the regional Emergency Coordination Group, when it was active). Regional operations largely support public health messaging through regional PIO and JIC, supply procurement and distribution through regional Logistics, and regional situational awareness.
- Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Rio Grande County Public Health provides updates, through an identified public health liaison, at the SLV COVID Response Conference Call. Attendees include SLV county emergency managers, regional DHSEM field representative, CDOT, SLV Small Business Development Center, Xcel Energy, SLV Rural Electric Cooperative, SLV Behavioral Health Group, Colorado State Patrol, CSP Dispatch, and other partners.
- Rio Grande County Public Health is an active partner in the SLV Healthcare Coalition. The SLV Healthcare Coalition has been meeting weekly through the COVID response, and a Testing Taskforce has been stood up to address regional COVID testing needs.
- Rio Grande County Public Health meets daily during the week with the other San Luis Valley public health agencies to support each other's work and align efforts.
- The two SLV Environmental Health staff are working with local retail food establishments to implement state orders, along with fielding additional business complaints and providing resources and guidance.
- Rio Grande County Public Health staff have been providing state and CDC guidance to affected businesses and community members, proactively and as requested.

#### **4. Conditions to determine the variance is not providing adequate COVID-19 protection and the triggers for tightening restrictions**

The San Luis Valley Public Health Department Operations Center monitors regional capacity data. Tracking includes current and closed case statistics and nurse call line data, as well as hospital, home health, and EMS capacity. This data is for Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Hinsdale, Mineral, Rio Grande, and Saguache counties, so provides a broader view of regional capacity that would impact Rio Grande County.

The determination on whether the physical distancing policies are working will be based on:

- 1) Keeping the proportion of positive tests to less than 15% of overall tests conducted;
- 2) The number of active positive cases for case investigation at one time to 10 or fewer; and
- 3) Staying below the threshold of 60% utilization of COVID-19 beds available in the San Luis Valley

(SLV RMC in Alamosa is the only hospital currently in the SLV with COVID beds (8).)

If respective numbers for any of these measures exceeds the stated limit, actions will be taken to increase physical distancing practices in Rio Grande County and it may be necessary to reissue local Safer at Home or Stay at Home orders. It is vital that everyone participate in this effort.

Although there is no doubt that Rio Grande County has been affected by the spread of COVID-19, the prevalence of the virus within Rio Grande County has been considerably less than that of other counties throughout the State of Colorado. Rio Grande County has not only seen a decline in cases over the past 14 days, but in fact, no new cases have been reported in Rio Grande County for more than two weeks. Rio Grande County attributes this decline to the County's close alliance with local hospitals and a network of other qualified health care professionals who, in collaboration with the County's Public Health Department and other County officials, have been able promptly identify cases, implement isolation procedures, and provide community supports to encourage compliance and effectuate containment. Notwithstanding the variances requested herein, the County is not only committed to adhering to the remainder of the applicable Public Health Orders of the CDPHE, but will also continue to promote the social distancing recommendations of the CDC to help further slow and ultimately stop the spread of COVID-19 within our community.