

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Tracking the spread of an invisible enemy

PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICIALS ARE TRYING TO DETERMINE WHERE THE CORONAVIRUS IS HEADED IN KERN COUNTY



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Dr. Dan Erickson, who has been working 14- to 16-hour days, holds a COVID-19 test kit. Erickson is co-owner of Accelerated Urgent Care, which has six locations in Bakersfield and is offering testing for COVID-19. He said he is doing about 200 tests a day and has had 96 tests come back positive so far.

BY STACEY SHEPARD
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What course the new coronavirus will take in Kern County is unknown and local officials have been reluctant to hazard a guess. But evidence is mounting that the disease is taking hold throughout a wide portion of the community and the severity of cases is increasing.

In the 20 days since the first positive case of COVID-19 was reported in Kern County, more than 200 people have now tested positive for the virus and two people have died.

Despite a steady increase at the outset, the rate of new cases picked up in the past week, doubling every three days, from 47 on March 28 to 101 on Tuesday to 199 by Friday. The total stood at 210 on Saturday, which included five nonresidents who tested positive while in Kern County.

"I do think the amount



After a patient is tested, the kit is placed in cold storage before it is sent to a lab to run the test for COVID-19. Erickson said he can now get results in 24 hours.

of virus in the community is growing but how much I don't know," said Dr. Royce Johnson, chief of infectious disease at Kern Medical and director of the Valley Fever Institute. Bottlenecks in testing and processing results when testing first started delayed many results, Johnson said, and we could be

seeing a bump in cases due to that.

But other indicators are pointing to an increasing problem.

As of Thursday, 27 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in Kern County and 12 of those patients were in the ICU, according to a California Health and

Human Services Agency dataset that reports hospitalizations by county. An additional 77 patients in hospitals had symptoms consistent with the coronavirus but were awaiting test results, and 23 of those cases were in the ICU, according to the

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PETROLEUM INDUSTRY

CRC weighs its options after oil and stock prices plummet

Major local employer examining its next steps after cancellation of deal to restructure \$5 billion debt

BY JOHN COX
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All Kern oil companies are having a rough time with low prices lately, but one faces a particularly tough outlook as it tries to stretch lower revenues to cover a looming "wall" of debt payments left from its birth as a spinoff six years ago.

California Resources Corp., a major local employer and recently the state's largest oil producer, said it is weighing its options — a statement many have interpreted as including bankruptcy — following the cancellation of a deal that would have restructured its nearly \$5 billion debt.

Market reactions have been harsh, with investors abandoning the company amid analysts' expectations that the company's earnings will worsen in the year ahead.

As far as immediate local implications, the company said last week it has had to slash its employees' work hours to save money after prices fell by a third in early March

Please see **CRC | A3**

VIEWPOINTS

New state water rules cause angst on all sides

A new set of water regulations aimed at protecting California's native fish came down from the state earlier this week to near universal condemnation from both agricultural and environmental water folks.

The regulations are contained in a 143-page "incidental take permit" issued by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife that lays out when — and how much — water can be pumped out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta by the State Water Project.

Agricultural contractors who get water from the project fear they could lose up to 300,000 acre-feet a year under the new permit.

Environmentalists say the permit gives a "free pass" to pumpers and is a path to extinction for native fish.



LOIS HENRY
SJV WATER

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VIEWPOINTS

Investment memo to my financial adviser

Note to my investment adviser: Buy Party City.

When church bells across the land peel the all-clear and we emerge from our respective homes, squinting into the unfamiliar sun like rescued copper miners, we will want to have parties. Lots of them. So buy Party City, Jose Cuervo and KFC.

I know the potential for a second wave of COVID-19 will be very real, and rash behavior, like mosh pits and wrestling tournaments, should be

undertaken with all due caution. We will want to heed the advice of medical experts who chart the expected course of viral pandemics, no matter what the president might be saying at the time.

The peak of this first wave still lies ahead. The stark scoreboard of morbidity that is cable news assures us of that much. You can read about it, hear about it, elsewhere, 24/7.

But here, today, I want to remind you that at some point

we will want to party — after, of course, we have been instructed when and how to properly do so. We partied on V-E Day despite the terrible weight of the war's historic toll and we will party again, because we must.

And we will spend money again, because we must.

Buy Babies R Us and Graco. Baby-shower shopping may become a key component of our economic recovery. In 1965, a historic power outage plunged 80 million people in the northeastern U.S. into darkness for 13

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ROBERT PRICE
FOR THE CALIFORNIAN



PETE TITTL

Round Table is a slice above the other chains

EYE STREET | E1



PRICE: \$2

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VIRUS

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data. “We’re starting to see people come in more significantly ill,” said Dr. Kristopher Lyon, the county’s interim public health officer who took over the position from Dr. Claudia Jonah in 2018.

Lyon said that local trends right now seem similar to what the state of Washington is experiencing, which is low patient volumes in hospitals but high acuity of cases among those hospitalized, as opposed to New York City, where there is both high volume and high acuity. In fact, he said, local hospitals are experiencing a dramatic lull right now. Volumes in Kern’s 10 hospital, which have a combined 1,222 beds, are down 50 percent to 60 percent right now, Lyon said, likely a sign that the public is heeding warnings and not heading to the emergency room if they are not seriously ill.

Meanwhile, predictions on when a possible surge in cases could happen continue to fluctuate. The University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation on Saturday predicted April 26 as the point when California will see its peak demand on health care resources.

‘INFECTIONS ARE LIKELY TO INCREASE’

While no one wants to speculate at this point how bad things will get, almost everyone agrees it will get worse.

“We’re still pretty early in the course of the trajectory,” said Lyon, who expects local hospitals to get busier as the disease progresses and the severity of illness catches up with the number of positive cases.

Statewide cases are on an upward trajectory and deaths are rising. Los Angeles is emerging as one of the most impacted areas, with more than 4,600 cases and 93 deaths as of Saturday. And health officials there said they expect cases to rise by 1,000 a day next week. Daily deaths in California were about 30 on Wednesday and had increased to nearly 40 by Friday, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Kern County had the most cases of any San Joaquin Valley county as of Friday, though San Joaquin County was leading in deaths, with 11, followed by Tulare County with three, according to data compiled by the L.A. Times.

“Following what has happened in almost every other place with local transmission, infections are likely to increase,” said Daniel Park, an assistant professor of public health at UC Irvine.

How quickly cases increase will be directly related to how well we can control transmission through physical distancing and hand washing, he said.

Cases in metro Bakersfield as of Saturday stood at 156, which accounted for 75 percent of the total cases countywide. There were 37 cases as of Saturday in the western region of the county, which includes Delano, Wasco and Shafter; seven cases in a region that includes Frazier Park, Tehachapi and the Kern River Valley; and five cases in the eastern Kern desert.

Asked if Kern’s proximity to Los Angeles could impact our level of virus

activity, Johnson, of Kern Medical, said he doesn’t think Kern will fare as badly as our southern neighbors.

“I think to the extent that we don’t have much travel, I think we could conceivably do better than Los Angeles,” he said.

‘BEYOND THE NUMBERS’

While it’s been nearly three weeks since Kern reported its first case, the virus seemed to hit closer to home in the past week.

As of Saturday, COVID-19 cases had been reported at a number of local entities. Brookdale Riverwalk senior living facility announced a case, as did Standard School District. An employee at Trader Joe’s and two at Albertsons, one at the store on White Lane and the other at the store on Panama Lane, were reported to have tested positive by both businesses. And Sheriff Donny Youngblood said Friday there are “several positive cases” in the sheriff’s department but would not specify if that was among deputies or the inmate population or both.

It was announced this week that schools would remain physically shuttered for the rest of the school year and some businesses began to lay off workers.

As local hospitals grappled with supply issues, many began to put their inventories under lock and key.

“Normally we put (supplies) out on carts but, you know, the first day this really hit we began seeing boxes of it disappear so we pulled it back up in to our general stores, and started releasing it by the box,” said Tim McGlew, CEO of the Kern Valley Healthcare District. Employees at two Bakersfield hospitals reported similar measures at their facilities. At Ridgecrest Regional Hospital, CEO Jim Suver said he has started receiving requests from some local employers to have employees tested who may have been exposed to a sick person. Many businesses are following a protocol where anyone exposed to someone with a fever or other symptoms of COVID-19 are being told to self-quarantine at home for 14 days.

Suver said he prioritizes requests from law enforcement but has had to turn down most other requests because tests must be reserved for those who need them most. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, priority for testing should be given to people who have symptoms of the virus and are hospitalized, health care workers, first responders or people exposed to those known to have the virus.

At one point last week, Suver said, the hospital was down to just 50 test kits on hand, a critically low number for a health care organization providing care to some 30,000 residents.

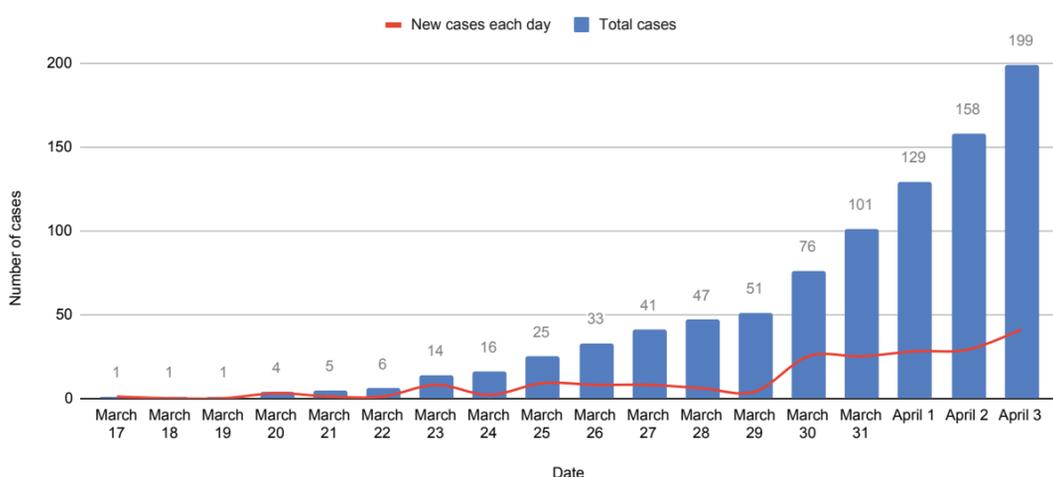
In Bakersfield, Dr. Dan Erickson, who co-owns Accelerated Urgent Care, which has six locations in the city, has implemented a large-scale testing operation. Erickson estimates he’s doing about 200 tests a day. He had 96 patients test positive as of Saturday.

“People want to know,” he said, “so we’re set up to process and give people results.”

With a background in emergency medicine, Erickson said he always had a mind for logistics. When

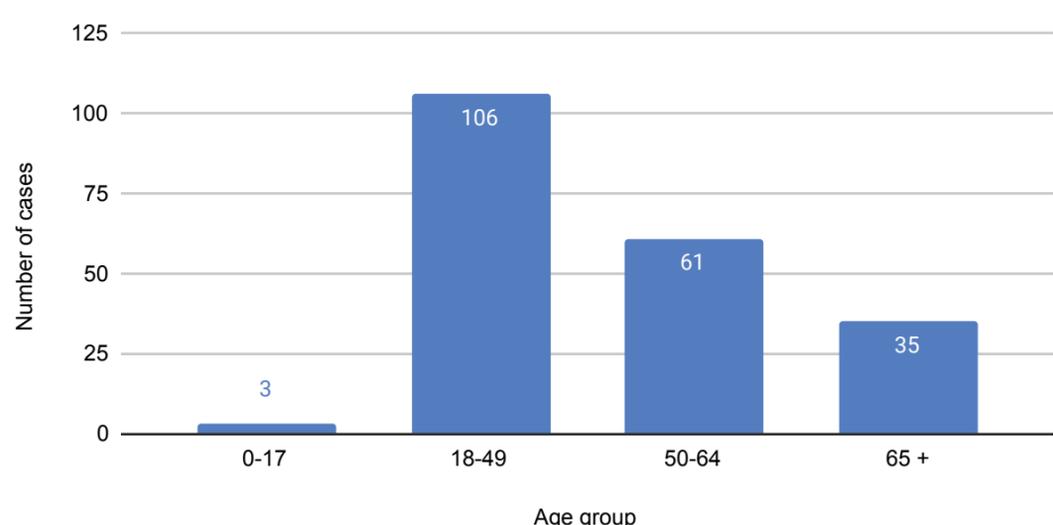
Kern County total cases and new cases by day

As of April 3, 2020



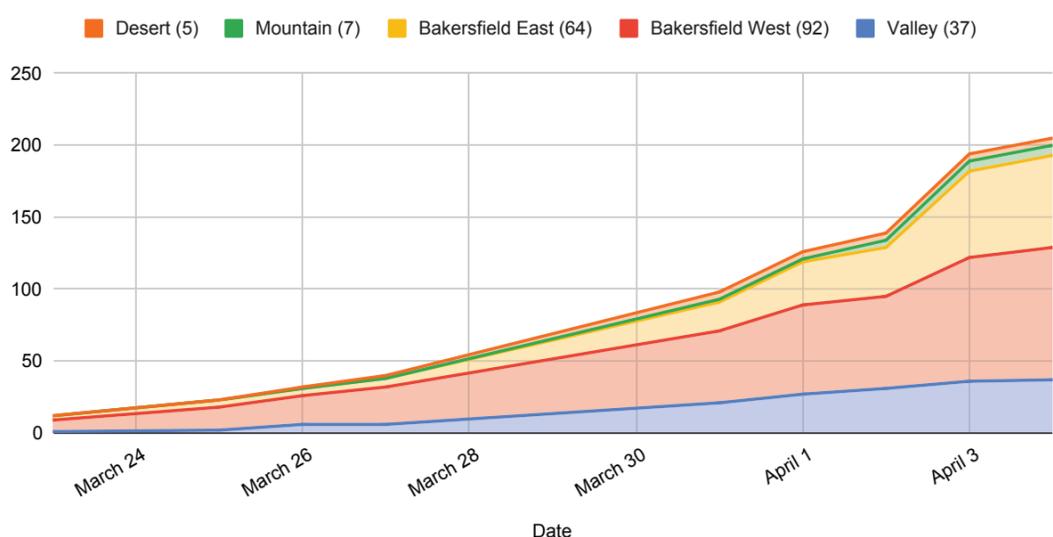
Kern County cases by age group

As of April 4, 2020



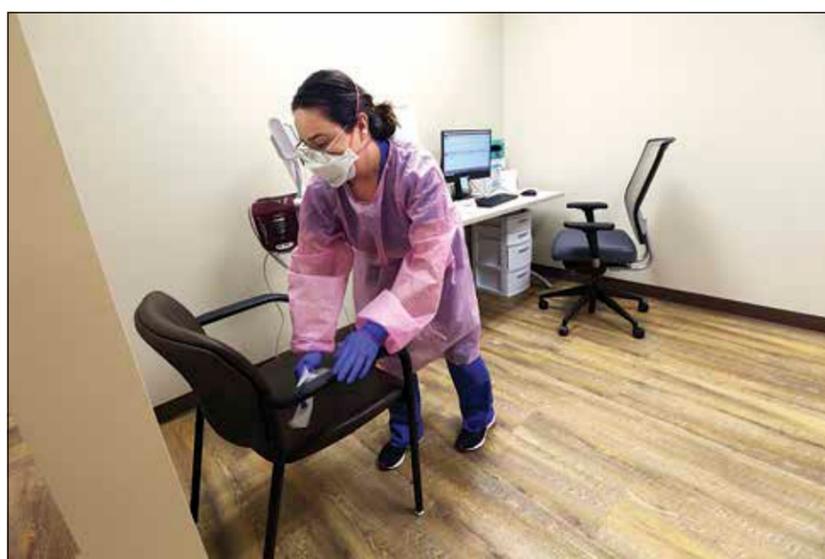
Kern County cases by region

As of April 4, 2020



Source: Kern County Public Health Services Department

THE CALIFORNIAN



ALEX HORVATH / THE CALIFORNIAN

Medical assistant Desiree Villa cleans the room after each patient who comes into it at Accelerated Family Medicine on Coffee Road.

he opened Accelerated Urgent Care eight years ago, he did so with the intent of creating a better health experience through efficient processes.

It was almost as if he was preparing for this moment.

As the coronavirus began to gain attention early this year, he began making plans for obtaining test kits and supplies.

Now his centers are a go-to spot for those seeking testing, even though public

health officials say anyone should be able to get a test through their regular doctor if they have symptoms.

Erickson said his staff is working past midnight on many days, trying to plow through the large patient

load.

He is now getting calls from police and fire officials and local companies that want to have employees tested.

Nine firefighters came in for testing last week because they’d been exposed to another firefighter who had a fever, he said.

They all tested negative and were able to go back to work rather than staying home out of precaution.

He acknowledged he is not following CDC guidelines for testing and will test even those not exhibiting symptoms, including patients whose employers require a negative COVID-19 test for them to return to work.

“If they come to me and I say you don’t meet the (federal testing) criteria, that person now makes zero. Now they can’t work or feed their kids,” Erickson said.

“If everybody stays at home the system falls apart,” he added. “That’s not rational.”

“I’m trying to keep the community going,” he said.

PRICE

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hours and, as the story goes, a population explosion followed precisely nine months later. Except it didn’t; that was an urban myth. But this — this forced, prolonged isolation — seems likely to ensure a surge of births around New Year’s Day 2021. Economists say we already need a next-generation workforce, and desperately. So, let’s prepare to welcome these little future taxpayers. We have a lot more than 13 hours to get it done. Buy Gymboree, Gerber and Baby Gap.

Buy Great Clips and Supercuts. Most of our compatriots will emerge on that Great American Easter, whenever it may come, looking like Geico cavemen. I’m talking men, women, children and certain

domesticated animals. Some of us will have mastered the art of the home- (self-?) administered haircut, but many more will need special, even urgent attention. The lines outside Great Clips should be good for some much needed laughs. But let’s try not be cruel about it.

Buy Office Depot, Office Max and Stinson’s (or its regional equivalent). Millions of work-from-home workers who never had to work from home until circumstances required it, will emerge with long lists of wish-I’d-had-these items. Buy Geek Squad-type operations, too, for home office workers like me who never did get that printer to work and weren’t about to bring it into the shop.

My technology quotient has always been somewhat lacking, but I’ve functioned well enough

to get by. Consequently, I’ve always tried to be on good terms with the office techie, who would invariably solve my problem du jour in 30 seconds or less.

The techie has stopped coming around because I’ve been working from home, in the impossibly cluttered spare bedroom I call an office. The dog still bounces into the room to visit, sometimes with an uprooted potted plant or some other discovery in his happy jaws, but no techie. I’m on my own, forced to fight my way out of technical jams with YouTube tutorials and needle-nose pliers. I am not especially adept at either one.

Maybe I’ll get my techie back on the other side of this pandemic. But I probably won’t. Life will be profoundly different in a multitude of ways, and this is one of the more likely ones: The world will have become more comfort-

able working from home. Most of us have no choice now, but when we emerge from this isolation, we may have realized there is much to like, and gain, from working barefoot and uncombed. So, I’d better get the tutoring help to operate it. So, buy Canon. Buy Apple. Buy Microsoft.

Buy Instacart, too, or similar services. I always thought paying someone else to do your grocery shopping was the height of laziness. Then I tried it. I’m sold. My shopper was Alberto R. and he was not especially personable — understandable under the circumstances, I guess — but he got it done, and he didn’t throw extras in the cart like I would have done as I waited in the checkout line. I do kind of wish he had surprised me with a Butterfinger or an Us Weekly — Katy Perry is pregnant! — but Alberto behaved

responsibly. Many Americans will have tried grocery shopping services for the first time during this lockdown, and, like me, liked it. So there. Buy Instacart.

These are stock market recommendations any of you can take to the bank, but I offer them specifically to my investment counselor for the benefit of his other clients, without expectation of reward or praise. Now, I might list some recommended “sell” stocks, too, but my space today is used up and, besides, it’s getting hard to see the entire screen. I really must try to prune my eyebrows. June can’t get here fast enough.

Robert Price is a journalist for KGET-TV. His column appears here on his own; the views expressed are his own. Reach him at robertprice@kget.com or via Twitter: @stubblebuzz.