

La Plata County

CONNECTIONS

SPRING 2021

AN INSIDE LOOK AT ANOTHER FIRE YEAR

*Where do fire restrictions
come from and why
do they matter?*

**LA PLATA CARES STEPPED IN TO ASSIST MANY
OF YOUR FAVORITE SMALL BUSINESSES**

**PUBLIC WORKS AND ENGINEERING IS MAKING
ROADS SAFER, ONE MILE AT A TIME**



La Plata County
Colorado

ACCOUNTABILITY • INTEGRITY • RESPECT

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WELCOME!

Greetings, La Plata County residents and visitors! We are pleased to present you with the Spring 2021 edition of La Plata County Connections. In this and every issue, we try to connect you with the people, programs and priorities that the county and our partners deliver every day.

We are proud of La Plata County's story. Our 420 full-time employees work every day to provide for the health, safety and welfare of our community. In the pages ahead, you will meet some of the individuals who make sure county services run smoothly each and every day. Learn about our Veterans' Services office, the Assessor's and Treasurer's offices – and how they work together – and meet your county commissioners. You can see how we have come together with community partners to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and read all the excellent work San Juan Basin Public Health has done to keep our community safe and informed during the past 15 months. You will learn about how the county works to prepare for and respond to emergencies of all kinds, and see how we work with our firefighting partners to plan for wildfire season.

We hope you enjoy learning a little more about the people who serve La Plata County and the services they provide. Our team is dedicated to this community and we are excited to share these stories with you.

La Plata County Board of Commissioners

Commissioner Clyde Church, *District 1*

Commissioner Marsha Porter-Norton, *District 2*

Commissioner Matt Salka, *District 3*

2021 COUNTY GOALS

ENSURE PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELFARE



Objective: Implement initiatives that protect and support public health, safety and welfare for all La Plata County citizens and staff.

BUILD CITIZEN AWARENESS, TRUST AND SUPPORT THROUGH SUSTAINED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INCREASED TRANSPARENCY



Objective: Plan, develop, fund and implement a strategic community engagement campaign that communicates the County's role, mission and services provided to residents of La Plata County.

ENCOURAGE AND DIVERSIFY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



Objective: Plan, develop, fund and implement policies and practices that encourage, foster and remove barriers to economic development.

IMPROVE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY FOR COUNTY SERVICES, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ASSETS



Objective: Develop plans and funding strategies to maintain and improve infrastructure and ensure county capacity to provide quality services to residents and visitors.

Meet your COMMISSIONERS!

Three commissioners represent all La Plata County residents. They are elected at-large, meaning that all county residents can vote in all commissioner elections, regardless of where they or the candidate lives. However, La Plata County is divided into three geographic districts and the Board of County Commissioners must comprise a resident of each district.

With two new commissioners elected to serve four-year terms in 2020, this is your opportunity to get to know your elected representatives a bit more!



MEET CLYDE CHURCH

Clyde Church, who was elected in November 2018, has always been passionate about serving his community. While many may be overwhelmed just by thinking how much work being a commissioner entails, Church has a long history of community involvement and serving in significant roles. He has served as the Board Chair on the Southwest Colorado Rural Workforce Board, the Durango Planning Commission, and as Firewise Chainsaw Crew Chief and Post-Wildfire Recovery Team Co-Chair. He has also served as the Rotary District 5470 Governor, a district that spans Colorado's southern half.

Church grew up in Phoenix, where he attended university and began his career. He moved to La Plata County with his wife Paulette in 1999, where he continued his career as the engineering manager at Metalcraft.

Church resides in District 1, which is the western area of La Plata County. District 1 includes Redmesa, Kline, Marvel and Hesperus, southern La Plata County including Bonadad, and northern La Plata County including Hermosa and Purgatory. Church's first term will conclude in January 2023.

MEET MARSHA PORTER-NORTON

Marsha Porter-Norton, who was elected in 2020, and her family have a long history in southwestern Colorado. She grew up in neighboring Montezuma County on her family ranch. After attending school along the Front Range, she moved to La Plata County in 1994 to return to her family and roots.

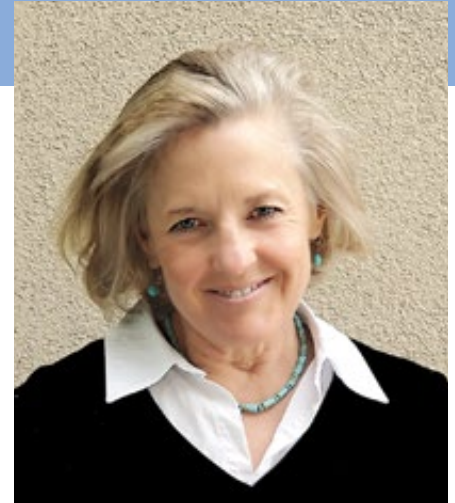
“As a person who has worked on many community- and countywide issues over the years, I felt like running for County Commissioner was a way to continue to offer public service,” said Porter-Norton. “Counties are central to residents’ lives, whether through the delivery of services or emergency response or public health or county roads. It’s a level of government at which a lot of change can happen that helps residents’ lives in concrete ways. That intrigued me and, honestly, inspires me as well!”

Porter-Norton has made it a priority to

address affordable and workforce housing and improve infrastructure, including broadband, roads, bridges and transit services.

“I think we all want youth and young families who grow up here or those who just moved here to live and thrive. These issues are exciting because there is already so much happening and much more than can be done. The time is ripe for all organizations involved (public or private) to set robust, ‘big’ goals in these areas and work toward achieving them.”

Commissioner Porter-Norton understands that with a rapidly changing climate and drought, water availability and wildfire safety are vital issues facing county residents. She aims to work for clean air and water and to support public lands. Her ultimate goal is to find the right people to fill county roles that encourage a modern and clean energy future.



Like many who call La Plata County home, Porter-Norton loves spending time outside, whether exploring the deserts or mountains of the Four Corners or even in her own yard.

Porter-Norton lives in District 2, which includes Durango and the immediate surrounding area. Marsha is currently serving her first term, which will conclude in January 2025.

MEET MATT SALKA

Commissioner Matt Salka, who was elected in 2020, was introduced to La Plata County when he attended Fort Lewis College. Growing up in a military family, Salka frequently moved around the country. He’s thrilled to call La Plata County home. After graduating, he established his own IT company, which he ran for 15 years.

Salka has a long history of service in the district he represents. Before being elected commissioner, he served as Mayor, Trustee and was on the Planning Commission for the Town of Bayfield. “As Mayor of Bayfield, I enjoyed serving the residents of Bayfield, but La Plata County constituents would reach out to me about concerns in the area,” said Salka. “At the time, I would have to direct them to the appropriate contact. After six years with the Town of Bayfield, I knew then I wanted to

be County Commissioner and represent all of La Plata County and be their voice.”

As County Commissioner, Salka will serve as the Board Liaison for the Sheriff’s Office, Coroner’s Office and District Attorney’s Office, and the county representative on the La Plata County Economic Development Alliance, Housing Solutions for the Southwest and the Durango-La Plata County Airport Commission.

“During my time as Commissioner, I hope to work on several projects and issues in La Plata County,” said Salka. “This includes workforce, attainable and affordable housing, better broadband access to rural communities and better job opportunities for La Plata County residents.”

When he isn’t in the office working for those who call La Plata County home, you’ll



find Commissioner Salka enjoying the surrounding area with his family. Favorite activities include camping and boating.

Salka lives in District 3, which encompasses eastern La Plata County including Bayfield, Ignacio and Vallecito. Salka is currently in his first term, which will conclude in January 2025.

THE REAL VALUE OF LA PLATA'S COUNTY ASSESSOR

The role of the County Assessor is to classify, list and value all real and personal property for taxation. Daily tasks include visiting properties throughout the county, conducting neighborhood interviews, taking photographs, and inspecting buildings to ensure all properties are valued fairly for everyone.



“All property taxes that support the work of the cities, county, schools and other entities like the fire and mosquito control districts begin with a value and classification of the real and personal property completed by the Assessor’s Office staff,” said County Assessor Carrie Woodson. “Without the assessor, we as taxpayers and the entities that serve us would not have the assurance that taxes were assessed and billed in a fair and equitable manner.”

Using a two-year schedule, the Assessor’s Office adjusts all properties to the current level of value – and 2021 is a year

when this reassessment takes place. To do this, the office is tasked with discovering new improvements or land splits and consolidations. They examine aerial photography and analyze sales from the previous two years, in this case June 2018–20.

One of the office’s biggest challenges is ensuring that all land assessed as “agricultural” is actually being used for agriculture. The value and taxes on agricultural land in Colorado are much lower than other classifications, which gives a tax break to active farm and ranch lands. To be sure that agricultural-assessed land meets the state’s classifications, the Assessor’s Office reviews all parcels, sends out questionnaires and visits properties to look for signs of grazing or growing crops.

The Assessor’s Office has a staff of 16: nine appraisers, one appraiser assistant, four administrative staff, one personal property appraiser and one oil and gas analyst. This smooth-running team ensures that lands in La Plata County are valued fairly and equitably.

Woodson came to work in the Assessor’s Office in 1996. She was elected Assessor in 2017 after serving as the chief appraiser, agricultural specialist and lead commercial appraiser during her tenure.

“What I have learned is that this is an industry of change, and keeping up with the many changes is part of the job,” she said. “I have been continually amazed that even after 25 years, there are still a lot of new and interesting projects to accomplish.”

THE ASSESSOR’S OFFICE



Determines property values.



Analyzes the characteristics and conditions of different properties.



Reviews property sales and price trends.



Cannot raise or lower taxes.

BANKING ON THE COUNTY TREASURER

THE TREASURER'S OFFICE



Collects tax payments.



Protects county funds.



Distributes county funds.



Cannot value or assess property,
set mill levies or adjust taxes.

The Treasurer's Office acts a lot like the county's bank. It ensures that the county does not spend more than it has and also collects, protects and disburses funds belonging to other taxing authorities in La Plata County.

"The funds we collect and distribute help pay the salaries of teachers, firefighters, police and other government workers who support our community, such as those who maintain our roads and water and sewer systems," said County Treasurer Allison Aichele. "This cash flow keeps our community healthy and growing."

About half of these funds come from property taxes, and the other half come from sources such as federal grants or fees collected by other offices.

Collecting property taxes is a process outlined by state statute and includes many checks and balances. The County Commissioners set the mill levies for the taxing authorities in December – based on what voters have approved – and tax bills go out in January.

"The funds we collect and distribute help pay the salaries of teachers, firefighters, police and other government workers who support our community."

In Colorado, property taxes can be paid in one full payment or in two half payments, but not in installments.

By July of each year, about 95 percent of all property taxes have been collected and

disbursed to the taxing authorities (school districts, fire districts, etc.). The rest of the year is about collecting taxes from the 5 percent of property owners who are delinquent.



ALLISON AICHELE,
COUNTY TREASURER

The La Plata County treasurer shares a space with the public trustee and the combined office has four employees: three work on treasurer tasks and one on public trustee tasks. To keep appropriate separation of duties – and therefore safeguards for taxpayer dollars – one person collects and receives funds, one person writes checks and disburses funds, and a different employee reconciles and records the movement of monies between funds.

Aichele was elected treasurer in 2014. She has an accounting degree from Fort Lewis College, an MBA from the University of Minnesota, and 20 years' experience in designing and implementing technology systems worldwide, including implementing accounting and financial systems.

WORKIN' ON THE ROAD

Improving safety one mile at a time

Every year, the Public Works and Engineering team works hard to evaluate roadways and improve their safety. Roads take a lot of work to maintain and keep safe for those who drive them every day. Many of us don't think twice about how roads are rated or if a compacted shoulder can help us recover after a quick swerve. But for Jacob Nester, a civil engineer for La Plata County, these are his everyday tasks.

Last year, Nester's team worked on the mill and overlay of County Road 502. This stretch of road between Durango and Bayfield leads to many residential driveways and is heavily used by oil and gas trucks. In fact,

this road project was funded in part by the Energy Impact Grant from the state of Colorado, meaning taxes from oil and gas fields were put towards repairs.

Improving County Road 502 is a massive accomplishment for the county. The project both lengthened the life of the roadway and increased safety for drivers.

"Milling is a method of removing the top layer of asphalt to remove the cracked surface and uneven portions of the roadway. The overlay is a new layer of asphalt that is applied for the structural component."

The mill and overlay helped to improve the drivability of the roadway. "This includes widening the road, the shoulders and the lanes," Nester said. "Once we get the pavement as wide as we can, we beef up the shouldering material and add additional width to that." This process gives drivers a much better chance of recovery if they run off the road for any reason – dodging an animal, texting while driving, slipping on ice or other possibilities.

While we never want people swerving out of their lanes while driving, the reality is that it does happen. County Road 502 is now safer. If someone does maneuver off the road, there are now 3–4 feet of compacted shoulder area so that drivers can regain control and get safely back on the roadway. Additionally, Nester's team added lengths of guardrail in some areas to provide an extra measure of safety.

The crew worked to seamlessly tie in the road with driveways that connect directly to County Road 502. Those residents will now experience improved accessibility.

Jacob Nester kept the team on track. This project was completed within 30 working days, starting September 30, and passed a final inspection on November 18, 2020. This is an accomplishment that Nester, who has lived in Durango for 20 years, loves to see. "I like seeing a finished project," he said. "I like to see improvement. I like to see betterment for the county and users and to know that in some small way, I helped to make the place we live a little better."





THE PUBLIC WORKS AND
ENGINEERING TEAM APPLYING THE
OVERLAY ON COUNTY ROAD 502



HOW DOES THE COUNTY DETERMINE WHICH ROADS TO IMPROVE?

The county evaluated all roads based on a Pavement Condition Index code, a condition rating and a structural index. Based on these variables, we can determine which roads need what and when. We also consider what the Road and Bridge crews, who complete daily maintenance on roadways, have to say. Residents and users of the roads can also submit their concerns online (tinyurl.com/lpengengineering). If you think a stretch of road can be improved, Public Works and Engineering welcomes your observations!



COLORADO WORKS OFFERS A LIFELINE *For Families*

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE HELPS PROTECT HOUSING, PROMOTES EMPLOYMENT

Many of the La Plata County families economically impacted by the pandemic received the help they needed to regain financial stability through Colorado Works, Colorado's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which La Plata County's Human Services Department delivers locally.

The program is designed to help families with children who find themselves temporarily without a reliable source of income. Through Colorado Works, qualifying residents receive cash assistance, along with support to further their education or build job skills to obtain employment. The relatively immediate cash support can be used to prevent a family from losing their housing, keep food on the table, and stretch the savings they have until they regain employment

or find another source of stable income.

TANF is a federally funded program, dispersed via grants to each state. Colorado Works operates in all 64 counties in the state. The local office has worked to develop relationships with other community agencies to provide a holistic approach to meeting each family's needs. The impact of the program, which provides a financial safety net for many of La Plata County's most vulnerable residents, is tangible throughout the community.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO FAMILIES?

"We receive feedback from various schools and childcare facilities where the children are positively impacted when they are able to maintain a stable and secure homelife," said Katie Hott, a Human Services Resource Man-

ager. "We can also see the reaching benefits in the community as a whole, with parents who are able to achieve goals of furthering their education and gaining substantial employment to better the lives of their families."

The last decade has revealed a wealth of research that suggests that when families are given the power to decide how to spend cash aid, as is the case with Colorado Works, they manage the money in ways that improve their overall well-being: Kids are more likely to stay in school, and the family's nutrition and health improves.

More recent studies have shown that this money has wider positive economic impacts, as it is generally being spent in the local community where it generates more revenue for local businesses.



WHAT LONG-LASTING IMPACTS ARE MADE?

The Department of Human Services' partnership with Workforce Development is intended to provide support towards self-sufficiency by connecting clients with education, job opportunities, training and resources. It can help low-income county residents identify and pursue strategies to increase the economic stability of their household.

In addition to serving adults, Colorado Works also provides opportunities for children to engage in supportive activities and services within the community.

Hott said, "Looking at the family as a whole, but also at individual needs, there is flexibility for families to access the support available in the community that will best serve their needs and help them meet their goals and ultimately achieve economic security."

"We can also see the reaching benefits in the community as a whole, with parents who are able to achieve goals of furthering their education and gaining substantial employment to better the lives of their families."

County residents are able to access emergency TANF payments specific to pandemic hardship. The application process for this one-time benefit is the same as it is for ongoing benefits, however the income requirements are not the same as the basic cash assistance which comes as a monthly payment. These guidelines allow for potential eligibility for families with an annual gross income of \$75,000 or less. The CARES Act supplied some funding to support this benefit, and the county also reserves funds for these emergency situations.

Despite a rise in the number of applications during the pandemic, the Colorado Works ongoing caseload in La Plata County



has historically remained consistent, averaging roughly 13–160 cases at any given time (in comparison to Medicaid, which is right now covering 7,000 individuals in La Plata County).

"Because it is meant to be temporary, coupled with the low-income eligibility guidelines, families rarely remain eligible for the TANF benefit for long periods of time," said Hott.

AM I ELIGIBLE?

To be eligible for Colorado Works in La Plata County, you must be a resident of Colorado, be unemployed or underemployed, have very low income and have a child 18 years of age

or younger (or be pregnant). You also must participate consistently with the Workforce Development Program.

The Department of Human Services employees remain committed to processing applications for Colorado Works and related programs in a timely manner. The application can be completed online, by paper or phone, and ongoing case management services are provided through phone, email and scheduled in-person meetings, if necessary.

To find out more and/or determine your eligibility, visit the La Plata County Human Services website (tinyurl.com/lpchumanservices).

GETTING HELP TO OUR LOCAL BUSINESSES...

First

When the La Plata CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act) grant was made available, La Plata County knew to distribute the funds to businesses as quickly and efficiently as possible – they were going to need help. The county contracted a 501c6 nonprofit that understood the county's businesses and owners like no one else: Local First.

News of the application process was announced at the end of September, and applicants could apply for funding from October 5–23. Even though this was a tight window, Local First was determined to get as many businesses qualified as possible. To expedite getting the funding to businesses, Local First brought in another nonprofit, AidToAll, to assist with screening applicants.

Through this collaboration, La Plata County was able to fund \$1 million to 152 local businesses.

About the Cares Grant

The CARES grant funding was available for nonprofit and for-profit entities in the county that had already been in operation by March 16, 2020. The qualifications to meet the grant included:

- » *50 or fewer full-time employees*
- » *Entities with multiple locations could receive up to \$10,000 per location*
- » *Businesses needed to have direct physical interactions with customers*
- » *Businesses were required to complete the San Juan Basin Public Health Self-Certification forms to verify compliance with safety measures*



The funds were available for out-of-pocket expenses incurred due to COVID-19: installing plexiglass, buying additional hand sanitizer and PPE – things that would not have occurred during normal operations.

La Plata County's businesses certainly have faced hardships throughout the pandemic. But the La Plata Cares program helped facilitate innovative business models to respond to the unique challenges.

PAINTING THE WAY ONLINE

How Blue Sage Art used grant funding to pivot into a more sustainable (and remote) business model

Among the businesses that adjusted their operations and received funding from the La Plata Cares grant program was Blue Sage Art. The artist and owner of Blue Sage Art, Ann Salviazul, had to shut down her studio when the pandemic began. With the help of the grant, Salviazul shifted from art shows in her studio to building out her e-commerce site. Salviazul, and her team of rock stars, Sandhya Tillotson, Allison Leath and Lisa Mackey, made this unfortunate situation a chance for them to take the leap into e-commerce.

"All of my energy has been to become e-commerce ready. This is a huge step for me, and I need this support to get that done," Salviazul said.

Ann Salviazul has reopened her studio at 12 Pine Tree Drive in Bayfield by appointment only and has created social media pages to display her art. Follow Blue Sage Art's journey into e-commerce by visiting them at www.bluesageart.com.



GRAND OPENING DURING A PANDEMIC

How Primi Pasta and Wine Bar survived its first year of business during a global pandemic, with just a little help from La Plata Cares

Operating a business is challenging on a good day, but how about opening in January of 2020, only to be blindsided by a pandemic a few weeks later? That's what owner and chef Jarrod Regan of Primi Pasta and Wine Bar, located at 12th Street and Main Avenue in Durango, had to endure the first weeks after opening his restaurant.

Regan evaluated his operations like every other business when the pandemic hit. However, one feature that saved this Italian restaurant was its patio. Primi Pasta and Wine Bar still had the capability of serving customers, even when indoor dining wasn't an option. After adjusting and readjusting the business model, Primi Pasta and Wine Bar had to modify its operations again when the colder months loomed. Winter coats and layers weren't cutting it anymore. Regan sought help through the La Plata Cares grant program, which La Plata County partnered with the nonprofit Local First to administer.

"We reached out to them about getting a grant for patio heaters to extend our season because that's what kept us alive all summer – being able to sit people on the patio. We pushed them for a grant, and we got it!" said Regan.



One of the latest ventures Primi Pasta and Wine Bar is pursuing are virtual wine workshops by Jarrod's wife, Tracey Regan. If you would like to support Primi Pasta and Wine Bar, they welcome you to enjoy your favorite glass of wine and an Italian meal, inside or out on the patio. If you would like to learn more about Primi Pasta and Wine Bar, visit www.primidurango.com.

ANOTHER FIRE YEAR IS STARTING



HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO STAY SAFE!

Coloradans are no strangers to fires – especially after 2020 when more than 625,000 acres of our beloved state burned. In La Plata County, we endured the 416 Fire in 2018 that cost more than \$43 million to fight while severely impacting our air quality, summer tourism season and quality of life. While fires used to be associated with the hot, dry months of the year, Shawna Legarza, Director of the Office of Emergency Management, says this is no longer the case.

Legarza spent 31 years as a firefighter. “It used to be that in the Southwest, we’d start to see fire season begin towards the end of May and then watch the fires work their way around the country. But now, more fires are happening outside of that normal boundary. It’s really a fire year,” she said. “Two fires already burned over Super Bowl weekend, proving they can start any time.”

The Southwest has experienced varying degrees of drought for several decades, leaving vegetation vulnerable to wildfire.

The National Interagency Fire Center analyzes precipitation, temperatures and the projected weather to determine the level of potential fire danger across the country and the agency is expecting above-average fire danger in Southwest Colorado for late spring.

Be aware of the danger and do your part to keep La Plata County fire-free this year.

BE FIRE-PREPARED!



It’s easy to think a wildfire evacuation won’t happen to you, but preparation is key! Here are a few things you can do to keep your family safe:

- 1** Do you have a plan for your animals? Make sure you know where you can take them if you are evacuated.
- 2** Get a bag ready with a change of clothes and other necessities in case of a quick evacuation.
- 3** Take stock of essential items like medication. Be sure they’re easy to grab on the go.
- 4** Make a plan as a family. Talk with your kids, so everyone knows what needs to happen if a fire is nearby.
- 5** Make sure your wildfire action plan takes COVID-19 into consideration.
- 6** Set an emergency meeting place in case you are separated from your family during an evacuation.
- 7** Sign up for CodeRED emergency notifications: (tinyurl.com/lpccodered).

MAKING SENSE OF FIRE RESTRICTIONS:

What You Need to Know in 2021

Fire restrictions aren't fun – who doesn't want to roast marshmallows over a campfire? – but neither are the forest fires that are all too familiar in La Plata County. You might wonder, “How do I know these restrictions make a difference?”

Fire restrictions in La Plata County are based on the latest data gathered by scientists using cutting-edge technology, including the National Interagency Fire Center which provides dynamic visual aids for wildfire forecasts nationwide.

“This year, La Plata County is one of the counties at the highest risk in the state,” La Plata County Sheriff Sean Smith said. “Our forecasts are based on predictive models, following historical trends.”

County leadership understands the frustration residents may feel at the sometimes-confusing nature of fire restrictions. The county, the local fire chiefs from the Durango, Upper Pine River, Los Pinos and Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Protection Districts, as well as state and federal partners, are looking to make restriction language more clear and tailor restrictions to actual conditions.

County leaders issue restrictions only when conditions warrant them, based on the most accurate data possible. These conditions are evaluated constantly, with more stringent restrictions issued when needed, and then lifted as soon as it's appropriate. When we work together, we improve the wildfire situation in La Plata County!



MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND PREVENT WILDFIRES!



Sign up for emergency notifications via CodeRED (tinyurl.com/lpccodered). CodeRED will let you know about wildfire evacuations and other emergencies based on your address.



Pay attention to whether fire restrictions are in place and understand there is an evidence-backed reason behind each one.



Communicate with county/local leaders. Don't hesitate to ask questions or give feedback if a fire restriction is confusing.

1-2-3 THE STAGES OF FIRE RESTRICTIONS

STAGE 1:

There is increased risk of fire danger. Open burning, burn barrels and open fires in undeveloped areas are prohibited. Safety precautions are put in place for welding and smoking.

STAGE 2:

There is a significant community hazard of fire. Stage 2 also bans charcoal grills, all campfires, smoking outside and community fireworks displays.

STAGE 3:

Stage 3 is a burning ban and closure of public lands. This level prevents the operation of any coal-fired steam engines. Stage 2 restrictions are still in place.

LA PLATA COUNTY VETERANS SERVICES

Serving those who've served

La Plata County Veterans Service Office Director Greg Dotson knows firsthand how confusing it can be to navigate the veterans' benefits system. After retiring from the Navy following 30 years of service in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa, he decided to use his talents at home, helping others in the same boat.

"Being a veteran myself and knowing how confusing the system looks at first glance, I wanted to see how I could simplify the system and make filing claims with the VA easier for everyone," Dotson said.

This is precisely what he did. The Veterans Service Office provides information, support and guidance to veterans and their families to

receive the maximum benefits they are eligible for, including service-connected compensation, pensions, education, and death and burial benefits.

All veterans who completed a minimum tour of service in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Reserves/National Guard and the Merchant Marines are eligible for benefits. When local veterans receive benefits, the entire community wins.

Dotson received accreditation through the Colorado Division of Veterans Affairs and the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers in just five months. This allows the office to work with the Veterans Administration on the veterans' behalf to move their claims along and answer questions that arise during the claims process.

"Every day has been different and always provides new challenges," Dotson said. "There is so much information to learn about veterans' benefits, and not a day that goes by that I don't learn something new to help our veterans and their dependents gain the benefits they are entitled to."



LA PLATA COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE
OFFICE DIRECTOR GREG DOTSON

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

According to 2019 Department of Veterans Affairs numbers, La Plata County has 3,451 veterans in the VA system. This translates to \$25,190,000 in combined benefits from the VA going directly to our local veterans and their dependents — money that often goes right back into the community.

The County Veterans Service Office is currently serving veterans and their families by appointment to ensure a safe environment for everyone. For more information or to make an appointment, call 970-382-6150.

3,451

VETERANS IN THE
VA SYSTEM

\$25,190,000

IN COMBINED BENEFITS

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IS SET UP FOR SUCCESS

How strategies used in running a COVID-19 testing site can translate to other emergencies

What does our Office of Emergency Management do in La Plata County? Unfortunately, there's no easy way to answer that question. Because many emergencies like fires, floods and blizzards require very reactive solutions, the department works hard to be prepared for anything that might come our way. This includes organizing staff and communication during emergencies so that everyone understands their roles.

Since taking over as the Office of Emergency Management Director in July, Shawna Legarza has been tackling an enormous task tied to the emergency that has everyone's attention: COVID-19. Legarza was charged with implementing a free COVID-19 test site. Many of the processes that she started can be reused in other emergencies.

For the test site, she chose a location that would allow for better traffic flow and more space than the previous location, and the La Plata County Fairgrounds fit the bill. There, the staff tested an average of 134 people a day with only a 15-minute wait time, with four testing lanes allowing cars to get in and out quickly. On their busiest day, staff tested 317 people. But the location was only the first hurdle.

Emergency Management set up a radio frequency to improve communications between testing staff and residents arriving to get tested. Rather than walking to each car to explain directions and how the process worked, Legarza had people tune their radios to 1700 AM, where they could listen to all the information needed for testing.

This technology has uses far beyond the pandemic. Emergency Management can use it to reach residents in any emergency – whether to announce road closures in a flood or evacuations due to a wildfire.



In building out the testing site and implementing evaluation and improvement protocols, Shawna and her team has set up La Plata County for success in handling future emergencies.

"I was determined to find something positive out of this COVID deal," Legarza said. While the pandemic has been nothing short of devastating for millions of people worldwide, she has used this situation to better prepare La Plata County for whatever the future holds.

This technology has uses far beyond the pandemic. Emergency Management can use it to reach residents in any emergency – whether to announce road closures in a flood or evacuations due to a wildfire.

A PUBLIC HEALTH TEAM'S TOOLBOX

One year ago, our world was still in the beginning stages of a global pandemic. There were so many unknowns. Testing wasn't easy to come by, masks were optional, and businesses struggled to adapt to closures and curbside pickup. But now, our society has come a long way. Health professionals and scientists learned a lot about the disease called COVID-19. They refined the tools needed to protect people. Let's take a deeper dive into what these tools are and how they work together.

TESTING: THE FOUNDATION OF CONTROL DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

LAST SPRING, many asked themselves how to control a global pandemic that affected every community worldwide. "Testing is the bedrock of our disease control strategy," said Brian Devine, Deputy Incident Commander for COVID-19 response at San Juan Basin Public Health (SJBPH). "We want to identify disease through testing before it has a chance to spread widely to people that you're in contact with."

With COVID-19 testing, timing is everything. It's not only essential to be tested after possible exposure to the disease, but to test at the right time. Typically, it is best to be tested five days after a known exposure. If you are experiencing symptoms, you should be tested immediately.

Repeat testing is also critical for anyone whose job brings

them into contact with many people, which increases the chance for exposure and spreading disease.

In La Plata County, the biggest challenge with COVID-19 testing has been to adapt to constant changes. Over the course of the pandemic, technology and administration requirements have evolved. It is essential that the personnel doing the testing can pivot to accommodate new methods and types of tests. "It has taken a lot of learning and certainly taken a lot of resources," Devine said.

While testing is the first step in controlling an infectious disease, it is just the beginning. There are several additional, critical steps that follow.



COMMUNITY TESTING OPTIONS

There are a number of ways to get tested for COVID-19, offered through local government, private facilities, medical providers and on-site testing for suspected outbreaks. Find out more online (sjbpublichealth.org/testing).

CONTACT TRACING

AFTER TESTING, disease investigation and control, more commonly referred to as contact tracing, is a public health agency's next defense line. SJBPH is the agency in charge of controlling diseases within La Plata and Archuleta counties, and therefore does contact tracing for residents in both counties.

Contact tracing is a technique that public health organizations have been using long before COVID-19 arrived on the global stage, but it has become an even more critical tool over the last year. "[Contact tracing] is the tool that we use all day, every day, without people even knowing it. But we've had to supplement it with other strategies because of the scale of COVID-19 and how new and dangerous it is," Devine said.

If someone tests positive for an infectious disease, their close contacts include anyone that they have been within six feet of for at least 15 minutes. SJBPH takes pride in the fact that 100% of those who have tested positive for COVID-19 have been contacted about next steps. SJBPH staff also notify any of their close contacts. In most cases, this is a phone call made by a real person. Our staff has found that

it's helpful for the person receiving the call to have a human voice on the other line to answer questions.

The SJBPH team also investigates outbreaks. If more than one person tested positive from the same location, they might bring "pop-up testing" to that site to ensure easy access to testing for anyone who may have been exposed. This also allows the public health team to evaluate the facility's infection control protocol and suggest measures to reduce the disease's spread.

While the public health professionals are working hard to track, control and inform the community about outbreaks, the rest comes down to our residents. "This is such a large emergency that everyone is an emergency responder," Devine says. "Whether they like it or not, we all can keep each other safe with our choices."

DID YOU KNOW?

An "outbreak" is defined as two or more cases linked to transmission at a facility. Most outbreaks in La Plata County are very small.



PREPARING A
POP-UP TESTING SITE

THE NEWEST TOOL: VACCINES

THIS YEAR started with some good news: vaccines for COVID-19 becoming increasingly available to the general public. The vaccine is a tool that will begin to overtake other means that, until recently, have been our only methods of defense against the virus. As has been the case throughout the pandemic, things are rapidly changing.

Across the nation, there is a vast network of enrolled vaccine providers in charge of making appointments. SJBPH is one of those providers and operates several clinics directly.

SJBPH also plays a role in coordinating vaccine distribution. “We want to ensure that no vaccine goes to waste,” Devine said. Sometimes, clinics don’t use all of their doses.

Other times, clinics are short on doses, so vaccines need to be transferred from clinic to clinic.

“It works so much better when we collaborate and share our resources,” Devine said. To streamline the process and share important information among clinics, providers join a weekly call where they share best practices. Relationships between providers have strengthened across La Plata County as health professionals come together for their community’s greater good.

For the most up-to-date information about vaccine availability and numbers of doses distributed to your area, please visit sjbpublichealth.org/covid-19-vaccine.



THANK YOU!

“A HUGE thank you goes out to all of our public health staff and volunteers,” Devine said. “Nothing about this pandemic has been easy. It’s required resources from all over our community to meet the challenge. Our public health staff has risen to that challenge, volunteers have risen to the challenge and our partners have risen to the challenge.”

Information regarding COVID-19 is continuously changing as we all learn, study and improve our understanding of the disease. While it can be frustrating at times, staff and volunteers have stuck with it, despite the numerous challenges. We all owe our public health team a big thanks for their hard work.



PUBLIC HEALTH STAFF
AND VOLUNTEERS

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC HEALTH LOOK LIKE?

COVID-19 has forced many individuals and businesses to realize the role they play in public health. Individuals and business owners have learned how to keep others safe from exposure to illnesses they may have. “The lessons that we have from COVID-19 are still relevant for the flu or other types of communicable diseases,” Devine said. While the pandemic has been devastating, there is a hope that we are approaching the end, and our community is more equipped to handle a similar situation in the future.

FIND MORE INFORMATION:
sjbpublichealth.org/coronavirus

TESTING:
sjbpublichealth.org/testing

VACCINES:
sjbpublichealth.org/covid-19-vaccine

COVID-19 DATA:
sjbpublichealth.org/sjbph-data-dashboard

RIDING OFF *into the Sunset*

These outgoing county staffers represented a broad swath of the services you rely on every day, and their long-term dedication to our county will be deeply missed.

La Plata County's staff is a dedicated bunch spanning many departments, committed to providing services to residents. When people come to La Plata County, they tend to stay. In 2020, we said farewell to seven veteran employees who each had more than 20 years of service to the county – and some far more! All told, more than 212 years of expertise, service and dedication culminated in 2020, and now we welcome a new generation of committed employees.



Butch Knowlton

**Director of Office of Emergency
Services and Building Department**

Butch is one of La Plata County's most visible and venerable personalities, serving in the critical role of preparing for and managing any emergency. Whenever disaster struck, Butch kept our citizens safe and informed, working with partner agencies to protect La Plata County from fires, floods and other challenges.

44.5
YEARS
OF SERVICE



Alan Andrews

Director of Information Technology

Alan started his tenure with La Plata County in the map room of the Assessor's Office and ended it as IT Director. Alan oversaw the county's transition to the digitally based information age, providing resources and support to the growing workforce. Under Alan's watch, La Plata County went from paper maps to offering one of the premier GIS portals in Colorado.

42.5
YEARS
OF SERVICE



Robert "Ed" Phippen

La Plata County Sheriff's Office

After entering the basketball Hall of Fame at Fort Lewis College, Ed Phippen joined the Sheriff's Office in 1987. Ed served in many areas and rose to Lieutenant. In his last five years with the Sheriff's Office, Ed became the recruiter for the agency and contributed to the high-quality workforce we have today, setting them up for success.

32.5
YEARS
OF SERVICE

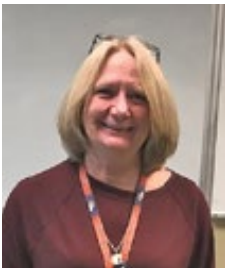


Sheila Lucero

Clerk & Recorder Administration Supervisor

Sheila provided exceptional customer service in the Motor Vehicle Division; she was very supportive of customers and staff and did the utmost to build a strong team. Sheila loved to learn and share any experiences that could help colleagues. In short, Sheila was extremely valued by all.

31.5
YEARS
OF SERVICE

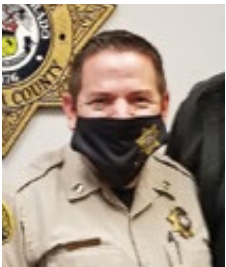


Carolyn Hately

Human Services Accounting Supervisor

Carolyn worked in the Human Services Business Office as Accounting Technician for six years and leading the office as supervisor for 21. Carolyn always kept the needs of our county residents first. She had a deep understanding of how Human Services programs and services are funded and always sought the most effective way to help those experiencing a crisis.

27.0
YEARS
OF SERVICE



Michael Slade

La Plata County Sheriff's Office

Michael began working for the Sheriff's Office as a Detentions Deputy in 1997 while pursuing a degree in computer technology at Fort Lewis College. Michael served his entire career in the jail and rose to Captain and Detentions Division Commander. Michael also used his technology skills to improve the jail's operations and modernize practices.

23.5
YEARS
OF SERVICE



James Coleman

La Plata County Sheriff's Office

Jim began his career at the La Plata County Sheriff's Office in 1997. He spent his tenure in the Patrol Division responding to calls for service from La Plata County citizens. Most recently, Jim focused on traffic safety and secured a position as a traffic Deputy with a particular focus on DUI checkpoints.

23.5
YEARS
OF SERVICE



Lori Rampone

Human Services Manager

Lori was a family therapist with the Department of Human Services for 19 years before becoming the Core Services Supervisor during her last year with the county. During this time, she provided support, guidance and a safe place to explore difficult topics for children and struggling families. Lori rejoiced in their successes and working with them through hard times.

20.0
YEARS
OF SERVICE



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