

**MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM, GOVERNOR**

James C. Kenney, Cabinet Secretary

Jennifer J. Pruet, Deputy Secretary

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Maddy Hayden, Communications Director
New Mexico Environment Department
505.231.8800 | maddy.hayden@state.nm.us

The Environment Department's mission is to protect and restore the environment and to foster a healthy and prosperous New Mexico for present and future generations.

Fighting the pandemic from the sewers: COVID-19 wastewater surveillance program shows early success *Program prevents outbreak at Las Cruces juvenile justice facility*

In early December, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) launched an innovative wastewater monitoring program to protect New Mexicans from COVID-19 at congregate settings in southern New Mexico. Just a few weeks later, the program prevented a COVID-19 outbreak at a southern New Mexico juvenile justice facility.

NMED is applying cutting-edge science to protect public health in southern New Mexico. Here's how it works: COVID-positive individuals – whether they are symptomatic or not – shed COVID-19 in their feces. Twice a week, NMED collects sewage samples at facilities participating in the program and analyzes the sample in a laboratory for COVID-19 gene markers. The laboratory confirms the presence or absence of COVID-19 in the wastewater.

Currently, 16 federal, state and local correctional and Children, Youth and Family Services Department (CYFD) facilities in southern New Mexico are enrolled in the NMED program.

The J. Paul Taylor Center, a CYFD-licensed juvenile justice facility in Las Cruces, is among the program participants. During the first few weeks of the December sampling, NMED did not detect the virus in the facility's wastewater. In late December, the virus was detected and NMED staff immediately notified CYFD staff, who then immediately directed testing of over 100 individuals – both clients and staff – for COVID-19.

The individual test results of clients and staff revealed that an asymptomatic COVID-19 positive individual was working in the facility at the time the wastewater sample was collected. That employee was immediately instructed to isolate. Subsequent wastewater samples from the facility did not detect the virus, indicating NMED and CYFD actions prevented an outbreak among the clients and staff at the facility. NMED continues to sample sewage at the facility.



A sampler gathers wastewater at a collection point.

“It’s clear that our actions saved lives,” said NMED Cabinet Secretary James Kenney. “The Environment Department continues to embrace the use of science and innovation to fight this virus and keep New Mexicans safe.”

"COVID-19 has brought out the best in innovative thinking and collaboration across New Mexico's state agencies," said CYFD Cabinet Secretary Brian Blalock. "The wastewater testing system is a terrific example of our commitment to test, track, and mitigate the spread of the virus to keep our staff members and the people they serve safe and healthy."

NMED is posting all COVID-19 wastewater sampling data [here](#). NMED updates the dashboard as results come in and shares trends with facility personnel so appropriate public health measures are taken. In the next few weeks, the dashboard will be updated to include graphs in addition to the posted datapoints to make trends easier for users to identify. For the safety of clients, information from domestic violence shelters is not publicly posted.

NMED is funding this effort through the federal CARES Act and will expand to other areas of the state and facility types as funding allows.

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Kathryn Becker, Non-Discrimination Coordinator | NMED | 1190 St. Francis Dr., Suite N4050 | P.O. Box 5469 | Santa Fe, NM 87502
(505) 827-2855 or nd.coordinator@state.nm.us

If you believe that you have been discriminated against with respect to a NMED program or activity, you may contact the Non-Discrimination Coordinator.

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