

County leaders put focus on public health

Here's how I came to the decision to declare coronavirus an emergency

By CLAY JENKINS

The decision I made to declare a public health emergency did not come lightly.

Last week, Dr. Philip Huang, director of Dallas County Health and Human Services, and I began reviewing what other jurisdictions with community spread of COVID-19 were doing.

Much is unknown about this virus, but what is known is that it is robust and easily transmittable, and it can live outside the host for significant periods of time.

If it gets into the compromised portions of our population, as it has in nursing homes in Washington state, it can and will be deadly.

Armed with that information, Dr. Huang and I knew that we must act aggressively to inform the public of the risk and pass measures that would give our community a better chance of controlling the spread of the disease.

Modeling best practices from other jurisdictions, we came up with preliminary ideas.

This past Thursday, while awaiting test results of the first probable case of community spread in Dallas County, we discussed our thoughts with four groups: The state's public health team, led by its commissioner, Dr. John Hellerstedt; the Dallas Regional Chamber, Dallas Citizens Council, and the Convention and Visitors Bureau representing businesses that would be impacted by my order; more than a dozen bishops, rabbis, pastors and imams representing the faith commu-

nity that would be impacted by the order; and the mayors and city managers of all the cities and towns in Dallas County.

Each group was focused on the public health more than any other interest, and the contributions they made were invaluable to the decision-making process that led to the order.

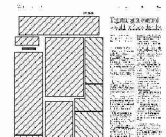
The level of success we have in combating the community spread of COVID-19 and the damage it will cause will be directly determined by the exercise of personal responsibility, good hygiene, and smart decision-making by all our residents.

We so need your help. Please look out not only for your own interests but for those of our community, especially people over 60 and those with underlying health conditions who are at an increased risk.

Although the current order only prohibits its community gatherings of greater than 500 people, we are discouraging in the strongest terms possible people over 60 or with underlying conditions being in group settings of more than 10 people.

Similarly, we are strongly discouraging any gathering of more than 250 people.

Now that the virus is



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matters.**

spreading within the community, every human interaction carries with it some risk. Each person must evaluate what amount of risk is acceptable.

My advice is to err on the side of caution and limit unnecessary gatherings.

We've faced difficult days in Dallas County before. The lessons we learned together from West Nile and Ebola put

us in a unique position for preparedness, response and resiliency.

Our public health is in your hands. We will meet this challenge and limit community spread if we stay calm, follow the science, and act responsibly while extending compassion to one another.

Clay Jenkins is the Dallas County judge. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.



Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins turned the podium over to Dr. Philip Huang, Director of Dallas County Health and Human Services, after announcing late Thursday that a state of disaster had been declared in the county.