



COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
COMMONWEALTH HEALTHCARE CORPORATION
GOVERNOR'S COVID-19 TASK FORCE



Special Address by Governor Ralph DLG. Torres
COVID-19 Update as of March 21, 2020

(as prepared for delivery)

Hafa Adai and Tirow, Marianas.

I understand that it has been a long week for all of us.

Last night, our community received some positive news in light of all that is going on in our region and around the world.

Two specimens that were sent to Guam earlier this week for testing returned negative for COVID-19. This includes the specimen from an individual we isolated.

While we still do not have a confirmed case of COVID-19 here in the CNMI, your government through our COVID-19 Task Force and the Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation, through CEO Esther Muña, continues to be proactive and implement strict social distancing procedures to keep you, your families, our man'amko, and our loved ones with pre-existing illnesses safe.

Since January, we have been actively conducting surveillance at our airports and screening tourists and returning residents through our health declaration form coming into the Marianas. We were the first state or territory in the United States to do this.

When we made the request on January 29 to suspend flights from China to protect our islands from the coronavirus, we knew that was a difficult decision. It brought our economy to a standstill and hurt our government revenues, which was seeing positive collections in January. But we knew we had to do what was right to keep our islands safe, despite having to go through this economic crisis.

On March 3, 2020, I wrote to President Donald J. Trump to inform him of our crisis in the CNMI and sought his assistance to mobilize federal resources to aid the CNMI government in our response to this pandemic.

Earlier this week, in response to my communication, FEMA has officially been authorized to provide appropriate assistance and to provide emergency protective measures (Category B) not authorized under other Federal statutes, including direct federal assistance, under the Public Assistance program.

FEMA Region IX Administrator Robert Fenton, who has been a strong partner of ours during typhoons, directly informed me that the President's declaration covers all of our islands, Saipan, Tinian, and Rota, for COVID-19 response.

Lt. Governor Palacios and I have already started working closely with FEMA since March 13 to access all the federal resources available to the CNMI pursuant to the Presidential declaration, including my request for the mobilization of the Incident Management Assistance Team (IMAT-A) to assist the CNMI in its emergency protective measures and response coordination to combat COVID-19.

We also worked with the US Small Business Administration (SBA) to provide economic injury disaster loans for our affected businesses. Through the support of our businesses, the SBA's Office of Disaster Assistance approved our request, and we are now waiting for the formal declaration to begin offering assistance to all of our impacted businesses and non-profit organizations.

Federal support at my request is well on its way, so we are not alone in this crisis. We made these requests before a confirmed positive case emerged within our region.

Then last Sunday, upon hearing the news of three confirmed positive cases in Guam, Lt. Governor Palacios and I did not wait. We took action. We immediately called for the closure of all government offices and non-essential government operations. We worked with the Board of Education, PSS, and NMC in closing down schools and our college. The next day, I officially declared a public health emergency for the CNMI.

Over the last week, we implemented the next steps of our public health pandemic plan. We established social distancing policies and guidance for our community as we combat COVID-19.

In our public awareness campaign, "Stay at Home. Stop the Spread."

We encourage everyone the Marianas to:

PLEASE STAY HOME and avoid unnecessary travel as much as possible.

WORK OR DO SCHOOLWORK FROM HOME whenever possible and reasonable.

AVOID SOCIAL GATHERINGS in groups of more than 10.

AVOID EATING OUT at restaurants, use DRIVE-THRU, TAKE-OUT, or DELIVERY OPTIONS.

CONTINUE PRACTICING GOOD HYGIENE:

Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.

Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when coughing or sneezing.

Avoid touching your face.

Disinfect frequently used items (cellphones, computers, household items) as much as possible.

But most importantly:

IF YOU FEEL SICK or IF SOMEONE IN YOUR HOME IS SICK, please contact your personal doctor or call the COVID-19 INFO LINE at 285—1352, 1542, 1672, or 1854.

IF YOU ARE AN OLDER PERSON (MAN'AMKO), you are more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus. Please stay home and away from other people as much as possible.

IF YOU ARE A PERSON WITH A PREEXISTING ILLNESS (such as ASTHMA, DIABETES, AND HEART DISEASE), you are more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus. Please stay home and away from other people as much as possible.

Children, young adults, and healthy people may also carry the virus without developing any symptoms and act as carriers transmitting the virus to our man'amko and the sick. Because of this, I have implemented new curfew hours for minors from 7:00 pm to 6:00 am.

So again we please urge the entire community to stay at home and stop the spread.

Effective Monday morning, March 23, all passengers from off-island, including residents, will be subject to mandatory quarantine for a minimum of 14 days. This may be an inconvenience for you, but please understand that this is to protect your family and your loved ones.

To all of our business and travel partners, thank you for all of the support and understanding since we first addressed this virus. In the coming days, we will be making more drastic decisions for closure of restaurants and other establishments.

This crisis is bigger than politics and bigger than ourselves. It is a challenging time for our Commonwealth, but I know that if we all work together, help each other out, practice proper hygiene, and promote social distancing, we can beat this virus.

We will always be Marianas Strong, and I will continue to provide updates, along with our COVID-19 Task Force, CHCC, and all our local and federal partners.

Thank you, Si Yu'us Ma'ase, and Ghilisow.

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