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Health officials need cooperation with contact tracers

Riverside County health officials are asking coronavirus patients to provide critically needed information when they are contacted by health investigators working to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Hundreds of contact tracers are working as part of Riverside County's response to the epidemic that has infected more than 20,000 residents and contributed to about 500 virus-related deaths. The contact tracers reach out to those who test positive for COVID-19 and attempt to determine the source of the infection, who the patient may have been contact with and where the patient may have visited. This information is used to help slow the spread of coronavirus by reaching out to those who may have been infected without identifying the infected patients.

"Unfortunately, in many cases, the person who is contacted is not providing the information that is being sought," said Kim Saruwatari, director of Riverside County Public Health. "This information is critical as we work to slow and eventually stop the spread of coronavirus. It is understandable that patients may be reluctant to discuss sensitive issues, but it is very important that this information is provided."

Saruwatari emphasized the information that is gathered is not shared with other governmental agencies or with those who are contacted by case investigators. Health officials have used the same techniques for years while investigating health issues like tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases.

"We don't share individual information and we don't ding people for being honest," said Dr. Cameron Kaiser, Riverside County public health officer. "The only thing new about what we're doing now is the scale of it. We know how to keep your information private and we ask only

what we need to know. But we also need to understand where our hotspots are so we can concentrate on those regions and sectors, and that can't happen if we don't find out what we need to."

Health officials continue to encourage Riverside County residents to take their own steps to slow the spread of coronavirus, like wearing a face covering, maintaining social distancing and frequent hand washing. Taking these steps can reduce the spread by up to 95 percent.

"The deadly pandemic caught us all by surprise. But we are resilient and we will overcome," said Board Chair V. Manuel Perez, Fourth District Supervisor. "In order for our county to thrive we ask you to join us in this war against coronavirus and agree to work with our contact tracers if you are called. Together we will beat this pandemic."

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