

Precinct 2 Newsletter

EL PASO COUNTY COMMISSIONER DAVID C. STOUT'S PRECINCT UPDATE



What's New

A WORD FROM COMMISSIONER STOUT

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Overview

by David Stout

As we begin 2021, I would like to wish you a safe start to this new year. We saw two significant COVID-19 peaks in 2020, and as we move forward, we hope that the vaccine will be deployed in such a way that prevents a third.

The pandemic has dominated nearly every aspect of County government, and our activities reflect that reality. Read on for more information about what we have been up to. This issue contains information about many of the key programs we have deployed in order to mitigate the pandemic's effects, including economic development programs that will help businesses weather this storm. There's also information about eviction diversion options, which include a blend of state and local funds geared toward preventing homelessness.

My office continues to operate virtually, and if you need anything from us, reach out to my staff at (915) 546-2111. You may also reach me by e-mail at commissioner2@epcounty.com

COVID-19 Update

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed lives and continues to disrupt what people around the world came to see as normal, but local conditions have recently changed for the good.

In September and October, El Paso County's infection rates soared, blowing away previous highs and culminating with a local peak on November 12.

Since then, rates have come down, but at its height, El Paso County's seven-day infection rate per 100,000 was 225, and nearly half of all hospitalizations were related to COVID-19.

In November, County Judge Ricardo Samaniego issued a two-week order to close nonessential businesses and shelter in place, similar to the order he issued earlier in the pandemic. The County faced litigation from some local business owners and the State of Texas. After the County prevailed in the district court, an appellate court overturned the Judge's order, which had been extended beyond the initial 14 days.

The two-week closure, which the City refused to enforce until the district court's ruling, marked the beginning of the decline El Paso County has

seen in its infection rate through the end of 2020, inaction and refusal notwithstanding. Though the holiday season's effects won't be full ascertained until well into 2021, the hope is that El Pasoans have continued to stay home, wear masks, distance socially and avoid large gatherings from outside their own household.

Commissioner David Stout, who began representing commissioners court on the El Paso United COVID-19 Task Force this fall, supported the Judge's order, as did his task force colleagues.

"The Judge discussed the order before issuing it, and the need was very obvious," Stout said. "All of the folks on the call knew how bad things had been, and we knew something had to be done so that lives would be saved. We don't take lightly that people have lost jobs and that businesses have closed during the pandemic, but we also cannot resurrect people who have died from coronavirus."

The primary source of hope that we have turned a corner COVID-19. Those vaccines began arriving locally in December, and a multi-phase vaccination plan is under way.

Phase 1 of the vaccine rollout covered November and December, with a limited supply of doses available and a rollout to key populations, including healthcare providers. Phase 2, running from January to July of 2021, will cover critical populations who weren't vaccinated in Phase 1, as well as working on rolling things out to the general population, and expanding the provider network that can administer the vaccine.

State and local authorities anticipate that a sufficient vaccine supply for the entire population will be here by July of 2021, and that will mark the beginning of Phase 3. They anticipate using teams to deploy vaccines through the general population and having most people vaccinated by October of 2021. In October, Phase 4 will begin, when there will be a sufficient supply of the vaccine and reduced demand because most of the population has been vaccinated. Health officials have also stated that boosters or annual vaccines, as have flu vaccinations, may become part of the new normal.

2020 Census Wrap-Up

After two-plus solid years of work, the El Paso County Complete Count Committee (CCC) and its partners, including Census Bureau staff, wrapped up the local Census 2020 count this fall.

El Paso has been drastically underfunded during the preceding decennial because of an undercount in Census 2010, but Census 2020 was a different story.

The CCC's efforts saw the City of El Paso with a final response rate of 68.1 percent, slightly higher than the national average of 67 percent, while El Paso County as a whole came in at 66.8 percent.

El Paso County finished just behind Travis and Bexar counties, which had a 67.3 percent response rate, but similarly sized cities across the country such as Detroit, Nashville, Boston, and Washington, D.C., all had lower response rates than El Paso.

Population numbers have flagged in recent years locally, so ensuring that El Paso got

as many of its people counted as possible was especially important. Areas with larger population growth since the last census could stand to gain federal funds and legislative influence through congressional allocation at El Paso's expense with another undercount.

The CCC spent almost \$937,000, with \$460,500 coming from the County.

That investment covered a project coordinator to promote grassroots-level awareness of Census 2020, the testing program, mobile digital ad buys, PR and media planning, the gift cards contest, printing costs,

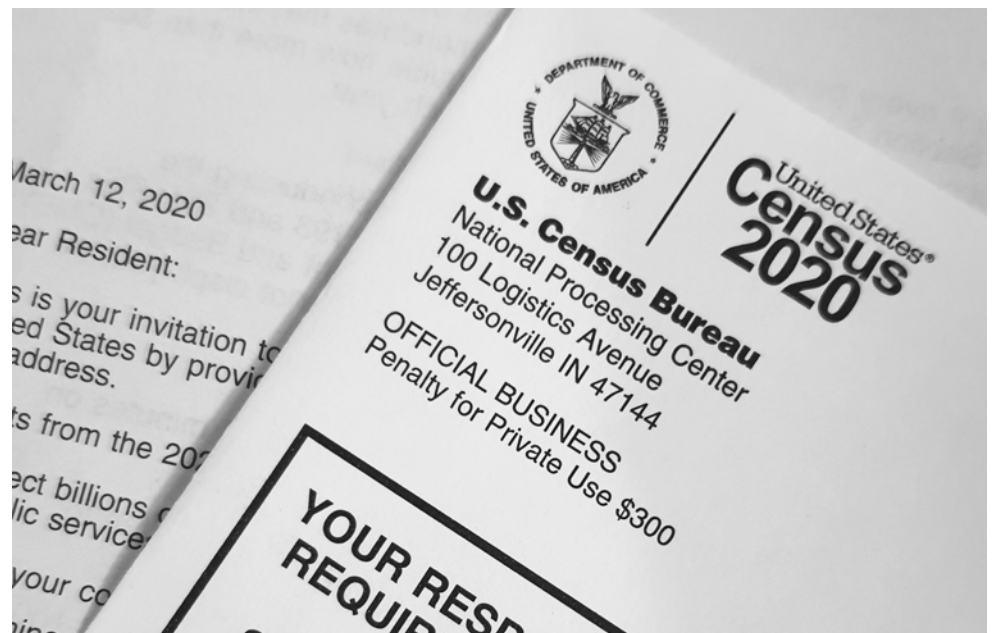
promotoras and event costs.

"We spent a lot of money getting out the word about Census 2020 and driving up our response rate, and we were more effective than last time," said

Commissioner David Stout, who co-chaired the CCC.

"The investment we made will pay off handsomely in the millions of funding for local schools, hospitals, and transportation infrastructure during the next 10 years."

In the intervening years, regional stakeholders will continue to promote census awareness, and the next CCC will convene in January of 2028.



The Family Independence Initiative

Working with a national organization and key local partners, the County started a long-term program this fall that will put money in the hands of struggling families and track data to determine the effectiveness of social programs.

The Family Independence Initiative (FII), which has worked in places such as Chicago and Austin, began operating a program here that makes unrestricted cash rewards of up to \$500 to families through a COVID-19 Emergency Relief Assistance Fund.

The County contributed \$275,000 for this program, while the Hunt Family Foundation gave \$100,000 in 2020 as part of a five-year commitment of \$500,000. Anonymous national donors gave \$175,000 to support the El Paso fund. The initial balance for 2020 was \$550,000, and all of those funds were exhausted after applications opened in October.

“I am proud El Paso County is partnering on this initiative that will empower people, helping to bring them more financial stability,” Commissioner David Stout said. “Data-driven decision-making is key, even more so when dollars are scarce. The positive outcomes that normally result from this type of program can have long-lasting impacts in so many ways, from the economy, to healthcare, even to public safety. I can’t think of a smarter way to deploy our precious CARES Act funding.”

FII has easily been one of the County’s most successful assistance programs during the pandemic. It mirrors efforts that Commissioner Stout proposed for the County’s CARES Act budget, which had been rejected because a majority of the commissioners court felt that providing unrestricted funds to citizens was unwise. FII draws parallels to the concept of universal basic income.

“From the beginning, I have long been a believer in the need for universal basic income, which is why I prioritized spending CARES Act funding to be focused on empowering people with unrestricted cash infusions, and it is why I supported FII,” Stout said. “We hope to partner to get even more aid to folks in the years to come.”

El Paso County will oversee the program, and FII’s UpTogether platform will manage it. FII trusts and invests directly in low-income families so they can work collectively to achieve prosperity. UpTogether allows people experiencing poverty to build and strengthen their social networks and access unrestricted financial transfers.

FII worked with the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization/Border Interfaith to ensure that hard-to-reach families were aware of the program, maximizing outreach.

Economic Development and Grant Funding

In November, the commissioners court began a process to provide relief to local businesses in the form of forgivable, zero-interest loans, as well as providing microgrants for operational safety improvements.

Working with a host of local business-serving organizations, the County will invest \$10 million in the Financial Assistance for Safety, Technology, and Economic Resilience (FASTER) Program.

The program will be finalized and rolled out in early 2021, right after the court finalizes Chapter 381 Economic Development agreements with each of its partners: Borderplex Community Capital (El Paso Community Foundation), LiftFund, Peoplefund, the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Workforce Solutions Borderplex, and the El Paso Chamber of Commerce.

Commissioner David Stout, who had previously advocated for tapping into emergency reserves for COVID relief, was pleased to see this program take shape.

He was part of the workgroup that designed the County's programs, which will prioritize historically underutilized businesses, those that pay a living wage, and those that have complied with all local orders.

"We need to take care of businesses that take care of their people, and that take care of our community by not putting the health of employees and the public at risk," Stout said.

The grants and forgivable loans the County funded earlier in the pandemic succeeded, and the application portal closed down very quickly because of high demand.

County staff expects the FASTER programs will receive similarly high demand.

The programs will provide zero-interest loans that are forgivable, with a large loan program making awards between \$35,000 and \$125,000; a small loan program offering up to \$50,000; microgrants of up to \$10,000 for PPE, signage and security improvements; commercial mortgage and

rental/utility assistance; and technical and equipment access assistance.

The County also will work with the Better Business Bureau of El Paso to promote awareness of the program through the Web site the BBB has jointly operated with the City of El Paso, epbusinessstrong.org. The BBB, which helped the County drive up sagging application numbers for rental assistance and debit-card programs offered through the Community Services Department and the El Paso Community Foundation earlier in the pandemic, took over ownership of that site in 2021.

The Court approved the 381 agreements at its first meeting of the new year, so log onto epbusinessstrong.org and get more information about the program.



Eviction Diversion

Project BRAVO, one of El Paso's major players in rental assistance during the pandemic, began administering locally the Texas Eviction Diversion Program (TEDP) this fall, shortly after El Paso County was selected as a pilot location for this program.

Created by a Texas Supreme Court order, the TEDP will provide up to six months of rent payments, past due monies and future payments in a lump sum with turnaround time as little as four days. El Paso's initial allocation was \$600,000, and by mid-December, approximately 10 percent of that money had been spent, with 11 families retaining their housing because of it. The CDC's moratorium on evictions because of nonpayment of rent expired December 31, so that program likely will be more utilized in the new year.

The state has set aside \$167 million for TEDP and will continue rolling it out statewide throughout early 2021.

This program holds great potential, though it does have flaws.

Ultimately, this program still requires an eviction to be filed, and it requires both landlord and tenant to consent to participating in

the program, which does little in situations where landlords prefer to restore possession of the leased property and move on from a tenant. It depends on referrals from Justice of the Peace courts, though the JPs are prohibited from advocating for the program.

The TEDP is above and beyond rental assistance programs offered by the County, Project BRAVO's own in-house rental assistance program, and the City of El Paso. Families on the brink could use programs in tandem, theoretically, to get help with back rent dating back through most of 2020 if necessary.

To learn more about TEDP, contact Evelyn Gallegos with Project BRAVO at (915) 562-4100 x 420, or contact the Precinct 2 office at (915) 546-2111.

UMC Medical Trailer

University Medical Center (UMC) has led from the front during the County's pandemic response. Taking on heavy COVID volume, making new spaces to treat COVID-19 and other patients, and stockpiling PPE that helped meet regional shortages, UMC has worked to meet unprecedented challenges.

In strategizing with commissioners court, UMC

asked for a bit of support, a key forward-minded step that will enable both UMC and the County to help meet needs in the unincorporated areas and to enable the County to play a larger role in the community's public health space.

UMC requested assistance in purchasing a mobile medical trailer, a unit that can be taken into out-county areas and used to screen, to see patients, and to administer tests and vaccines, among other things.

The court unanimously approved spending up to \$520,000 for this mobile medical unit, and the County also will help UMC with initial staffing costs, paying \$250,000 to cover that expense.

UMC's neighborhood clinics offer access to healthcare and lab space to analyze test samples, but many El Paso County residents are far from those clinics. This trailer will help close that gap for some.

"This was easy to support because UMC serves the people better than it does anything else," said Commissioner David Stout, whose precinct contains UMC's main campus. "The lack of access to healthcare caused the pandemic to be much worse here, whether it was access to testing or fewer alternatives to meet basic needs. UMC will now be able to meet more of those people right where they are."

CARES Accounting

Recognizing that the CARES Act funding set to expire December 31 might go unspent, commissioners court approved a budget swap, freeing up some budgeted dollars by using CARES Act funding to cover staffing expenses related to the mitigation of COVID-19 in the community.

Unspent CARES Act dollars would have to have been returned to the federal government, but by doing the budget reimbursement, commissioners court kept those millions here in El Paso. The final amount saved will be ascertained early in 2021, but it definitely will be an eight-figure amount.

A majority of the court approved using \$4.5 million of the funds for giving bonuses to County employees, favoring law enforcement employees (the only employees who received raises in this year's budget) and employees who work from the office over others by giving them a \$1,500 bonus. Other employees who work from home, many of whom work well beyond scheduled

hours while receiving neither overtime nor a raise, received \$500.

Commissioner Stout was one of two commissioners who opposed giving bonuses.

"Not only is it completely wrong to heighten the disparity the court created by only giving certain favored classes of employees raises this year, it is completely the wrong move to use funds that we need to pay bonuses during this time of great struggle for our community," Stout said. "I love County employees, but we have not furloughed anyone and no one has missed a day's pay during the pandemic. As a public servant, I firmly

believe we should have used those dollars to serve our constituents, not our employees."

Commissioner Stout is working with County staff to make sure the remaining balance from the CARES Act reimbursement is spent on meeting community needs.

"We need to use those funds for COVID relief, namely more cash and rental assistance, attacking food insecurity by hiring SNAP coordinators to draw down millions in federal dollars El Paso leaves on the table, homelessness mitigation, and additional needs for small businesses," Stout said.



Broadband Study

As thousands of students in El Paso County schools have seen life change by shifting school from in-person to online, the region's digital divide has become another point of separation between urban and rural, between richer and poorer.

The County's Economic Development Department, in conjunction with UTEP's Loya Center, proposed to do a broadband study to fully document and ascertain broadband capacity in all parts of El Paso County.

In exploring federal funding to expand broadband into the unincorporated areas, County staff learned that millions are available to meet the need, but without a full and accurate study that documents existing capacity, El Paso County cannot access those funds.

The Loya Center's broadband study will fill in that missing link.

Commissioners court initially approved CARES Act funding for this, given the need for expanded broadband capacity not only for schools but also for things like medical appointments, which have migrated to the virtual world for some during the pandemic.

However, the County reconfigured the deal to comply with CARES Act requirements mandating that deliverables had to be tendered by December 31, 2020.

The study will be completed in May of 2021, so the County worked out an arrangement with the El Paso Community Foundation to pay for labor in support of the endeavor, with the County's \$130,000 contribution being settled within the designated timeline.

Broadband will continue to be important in unincorporated areas even after all children return to school, including for initiatives such as the County's Digital Library.

Finally, in late summer of 2020, Commissioner Stout's office was approached by Canutillo ISD to help leverage state CARES funding to achieve a 3 to 1 match for our local schools to adequately equip their students with the technology they need to be successful.

Ultimately 7 local school districts including Anthony ISD, Canutillo ISD, Clint ISD, Fabens ISD, San Elizario ISD, Tornillo ISD, and Ysleta ISD received funding to help get their students the proper technology to succeed virtually.

Immigration Reform Campaign

At the December 14 meeting, a majority of the commissioners court approved Commissioner David Stout's resolution helping to kick off the Border Network for Human Rights' 2021 Immigration Reform Campaign.

BNHR has been among the local organizations opposing the

xenophobic immigration policies advanced during the Trump Administration, all of which were hostile to people of color and made worse an already broken immigration system desperately in need of common-sense reform.

Specifically, the resolution called for the introduction of fair and inclusive immigration legislation, for the Biden Administration to undo immediately harmful policies the Trump Administration imposed by executive order, finding a pathway to citizenship for recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, demilitarization of the border, closure of ICE detention facilities, reunification of families broken up by Trump Administration policies, and accountability for law enforcement.

Two members of the court opposed the resolution, wrongly perceiving the resolution as an attack against law enforcement.

"I do not understand how calling for accountability could be reasonably perceived as an attack on law enforcement," Stout said. "The only law enforcement officers who should be scared of accountability are those who violate the law and the Constitution. All professionals should be held accountable, but especially those who abuse the trust placed in them by the public."

Indigenous Peoples Day

Following up on his advocacy during budget season, Commissioner Stout presented a resolution honoring October 12, 2020, as the County's first observance of Indigenous Peoples Day.

The County has observed a holiday on October 12 for many, many years, but Commissioner Stout believed the County should join with other jurisdictions across the country that have removed Christopher Columbus' name from the holiday.

"Indigenous people form a key part of El Paso County and the constituents we serve, and I was very honored to shift the focus from where it has been historically, conquest, to where it should be, the diversity that makes life here so rich," Stout said.

The commissioners court approved a full slate of holidays as part of the budget, and Stout's office worked in tandem with the County's Human Resources Department to update this year's holidays to include Indigenous Peoples Day.

Veterans Advisory Board

This fall saw a changing of the guard for Precinct 2's representation on the County's Veterans Advisory Board.

Burrell McCollum served the County with great distinction, and he resigned this fall as chair of the VAB because his family relocated.

After interviewing several well-qualified candidates, Commissioner Stout nominated Ms. Alexis McCray to succeed Mr. McCollum on the VAB.

Ms. McCray is an Air Force veteran who has made El Paso her home, moving here to become a mental health provider. She understands the behavioral health needs of veterans very well, in addition to understanding the challenges of transitioning from military to civilian life.

Commissioner Stout believes that Ms. McCray will represent Precinct 2 well in filling Mr. McCollum's unexpired term.

"I was very pleased to select her," Stout said. "Her priorities mirror those of my office. She will be a solid contributor, as was her predecessor."

EHN Board

In December, commissioners court reappointed Commissioner David Stout to the Emergence Health Board of Trustees, a two-year appointment that began this month.

Stout, who has previously served as Vice Chair of the board and chaired the Board's Human Resources Committee in 2020, is in his final term serving with EHN because of term-limit restrictions.

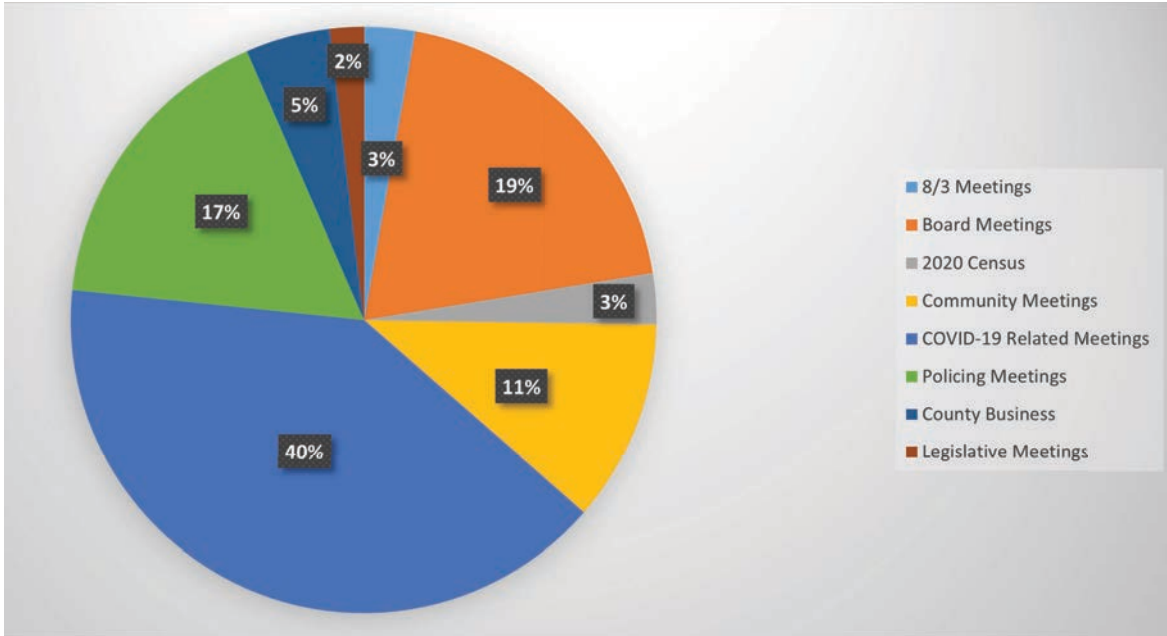
"Mental health and access to care through the behavioral health system of care has been a priority of mine for my entire public life," Stout said. "I seek to make a difference in that space, and it's why I am pleased I will continue with the organization."

Stout also serves on NAMI Texas' Board of Directors, where he is the Finance Chair.



Precinct 2 by the Numbers

Office Meetings in Q4: Total 107



*between October 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020

Office Statistics

- 10 Virtual Commissioners Court meetings since October 1, 2020
- 5 resolutions sponsored
- 4 op-eds published

Precinct 2 Resolutions

Resolution honoring the life of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Resolution honoring and recognizing Veterans Day in El Paso County, Texas

Resolution recognizing National Transgender Day of Remembrance in El Paso County, Texas

Resolution recognizing Veteran Caregivers and their invaluable service to our country

Resolution calling for immigration reform in 2021 with the new federal administration

Commissioner Stout in the News

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EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS
DAVID C. STOUT
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, PRECINCT TWO

El Pasoans must work together to prevent a tsunami of winter evictions
 by David Stout, El Paso County Commissioner
 October 26, 2020 – El Paso Matters

The pandemic has taken so much from us — jobs, our way of life, our health, and for far too many, relatives and loved ones have been lost here in El Paso and across the nation.

Some stand to lose even more in the months to come, namely the sanctity of home. Organizations like Project BRAVO and advocates such as Texas Housers have sounded the alarm about a potential eviction tsunami.

My colleagues and I tried to get in front of this crisis, approving a cash infusion into our Rental Assistance Program, which is available to those who reside outside El Paso city limits. Our counterparts on City Council, meanwhile, also have funded rental assistance.

Project BRAVO has reported that 36.8 percent of Texas households could face eviction or foreclosure within two months, despite the Centers for Disease Control's order halting evictions based on non-payment of rent.

The CDC order has slowed things down, but we have also heard of a rise in evictions based on reasons other than nonpayment of rent, usually facilitated by the fine print of a lease executed months or years earlier. The spirit underlying such evictions goes against the collective pursuit of the common good we need to remain resilient, especially with millions of dollars in rental assistance available through local government and organizations like Project BRAVO.

The Texas Supreme Court had a moratorium earlier this year, which has long since expired. Justices of the peace in some areas have taken steps to delay or postpone eviction hearings, but when the CDC moratorium expires on Dec. 31, very little will stand between struggling families and loss of home.

Unless landlords can get paid, struggling people are eventually going to find themselves facing an eviction, and with it, their ability to help keep our community safe by sheltering in place and avoiding congregate settings. As we try to get this October surge under control, the thought of a large segment of the population becoming homeless in early January, during winter and in the midst of flu season, should motivate us to be very proactive.

Our community has already begun to see increased homelessness. The Delta Welcome Center reported that 41 households sought emergency shelter because of an eviction since they began tracking that metric a couple of months ago. We cannot allow that figure to increase.

Near the end of September, the Texas Supreme Court created a new program called the Texas Eviction Diversion Program, and El Paso was selected as a pilot program site. Project BRAVO administers the program, bolstered by the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs' \$600,000 investment to help keep El Paso families in their homes.

This pilot program will develop best practices to illuminate a larger investment of \$163 million in federal funds that will be deployed throughout Texas' 254 counties. Through TEDP, eligible families could be in line to receive up to six months of rental assistance dating back to April of 2020, though counterintuitively, a court referral is required to tap into TEDP funds.

However, no court referral is need for Project BRAVO program, which provides three months of rental assistance. It's the same for the county's program.

The nonprofit and governmental sectors have provided options for landlords and tenants. What our community needs now is landlords and tenants to collaborate, helping to prevent an eviction tsunami here and to contain COVID-19.

If you are a struggling tenant, talk to your landlord about options. Don't wait.

David C. Stout has represented Precinct 2 on El Paso County Commissioners Court since 2015. He also serves on Project BRAVO's board of directors.

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EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS
DAVID C. STOUT
 COUNTY COMMISSIONER, PRECINCT TWO

Reducing risk at holiday gatherings

by David Stout, El Paso County Commissioner
 Nov 29, 2020 – El Paso Inc.

There is still much we don't know about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. But what health care and government officials know for sure is that we can all help contain the spread of COVID-19 by getting tested and following a few simple steps: wear a mask over your mouth and nose, wash your hands frequently, avoid large indoor gatherings, and maintain physical distance from others.

Recently, the National Institutes of Health laid out three reasons why testing is so crucial: it saves lives, can be quick and easy, and matters more in communities like El Paso.

According to the NIH, "Testing of all people for SARS-CoV-2, including those who have no symptoms, (those) who show symptoms ... and (those) who may have been exposed to the virus, will help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by identifying people who are in need of care in a timely fashion."

As we've seen, COVID-19 can spread quickly in a community such as ours, and that may be partially attributable to confusion about when to get tested. To be clear, anyone showing symptoms, including trouble breathing, fever, sore throat or loss of sense of smell and taste, should be tested immediately. Likewise, anyone who may have been exposed to the virus should also be tested to help prevent further spread.

Additionally, it's important to understand the type of test you're taking.

A molecular test, like those given at many of the public testing sites, is the most accurate. Unfortunately, results take a few days. Antigen tests, often marketed as rapid tests, are not as accurate as the molecular test and may miss some infections. Antibody tests can tell you if you have produced specific antibodies that indicate you previously had the virus.

According to the CDC, if you test negative, it's only a snapshot of the moment in time at which you got tested and doesn't mean you should let your guard down. While testing allows people to self-isolate and seek treatment more effectively, none of the tests now available are 100% accurate.

El Paso city and county officials recognize that testing as many people as possible is one of the keys to controlling the spread of COVID-19, by identifying as many people as possible that are infected to place under isolation or quarantine.

As the number of cases in El Paso County increased at an exponential rate over the last several weeks, health officials had a hard time keeping up with the need to collect and process tests, and the supply of tests was limited. However, capacity and supply have now increased dramatically and up to 10,000 people can be tested daily.

In the next few months, more will change as vaccines become available. However, it's important we contain the virus now before flu season peaks in the borderland – which generally happens from late-December to January.

For a complete list of testing sites and a link to schedule an appointment at one of the drive-thru testing sites, visit [ReduceTheRisk915.org](https://www.reducetherisk915.org). While you're there, you can also get valuable information on how to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 in our community.

El Paso County Commissioner David Stout is a member of the El Paso United COVID-19 Transition Task Force, which is made up of medical experts, elected officials and nonprofit organizations from the region.

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EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS
DAVID C. STOUT
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, PRECINCT TWO

Marcelino Serna was a World War I hero. He still has a lot to teach us
 by David Stout, El Paso County Commissioner
 Dec 16, 2020 – El Paso Matters

As our nation transitions, we need to pursue ways for Americans to become united again. An El Paso history lesson provides a way forward for the healing our nation needs.

Marcelino Serna became an El Pasoan, though he was born in a mining camp outside Chihuahua, Mexico. In World War I, shortly after emigrating, he fought for the United States. He ended that war in an army hospital in France, according to the Texas State Historical Association's Handbook of Texas, but before that, during the battle of Saint-Mihiel, he volunteered to scout ahead after 12 of his brothers in arms had been killed. He killed six members of the machine gun emplacement that had his unit under fire and captured the remaining eight soldiers.

Later, during the Meuse-Argonne offensive, he scouted ahead, again as a volunteer, and followed a German sniper to a trench, where Pvt. Serna used an Enfield rifle, pistol and grenades to trick the German unit into believing they were under attack by a larger unit. He killed 26 enemy soldiers and took 24 German prisoners, whom he later protected from execution in compliance with international law.

Pvt. Serna did all these things after refusing a discharge, offered when the Army learned he was not an American citizen. Pvt. Serna spoke limited English, but he served his adopted nation honorably, earning two Purple Hearts and becoming the first Latino soldier to receive the Distinguished Service Cross. He became one of Texas' most decorated World War I veterans.

In September, the El Paso County Commissioners Court unanimously passed twin resolutions honoring Pvt. Serna and supporting efforts by our federal and state delegations to seek recognition of his record through posthumous grants of both the Medal of Honor and the Texas Legislative Medal of Honor.

Both awards would be meritorious, but Pvt. Serna's story should also be a catalyst for an even larger, more important conversation about American life and the common good, about making sure that we do all we can to make America greater into the future.

America has been great since long before anyone living took their first breath. Even if he was not born here, Pvt. Serna devoted his life to making America stronger and an even greater nation.

There are hundreds of thousands of people who could follow in Pvt. Serna's footsteps, recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, who know no home other than America, who have been educated here, who hold jobs here, and who have served in our military.

The divisive rhetoric of the past four years has turned these people into political pawns, valuable contributors who have been reduced only to their immigration status, to manufacture outrage and score political points. The conversation focused on division instead of how we might unify as a people to do the right thing.

Pvt. Serna should be viewed as a model for what America has been and continues to be when we are at our best: a whole much greater than the sum of our parts, and a diverse people who agree that we can achieve more together than we can divided, even if we do not always agree on the best ways to proceed.

Being a bridge of opportunity to the thousands of DACA recipients who need permanent legal protection would be a fine way for Americans to commit to the common good, cementing the legacy of a distinguished veteran whose contributions racism has minimized.

If we can agree on that, we will have taken a large step toward restoring American greatness.

David C. Stout has represented Precinct 2 on El Paso County Commissioners Court since 2015.

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EL PASO COUNTY, TEXAS
DAVID C. STOUT
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, PRECINCT TWO

Actions we take now will mitigate poverty's expansion: David Stout
 by David Stout, El Paso County Commissioner
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As fall turns into winter, there are reasons to feel optimistic that the pandemic's grip on our community is loosening.

COVID-19's immediate effects here are the dead and the disruption of daily life. As America has moved past 310,000 deaths, El Paso has seen nearly 1,500 of our own die. Many children attend school virtually, and beloved restaurants and shops have closed.

Those are significant, but without smart work, the pandemic's legacy will become poverty's expansion.

A Columbia University study released in October estimated that 8 million Americans had slipped into poverty during the pandemic. Shortly before, a World Bank report estimated that global extreme poverty would rise for the first time in 20 years, projecting as many as 150 million would fall into extreme poverty by 2021.

Locally, these effects could be more pronounced. El Paso County already had many struggling families before the pandemic. Through the end of October, some 19,000 fewer El Pasoans were employed than in February. Workforce Solutions Borderplex reported 8,018 new unemployment claims filed in November, the highest since June, so those numbers likely have increased.

At the same time, 54 households have sought emergency shelter because of evictions since tracking began this fall. That number will increase early in 2021 after the Centers for Disease Control's partial moratorium on evictions expires.

The Texas Eviction Diversion Program allocated \$600,000 for a pilot program here to provide up to six months of rental payments, but after more than a month online, that program hadn't yet spent 10 percent of its funds. The cumbersome referral process and unclear training have marred effectiveness, not to mention that parties cannot be referred until an eviction has been filed. Some landlords who file may not want to stop the process even if they will get paid.

The TEDP's stalled efforts to get money out locally mirror the County's difficulties in spending the \$750,000 in CARES Act funding commissioners court earmarked for rental assistance. Even when we try to spend money to solve problems, execution sometimes gets in the way.

Losing a home is only one part of an eviction, though. Often, people who lose access to stable housing take months or years to get back on their feet, and some folks never fully recover. Why is that?

Among other reasons, one is the other part of an eviction: civil damages associated with unpaid rent and various fees and penalties usually built into leases. Unpaid landlords usually aren't the only bill collectors struggling families can't pay either.

With lost jobs, closed businesses, and some types of lower-skilled work that may never return to pre-pandemic levels, the crushing weight of that debt could leave families in poverty for years to come.

The County spent \$275,000, matched by local and national partners, to establish a fund that made unrestricted cash awards to people of lower means, and it was one of our most successful relief programs. The money got out quickly to people in need.

In the coming months, the commissioners' court will have some extra money available to mitigate poverty's expansion in our community. We will need to use those funds wisely because the need surely outweighs available resources.

Actions we take now -- saving businesses, putting money in the hands of struggling families, and helping new businesses get started -- will be what keeps poverty from drawing in a larger portion of our population. The vaccine will save lives, but how we rebuild the economy is what will change them.

David C. Stout has served as Commissioner of Precinct 2 since taking office in January of 2015.

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