The following are summary minutes for the meeting of the City of Las Cruces – COVID-19 Task Force Committee on February 16, 2022. At 3:30 p.m. at City Hall, 700 S. Main Street, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Members Present:
- Kasandra Gandara, City Councilor, District 1
- Yvonne Flores, City Councilor, District 6

Members Absent:
- Tessa Abeyta-Stuve, City Councilor, District 2
- Kathryn Olszowy, Ex-Officio member
- Adrian Larson, MountainView, Member

Others Present:
- Renee Armijo, Administration, Parks and Rec
- Phil Catanach, Recreation Services Manager, Parks and Rec
- Eric Enriquez, Assistant City Manager
- Becky Baum, Recording Secretary, RC Creations, LLC
- Christine Rivera, City Clerk
- John Webster, COVID-19 Project Manager at NMSU

I. Call to Order: Councilor Gandara called the meeting to order.

II. Conflict of Interest: There was no conflict of interest.

III. Acceptance of the Agenda: Councilor Flores motioned, Councilor Gandara seconded. The agenda was accepted.

IV. Approval of the Minutes - January 19, 2022: Councilor Flores motioned, Councilor Gandara seconded. The minutes were approved.

V. Discussion Items:

A. COVID-19 Vaccination Task Force

i. Department of Health - Dawn Sanchez: Dawn Sanchez thanked the Las Cruces Fire Department for helping with vaccinations. Dr. Whaley gave the presentation. Doña Ana County has had a little over 61,000 cases since the onset of the pandemic: roughly 28% of the population. The past seven days to February 11th, Doña Ana County had 1,600 to 1,700 cases; 7.6 to 7.7 per 1,000 residents which is pretty elevated. The test positivity rate stands at 21.2% which is still higher than what is the target which is 7.5%.
The at home test kits are biasing the numbers upwards but a large indication that there is still widespread community spread going on.

In terms of day to day case load, Doña Ana County is now averaging 175 new cases per day which is down from the peak of 700 a few weeks ago. Omicron is waning; shot up in middle of December, was flat for a week, and is now starting to fall. The infection rate is now at 0.5 which means it takes two positive people to infect one other person. The rate of transmission is on a trajectory of halving with each cycle of the virus.

A table was shown of all the cases which are sequenced and have been able to type; 1,900 Omicron cases. Of those cases, only one has died. It is important to know that this is just among the cases which have been sequenced, not among all the cases. This does show that the Omicron variant is not as lethal as the Delta variant. The variants detected is mostly Omicron since December; bad that it is more transmissible but good that it is less severe.

The vaccination progress is doing very well. Doña Ana County has over 95% of population 18 and over have at least one shot; 82% have had either both shots or complete dose in the case of Johnson and Johnson vaccine. Children five to 17 are at roughly 55% of having at least one shot; 43.5% have had the complete dose. Over the past week or two the numbers for kids have plateaued; the outreach may need to be increased.

Breakthrough cases over the last month were roughly 18% of the entire caseload statewide; fully vaccinated and with a booster. A little less than a third of the cases were among people who had a completed vaccine. Half of the cases statewide were among those unvaccinated. Deaths of breakthrough cases were 9% among those with a booster. Two-thirds of the deaths were among those unvaccinated; risk of death is twice as high as those who are vaccinated.

Hospitalization rate information is lagged from receiving the necessary information. However there is a decline showing at the moment. Dr. Whaley recommended caution against looking at the dramatic slope the last couple weeks as a lot of the decrease is from incomplete data. Once the data is in there should show a slight decline. Nearly half of the breakthrough cases are coming from Pfizer; more people have had the Pfizer than the other vaccines which will bias the numbers up. When they control for that bias, it is closer to the same between Pfizer and Johnson and Johnson vaccines.

The percentage of new hospitalization by age group is relatively consistent. There was an increase in 35 to 64 year olds with Omicron but it has now switched back to more elderly. The age of mortality for Doña Ana County
is they have lost 271 people per 100,000 persons; there is control for population but not population density. Doña Ana County is denser in terms of people which means more infections.

The EUA Pfizer pulled back the approval for the six months to four year olds; delayed until April. There was nothing in relation to the safety of the vaccine but rather the number of doses. They are working with pediatricians and primary care providers to be ready for that population once the vaccine is approved. There has been updated guidance in regarding spread to immunocompromised people 18 and over. The information can be found on cv.nmvaccine website.

Testing is still necessary and a link was provided to show places to test and find in home tests. There is a fifth monoclonal anti-body available; five different treatments, IV and oral. The triage floor is no longer there; person's interested use to need to have several different indicators in order to qualify for the treatments but it has changed due to more supply. The ICAT testing is available with the FEMA group at the Field of Dreams, PCR and rapid test available. This will conclude on Monday February 21st. They are available from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Demand for testing has gone down but is still a critical component. Ms. Sanchez reminded everyone to get vaccinated and tested as the need arises. The numbers will hopefully continue on the downward trend. The current public health order mask mandate goes through March 4th.

ii. Office of Emergency Management - Stephen Lopez: Stephen Lopez was unable to attend but sent his information to the Board previously. Distribution of at home COVID test kit continues to go well and people can find distribution sites online at findatestnm.org. Case counts are coming down almost as fast as they were going up. The seven day positivity rate has gone from 25% to 11% and will likely be within single digits again within the next week. The strain on hospitals are letting up though ICU bed occupancy remains too high. It will likely take a few more weeks to come down to the same level as general bed occupancy.

With the decreasing case counts and positivity rates it’s likely they will see the removal of the indoor mask. Requirements will be known within three weeks. Mr. Lopez is urging the government leaders to start considering they are moving from a pandemic to an endemic phase which means that public health efforts will continue to be reduced as things become routine. There are now plenty of preventative options available for people to reduce chances to get seriously ill and there are four highly effective treatments for people that do contract COVID-19 to keep them from getting worse. Mr. Lopez is available throughout the day via e-mail for any questions.
Councillor Gandara asked if the treatments and where to find them can be found on the website. She also asked if any of them required a doctor referral. Ms. Sanchez stated they do require a physician’s referral. The listing of different treatments are available on the vaccine website as well as who it’s for. Councillor Gandara thanked Dr. Whaley for everything he’s done.

iii. **City of Las Cruces Staff Update:** Eric Enriquez gave the presentation. The City continues with safe practices; getting N-95 masks out to staff, hand sanitizers, and other safety practices. The City has been helping with home test kits. Scott Rodgers has kept a spreadsheet of what has been sent out and where. Testing kits are available at seven locations: Munson Center, Meersheidt, Papen, Sage, Benavidez, and East Side. Kits are also being distributed out of Transit. As of this afternoon 2,048 kits have been distributed with 5,000 kits on location spread between the seven sites. There is a process to drop ship additional kits at a site if needed; currently they are fully stocked.

Chief Smith stated that the Fire Department is winding down on the homebound vaccinations. The program did over 1,000 homebound individuals with their full vaccination and booster. It will be closed within the next week or two. Councillor Gandara thanked the Fire Department for everything they’ve done to do that as well as staff for distributing the kits.

iv. **Community Messaging:** Mandy Guss stated that they have been sharing the availability of the test kits and answered several media requests related to them. Information from the Department of Health is continually being shared. There were some media requests regarding the Field of Dreams event. Different testing and vaccination locations are also being shared to inform the public better. As the homebound program with the Fire Department wraps up they will put out a news release regarding that; remind those to get vaccinated if not. Councillor Gandara thanked Ms. Guss and her staff for getting the word out.

v. **Discussion:** Mr. Webster gave an update for NMSU. They need to maintain less than 13% of population positivity rate; last week they were at 4.88%. 78 were reported while Doña Ana County was 1,599 minus the 78. Active cases are coming off the list as quick as they go on with the new five day isolation periods. There are nine active cases system wide throughout the state. Trend lines are going down as fast as those in Doña Ana County. Several different areas are closely monitored. There was a testing or vaccination mandate on October 1, 2021; from October to December 2021 the vaccinated individuals on campus had 1% positive case with a 5% of non-vaccinated individuals. Vaccinated individuals are not required to test so it is not based on the test themselves.
Councilor Flores asked how often students are tested. Mr. Webster stated that the new mandate states they have until midnight on the 17th if they’re not boosted or eligible for a booster must submit weekly tests. Faculty and staff are required to be vaccinated but not boosted. No students have been dis-enrolled; all are complying. Two are in isolation in a population of 13,000 on campus; 23,000 students’ total. If students aren’t coming on campus they don’t have to test. The home test kits are being handed out to students; a campaign for Spring Break is being done. Roughly 9,000 tests were received and roughly 4,000 has been distributed. If there will be more than needed NMSU will partner with the City to redistribute as needed. All student vaccinations have been tracked; they submit into Crimson Connection.

vii. Next Steps:

VI. Future Discussion/Task Listing: Councilor Gandara asked if they need to meet next month. Councilor Flores stated they should keep meeting to keep the stats current. Eric Enriquez would like to meet to see what the mandate does. They can also see what the trend is and if it’s continued down. Perhaps after seeing the trend the Committee can change to meeting quarterly; work on what information needs to be sent out to the community.

Councilor Flores asked how the spike suddenly happens when things are going smoothly and if there’s any discussion or speculation on what COVID may come to, perhaps like the flu. Dr. Whaley stated that variants happen every time the virus replicates or there’s another infection; the mutations are always random. What dictates what mutation comes out is how good the mutation is at infecting, replicating, and transmitting, largely a function of biology. The only thing that can be done is stay vigilant and minimize the number of times the virus replicates. The precautions taken right now with masking, vaccines, social distancing, and etcetera is helping to mitigate the mutations.

VII. Next Meeting Date - March 16, 2022:

VIII. Adjournment:

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Chairperson