Monterey County has activated its Emergency Operations Center, albeit at the lowest, non-emergency level, to help coordinate county monitoring and preparations for a potential local outbreak of the coronavirus, formally known as COVID-19, even though there are still no local cases reported.

Meanwhile, county health officials have reported that they have already experienced the first local “person under investigation” for the virus back in mid-January who ended up not having contracted it. Last month the county began monitoring county residents who had traveled to high-risk parts of the globe before returning home.

Additionally, local health officials have requested and are awaiting on the arrival of test kits from the federal Centers for Disease Control.

That’s according to a report to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday from county
Malais told the county board the emergency center was opened at a Level III activation to help the county get prepared “in case the crisis, which is at a very incipient stage, becomes more serious.”

Moreno said county public health has a range of preparedness and response plans in place and conducts regular exercises, and has been in regular discussions with area hospitals and health care providers. He noted the county has already implemented response plans during past viruses including H1N1, also known as the swine flu, SARS, and the like.

He said public health has also shared guidance with a range of community institutions, including schools and organizations, and offered advisories on what the public and partnering agencies can do to protect themselves, their employees, and those they serve both ahead of and during a possible outbreak.

Future strategies in case of a local outbreak include “social distancing,” including the potential closure of schools and cancellation of large events.

For now, though, Moreno advised people to remember to wash their hands and to refrain from touching their faces, among other safety tips. If someone feels sick, Moreno said not to go to a hospital emergency room or request a coronavirus test but to stay home. If symptoms worsen, Moreno said to contact a health care provider, who will contact the county Health Department if there’s a suspected coronavirus case.

Wall said the area’s four hospitals are “essentially linking arms” to prepare for a potential outbreak, and are working together in partnership with the county Health Department, county Emergency Medical Services, county Office of Emergency Services and others on possible implementation of an existing pandemic influenza response plan including alternate treatment areas, and conducting training and simulations.

According to Wall, there is “good news” for county residents relative to the virus in a unified local medical community, a low pediatric “attack rate” so far, and the development of mitigation strategies.

“I understand the potential anxiety,” Wall said, especially given the media coverage of the virus. “But we’ve been here before.”

Asked by Supervisor John Phillips about establishing a informational hotline, Moreno said local health officials are developing a “joint information center” in
Board chairman Chris Lopez inquired about the possibility of declaring a local state of emergency even before any local cases are found, but Malais said that’s not being recommended for now because local officials “don’t want to cry wolf” and raise unnecessary concerns.

Seaside mayor Ian Oglesby told the board that he hadn’t yet been contacted by county health officials and suggested local elected officials be included in communications, and asked the board to let him know how his city could help the county response.

Dr. Charles Limbach of the county’s Alisal Health Center told the board that the virus would likely be concentrated in more crowded communities like East Salinas and could have a stronger impact on poor families, and that the community should get special attention as a result.

Also Tuesday, the board heard a report from PG&E on its wildfire safety program including the use of public safety power shutoffs to avoid power line accidents in high-risk wildfire areas during high-speed and unpredictable wind periods that affected parts of the county, especially the Salinas Valley communities of Gonzales and Soledad, as well as North County, last fall.

In response to complaints from the supervisors, PG&E official Jason Regan apologized for the power company’s lack of communication during and in the five months following the week-long power outages that left some residents without power for up to 66 hours, and promised to reach out to community leaders and conduct public open houses to explain the company’s power shutoff strategy.

Regan called the power shutoff a “necessary evil,” and said he also agreed the company “could have done better” with its community response during the outages. He said the company’s goal is to reduce all outages to no more than 12 hours at a time and is working on planning for provision of backup power sources during outages, as well as “hardening” its infrastructure and enhancing its ability to better isolate outages to just high-risk areas. The company is expecting to complete that work by late spring and late summer, according to Regan.

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