

Newsom issues order allowing California to take over hotels for coronavirus patients

By Taryn Luna Staff Writer

California Gov. Gavin Newsom released a sweeping executive order on Thursday that allows the state to commandeer hotels and medical facilities to treat coronavirus patients and permits government officials to hold teleconferences in private without violating open meeting laws.

Newsom issued the order hours after he called for the [cancellation of gatherings of 250 or more people through the end of March](#), marking the first time he has applied so-called social distancing practices to the entire state of California.

“This is where we need to go next, and to make sure we fully implement those procedures and protocols to slow down the spread to get through a peak and to get through the next few months, so we don’t overwhelm our healthcare delivery system,” Newsom told reporters.

But as he used his executive powers to expand the state’s response to the outbreak and made unprecedented requests of its 40 million inhabitants, the first-term governor also faced questions about whether he was going far enough.

Newsom described the directive to cancel large-scale events across the state, which he also included in his executive order, as “guidance” and said its legal authority is limited. He said he has the power to enforce closures, but did not think that would be necessary.

“I see people doing the right thing,” Newsom said. “Why take a step that’s unnecessary when people are naturally going to do the right thing? Many times, you don’t need to penalize people or even threaten to penalize them when they say, ‘Well, we’re happy to comply.’ ”

Theme parks, casinos and theaters — all places where people congregate in close proximity — were exempted from Newsom’s directive.

“The reason we didn’t do it was because the complexity of their unique circumstances, but I assure you we are moving quickly and effectively towards a resolution in those spaces,” the governor said.

Shortly after his news conference concluded, Disney announced that its Disneyland and California Adventure parks would close to the public beginning Saturday until the end of March. It’s unclear whether other amusement parks will follow suit.

The governor said theaters were looking at ways to stagger seating to create distance between moviegoers, adjust show times and change line formations. He offered little explanation for preventive measures at casinos, which are on tribal land.

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While the state of New York sent the National Guard into the city of New Rochelle, a hot spot for the virus, Newsom has declined to call in military support to places such as Santa Clara County. With 48 confirmed cases as of Thursday afternoon, the virus is not as advanced in the county as it is in New Rochelle, which counted more than 100 cases when New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo requested military intervention.

“This is a dynamic process, but I can assure you we’re not there yet,” Newsom said earlier this week. “Right now, we have no identified need to utilize them.”

The governor said 198 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in California of Thursday, marking a 10% increase from just a day earlier. The executive order will enhance the state’s ability to fight the pandemic going forward, Newsom said.

The order established a 60-day extension for people or businesses to file state taxes if they may be unable to do so because of the outbreak and requests from health officials. It also allows the Employment Development Department to waive a one-week waiting period for people to apply for unemployment or disability insurance in relation to the virus.

Newsom’s action waives work hour limitations for Office of Emergency Services staff and makes it easier to hire back retired employees who may be able to offer their expertise in a crisis. Under the order, the California Health and Human Services Agency and the Office of Emergency Services will be able to execute agreements to commandeer hotels, or medical facilities that are not in use, to quarantine, isolate and treat COVID-19 patients or those with a high risk of exposure, the order states.

The order also allows trained laboratory personnel to perform COVID-19 tests, which are ordinarily completed only by microbiologists.

When asked what residents should expect next, Newsom said it depends on how people respond to health guidelines and requests.

“I continue to posit that it’s decisions, not conditions, that will determine our fate and future as it relates to COVID-19,” Newsom said. “We have agency. We can change the future. So, it is in the sum total of our individual decisions that we will determine the fate of this virus. We will meet or not meet the moment. I am confident we will meet the moment.”