

NEWS RELEASE

County of Warren, New Jersey



Warren County Approves Agreement for State COVID Funding

(WHITE TOWNSHIP, NJ – August 19, 2020) – Warren County will receive funding from New Jersey for past and future COVID-19 testing under an agreement approved in an emergency meeting tonight, but the freeholders said the funding falls far short of what they need.

The board voted unanimously to authorize Freeholder Director Richard D. Gardner to execute a Memorandum of Agreement between the state Office of Emergency Management, NJ Department of Health, and the County for funding more COVID-19 testing and reimbursement of existing COVID-19 expenses.

“The governor is providing some funding to Warren County, which unfortunately falls drastically short of reimbursement costs on our coronavirus testing,” Gardner said. “He has offered additional money to provide testing, but these dollars require mandatory testing, even if the county doesn’t need to re-establish a testing site. And once again, the dollars are miniscule compared to what the costs will be overall,” Gardner added.

The freeholders noted that while the agreement with the State provides testing funds, it ignores the other impacts the pandemic has had on the County’s residents, businesses, and schools.

“More importantly, the governor has thoroughly left our bigger towns and all our school systems out of the loop. In Warren County they will receive no money for any extra costs due to the coronavirus, and that is simply wrong,” Gardner said.

The agreement provides \$397,404 to reimburse a portion of the \$1.6 million the County has spent fighting the pandemic so far; \$357,500 to establish another county-run COVID-19 testing facility; and \$626,736 to provide testing until June 2021.

To date, Warren County government had not received either CARES Act or stimulus funds, unlike many other counties in New Jersey.

“For several months, Warren County has tirelessly fought for federal dollars to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic,” Freeholder James R. Kern III explained. “In early April, Congress passed the CARES Act, which provided billions of dollars of stimulus funds, some of which included assistance to state and local government agencies. Due to a rushed legislative process and lack of congressional representation, the counties of Hunterdon, Salem, Sussex and Warren were excluded from direct funding. The Washington, DC insider response was that we were precluded due to ‘long standing, unchangeable and automatic federal formulas.’ To that I ask, who writes federal formulas?” Kern said.

He continued, “Nevertheless, this oversight was attempted to be addressed when New Jersey’s entire Congressional delegation sent a bipartisan letter to Governor Phil Murphy on April 10 asking him to immediately allocate the discretionary aid that was included in the act.

“According to this letter, the Governor had millions of dollars he can distribute as he sees fit. During this time period, Warren County opened up a self-funded COVID-19 testing site to help ease the burden on our local healthcare system and assist with the Governor’s plan of aggressive testing. Our neighbors in Hunterdon and Sussex were forced to partner with adjoining counties for testing and Salem operated one on their own. Under the Governor’s statewide COVID-19 policy approach, Warren County businesses and individuals have been impacted just as harshly as those in Bergen, Essex and Monmouth, all who received millions of federal dollars directly,” Kern said.

“After numerous letters to the administration, our cry for aid was not heard until three weeks ago when Warren County leaders gathered on the steps of the Court House in Belvidere demanding that the CARES Act aid be released. Today Warren County finally has an agreement in front of us that is acceptable for approval. While not perfect, we have an obligation to our taxpayers and general public to recoup costs and also have funding available to assist in future testing should this virus resurge. I thank our County Administration, staff and Counsel for reviewing this document in short order,” Kern said.

Freeholder Jason J. Sarnoski said the County would accept the funding, but expressed concerns about any strings that may be attached.

"I am extremely disappointed by this agreement given to us by the governor in order to get a small piece of the CARES act funding," Sarnoski said. "As stated in their letter to the governor, our congressmen intended this money to be given to counties like Warren who received no money from the first or second rounds of funding. While counties like Bergen, Monmouth, and many others have gotten more than they needed to fight this pandemic and have been able to pass that money through to their businesses and partners, Warren County has received nothing and has been left to fight on our own."

Sarnoski added, "To now offer a small piece of funding with so many conditions pretty much amounts to extortion, and it is unfair to our taxpayers. Unfortunately, we have little recourse but to accept what is offered at this point or we face a nearly \$2 million budget deficit next year and we put our residents' health in jeopardy."

Noting there are concerns over statements Murphy has made about enforcing contact tracing and quarantining, Sarnoski said, "I can promise I would fight any plan to use this funding to violate my residents civil liberties by over-reaching on our planned testing and contact tracing procedures that have been in place since this pandemic began. No one should be afraid for their life or liberty just because they get sick. We will use this money to make ourselves whole for what we have spent, and to continue to help our constituents through testing."

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