

Spotlight on Operations During a Global Health Crisis

This month we spoke with three tribal leaders about how the COVID-19 health crisis has impacted their tribe; what their strategy has been to combat the crisis; if they have reopened their properties, what the reaction has been so far; as well as any words of advice from their experience to share with other tribes. Here is what they had to say...

Ken Choke, Chairman Nisqually Indian Tribe

Nisqually Red Wind Casino in Olympia, WA
redwindcasino.com
nisqually-nsn.gov



Ken Choke

Initially, COVID-19 took us by surprise, of course, as it did a number of not only tribal nations, but also America in general. What we developed here ten years ago was an Emergency Management Division for the tribe, which prior to my appointment as Chairman, I was and am the Director of. Through courses with the Emergency Management Institute and other opportunities through FEMA,

we've been able to lay down the groundwork to assist our members during the COVID-19 situation. The pandemic itself is something we've never experienced in my generation, but I know generations in the past have experienced this. I like to share stories with my elders and get guidance on how past pandemics were handled. Fortunately, all of our enterprises and departments came together to assist our tribal nation in the beginning, and continue to do so to this day.

Initially, our strategy was to follow certain guidelines at the state and federal level, as well as the tribal level. We've had the opportunity to speak with other tribal leaders, and of course, governmental leaders, and work in collaboration with them.

Our casino shut down in the first part of April, but has since re-opened. We've worked in collaboration with the Governor and the orders he imposed on Washingtonians here. We have a good standing relationship with Governor Inslee. Prior to his being elected Governor, he took the opportunity to participate in our annual tribal Canoe Journeys, where we travel the waters here in the South Puget Sound.

Before we even considered the operation open up again, certain guidelines were set in place by the tribe, and then we worked with management at the casino who we have a good working relationship with. We wanted to ensure not only the safety of employees and patrons of the casino, but also because

the casino is located on the reservation, we had to have a solid plan developed prior to considering reopening.

Currently, the casino is in phase three. All guests are required to wear face masks, and the casino has implemented a no smoking policy except for in designated smoking areas. Guest temperatures are taken and we utilize facial recognition so that in the event we do have an initial outbreak here on, God forbid, we can actually narrow it down to individuals that were present during when a potential situation broke out in the casino.

On the tribal side, we are only at phase two, so we are not at 100% operation, but we do have enough employees to keep the ball rolling and provide the resources to membership. For casino employees that don't feel safe in their role at this point, we have implemented a plan to where they can be rotated into different departments and different areas.

Throughout the casino we utilize hand sanitizers, wipes, and have a maintenance staff that continuously wipes down the machines to keep everybody safe. We do our due diligence in that aspect, and haven't received any negative complaints from the public. They are happy with the fact that they have a place to go, but also recognize that the safety precautions we take not only protect themselves and the employees, but also the tribal community itself.

We've kept our RezMart up and operational throughout the pandemic, but of course, put up plexiglass and have been requiring face masks. The Emergency Management Department helped set all of these kinds of guidelines and has worked ensure everyone understands how important it is to have all of these precautions in place.

Josefina Cortez, Tribal Chairwoman Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria

Bear River Casino Resort in Loleta, CA
bearrivercasino.com
brb-nsn.gov

As with many tribes throughout the country the COVID-19 health crisis has been particularly precarious. The Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria is proud to say that our team members on the tribal government side as well as our casino



Josefina Cortez

resort have done a fantastic job assisting in the combat of this crisis. Through the collaborative efforts of both, we have been able to ensure the wellbeing of our guests, community and tribal members. With the dedicated efforts from all, we have been able to provide numerous services to our tribal membership, which have aided in the prevention of COVID-19 within our tribal community. Some of

the services provided include: distribution of food boxes, police department check points, tribal community curfew, and mobile testing sites available on the Rancheria.

Since the reopening of our casino, we have experienced steady patronage. Our property was reopened in phases to include select gaming machines being operational, limited food and beverage, limited seating for indoor dining, alcohol service was suspended, and smoking was not allowed. At every entrance patrons are required to undergo non-invasive temperature screenings, mask checks, and identification card documentation to allow for contact tracing. In addition, our casino resort has implemented extensive sanitation protocols, installed Plexiglass shields, maintained adequate personal protective equipment, and additional safety and hygiene signage.

As Indigenous People, we are resilient and overcoming COVID-19 is no different. What we need to keep in mind is that we are all one and we must care for one another. When one of us perseveres, we all persevere.



American Red Cross

redcross.org

Amanda Vance, Tribal Chairperson Augustine Band of Cahuilla Indians

Augustine Casino in Coachella, CA

augustinecasino.com

augustinetribe-nsn.gov



Amanda Vance

We've been fortunate that no tribal members have contracted the virus to date. But, the impact has still be enormous in so many ways. We've incurred financial losses in the millions of dollars; we've had to furlough and lay off hundreds of tribal government and business employees; we've had team members and customers who have lost loved ones; and we've been forced to conduct operations in a whole

new way throughout our organization, etc.

Tribal and business leadership have stayed in constant communication since early March about every aspect of our operations. Since the very beginning of the pandemic, the tribe has put safety and health above all else, and that overriding principle has guided tribal council in its decisions. We were one of the first tribes in the Coachella Valley to close our casino's doors in March, and among the last to reopen in June. As a result, so far, we have not experienced an outbreak at our casino.

Since we waited to reopen, we were able to make sure that our team was ready and plans were firmly in place so that our team members and guests would quickly realize that we were serious about keeping Augustine as safe as possible. We have taken extraordinary measures to protect our team and guests, including: banning smoking; eliminating table games, buffet dining and valet parking; closing the casino every night to do a deep cleaning; making masks and physical distancing mandatory; adding dozens of hand sanitizer dispensers to the floor; constant cleaning of slot machines and other surfaces; removing various touchpoints throughout the casino, bars and restaurants and more. The reaction from guests and team members alike has been overwhelmingly positive. Many of our customers have told us they weren't planning to come back until the crisis was over, but they had heard how serious Augustine was taking all of these protocols and decided to give us a try. Now, we see them regularly. Our casino serves predominantly locals, so our surrounding community and its trust in the tribe are very important to us.

As far as words of advice, I would just say that it's important to find your way to keep the safety and health of your tribal members, employees and guests as a paramount goal. Let that guide your actions and decisions. ♣