



MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM  
Governor

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Acting Cabinet Secretary

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Department of Health recognizes outstanding contributions  
from five individuals**

*Will be honored at today's Isotopes game*

SANTA FE - The New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) today will recognize the outstanding contributions of two DOH staff members and three National Guard service members for their work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These individuals include Heather Black, Dr. Chris Novak, Lieutenant Colonel Tony Cordova, Staff Sergeant Karina Lewandowski, and Staff Sergeant Victoria Hern.

The recognition ceremony will occur at the Isotopes' State Employee Night Opening Pitch Ceremony with the Governor from 5:45 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. State employees can purchase tickets [here](#).

Below are summaries depicting these individuals' contributions to the COVID-19 effort and beyond:

**DOH – Dr. Christopher Novak, Public Health Division Medical Director**

Early in the pandemic, Dr. Novak led the Public Health Division with the establishment of the Incident Command System for organizing the divisions' overall COVID response. Dr. Novak played a critical role with the development of protocols and plans for COVID testing, which included guidance on PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) for staff.

Currently, Dr. Novak assists with Medical Director activities for COVID Shelter Response throughout the state. In addition, he is a key member of the Planning Section Team for the state's vaccine roll-out. Dr. Novak provides medical guidance in congregate settings and is a key member within the Public Health Division's leadership team.

Additionally, during one of the largest congregate setting outbreaks in New Mexico, Dr. Novak worked tirelessly to support local partners in getting rapid testing systems set up to decrease the spread of COVID for people experiencing homelessness.

Dr. Novak is a dedicated public health leader and it's not uncommon to see him working long hours to get the job done. He is always available to support his colleagues, staff, and community partners at any time of day or night and inspires those around him to continuously improve. His dedication and service to public health has positively impacted individuals and communities during the state's COVID-19 response.

### **DOH – Heather Black, Public Health Division Chief Nurse**

Heather is a key part of public health leadership in New Mexico, and this has been highlighted even more by the breadth and depth of her involvement in the state's COVID-19 response. She brings intelligence, creativity, experience, excellent communication skills, and energy to solving problems. Her compassion and common sense make her a trusted leader and inspiration for staff.

During the COVID-19 response, Heather has continued to serve as Logistics Section Chief for the COVID-19 vaccine response, where she has been a very active member of the Incident Command General Staff. Heather has balanced the many demands for staffing and supplies, in addition to supporting many stakeholders' needs (National Guard, State Lab, pharmacy warehouse, Medical Reserve Corps, FEMA).

Heather has been remarkable for working on the front lines, on evenings and weekends, for long periods and inspiring her colleagues. This has included her service as the Chief Nurse for the Gibson Alternate Care Site, as well as the state's Federal Urban Mobile Unit to provide services and ensure vaccine safety. Heather also organized FEMA mobile team deployments and worked with Public Health Regions to address testing and vaccine needs throughout the state.

### **National Guard – Lieutenant Colonel Tony Cordova**

LTC Cordova served as the Director of Military Support during the entire COVID-19 pandemic response. He was instrumental in coordinating support through the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. His ability to foresee requirements allowed for a seamless and expeditious National Guard response to the state's needs. He assisted in leading staff to enable efficiencies in planning which resulted in very timely support to all communities in need throughout the state. His liaison efforts streamlined the response structure within DOH and DHSEM, which aligned the support requests process for agencies in need throughout the state. LTC Cordova oversaw and assisted in planning and executing hundreds of mission support requests to ensure that all available resources were utilized efficiently to meet the needs of New Mexico. Lieutenant Colonel Cordova kept the Director of the Joint Staff, the Adjutant General, and numerous Cabinet Secretaries informed through daily operations briefings and

situational updates. LTC Cordova's selfless service and devotion to duty was paramount to operational success in a joint operations environment. His efforts resulted in superior operations support, execution of required missions, and outstanding civilian agency support.

### **National Guard – Staff Sergeant Karina Lewandowski**

SSgt Karina Lewandowski supported the Joint Task Force Medical Operations effort during the COVID-19 pandemic response. She was directly responsible for the assignment and tracking of personnel assignments, workforce analysis, and leave tracking for over 130 Army and Air National Guard Service Members. SSgt Lewandowski's diligent work ethic and technical knowledge contributed greatly to the coordination of work force assignments for the New Mexico National Guard to meet hundreds of mission requests throughout the state. Her assistance led to a completion of over 200,000 vaccinations statewide in support of the New Mexico Department of Health. SSgt Lewandowski's selfless service and dedication to mission success was crucial to the success of the New Mexico National Guard support effort.

### **National Guard – Staff Sergeant Victoria Hern**

Through her innovative thinking, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Hern developed and administered mission-tracking methods in support of the Joint Operations Center (JOC). She served exceptionally well as operations sergeant in the JOC from March 7 through July 2. Throughout her time with the JOC, SSG Hern tracked over 4,215,669 PPE items, over 10K gallons of water, and 648 pallets of bulk food to citizens of NM. Eager to take on more responsibilities, SSG Hern played a key role in reporting to National Guard Bureau (NGB) and the compilation of state metrics that allowed the Adjutant General (TAG) to brief the Governor on our daily operations. SSG Hern's performance greatly contributed to the accurate reporting of global, national, and local significant actions in line with current operations in response to COVID-19.

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## **NMDOH**

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The Department of Health works to promote health and wellness, improve health outcomes, and deliver services to all New Mexicans. As New Mexico's largest state agency, DOH offers public health services in all 33 counties and collaborates with 23 Native American tribes, Pueblos and nations.