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Amendment

-- Public Venues Effected By Alachua County’s Restrictions On Gathering Sizes

Alachua County released a second amendment to the COVID-19 emergency order July 2. This amendment focused on the enforcement of gathering sizes that are not social distancing.

The amendment was written due to the increase in COVID cases amongst youth in the county.

“Many of these cases were traced to parties and large gatherings,” said Art Forgey, PIO at the Alachua County Sheriff’s office.

The most noticeable order added to the amendment limits gathering sizes due to the growing concerns about young people not committing to social distancing guidelines.

“By having this amendment in the emergency order, it will allow us to take enforcement actions at those large gatherings or house parties,” said Forgey.

With the updated emergency ordering stating those who do not comply with social distancing “may be ordered to disperse by law enforcement or codes enforcement,” local businesses and venues are being watched with a close eye by both law enforcement and code enforcement.

“Groups with more than 50 people are not permitted to congregate in a space that does not readily allow for appropriate social distancing,” said Alachua County communications director, Mark Sexton.

Popular gathering spots, such as local music venue, High Dive, are facing economic hardships due to the limiting of gathering sizes.

“We spent a month developing a safety plan to open that included social distancing, mask requirements, hygiene, etc. We did not get to use it,” said Pat Laverly, owner of High Dive.

High Dive is a venue for concerts and musical events and its open space does not comply with gathering size limitations.

Bars are currently closed indefinitely, but when the ban is lifted, the state will require 50% capacity limitation.

“Any further restrictions by the county to limit attendance at our events will make it impossible to generate enough revenue to pay our bills,” said Laverly.

In order to accommodate to the new mandates in place, High Dive is offering their space to live stream performances. Performers will utilize the stage and put on a show for virtual viewers instead of a physical audience.

The order on gathering sizes could potentially raise question about other gathering spaces such as wedding venues and religious services.

“Business will be affected by the consequence of rescheduling the majority of our events to the fall and even 2021,” said events director for Top Secret Events, Bailey Bruce.

Venue spaces in downtown Gainesville, such as Wooly Event Hall and The Depot Event Space are still being rented out for smaller, private events but concerts and dance nights are not in the works.

Religious services are not affected by the amendment to the emergency order, as they have been required to social distance since the initial statewide emergency order was issued.

“It does not really affect churches because churches were already required to practice social distancing, so they already had a limit of church-goers. They continue to do what they’ve been doing,” said Sexton.

The amendment to the emergency order was put in place in order to prevent the further spike of 18-to-30 year olds who were contracting the virus due to their lack of social distancing practices.

“If you are not in a space practicing social distancing, there’s every chance that you will be dispersed and this order gave law enforcement the tool it needed to do that,” said Sexton.