

WEST RIVER EAGLE



What actually happens at a tribal checkpoint?

Alaina Beautiful Bald Eagle on May 13, 2020

Fran Carr



PHOTO BY ALAINA BEAUTIFUL BALD EAGLE

A deputy goes over a questionnaire with a motorist at a Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe public health checkpoint.

The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe has established nine checkpoints within the reservation in rural South Dakota in order to prevent or contain the spread of coronavirus. The people who live there are a vulnerable population who are already struggling to preserve their ancestral lands and culture. For the people who staff the checkpoints, the work is an historical effort to protect Native elders and children.

The checkpoints are staffed by paid deputies who live on the reservation. They come from all walks of life and ethnicities. They arrive in the centralized town of Eagle Butte, each morning to be ferried to their stations in Bridger, Faith, Isabel, Red Scaffold, Red Top Hill, Swift Bird, Takini, Timber Lake and on the bridge across the Missouri River on State Route 63.

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weather in the most far flung reaches of the reservation, a sometimes-desolate area the size of the state of Connecticut.

Arriving at the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Game, Fish and Parks depot in the grey morning or chill of the night, they bring their first meal of their shift with them. Some have a mask and gloves from home. Others are given a disposable mask to use for the day. There are not enough latex gloves, so they are washed and reused as long as possible. Deputies have learned to manage to keep their gloves on all day and not to touch their faces.

The crew for each checkpoint loads into a tribal vehicle and rides to the checkpoint, often an hour or more away. Once there they stand outside all day or all night, try to keep warm with coffee from a thermos, and have access to a port-a-potty. The vehicle brings a meal for the workers coming off shift as well, and then takes them back to Eagle Butte. From there they face the long drive home to the corners of the reservation. Very few have a personal car that can be left at the checkpoint all day or that is not needed by a family member or neighbor.

The more remote checkpoints have 30 or so cars per day, with the same people coming through five or six times a day. The more popular checkpoints have higher traffic and more commercial traffic. Those with a travel permit are allowed through quickly. Travel permits are by individual, not vehicle. Those without a permit are asked some additional questions regarding health and travel. All questions are HIPAA compliant.

When a driver arrives at a checkpoint, they are cheerfully greeted by the deputies. The conversation is light and informational. Workers ask, have you been through one of our checkpoints before? They welcome the visitor to the Cheyenne River Lakota nation and inform them that, due to the underlying medical conditions faced by the population here, and the risk of COVID-19, the Tribe has tasked the deputies to compile a database to track individuals as they move around the reservation so that, should a exposure be identified, the authorities will know who to notify to take precautions and where to direct their very limited medical resources.

The questions asked at the checkpoint are basic demographics. They include name and address, where the person is traveling to and from. Health questions screen for the most common symptoms. Do you have a fever? Dry cough or trouble breathing? Body aches and fatigue?

Those with a travel permit have already agreed to follow common-sense guidelines such as limiting stops on their trips off the reservation and batching errands together, practice social distancing six feet apart, wash hands frequently and use hand sanitizer in between washings, cough into arm or elbow, wear a mask and gloves, wash clothes as soon as they get home.

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A checkpoint deputy gazes down the highway as he awaits an approaching vehicle.

checkpoint from UPS and USPS. Agricultural workers came through headed to mend fences on ranches. Each vehicle was logged and allowed to continue.

Sometimes a driver will ask why they have to stop every time. Offering an example is helpful. The deputy will explain, “What if I, myself, come down with COVID-19? Because we are building this database you can know if I was infected five minutes before I met you, or five minutes after.”

Masks and gloves are always worn by checkpoint workers. Many people coming through wear masks or have them in the car. Near the borders there are fewer masks and people have more opinions about wearing them. David Castle, a worker at one of the smaller checkpoints, said, “I wish people should really think about whether their right to move is as important as someone else’s right to live.”

Almost all drivers are required to provide. Residents and those who come through the

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alerted to the purpose of the checkpoints he was happy to turn his pickup around and take a route that did not go through the reservation.

In a very rare case, a driver will not stop. When this happens the workers alert law enforcement — tribal police or the local sheriff. The vehicle is then stopped further down the road while the checkpoint workers continue to deal with their customers at the checkpoint.

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A caravan of commercial vehicles is waved through a checkpoint on May 9.

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