

# *ESC offices in Southwest Missouri reopening to public*

## Masks, social distancing still required

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Around this time last year, the Economic Security Corporation of Southwest Area was preparing to close office doors throughout its four-county service area due to the statewide shut-

down brought on by the pandemic.

Like many other agencies, the ESC has learned to adapt to the changing times and has offered some services virtually. Client meetings were held by phone, text messaging and online.

But officials are now

comfortable enough to reopen ESC offices in Jasper, Barton, Newton and McDonald counties to the public on Thursday because COVID-19 cases in the region are decreasing and more people are becoming vaccinated, according to Debbie Markman, resource development director.

The reopening plan includes ESC's Joplin central

office, weatherization and home repair offices, as well as outreach offices in Lamar, Anderson, Neosho, Carthage and Joplin. Locked drop boxes will continue to be used for documentation and/or application drop-offs.

This is the organization's first step in the gradual reopening process and could help clients who don't have

technology or internet access from falling through the cracks.

"We found that a lot of customers may have a smartphone, but they may not have a data plan," Markman said. "Typically, the customer would come in and visit with whoever they needed. We haven't been able to do that. It's been very challenging."

The ESC provides a variety of services meeting basic human needs for food and shelter while also offering access to increased education and skills. The private nonprofit organization receives federal, state and local funding as well as foundation grants and donations.

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“You want to be in-person to have those conversations because it is private, and sometimes having them over the phone is more difficult,” Markman said. “And you can’t see each other. For me, it’s about comforting someone at times, and it’s hard to do over the phone or on Zoom. It’s just different. We’re in the community and people business, so we did have to figure out different ways to continue providing those services to customers — rental assistance, energy assistance, weatherization, home repairs, housing — everything has continued.”

With many children learning from home, the ESC continued operating its Head Start and Early Head Start centers with safety precautions recommended by the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention. However, volunteers haven’t been able to receive training or interact with the children for a year.

“People come in and read books to the kids, and that’s really been impacted a lot because we haven’t been able to have anyone come into a classroom again because of the CDC child care regulations,” Markman said. “But we also recognize we’re in a global pandemic, and we have to do what’s safe for the children, our families and staff.”

Several employees have been working remotely from the office, but many feel safer to return because they’ve received their COVID-19 vaccines.

“We learned that some of our positions we can utilize remote work, and it went well,” Markman said. “We will have all of our staff back. We’re looking forward to those services we couldn’t provide, like employment training for the homeless,

which was put on hold.”

Markman said the ESC will continue to reopen gradually, but it could change depending on the cases in the region. Masks, social distancing and hand-washing or hand sanitizer are still required.

President Joe Biden and a top health official warned Monday that too many Americans are declaring virus victory too quickly, appealing for mask requirements and other restrictions to be maintained or restored to stave off a “fourth surge” of COVID-19. The head of the CDC said she had a feeling of “impending doom” if people keep easing off, according to The Associated Press.

“Many states have taken away the face mandates, and I saw last night that 11 states had increases in cases,” Markman said. “I know the CDC director is concerned, and I think we want to take things in incremental steps.”