

COVID 19 Update Three Rivers Health District, 7/13/2020

WARNING: The Pandemic Is Getting Worse

The COVID 19 virus is taking full advantage of increasing social interactions, without maintaining social distancing and masking, in many areas and in many venues. In the United States, cases are surging. Currently, we have had over 3.3 million cases and over 135,000 deaths in this country. National case counts are over 60,000 new cases daily. Most states are experiencing increasing case counts. This virus, unlike flu, transmits briskly from person to person in summer conditions. Florida, Texas, California, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Arizona are all spiking to record high case numbers daily. This is not due to increased testing; hospitalization, critical illness rates and deaths are rising in the most affected states as well. These increased case counts are due to relaxed social distancing measures and failure to continue to take simple precautions that we know work to protect us. We can protect ourselves from this virus if we maintain social distancing, wear face coverings, avoid spending long periods in crowded places in close proximity to others, and wash our hands regularly.

In Virginia, our key measures have begun trending in the wrong direction. Case numbers, testing data, and hospitalizations are trending up. As of 7/13/2020, we have 71,642 cases, 6,765 hospitalizations and 1,968 deaths. The metropolitan areas of Hampton Roads are particularly challenged with sharp rises in pandemic measures. VDH Eastern Region Health District Directors (Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Hampton, Peninsula, Eastern Shore and Three Rivers Health Districts) are discussing with VDH senior leadership how best to control the pandemic surge in their respective areas. The surge appears primarily related to younger individuals gathering in social venues without observing adequate protective measures.

In Three Rivers, we had been averaging 17 to 20 per week. Three weeks ago, we had 39 new cases, 2 weeks ago, we had 50 new cases, and last week we had 100 new cases, about half of them related to an outbreak event. We are watching this trend very carefully. The increasing case counts nationally and regionally pose a threat to us, even in rural Virginia. There is no doubt that we are all in this together, and failure to take protective measures by some put all of us at risk. We must all realize the virus is present and surging in our communities, and the majority of us (over 90%) remain susceptible to infection. Now is the time to maintain social distance, wear face coverings, and reduce the time we spend in crowded areas, wash our hands regularly, and stay safer at home. If we fail to protect ourselves, we will lose lives and our economic recovery will suffer.

Virus Update

The COVID 19 virus undergoes genetic drift over time, and can change its characteristics and abilities. The virus has changed by becoming more infectious over time. It has not become more lethal at this time. There are no new advances in therapeutic measures to report this week.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Testing

While there are PPE shortages developing nationally in the most adversely affected areas, no hospitals are reporting difficulty in obtaining PPE on the Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association (VHHA) dashboard as of today.

Testing remains key to our primary containment efforts for COVID 19. The 7-day average percent positivity of testing across the commonwealth reported on July 6 as 6.3%, which remains favorable.

In Three Rivers, we are working to establish our own testing team. Our plan is to establish a team of individuals who can travel around the district and hold smaller, more frequent and more flexible testing events each week. We can maintain continuous monitoring of all jurisdictions by using this model instead of the larger community testing events we held during June and early July. We can no longer pursue these large testing events due to loss of commercial vendor contract and redeployment of the Virginia National Guard. We hope to have our testing capability implemented by the beginning of August. We need to suspend community-testing events for the next several weeks until we can hire our testing team members, train them, and equip them appropriately.

Pandemic Containment Efforts

Hiring efforts in support of enhanced case investigation and contact tracing are proceeding. Our case investigation and contact tracing capability is intact in the Three Rivers Health District, and we are prepared to enhance this capability as required.

Planning for COVID 19 Vaccination efforts

We intend to pursue an intense flu vaccination campaign in the fall, with planning efforts to offer a COVID 19 vaccine in the process. We do not know definitively when a COVID 19 vaccine will be available at this point, but we are preparing to administer it according to CDC guidelines as soon as we are able to do so. We continue to hope a COVID-19 vaccine will be available to the general population early in 2021.

Easing Of Business Restrictions: Executive Order 67 and Phase 3

On July 1, Virginia entered Phase 3 of reopening activities with the publication of Executive Order 67. VDH is using an online form to report concerns and complaints about Executive Order 63, 65 and 67 violations.

The form can be found here:

https://redcap.vdh.virginia.gov/redcap/surveys/?s=Y4P9H7DTWA&fbclid=IwAR2EHaU1bkUhkabCLIt6U6L_A0_kxF56_k1Q-AjSu9Qcufk2oA0pKaLkTY8

The responsibility for monitoring and enforcing compliance with pandemic related Executive Orders rests primarily with health district Environmental Health personnel. When we receive concerns and complaints about alleged violation of Executive Orders or unsafe practices, our environmental health personnel investigate. Our approach is always collaborative and educational, but the VDH is able to

pursue injunction and enforcement action for egregious, repeated, and reckless violations that pose a threat to public health. Thus far, business owners have responded to complaints with cooperation, concern for public safety, and compliance with safe practices. I anticipate this cooperation between the health district and business owners in our jurisdiction to continue, as we are all concerned about the demonstrated ability of this virus to cause potentially fatal disease and to continue to impose severe economic hardship.

Leveraging lessons learned from the meat and poultry industries, we have initiated a collaborative effort between the Shellfish Safety Division of the VDH, and the Three Rivers and Eastern Shore health districts to provide in-person visits for education and consultation purposes to seafood production facilities. Some of these facilities use indoor production techniques, employ migrant workers and workers from vulnerable populations, provide congregate housing and some provide congregate transportation systems. These factors can be associated with increased risk for outbreaks. We are trying to address and mitigate pandemic risk both to the workers and to the industry at this time.

Facility Related Outbreak Prevention and Control

Outbreaks in long-term care facilities (LTCFs), correctional facilities, assisted living facilities and congregate settings remain a prominent risk of the pandemic. We have learned many best practices and protective measures to help control and prevent these outbreaks. We are continuing to work with these facilities, connecting them with resources for consultation, testing and supplies.

K-12 and Higher Education Opening

School systems are busy preparing plans for re-opening, based on the Forward Virginia blueprint. Every school is required to prepare and submit to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) a plan outlining their strategies for mitigating public health risk of COVID 19. The Virginia Council for Private Education (VCPE) will receive plans submitted by private schools accredited through a VCPE Approved State Recognized Accrediting Association.

We are consulting with school systems district wide, and advising them on their re-opening plans. One of the major questions has to do with adequate social distancing. The American Academy of Pediatrics has identified the very considerable risks incurred if students do not return to school. These include social isolation, difficulty identifying and addressing important learning deficits as well as child and adolescent physical or sexual abuse, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation. There are also obvious educational implications, as well as problems with food security and compromise of physical activity. Coupled with evidence that the virus may not be as transmissible in very young children and in general, causes less serious disease in younger people, this mitigates towards opening schools with reduced physical distancing and masking required, in their opinion. We must carefully consider the characteristics of the virus in the pediatric population, the risks to children and families of virus transmission in school, and the risks of keeping children out of school. We must pursue a balanced risk acceptance approach to school reopening. Levels of community virus transmission should drive the approach taken. It is important to remember that we still have much to learn about this virus, and we do not fully understand its behavior in all segments of our population.

No one really knows what conditions will prevail in the fall, so we are encouraging school systems to ensure their plans are flexible and adaptable to different virus risk levels in our communities. The measures of maintaining social distance, controlling respiratory secretions, preventing infected individuals from entering our schools as much as possible, and making sure anyone who gets sick goes home quickly should work together to protect our children and communities as we reopen the schools this fall.

The Path Forward

We will continue working closely with local government officials to inform them of COVID -19 transmission risk levels and to advise them as we progress through Phase 3 of re-opening. Health districts will be extremely busy with testing, containment, executive order compliance, consultation (businesses, schools, long-term care facilities, others) and vaccination activities. We must continue our social distancing measures, staying at home when possible, wearing cloth face coverings when we go out in public, washing our hands, sanitizing surfaces, maintaining at least 6 feet of distance from others, and avoiding large groups as we continue phased reopening activities. Failure to take these precautions results in dramatic increase in virus cases, as demonstrated in many states across the nation at this time, and currently demonstrated in areas of Virginia as well. Masking in public will be particularly important to prevent asymptomatic spread, which is a prominent and treacherous feature of this disease. It is important to realize that by wearing a face covering, we are protecting all those around us. We are protecting each other. It is imperative that we remain vigilant in our protective, monitoring, and containment efforts to prevent a surge in cases. This disease is a threat to all of us, including our children and grandchildren. Older individuals and those with underlying health conditions such as heart disease, pulmonary disease, and diabetes, should continue to remain at home and take careful measures to protect themselves.

Remember, if you are sick at all, even if your symptoms do not feel like COVID 19, stay at home and consult your health care provider. The virus can masquerade as many other diseases, and can fool us all. Difficulty breathing remains a sign of possible serious disease; if this develops, seek help very quickly.