

November 9, 2020

To: Ramsey County Elected Officials

I am writing to make sure you are aware that Ramsey County currently has a COVID positivity rate of greater than 5%.

This rate reflects the number of COVID-19 tests that were positive over the total number of tests performed in your county during the most recent 14-day period prior to a one week lag period to assure data completeness. **Having a positivity rate above 5% means the spread of the virus in your county has reached a concerning level.**

**Higher rates of virus transmission in the community increase the risk for all members of your community, including residents and staff in long-term care (LTC) facilities.** As cases continue to rise, the residents and staff in these facilities are at serious risk even as they take aggressive action to limit infections.

This can be a significant concern because:

- Data shows that one in four long-term care residents who develop COVID-19 will be hospitalized, and one in five will die from the disease. In addition, community and workplace-related exposure and infection of staff can lead to staffing shortages, jeopardizing care for all residents.
- Although LTC facilities have made great efforts to keep their residents and staff safe, the good work that has taken place in these settings cannot completely protect facilities and residents from the high rate of viral transmission in the communities surrounding them. All too often, the virus enters a facility from staff who have been exposed through their interactions in the community, often through contact with someone who is infected but may have mild or no symptoms and be unaware that they have COVID. As the number of cases in the community continues to increase, it is increasingly likely that these hard-won safeguards of our most vulnerable Minnesotans will be overwhelmed. The consequences of this can be grave.
- If your county's 14-day percent positivity rate is greater than 10%, skilled nursing facilities and assisted living settings will no longer be able to allow visitors beyond Essential Caregivers and compassionate care. This will increase isolation for LTC residents, which presents risks for their physical and mental well-being. To avoid this unfortunate development, we all need to pull together.

Here is what the state and local public health (LPH) departments are doing to help facilities in your community:

- The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) provides guidance on implementing infection control best practices, health care worker monitoring, drafting crisis-staffing plans and implementing testing requirements. MDH has distributed all best practices to LTC facilities and is available seven days a week to help facilities in crisis.

- All facilities with a COVID-19 outbreak are assigned a COVID-19 Case Manager to help navigate guidance and connect them to resources.
- LPH departments provide outreach, consultation, and support for LTC partners.
- Skilled nursing facilities must test their staff (one or two times per week) based on state and federal guidance. MDH, often in partnership with LPH, provides a range of supports to help facilities accomplish this requirement. We are also working to obtain comprehensive data on testing in LTC facilities, and will review and provide assistance if gaps are identified.
- MDH is reaching out to all assisted living facilities in the county and strongly encourages them to start testing their staff regularly, offering them swabbing teams to do this if they need it.
- State assistance is always available to provide testing support to LTC facilities, including sending a mobile swabbing team, providing an ordering physician, making all arrangements for labs, and testing supplies.

Here is how we need you to help reduce community spread:

- By encouraging compliance with masking requirements and gathering restrictions.
- By increasing communication to/partnerships with businesses, including restaurants/bars, to reinforce the harmful impact of spread on our vulnerable LTC residents.
- By amplifying communication in your community regarding the risk and spread of the virus to everyone in the community and especially to our elders.
- By encouraging those most at risk for severe disease—the elderly and those with health conditions—to stay home as much as possible and encouraging those who interact with them to use prevention measures carefully.

Reducing community spread is critical for successfully preventing COVID-19 infections and deaths in LTC facilities. Your leadership and partnership are important in this effort. We share your commitment to ensuring the health and well-being of your community's residents and we thank you for all that you are doing to help protect Minnesotans.

Sincerely,



Jan Malcolm  
Commissioner of Health