



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ITASCA COUNTY RALLIES TO BATTLE COVID

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Nov. 19, 2020**) – Itasca County is not immune to record-breaking rates of COVID-19 spreading across the state, region and country. Still, local public health officials and front-line health care providers call on residents to stem the spread through choices that protect themselves, their families and their communities.

“We each are being asked to take extraordinary and often difficult steps to disrupt the raging spread of COVID-19,” said Kelly Chandler, division manager for Itasca County Public Health. “Still, simple things can make the difference -- like wearing your mask, keeping physical distance and definitely avoiding any kind of gathering as there is certain to be virus in your midst.”

As of 3 p.m. on Nov. 19, Itasca County has seen 288 positive cases of COVID among residents in the past seven days and 551 within the past 14. The 14-day average case rate for every 10,000 residents is up to 123.3 as of Nov. 16.

An additional Itasca resident has passed away due to COVID, a male in his 70s. Three residents are in intensive care units and 24 are hospitalized.

“Northern Minnesotans understand the threat of wildfire, and that’s what the pandemic feels like right now,” said Chandler. “Itascans, especially, know that to stop the spread of a forest fire, you’ve got to create a break—space enough to disrupt the pace of the spread so it can be put out, or at least managed. That’s what the public health community is trying to do right now, to slow the spread enough so that we can keep up with the needs.

“Our local healthcare workers and resources are stressed. Please make the hard decisions to slow the spread of COVID. Avoid gatherings with others, and assume when you are around others, including your close family and friends, that someone has COVID or has been exposed to COVID.

“We can do this together. Until we have vaccines, it’s up to us to make the difference. Simple acts of kindness and gratitude are needed today in the true spirit of Thanksgiving. Show appreciation to all who are sacrificing to keep our communities safe – our restaurants and bars, our young students and athletes, our fitness centers and schools, our parents stepping in as teachers and tutors. They are our fire break right now.”



Each of Itasca County's three major health facilities has reached capacity in a variety of ways and is pleading for support from the community.

Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital

"Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital has been planning for a surge of patients since the start of the pandemic," said Jean MacDonell, president and CEO. "We have made many adjustments to our facility to increase our capacity, in the event of an influx of COVID patients.

"The current combination of patients needing hospitalization for COVID and non-COVID has pushed us to our limits not because of physical space availability, but because our scarcest resource is staff. In the last two weeks, we have been on divert in our hospital, or not able to accept new patients, on several occasions. At times, we have the space to care for patients but not enough staff to provide the necessary care. The health and safety of our staff and patients is our top priority. Please do your part to help stop the spread of COVID so that we can care for everyone that needs us, in the comfort of our community."

Bigfork Valley

According to Angela Kleffman, chief operating officer, "Bigfork Valley continues to collaborate with area healthcare facilities to ensure each patient is cared for in the right setting. As beds begin to fill in our region, we are cognizant of the potential that we will be caring for patients diagnosed with COVID-19 at a greater capacity and have taken the last nine months to prepare for this surge in cases.

"As the flu season approaches, we anticipate that staffing shortages will continue to be a threat. To protect our patients and staff, we are making every effort to remove ill workers from providing care and are facing staffing challenges in response to COVID-19 quarantine periods following illness and exposure.

"We urge our community to adhere to the Governor's restrictions in an effort to reduce the rate of community spread. By limiting community activity, we are hopeful that we can make an impact on the rate of infection and change the outcomes for our region. It will take all of us to make an impact, but we are confident that we can do it together."

Essentia Health Deer River

"Essentia Health's hospitals are reaching capacity and our health care providers are incredibly busy caring for COVID-19 patients," said spokesperson Louie St. George. "Our resources are stretched thin and our ability to staff hospital and ICU beds is being tested. This presents a risk to our community, which is why we urge you to take this pandemic seriously.

"Please be vigilant against COVID. Wear a mask that covers your mouth and nose. Practice social distancing. Avoid large gatherings. Stay home if you're sick. And — we realize this is a big ask —



don't congregate indoors unless it's absolutely necessary. Reducing community spread is critical to protecting front-line health care workers so they are able to care for patients."

Testing continues to be essential and increasingly available. The power of testing, however, is how it informs and drives behavior.

- If you are waiting for COVID test results, stay home.
- If you experience even mild symptoms that resemble a cold or allergies, stay home and seek testing.
- If you have a positive test, your household members also need to quarantine for 14 days from last exposure.

In addition to COVID testing available through local health care facilities, Itasca area residents now have access to two additional sources.

Minnesota Department of Health opened a community testing site this week at the National Guard Armory in Hibbing at 2310 Brooklyn Drive. Tests involve nasal swabs and are 100 percent free, whether or not you have health insurance. Hours are 12-6 p.m., although the facility is not open every day. To minimize your wait and ensure that it is a testing day, schedule an appointment here: <https://www.primarybio.com/r/hibbing>

Free home saliva testing kits also are available to any person in Minnesota, delivered to your home with expedited shipping (go to <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/testsites/athome.html>). UPS sites for returning completed tests include:

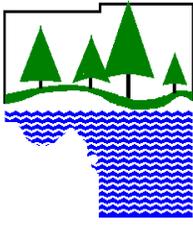
- UPS Grand Rapids, 425 11TH ST SE, GRAND RAPIDS, MN 55744
- 108 MAIN AVE E, DEER RIVER, MN 56636 (Inside Jurvelin Hardware)
- 431 E PLATT AVE, NASHWAUK, MN 55769 (Inside Ross Home Center)
- 100 OTTUM AVE, BIGFORK, MN 56628 (Inside Bigfork Hardware)
- Link to other sites - <https://locations.ups.com/mn/>

Itasca residents with questions or concerns may leave them at the Itasca County COVID message line, with calls returned 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday – Friday. The Itasca COVID line number is 218-327-6784. Current local data and information also can be found at the county's website here: <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/798/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Information>

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Note to media: Itasca County Health Department will host 30-minute press briefings on Thursdays at 10:00 a.m. as needed. The next scheduled briefing will be Dec. 3. There will be no additional November briefing, unless need dictates. Contact anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us for more information.

Itasca County Public Health media contacts



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