



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COMMUNITIES FIGHTING TO GET COVID SPREAD DOWN

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **November 5, 2021**) – Activity surrounding COVID is ramping up again in Itasca County, including increased vaccination, booster shots and the introduction of vaccines for those ages five to 11. Also rising again is the rate of infection in the county. For many individuals and organizations, the fight against COVID has never let up.

Late Fall began the worst stretch of COVID infection across Itasca County in 2020, peaking in December. Now, a year later, the county anticipates hunting season, more indoor activities, and holidays while starting at a significantly higher rate of COVID spread.

Itasca County's 14-day case rate per 10,000 residents in October and November 2020 ranged between the 30s and 50s; this year, the area already has been in the high 90s and is currently sitting at a rate of 84. At this time last year, Itasca County had seen 18 total deaths from COVID to date; this year, it has seen 19 deaths in the past six weeks.

"We saw some preliminary plateauing of cases last week; however, this week we are seeing increases in daily positive cases again," reports Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health division manager. "COVID is not through with us and we encourage our community members to dig deep and stay strong with your mitigation measures.

"Not only do we strongly encourage vaccinations from COVID, but also getting back to wearing a mask, staying six feet from others, and keeping your gatherings smaller to keep each other safe. We want everyone to bring back stories and not illness from hunting camp and family gatherings."

New positive diagnoses of COVID in the past seven days numbered 227, up from 181 the previous week. Three more Itasca County residents have died due to COVID, a female in her 60s, a female in her 90s, and a male in his 40s.

Vaccination rates building

Children ages five to 11 now have been authorized by the Centers for Disease Control to receive the two-dose Pfizer vaccine and supplies will become available in Itasca County starting Nov. 8 at Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital, Essentia Health in Deer River and Bigfork, Scenic Rivers clinics in Bigfork and across the region, Cass Lake Indian Health Service,

and tribal clinics. Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital also will offer Pfizer vaccine through clinics at both East and West Elementary schools in the coming weeks.

More than half (54 percent or 23,606) of all Itasca residents have received at least a first dose of COVID vaccine. Among those ages 12 to 15, 40 percent have been vaccinated, as are 42 percent of Itasca residents ages 16 to 17.

Breakthrough infections have been documented in two percent of Itasca residents who have been vaccinated. Of these 530 Itascans, 40 were hospitalized, seven were in an intensive care unit, and eight have died from COVID (all aged 70 or older). The local rate of death among Itasca residents who have been vaccinated is 0.03 percent.

“Our local experience is very clear; vaccines are working,” said Chandler. “Please get vaccinated. COVID does not discriminate with who may have long-term health effects or whose life will be taken.”

Vaccines (including booster doses) and testing remain widely available in the county through clinics, pharmacies and public health events. Local details are available at the Itasca County website, <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us>. The Minnesota Department of Health also offers a handy database of test sites throughout the state (<https://mn.gov/covid19/get-tested/testing-locations/index.jsp>).

Boosters are currently available to anyone age 18 and older who received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine at least two months prior and to individuals who received a Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at least six months prior and are:

- 65 years and older,
- Age 18+ who live in long-term care settings,
- Age 18+ who have underlying medical conditions, or
- Age 18+ who work or live in high-risk settings.

Battles wage on

“There’s plenty of bad news out there, but there also continue to be positive acts that deserve our attention and gratitude,” noted Chandler during a briefing on Nov. 4. “So many Itascans are doing good things and showing kindness to their neighbors.”

During just the first six months of 2021, the staff, volunteers and partners of Second Harvest North Central Food Bank in Grand Rapids shared with neighbors 2.2 million meals, nearly 6,000 food boxes for seniors, 180 pop-up pantries and 3,000 volunteer hours.

“If folks are really in crisis and afraid, at least they have one less thing to worry about if they have food at home to feed their kids,” said **Sue Estee**, executive director for the food bank. “We have not missed one beat through the entire pandemic; we have been here, every day, getting the work done and making sure our neighbors have the food that they need.

“We need to keep our staff safe because we have important work to do. If it wasn’t for us, some people would go hungry. For example, it’s also very important that I have my team of truckdrivers and warehouse workers healthy and able to deliver the food out to the communities that need it.”

Second Harvest employs masking (recommended, not required), social distancing and extra cleaning. Meals are pre-boxed and delivered at their food shelf and pop-up pantries without physical contact. Processes, such as signatures, have been eliminated to reduce risk of infection.

“We are extremely busy and extremely grateful for the support of the community and our ability to really step up during this crazy time of crisis and provide the food that so many people need in our community,” said Estee.

Grand Rapids Police Captain **Andy Morgan** also described how law enforcement has had to change much of how services have been delivered during the pandemic. “GRPD’s primary role throughout has remained ensuring public safety. It certainly became tricky when efforts and practices were put in place to limit face-to-face contact,” he said.

Transitioning to phone and technology for contact, limiting which calls received a physical response, moving to remote staffing, sometimes requiring masking, adjusting patrol schedules – these are just some of the choices needed to adapt to a whole new level of community safety, all while working to build and maintain relationships.

“Ultimately, it is about maintaining safety of the public and individual employees so that the agency can continue to provide services,” said Morgan.

The staff of Target Grand Rapids challenged themselves to make their store the safest place to shop possible. “Safety is the most important thing for our guests and for our team,” said **Abbey Laine**, store director for Target Grand Rapids. “Safety is how we show we care.”

“We are striving for that goal of being the safest place to shop,” said **Logan Kuschel**, service and engagement team lead for the store. Adaptations have included drive-up service, special shopping hours for vulnerable guests, universal mask-wearing by staff, intensive cleaning before the store opens and throughout the day, touch-free soap dispensers and hand sanitizer throughout the store, even quarantining of returned products before they go back out on the floor. “It’s about making sure guests feel safe and welcome,” said Kuschel.

“Our COVID journey has evolved over time, from encouraging employees to stay home if they’re sick and doing health checks before coming to work, providing paid time to get a vaccine as well as paid time to recover from any adverse effects, to working with employees who have a close contact and need to quarantine or need time to care for themselves or a family member,” said Laine.

Target Grand Rapids also arranged for some employees to work overnight when potential for exposure is less, a series of bonuses for front-line workers, redesigned staff appreciation events involving individually wrapped food and staggered schedules, access to counseling resources, creation of a specific disinfection job, and access to vaccines and boosters.

“A lot of great work is happening in our community,” said Chandler. “On behalf of all of us in this fight, we honor you and thank you for your grace and goodness.”

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 through Friday. The Itasca COVID line number is 218-327-6784.

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