



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ITASCA COVID RATES REACH NEW HIGHS

Those unvaccinated urged to talk with their physicians

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **November 19, 2021**) – Rising cases of COVID infection in Itasca County continue past their 2020 peak. As of Nov. 18, the county's 14-day case rate per 10,000 residents stood at 143.7, with 273 new cases identified in the past seven days and 612 over the past 14 days. The highest 14-day Itasca case rate per 10,000 residents in 2020 was 129.

"There's no sugar-coating the fact that Itasca County, like much of Minnesota, is in trouble right now," said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health. "It's up to us to turn this trend around, to make hour-by-hour choices that protect ourselves and others by wearing masks, keeping distance, staying home if sick. And, for sure, getting fully vaccinated.

"Having been in the trenches with our health care providers, especially over the past week, I can tell you that we are blessed to have some of the best rural health care available. At a time of historic stress, we can count on courage and commitment from our very skilled nurses, physicians, hospital and clinic staff, police and security personnel, school staff, mental health providers, nursing home and personal care attendants, and volunteers across the county. Not every community has this kind of care close. As we go into Thanksgiving week, please keep all of these front-line folks in mind."

In a letter for the community provided to Itasca County Public Health, a local resident shared her thanks: "I spent 20 days in a local hospital, with 17 of those in Intensive Care. I received amazing care and am very grateful for the entire staff who took care of me. I still can't find the right words to describe what COVID is like, except that it is a huge puzzle that you have to fight your way out of."

Dr. Simon Lick, a hospitalist at Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital, reports that one-quarter to one-half of available hospital beds at Grand Itasca are occupied by patients who are COVID-positive. "Obviously, this puts a strain on all of the team members who make it possible to deliver health care," said Dr. Lick. "Things have been very critical and very dire over the past number of weeks. This last surge of COVID has pushed the state's entire health care infrastructure to its very

limit. This whole pandemic has put a light on some of the weaknesses that our health care system has been having for a long time.”

Still, urged Dr. Lick, “For those with emergent issues, we are absolutely open for business and we will continue to triage folks as they need and as we are able to accommodate.”

Kimberly Powell is Bigfork Schools’ nurse and an RN at Bigfork Valley Hospital. She calls increasing vaccination rates “the hill we have to climb.”

“If you have ever trusted your physician to care for you, to keep you alive, to take care of the people you love, offer them the dignity of a conversation about vaccines” said Powell. “Trust me, they will listen.

“The best way to honor health care providers in your community right now is to do what we know works – wear masks, keep distance. Dig into your questions about vaccines. That is the best way that you can honor us, protect us, and keep us in the game because we are a limited tribe. And resilience has its limits. We’re trying to keep families whole and safe and the best way the community can honor itself and its health care workers is do what we know works.”

Among the 3,930 Itasca County residents infected with COVID between March 15 and Nov. 15 this year, 83 percent were unvaccinated. Similarly, 80 percent of COVID-positive Itasca residents hospitalized, 84 percent of those admitted to ICUs and 78 percent of those who died were unvaccinated. Currently, 54 percent of all Itasca County residents have received at least a first dose of COVID vaccine.

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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