



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER
1209 SE 2nd Avenue, Grand Rapids, Minnesota 55744-3983
Hearing Impaired Number TDD: 218-327-5549
(218) 327-2941

Visit us at: www.co.itasca.mn.us

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GRATITUDE COMING FROM COMMUNITY AS COVID KEEPS GRIP

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **April 2, 2021**) – Amid news that Itasca County is seeing increased spread of COVID-19, there also are significant signs of hope. For example, 41 percent of the county’s residents have begun their vaccines series and 76 percent of those over age 65 are now fully vaccinated. Supplies of vaccines are arriving weekly in the county, with actual results proving even better than expected. Most (3,267) area residents diagnosed with COVID in the past year are no longer needing isolation and the county has seen no new deaths due to COVID in many weeks.

The finish line is within sight, but not yet reached. The current picture of COVID in Itasca County includes rapid spread of the B.1.1.7 variant among both adults and youth. Over the past seven days, 89 residents have been diagnosed with COVID, a rise similar to that seen over the past several weeks. The 14-day case rate per 10,000 residents currently stands at 39 in Itasca County.

“Many in our communities have been on the front lines of this war for more than a year now,” said Kelly Chandler, division manager, Itasca County Public Health. “This is an important time to make space for gratitude, to show others that we are with in this fight with them and appreciate them. Stay strong, Itasca.”

“Being an optimist is a choice,” according to Jason Anderson, director of Itasca County Probation. “No question that the last year can be described as dire and dismal. Still, we can honor the struggles *and* see the good. We can seek out reasons to be grateful, cherish more time with families and increasingly workers and teammates. We can examine what we are learning and be even more effective.”

“Intentionally focusing on gratitude improves our physical and mental health, relationships, sleep, self-esteem, and empathy,” says Chandler. “Gratitude decreases pain, decreases aggression and poor mood, and, very importantly, it promotes resiliency – the ability to cope with stress and trauma, something we all could use after the year we have had.”

Karen Arnold is among Itasca residents who have been hospitalized during the pandemic and grateful for the care and kindness received. “We thought we’d made it through after being very careful all winter. I have co-morbidities that make this especially dangerous. We were just



about to get vaccines when my husband got sick, then I got it too, of course. I am so grateful to be out of the hospital and here to celebrate Easter.”

Arnold spent 10 days hospitalized, including in intensive care, receiving treatment and medicines she says saved her life. “No joke, it was scary. I am so thankful for all the people in the world here to care for people like me. Everyone I touched throughout this experience was so kind.”

A local student and front-line worker also expressed her thanks, being able to attend school, bring home a paycheck and get back to spring sports. “I have a job at a local restaurant as a cook and server,” said sophomore Caroline Ahcan. “People like me have been helping the community throughout the pandemic and have been at high risk of exposure to COVID because of it. There are a lot of kids working at gas stations, waiting tables, checking people out at the grocery store -- trying to stay productive and bring home a paycheck. Most of us are still too young to get vaccinated. Thank you to our friends, our employers and the adults in the community for doing the right things so we can be safe.”

Ahcan also expressed appreciation to health care workers who “kept working no matter what” and those who made it possible for kids to attend school in person. A lacrosse player, Ahcan said she is especially grateful to be able to play again after the entire spring season was cancelled last year.

Angie Berg, assistant principle at Robert J. Elkington Middle School, also appreciates those who are helping students get back to some sort of normalcy, especially the efforts of school nurses. “The amount of work school nurses do in our buildings to make sure that our kids stay as safe as possible is amazing – they are contact tracing, conducting spit tests every two weeks, making the tough phone calls no parent wants to get,” she said. “Because of them, we are able to keep our kids here, minimizing the amount of learning loss.”

Berg also credits teachers and students for staying on top of their mask-wearing while in school. As a parent, she also says teachers have done an amazing jobs with all of the changes they have had to absorb. “I don’t know how these teachers do it,” said Berg. “Even from a distance, they have kept children learning, moving forward, feeling loved.”

Dr. Dan Soular, vice president of medical affairs and family practice physician at Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital, reinforced the important role of prevention and testing given increase case rates and the spread of variants, especially among youth.

“Variants with viruses are very common,” according to Dr. Soular. “The variants in our community are more easily transmissible, especially in youth sports and activities. Still, the vaccines seem to be effective against hospitalizations and death. We need to continue with our public health measures – wearing masks, avoiding gatherings, keeping distance. Most importantly, stay home if you’re sick or in close contact with someone who is sick. People sneaking back into school or work with mild symptoms is fueling spread right now.”



The State of Minnesota is recommending that school-aged children get tested for COVID every two weeks and kids in sports and activities get tested every week. “If we can catch even a single case, we can snuff out the virus before it spreads,” said Dr. Soular.

In addition to the nasal swab test available through local clinics, saliva tests will be delivered to individuals at no cost through the State of Minnesota: <https://learn.vaulthealth.com/state-of-minnesota/>.

Vaccines also are regularly available in Itasca County at:

Bigfork Valley (Bigfork) – 16 and older, with waiting list and appointments at 218-743-4444 or email COVIDWaitList@BigforkValley.org.

Essentia Health Deer River (Deer River) – 16 and older, call 218-786-1750 or visit www.essentiahealth.org.

Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital (Grand Rapids) – 16 and older with underlying medical conditions and those 50-64 regardless of current health status as described in Phase 1B, Tier 4 of State of MN's plan. Log into MyChart to schedule or call 218-326-7344.

Itasca County Public Health: working with specific groups and locations. Periodic public clinics announced at the department's Facebook page and website.

Scenic Rivers Health Care clinics in Bigfork, Northome, Big Falls, Cook, Tower and Floodwood are vaccinating as supplies allow. Call [877-541-2817](tel:877-541-2817).

Thrifty White Pharmacies (Grand Rapids): 16 or 18 and older (both Pfizer and Moderna available), www.thriftywhite.com or, for those needing registration assistance, you may call individual locations.

Walmart Pharmacies: availability is updated daily at www.walmart.com, including for the Grand Rapids location.

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. Information about vaccination options and current local data and information may be found at the county's website here: <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/798/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Information>

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Media briefing: 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 April 15.

Itasca County Public Health media contacts

Kelly Chandler (218-327-6144 and Kelly.chandler@co.itasca.mn.us)

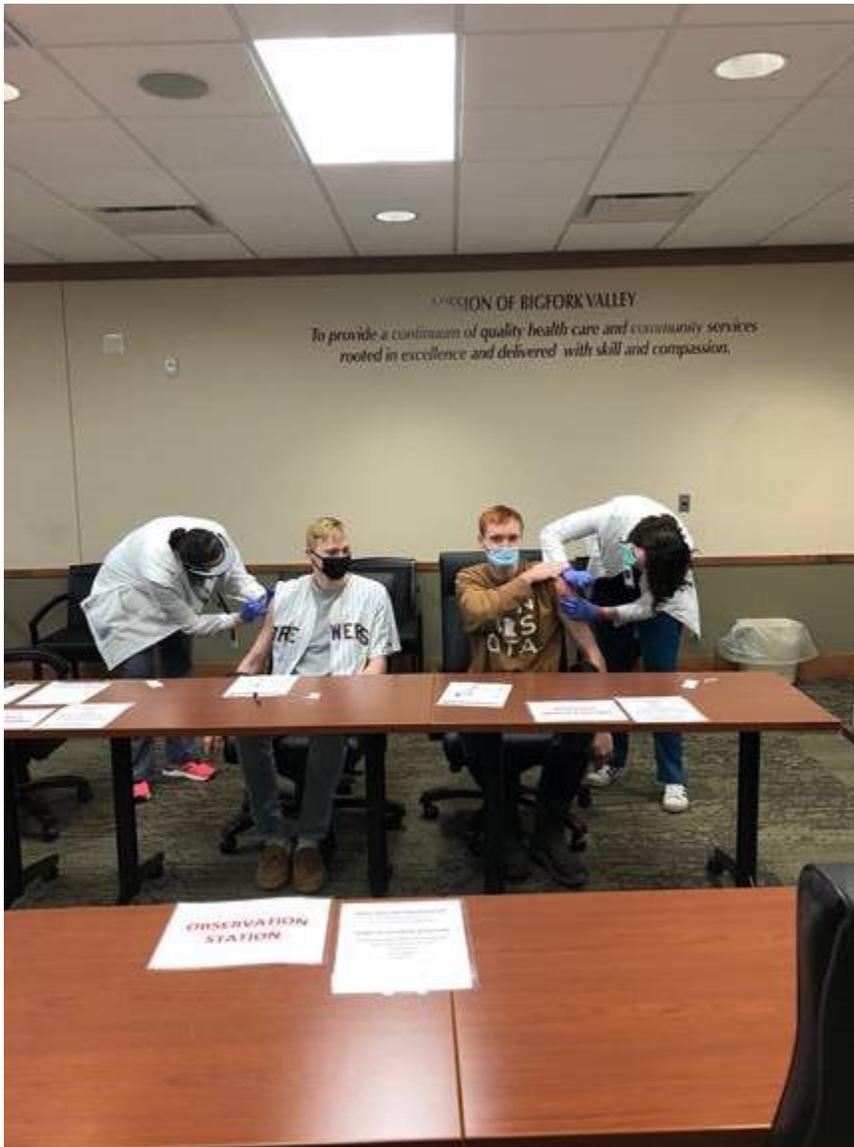
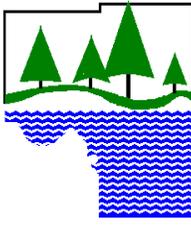


Photo caption: Jeff Lorenz (left) and Jack Lorenz (right) of Nashwauk are seen here receiving their first COVID-19 vaccine doses. The twin brothers are seniors at Nashwauk-Keewatin High School and are the sons of Duane Lorenz and Kirsten Amundson. The vaccines were administered by their twin aunts, Dr. Heather Bibeau (left) and Dr. Sara Elioff (right). Dr. Bibeau is the Outpatient Pharmacy Director and Dr. Elioff is the Hospital Pharmacy Director at Bigfork Valley. They serve as co-coordinators of the vaccination program. Dr. Bibeau will be working with Itasca County Public Health to vaccinate area high school students aged 16 and older in the near future.