



ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

ITASCA RESOURCE CENTER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ITASCA COUNTY SEES FIRST COVID-RELATED DEATHS AND GRADUATION PLANS ADAPTED

(Grand Rapids, Minn., May 11, 2020) – COVID-19 has contributed to the deaths of two Itasca County residents, according to Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health department manager. Details of the deaths are unavailable at this time.

“This is news we hoped we’d never hear in Itasca County. We grieve with those whose loved ones have been taken from them by this devastating virus,” said Chandler. “Hundreds of us are working every day in our local communities to minimize spread, and certainly to fight for those who are impacted. These are our family members, neighbors, friends, sometimes ourselves.”

Itasca County also saw a rise in laboratory-confirmed cases to at least 40 over the weekend, said Chandler, with more tests in process. The Minnesota Department of Health website will reflect numbers in the 30’s for Itasca County positive COVID-19 cases today and they are updating their database with the remaining laboratory confirmed cases. The ages of those testing positive in Itasca County so far range from teens to 90s.

Symptoms of COVID-19 for some may be mild. Some persons with the virus may not show symptoms at all. However, in persons with underlying health conditions, contracting the virus can be serious or even cause death. If you are sick, Minnesota Department of Health has helpful tools at their website: <https://mn.gov/covid19/for-minnesotans/if-sick/index.jsp>. Clinics and hospitals in Bigfork, Deer River and Grand Rapids all are available to provide tests for COVID-19, although call ahead for guidance.

Many positive local cases are in congregate care settings. “Grand Itasca continues to work with the Minnesota Department of Health to test and retest, when recommended, residents and staff in congregate living settings,” said Jean MacDonell, President & CEO, Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital. Grand Itasca has completed more than 500 tests at its campus. “We understand that an individual can contract COVID-19 2-14 days after they are exposed, so we certainly understand the need to provide testing on an ongoing basis. In partnership with other area



clinics and hospitals, we'll continue to support our community partners for all their needs, testing being just one of them."

Itasca County's enhanced Call Center now provides live staffing every day between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. at 218-327-6784 for those with COVID-related issues and needs.

Area graduations

On Friday, Governor Walz announced guidance for spring 2020 graduations, prohibiting ceremonies indoors or in stadiums. Minnesota Department of Education's top guidance is to conduct virtual ceremonies, meanwhile offering guidance on some alternatives (details are at MDE's website or at <https://tinyurl.com/MNGraduation>). All Itasca area schools are fine-tuning their plans given this new guidance, looking to honor graduating seniors while keeping communities safe.

According to Superintendent Matt Grose, Admin Committee chair of the Itasca Area Schools Collaborative, "Many districts had graduation ceremonies planned based on previous guidance and last Friday's announcement by the state has required a pivot, and in some cases, going back to the drawing board."

Itasca area plans so far include:

Bigfork (May 30) - Bigfork School will be hosting graduation in a drive-up ceremony where graduates will have the opportunity to cross the stage and receive their diplomas before immediate family. The Valedictorian and Salutatorian speeches will be included in the ceremony. The ceremony will be streamed live on Facebook.

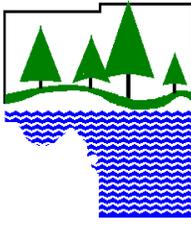
Deer River Warriors (May 31) – Plans are under way for a drive-up/through graduation ceremony. Seniors are involved in creating the celebration with their community.

Grand Rapids Thunderhawks (May 29) – GRHS will host a parking lot ceremony in which small groups of students will walk and receive their diplomas in front of immediate family. Student speeches and the presentation of the graduates will be delivered electronically. The ceremony will be streamed live on Facebook.

Greenway Raiders (May 30) - Plans are under way for a drive-through graduation. Expectations are that graduation speakers will be live, with students receiving diplomas during the drive-through portion. A virtual program will be sent out following the drive-through ceremony.

Hill City Hornets (May 29) – Hill City will be taking graduation to the grads. A brief ceremony will be conducted at each senior's home, followed by the presentation for each senior of a swag bag stuffed with many donated items.

Itasca Community College (May 11 - 14) – Recognizing that graduation is an important college tradition and a milestone in recognizing student accomplishments, the college is conducting a



“traditional large graduation” via ZOOM broadcast on May 14 at 5:00 p.m., plus graduation ceremonies by program throughout the week. ICC has provided its graduates free caps and gowns for the ceremonies.

Nashwauk-Keewatin Spartans (May 30) – A drive-up/thru graduation is in the works that meets safety requirements. Seniors are collaborating in the planning.

Northland Community Schools Eagles (May 29) – The Northland School Board is meeting this week to reconsider the traditional ceremony they had planned. Stay tuned for adaptations.

Watch area media for special programming, including commencement speeches, lists of graduating seniors, grad profiles and more.

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Note to media: Itasca County Health Department will host 30-minute press briefings on Tuesdays at 1:00 p.m. and Fridays at 10:00 a.m. as needed. Recordings available. Contact anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us for more information.

Media Contacts

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