

ITASCA COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
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*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*

ITASCA PANDEMIC RESPONSE INCLUDES CALL FOR KINDNESS,  
GRACE AND UNDERSTANDING

(Grand Rapids, Minn., **Oct. 15, 2020**) – The effects of super-spreading events in Itasca County continue to drive up COVID-19 infection rates among residents. As of Oct. 12, the 14-day average of positive cases per 10,000 stands at 52.4. Over the past seven days, the county has seen 118 additional cases and the death of an area woman in her 60s due to COVID.

“While numbers matter, the real story of this disease is written through the lives impacted,” said Kelly Chandler, Itasca County Public Health. “Our deepest sympathy to the family, friends and neighbors of our lost resident, and to all those who grieve.

“While much about the coronavirus is out of our control, there are three simple things we can turn around surging COVID cases in Itasca County. Every person is asked to keep six feet of distance from those outside of your immediate household, avoid gatherings, and wear a mask.

“Our schools have not announced further changes in their models, but if we don’t turn around our community spread of COVID, they will have to seriously consider going online-only. They have done a phenomenal job to prevent virus spread within their facilities. In many ways, our kids are more protected from COVID-19 in school than out in the community.”

As cold and flu season nears, Itasca County Public Health encourages individuals and families to plan for obtaining flu shots. Flu vaccinations are now available at pharmacies and clinics throughout the county (call ahead or check websites for hours, paperwork, and processes). Itasca County also will conduct flu shot clinics at area schools in upcoming weeks, with details available through each school building.

“Getting a flu shot is much more important now than ever,” said Chandler. “We know from experience that, even if you contract influenza, you are far more likely to end up with an illness that you can manage at home. We want to keep our hospitals open for COVID patients, and any other critical health needs and getting your flu shot is one thing you can do to help yourself and the community.

“With high rates of COVID throughout the state, concerns are growing again about the capacity of our state’s hospitals to handle surging infections on top of normal care,” said Chandler. “All Itasca hospitals are working regionally to manage patients needing hospitalization for COVID or



other serious health issues. Our local hospitals all have the ability to admit and treat covid-19 patients and they monitor availability of beds daily both in the region and state.

“The overall goal is to assure patients have the right care when they need it, and that may be regional care, or it may be local care. Providing actual real-time number of hospital beds is difficult to provide at any given time as Hospital capacity changes on an hourly basis. We do want Itasca County residents to know that hospital beds are still available right now, and we do want our community to stay as healthy as possible so we do not need to fill hospital beds and can keep them available for COVID patients who need critical care.

“The stress on our hospitals and health care workers is very real. We have been at this for seven months, and we truly appreciate the efforts of community to control as best we can the spread of the COVID here.”

In addition to the mental health of those on the front lines of the virus, individuals and families also are naturally experiencing unprecedented stress. At its extreme, increases in Itasca County rates of suicide and overdose mirror those of the state (32% more suicides and 38% more overdoses), according to Tom Gaffney, clinical director for Itasca County Crisis Response Team and First Call for Help.

“With the pandemic, people can feel powerless right now,” said Gaffney. “It helps to remember that there are things we can still control. We can stay connected with others. We can be attentive to the connections our children are making with their schools and help them connect safely to friends. And we can talk about what we’re feeling. First Call for Help is here to informally to talk about mental health issues and explore options and resources. We are in this together.”

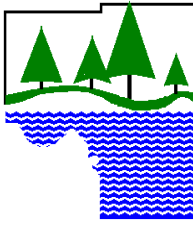
The First Call for Help crisis line is accessed by calling 2-1-1. Local resources also are available online at [www.stableembrace.com](http://www.stableembrace.com).

Dr. Bruce Tanenbaum, psychiatrist at Grand Itasca Clinic & Hospital, agreed. “Connecting with people is maybe the most important thing” for those struggling, he said. “For young children, we need to be validating their experiences, creating new routines and curating what they are exposed to, such as the news.

“For older children, be attentive to behavioral changes such as withdrawal, isolation and irritability. Alone time, private time with a parent, and patience are key.”

“We have the power to change the trajectory of COVID in Itasca County,” reminded Chandler. “We are asking each person to do their part. Stay six feet apart, wear your mask and avoid gathering in groups.

“This is a time for kindness, grace and understanding.”



Itasca County has created a local dashboard with current local data, including positive COVID cases by ZIP code. It is at: <https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/798/COVID-19-Coronavirus-Information>

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.

### Helpful links

Itasca area resources and ideas for staying mentally and emotionally healthy:  
[www.stableembrace.com](http://www.stableembrace.com)

Excellent resources for parents and families: [www.childmind.org](http://www.childmind.org)

Minnesota Department of Health mental health resources:  
<https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/mentalhealth/#Example1>

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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 briefing will be Oct. 29. Recordings available. Contact [anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us](mailto:anna.anttila@co.itasca.mn.us) for more information.*

### Itasca County Public Health media contacts

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