

**Pandemic Status: Higher new case numbers in Three Rivers continue**

There is a second wave of COVID 19 currently in progress across Europe. The COVID 19 new case trends across the United States are increasing as well; the 7 day moving average is up to 49,500, and today over 28 states are reporting higher case numbers. We have had over 6.8 million cases in the United States, and we are approaching 200,000 deaths.

Across Virginia, the 7-day moving average of cases by date reported is down to 938 on 9/21. The 7-day average percent positivity of tests is currently 5.7%, which is improved. Community transmission extent in the Central region is substantial (high). Community transmission extent is moderate and stable in the Eastern Near and Far Southwest, and Northwest regions, and it is low in the Northern region. The moving 7-day average of people hospitalized for COVID 19 is 982 on 9/21. We still have good hospital and ICU capability across the state.

In Three Rivers, we are experiencing indicators of increased community transmission. Only one of our jurisdictions remains below ten cases/100,000 moving 7 day average (Gloucester), the rest are over 10, which the VDH considers higher range. We had 144 cases reported last week across our jurisdictions, the largest single week increase in cases since the pandemic began. We had one new outbreak in an adult care facility, and another in a congregate setting. The main source of community transmission continues to be individual exposures and private events.

We all must redouble our efforts to mask in public, practice social distancing in all venues, stay out of crowds, wash our hands, and practice good sanitation, to help reduce further viral surge. The SARS CoV 2 virus will readily exploit any opportunities to spread.

**Virus update: The CDC will address airborne transmission of COVID 19**

The CDC posted guidance on its official website on September 18, stating:

*“It is possible that COVID-19 may spread through the droplets and airborne particles that are formed when a person who has COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, sings, talks, or breathes. There is growing evidence that droplets and airborne particles can remain suspended in the air and be breathed in by others, and travel distances beyond 6 feet (for example, during choir practice, in restaurants, or in fitness classes). In general, indoor environments without good ventilation increase this risk.”*

*“How easily a virus spreads from person to person can vary. Airborne viruses, including COVID-19, are among the most contagious and easily spread. Some viruses are highly contagious, like measles, while other viruses do not spread as easily. The virus that causes COVID-19 appears to spread more efficiently than influenza, but not as efficiently as measles, which is highly contagious. In general, the more closely a person with COVID-19 interacts with others and the longer that interaction, the higher the risk of COVID-19 spread.”*

*“The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus. You can take steps to slow the spread.*

- *Stay at least 6 feet away from others, whenever possible. This is very important in preventing the spread of COVID-19.*
  - *Pandemics can be stressful. During times of increased physical distancing, it is still important to maintain social connections and care for your mental health.*
- *Cover your mouth and nose with a mask when around others. Masks should not replace other prevention measures.*
- *Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.*
- *Stay home and isolate from others when sick.*
- *Use air purifiers to help reduce airborne germs in indoor spaces.*
- *Routinely clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces.”*

This afternoon, the following message appeared on the CDC website: *“A draft version of proposed changes to these recommendations was posted in error to the agency’s official website. CDC is currently updating its recommendations regarding airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19). Once this process has been completed, the update language will be posted.”* I will include the final CDC language concerning airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2 as soon as it is available.

The CDC also modified earlier guidance on September 18 concerning testing asymptomatic people, stating: *“Due to the significance of asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic transmission, this guidance further reinforces the need to test asymptomatic persons, including close contacts of a person with documented SARS-CoV-2 infection.”*

Aggressive vaccine development and clinical trials continue worldwide. The AstraZeneca vaccine clinical trial was halted on September 6 to evaluate a possible adverse reaction in a recipient; the trial was restarted in the UK on September 12. This is an adenovirus vaccine, using an attenuated live chimpanzee adenovirus modified to express the SARS CoV 2 spike protein. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccine clinical trials continue; both are RNA vaccines. The Moderna vaccine side effects are being characterized as “mild to moderate” thus far.

There is a COVID 19 vaccine group working in the VDH central office, with representation from community stakeholders. Health departments are preparing to distribute the COVID 19 vaccine as soon as it becomes available. Speculations and concerns over safety continue as efforts increase to have a vaccine available as early as October or November. Whenever a safe and effective vaccine is available, we will be ready to distribute it. The distribution process will take many months, during which time we must all be prepared to continue our personal protective measures.

**Executive Order Compliance: Businesses have good compliance attitude**

We will continue to investigate concerns and complaints and enforce executive order compliance to the best of our ability across the district. Thus far, we continue to see good compliance attitudes among businesses and restaurants across our jurisdictions.

### **Testing: Three Rivers Health District continues testing for COVID 19**

There is increasing access to rapid antigen testing across Virginia, especially in outpatient medical clinics. This testing detects viral proteins, not genetic material, and results are ready in about 15 minutes. Rapid antigen tests are not as sensitive as the genetic material tests; this means that there are more false negative results. If COVID 19 disease is strongly suspected, and a negative antigen test is received, confirmatory Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) testing (for viral genetic material) should be considered. Rapid antigen tests are most useful in the clinical environment and in vulnerable facilities, to detect as many cases as possible with no lag time and to contain outbreaks quickly.

The Virginia National Guard is again stepping up to pursue focused testing events at vulnerable facilities across the Commonwealth. The VDH has also contracted with two companies (BakoDX and Mako Medical Laboratories) to provide testing services for all Health Districts, Regional Emergency Offices and any other office under the Virginia Department of Health. They are now available to conduct testing events in the districts.

Our testing team in the Three Rivers Health District is actively conducting testing events across our jurisdictions. Upcoming events include:

- Wednesday, 9/23: West Point Middle School (King William) 10am-12pm, 1040 Thompson Ave, West Point, VA 23181
- Thursday, 9/24: Dream Fields (sponsored by Bon Secours Rappahannock General Hospital), 10am-2pm, 1385 Irvington Rd, Weems, VA 22576
- Tuesday, 9/29: Washington and Lee High School (Westmoreland) 10am-2pm, 16380 Kings Hwy, Montross, VA 22520
- Wednesday, 9/30: West Point Middle School (King William) 10am-12pm, 1040 Thompson Ave, West Point, VA 23181
- Tuesday, 10/6: Mathews Health Department 10am-2pm (APPOINTMENT ONLY), 536 Church St, Mathews, VA 23109
- Wednesday, 10/7: Northumberland High School 10am-12pm, 201 Academic Ln, Heathsville, VA 22473
- Friday, 10/9: Richmond County Health Department 10am-2pm (APPOINTMENT ONLY), 5591 Richmond Rd, Warsaw, VA 22572
- Tuesday, 10/13: Lancaster County Health Department 10am-2pm (Appointment Only) , 9049 Mary Ball Rd # 100, Lancaster, VA 22503
- Thursday, 10/15: Gloucester Library 10am-2pm (Appointment Only) , 6920 Main St, Gloucester, VA 23061

We are offering 150 tests per event, there is no charge for the testing, no appointment is needed and all events are open to the public.

### **Flu Vaccination Campaign: Flu vaccine now available**

We held our second drive through flu vaccination event on Saturday, 9/19 at the Warsaw Rescue Squad. We are providing flu vaccines to persons 10 years of age and older, free of charge.

We are also planning two additional flu vaccination events in October. These events will prepare us for the upcoming large vaccination effort when COVID 19 vaccines are available. It is more important than ever to get our flu vaccine, to reduce flu case rates, ease the burden on our health care system, and help lessen confusion with COVID 19 cases, which may look just like flu. It is possible to have flu and COVID 19 at the same time; it is best to avoid this if possible.

### **Pandemic Containment: Three Rivers continues case investigation and contact tracing**

Our Three Rivers case investigation and contact tracing capability remains excellent. We have hired 18 additional containment team members thus far. Traditionally, respiratory disease transmission rates increase over the fall and winter months coincident with increasing indoor congregate activity. We expect COVID 19 to do the same, and we are prepared to respond to help limit spread of the virus.

I want to reiterate an explanation of our viral containment efforts, because we are still encountering people with COVID 19 infection who are hesitant to cooperate with our investigators and contact tracers. The case investigation and contact tracing process requires extensive effort and community cooperation. If you become infected with COVID 19, you will be asked to isolate yourself and a Three Rivers case investigator will contact you. Please cooperate by identifying your close contacts to the case investigator (anyone that was within 6 feet of you for 15 minutes or more). Our contact tracers will then inform those people that they have had a high risk exposure, and should quarantine themselves for one virus incubation period (2 weeks from the exposure event). People in quarantine should pursue testing, especially if symptoms develop. If you are in quarantine and test negative, you must continue to stay in quarantine (you could turn positive anytime in the 2 week post exposure period). If you are in quarantine and develop symptoms and/or have a positive test, then you will go into isolation and will need to identify your close contacts to a case investigator. Containing COVID 19 cases and interrupting the spread of disease is critically important to us all. Our contact tracing efforts will not succeed without strong community support and cooperation.

### **K-12 School Status: Three Rivers Health District is supporting schools closely**

School systems have opened across the state. According to the Virginia Department of Education, school systems in the Three Rivers Health District have opened under the following configurations:

King William, King and Queen, Richmond, Northumberland, Mathews, and Westmoreland Counties:  
Hybrid Plan

## Gloucester, Middlesex, Essex, and Lancaster Counties: Fully Remote Plan

School systems with fully remote learning are making plans to bring vulnerable children back into the schools and begin in-person operations, guided by current community transmission extent. It is important to remember that many cases of COVID 19 among children are asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic, children can rarely suffer severe complications from COVID 19 infection, and long-term health effects among children remain unknown.

The CDC published new guidance to address risk of virus transmission in schools last week, entitled: *"Indicators for Dynamic School Decision Making"*. It stratifies risk for the following indicators:

1. Number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 14 days
2. Percentage of RT-PCR tests that are positive during the last 14 days
3. Ability of the school to implement 5 key mitigation strategies:
  - a. Consistent and correct use of masks
  - b. Social distancing to the largest extent possible
  - c. Hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette
  - d. Cleaning and disinfection
  - e. Contact tracing in collaboration with local health department

VDH central office personnel are considering this new guidance and will consider modifying our VDH pandemic dashboard and school guidance accordingly.

We continue to experience COVID 19 cases among school faculty, staff and now students in multiple Three Rivers Health District jurisdictions. This reflects our current higher community transmission rates; we know the virus is actively circulating at higher levels. All these infections appear to have been acquired outside the school settings thus far; they were detected quickly and we have not yet seen virus transmission in schools. We are investigating every case carefully, with the close cooperation of our school officials. We are now beyond week 2 of hybrid school openings; we are seeing increased community transmission, but the fact that we are aware of no active viral transmission in the school systems is encouraging. It is too early to draw conclusions at this point about how readily this virus will transmit in school settings, however.

To reiterate: We will remain in close communication with all school superintendents in the Three Rivers Health District, as well as leaders of private schools, throughout the school year. We will support our school officials as they endeavor to maintain social distancing, masking when possible, sanitation, keeping sick students and staff out of school, detecting sick children at school, isolating them, and getting them out of the school to health care as soon as possible. It is highly probable that COVID 19 cases will occur in our schools: our objective is to contain COVID 19 cases, minimize outbreaks and prevent further community spread. There is absolutely no question that the lower the level of community transmission, the safer we all will be, the better our economy will be, and the safer it will be to send our children in person to school. We must continue to decrease virus transmission as much as possible and keep it low.

**Our best defense remains prevention of disease by social distance, masking, staying out of crowds, hygiene and sanitation**

To repeat our most important message, this virus has demonstrated its ability to transmit briskly if given the opportunity. We all hope for an effective vaccine, and we all hope for better medications to treat this virus. Our best defense remains to **prevent virus exposure and disease through social distance, masking, avoiding crowds, washing our hands, and practicing good sanitation methods**. Our secondary line of defense is containment activity with extensive testing, case investigation and contact tracing, intended to control spread of active infections that we are unable to prevent. We are seeing a post labor day surge in cases, and we expect to see further case increases during this fall and winter.

Remember, as always, masking, social distancing, avoiding crowds, hand washing, and good sanitization practices all work together to reduce transmission risk and to get this pandemic under control. If you are sick at all, even if your symptoms do not feel like COVID 19, stay at home and consult your health care provider. The virus can masquerade as many other diseases, and can fool us all. Difficulty breathing remains a sign of possible serious disease; if this develops, please seek help very quickly.