



Press Release

Macon County Public Health Addresses Questions Regarding Discontinuation of Notification of Clusters

As announced earlier today, Macon County Public Health will no longer issue press releases regarding clusters due to exceptional community spread and, a shortage of resources to continue the disease detective work involved in Contact Tracing.

Contact tracing identifies people that have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19. Macon County Public Health employs 3 nurses who have been performing contact tracing and case investigation. This task is extremely time consuming and at this point we must redirect these staff to testing and vaccination.

Contact tracing is the only way to identify clusters in the community. In order to identify a cluster, the Macon County Public Health's Communicable Disease Nurse must look at every positive case, their contacts, and their travel history and determine if there is any plausible epidemiologic linkage between the cases then, determine if this qualifies as a cluster. This type of epidemiologic detective work can consume hours of nurse time for a single case. As stated in the earlier press release, it is no longer epidemiologically possible to designate one business, gathering, etc. as being the sole producer of a cluster. The definition of a cluster is also limiting in that even if there are 5 individuals who, just for example, got sick as a result of a family holiday gathering, if they are all related, it does not meet the definition of a cluster. What we are currently seeing is an exponential rise in cases due to individuals gathering over the holidays.

The decision to stop reporting clusters in no way means that Macon County Public Health is going to stop identifying positive cases. According to Health Director, Kathy McGaha, "We simply do not have the nursing and support staff to do the disease detective work required to identify where individuals contracted the virus. It is not as simple as editing a press release. It takes a team of staff to do the work required to do that reporting and, we simply do not have the capacity needed".

While Macon County has reached the NC DHHS defined level of Critical Community Spread McGaha requests that Macon County residents "adhere to the strictest recommendations and know they can be exposed anywhere at this point".

Macon County Public Health continues to providing testing and vaccinations with vaccinating the community being the top priority at this time. Macon County Public Health continues to partner with Macon County EMS and others in staffing to conduct testing and vaccinations and, requested that NC DHHS provide surge staffing for Contact Tracing. Once additional resources can be secured, Macon County Public Health may resume notification of clusters.

The entire state of North Carolina is under a “Safer at Home” executive order, currently under phase three with masks required to be worn when social distancing cannot be maintained. Older adults and people of any age who have serious underlying medical conditions might be at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19; however, anyone of any age can become infected with this illness. Therefore, we ask that community members strictly follow the governor’s orders and continue to practice social distancing, as well as safe hygiene measures such as hand washing and frequently cleaning touched objects and surfaces.

Symptoms for COVID-19 are fever, cough, other lower respiratory illness (shortness of breath). If you believe that you may have COVID-19, please call the Health Department at 828-349-2517. The call center is open Monday through Friday from 8:30am – 4:00pm, closing daily for lunch from 12:00pm – 1:00pm, until further notice.

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