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## Kalamazoo County COVID-19 Cases Trending Upward

*Health officials urge residents to do their part to stop the spread and avoid social gatherings.*

KALAMAZOO, MI – Kalamazoo County Health & Community Services Department reports that Kalamazoo County COVID-19 cases are trending upward. Health officials ask all residents to do their part to stop the spread of COVID-19 by adhering to public health guidance. The most effective public health recommendations continue to be wearing a face covering or mask, maintaining six feet from others, avoiding social gatherings, and washing hands frequently. Crowded, indoor gatherings are particularly high risk.

Widespread community transmission of COVID-19 is occurring within Kalamazoo County. Although the case rate declined from a peak on October 8 to October 15, cases remain high and approximately doubled from late April's peak in cases. The data from September 13 to October 13 shows that only 7% of the 1,032 cases lived or worked in high-risk or congregate settings. Most transmission is thus occurring in the general population.

Through contact tracing data, exposure is not necessarily happening while at work or school. Workplace and school settings are applying strict public health risk mitigation strategies and MIOSHA work standards to protect employees and students. Instead, most exposures are happening in social gatherings outside of work or school, where people are not as strict with following the public health recommendations in their personal lives. Then people are reporting to work while infectious, whether asymptomatic or symptomatic, and spreading COVID-19 into the workplace or school setting.

"If we want to continue to enjoy the little bit of normalcy we have added back in, like businesses reopening and our kids returning to school, then we must adhere to public health guidance in our social lives," says Jim Rutherford, Health Officer of Kalamazoo County. "As the community starts to re-engage, it is even more critical that we take ownership as individuals. In our social lives, we must hold that responsibility and accountability. We all must do our part."

The data also shows that 18 to 24 year-olds made up 37% of cases during this timeframe. The young adult population (18-24 year olds) drove the initial increase in cases in the beginning of September; Kalamazoo

County is now seeing increases in middle aged (30-59 year olds) and older adult populations (60+ years). The increased case count seen in middle aged and older adult populations increases risk for more severe disease presentation, with increased hospitalizations and a higher risk for mortality given the vulnerability of older populations.

Another statistic concerning health officials is increasing percent positivity of COVID-19 tests (the proportion of positive tests out of the total number of tests performed). Percent positivity has more than doubled from approximately 3% at the beginning of September to approximately 7% currently. Increasing test positivity and overall case rate indicate more COVID-19 disease in Kalamazoo County. These community trends also increase risk for additional hospitalizations and deaths.

Furthermore, nearly 70% of cases during September 13 to October 13 were symptomatic. As allergy, flu, and cold season approach, many symptoms will be similar to COVID-19 symptoms. Kalamazoo County Health & Community Services Department and healthcare partners Ascension Borgess, Bronson Healthcare, Family Health Center, and WMed Health urge residents to get vaccinated against the flu to protect themselves and their loved ones from the influenza virus. As the coronavirus pandemic continues to affect Kalamazoo County communities, getting the flu vaccine is one of the best ways to reduce respiratory illness circulating in the area.

“If you show symptoms, do not make assumptions this year that it is allergies or a common cold. Stay home if you are symptomatic and see your doctor. With COVID-19 still spreading, getting the flu shot is more important than ever to stay healthy. The influenza vaccine is a safe and effective way to reduce illness, school or work absences, hospital stays, and death due to the flu. The more people are protected from the flu, the more hospital beds and testing supplies can be available during the COVID-19 pandemic. This further protects yourself, your family, and your community,” states Dr. William Nettleton, Medical Director for Kalamazoo County.

Kalamazoo County is under the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Epidemic Orders issued on October 5th and October 9th. MDHHS issued these orders under a law first enacted by the Michigan Legislature after the Spanish Flu of 1918, specifically to deal with epidemics. This gives the MDHHS director broad authority to take actions by emergency order to protect the public health during an epidemic. To reduce confusion following the recent Michigan Supreme Court decision, MDHHS issued orders following existing executive orders as much as possible under a different law to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19. The orders remain in effect until October 30, 2020.

“As humans, we are social beings. But this is how COVID spreads - by being around others. We urge everyone to stay vigilant and do their part - avoid social gatherings, stay at least six feet from others, wear masks and wash our hands. The individual decisions we make affect the health of our families and the entire community," said Nettleton.

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