Understanding Public Health's Role in Stopping the Spread of COVID-19

Health and Human Services has received several inquiries asking if the positive COVID-19 cases in Richland County are due to community spread and questioning if the community should be provided more information about the individuals who tested positive. Understandably, people want to know if they are at risk. Many people may think that if they knew more about those who are positive for COVID-19, they would be able to make decisions about their own safety and wellbeing. Because of these questions and concerns, it seems that it would be helpful for the members of our community to understand what our local Public Health Department is doing to ensure everyone's protection and explain why some of the information that is being shared may be limited at times.

Our Richland County Health Officer, Rose Kohout and our two Public Health Nurses, Brandie Anderson and Carlene Shaw have been extremely busy conducting surveillance; providing guidance to local officials and businesses; and following up with those directly affected by the COVID-19 virus. They are working long hours to assure we are doing everything we can in Richland County to slow the spread of this highly contagious virus. Their efforts are closely coordinated with the Richland County Emergency Operations Center to protect our community. We are very lucky to have such knowledgeable and highly capable professionals during this health emergency! I am reaching out on behalf of the Health and Human Services Public Health Unit to share what is occurring related to our public health response.

First let's talk about what happens when a positive COVID-19 case is identified. Healthcare professionals report positive test results of all infectious diseases to the Wisconsin Electronic Disease Surveillance System. Our Public Health Nurses receive the information on residents of Richland County who tested positive for COVID-19 and then begin to conduct an investigation with the goal of stopping further spread of the virus. A Public Health Nurse interviews the individual to learn about who he or she may have been in close contact with and to find out where he or she has spent time. The COVID-positive individual is given instructions to remain isolated at home. Most people voluntarily follow isolation instructions because they understand the importance of protecting others from exposure, but if a person does not follow isolation instructions, the Health Officer has the legal authority to mandate isolation. This can even involve posting a guard at the residence if necessary.

Next our Public Health Nurse follows-up with each of the people who had close contact with the COVID-positive individual in order to let them know that they may have been exposed to COVID-19. They are informed about the symptoms to watch for and are instructed to isolate themselves. Because individuals who are in isolation may not be sick, the Public Health Nurse engages in a daily process to find out if they are experiencing symptoms and to provide needed support for remaining in isolation. All the decisions and recommendations related to the person's isolation are based upon guidance provided by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Department of Health Services (DHS). The CDC and DHS guidance is regularly updated based on what scientists and researchers are learning every day about the COVID-19 virus. If exposure to the COVID-positive individual was widespread, the Health Officer would contact the media to advise the community. If the exposure occurred at a public event or venue, Public Health would contact the event organizer or the venue manager to request that they provide more information to the public using local media.

Because Richland County is a small close-knit community, it isn't hard to figure out who's who when just a few details are provided about person. For small communities like ours, only limited information about COVID-positive cases is shared with the public in order to protect individuals' privacy so that they can focus on getting better. Public Health is mandated to protect the identities of individuals who are COVID-positive and at the same time carries the responsibility to protect the public from the spread of the virus. Our Richland County Health Officer and Public Health Nurses take both of these responsibilities very seriously.

In Wisconsin, COVID-19 cases include imported cases in travelers, cases among close contacts of a known positive case, and community-acquired cases where the source of the infection is unknown; also known as "community spread." According to the CDC, the virus that causes COVID-19 seems to be spreading easily and sustainably in the community (community spread) in many affected geographic areas.

We know that our neighboring counties have reported community spread. So regardless of whether the individuals who tested positive in Richland County contracted their virus from known sources, or if their exposure was due to community spread; we must assume there are undiagnosed cases in Richland County as well. With the assumption that there is community spread in Richland County, Public Health encourages all of us to focus on prevention activities while they continue to do investigations in order to isolate infected and exposed individuals and reduce the spread of the virus.

We can all do our part to keep our community safer and slow the spread of COVID-19 by adhering to these prevention activities.

Follow the Safer at Home Order:

All individuals in the state of Wisconsin are ordered to stay at home or at their place of residence, with limited exceptions. Individuals who are using shared or outdoor space other than their home or residence, must, at all times and to the extent possible, maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet from another person. Individuals do not need to maintain social distancing between family members in a single living unit or with other household members.

All individuals may leave their home or residence for a number of essential activities and functions including health and safety, such as picking up medications, visits with health care providers; obtaining groceries and food, buying gas or pet food, and other activities necessary to maintain the home or residence; outdoor activities, such as walking, biking, hiking or running while maintaining social distancing (does not include contact sports such as basketball); taking care of others, including friends and pets; and the travel associated.

Avoid close contact with others, and practice social distancing
- Stay at home as much as possible. Cancel events and avoid groups, gatherings, play dates, and nonessential appointments.
- Avoid gatherings of 10 or more people.
- Stay at least 6 feet away from other people, when possible.
- Stay home when you are sick, except to get medical care.

Practice good hand hygiene
- Wash your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your face, eyes, and mouth when in public.

If you start to feel sick
- If you become sick, stay home.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces and objects daily (for example, tables, countertops, light switches, doorknobs, and cabinet handles).

Stay safe and keep healthy!
Tracy Thorsen
Richland County Health and Human Services Director