

Dear Community Members,

Last spring, our health care facilities across the region prepared for the potential surge of COVID-19 cases. As we now watch cases rise, and hospital beds and intensive care units reach capacity, it's clear that surge is here.

Throughout the summer, our region remained close to a 5 percent positivity rate, which means one in every 20 patients tested came back positive. A rate of over 5 percent is considered wide-spread community transmission and poor control of the virus. Today, we see 33 percent or one out of every three tests coming back positive. That rate is alarming!

The rise in the number of cases has a significant impact on hospitals. It overloads our resources like availability of beds, supplies, medications and staff. When community spread is this wide, our workforces are inevitably affected due to exposure or illness.

Staffing and bed shortages also affect patient care. When one of our patients need critical care that exceeds what we can provide locally, they are transferred to larger hospitals for higher-level care. However, those regional hospitals are nearing capacity, which limits access to those urgent medical needs.

This virus is especially harmful to our elder and vulnerable populations. We all have older family members and know people with chronic diseases. We all want them to be safe and able to seek the care they need should the need arise.

We need all our communities to come together to slow the spread of COVID-19. In addition to protecting our most vulnerable, we can help area businesses and schools stay open. That is why we advise using the tools we have to limit the spread of the virus. These include washing or sanitizing hands frequently, avoiding gatherings, maintaining social distancing, staying home when you're sick and wearing a mask. With flu season here, we also recommend getting a flu shot.

With the holidays approaching, we know it may be tempting to congregate with family and celebrate. However, these gatherings can be a significant source of spread and risk the lives of family members and friends. It may not be easy but try to find safe alternatives to these gatherings.

Until a safe and effective vaccine is approved and available in our area, we have limited tools to stop the spread of COVID-19. We know everyone is exhausted, but it is imperative that we join together to slow the currently rampant rate of spread of this virus. We must decrease the positivity rate to keep our health care workers healthy, hospital beds and healthcare resources available, kids in school and local businesses open. The time to act is now, and we need everyone's help.

Sincerely,

Chuck Hofius, CEO, Perham Health
Danielle Lesmeister, CEO, Prairie Ridge Healthcare
Kent Mattson, CEO, Lake Region Healthcare
Joel Beiswenger, CEO & President, Tri-County Health Care
Anne Stehn, Administrator, Horizon Public Health
Cindy Pederson, Director, Wadena Public Health
Jody Lien, Public Health Director, Otter Tail County