

An update on the COVID-19 situation in St. Louis County

By Amy Westbrook, St. Louis County Public Health Division Director

Early in the pandemic, we in Public Health sometimes compared our efforts to being both a sprint and a marathon. We were racing as fast as we could to prevent the spread of COVID-19, knowing we were also in for a long and difficult challenge. Now, after more than a year and a half, it's seeming more like we've been sprinting through an ultra-marathon. Over mountainous terrain. And the finish line, which seemed so close just a few months ago, is no longer in sight. Consider this:

- Area hospitals have been at capacity for weeks and have had to divert patients.
- Schools and long term care facilities are dealing with outbreaks and having to quarantine.
- More people in St. Louis County tested positive for COVID-19 in the last week than last year at this time.

Please read that last point again. Even with approximately 120,000 of our 200,000 residents now vaccinated; more people are getting sick now than a year ago at this time. And last year, what followed in late fall and early winter was a surge in hospitalizations, ICU admittances and deaths. We can do better this autumn. We know more – and continue to learn more – about how the virus circulates; and we have the best defense to serious illness – a vaccine.

How can it be that COVID infections are higher now than last year? It's a combination of factors.

Even with 60% of our St. Louis County population now vaccinated, we still have 80,000 people who are not vaccinated, this includes children who are too young to be eligible for the vaccine. Additionally, many people are not following the recommendations to wear face masks and avoid large gatherings. This is all while the highly contagious delta variant is spreading through our communities.

We are just a few weeks into the 2021-22 school year, with in-person instruction. And with an average of 20-30 new cases in schools being reported every day, we already are seeing two important trends. In school settings where vaccination rates are highest, the transmission rates are lower. And even in school settings where vaccination rates are low, transmission rates are lower if there are layered strategies such as masking, social distancing, and good ventilation.

This is why we encourage all districts to implement layered disease prevention approaches. This is why we continue to plead with people to get vaccinated, and why we continue to emphasize that vaccines are safe and remain our best defense against COVID-19.

No vaccine is 100% effective. We do see breakthrough cases – people who are fully vaccinated who still catch the virus – but in these instances, people's symptoms are typically mild and rarely require hospitalization. The vaccines have proven extremely successful at preventing serious illness and death. I should mention we're also seeing cases of re-infection – people who've had COVID who've caught it a second time. Even if you've had COVID already, you are still recommended to get vaccinated.

There is a lot of misinformation circulating about the vaccines, face masks and other prevention measures. And there may be some mistrust of health experts. We urge you to talk to your doctor or a

trusted medical professional. Ask questions about your concerns so that you are making informed decisions.

Please wear a mask. We know people are tired of them; we're tired of wearing face masks, too. But when used properly they limit the spread of COVID-19. And they're safe. We're hearing claims about face masks being bad for your lungs. Numerous research studies have proven their effectiveness and shown that there are no negative effects for the vast majority of people.

Pay attention to other mitigation best practices. As we've said all along, there is no one single tool to stop COVID. Rather, it takes a layered approach. Vaccines are most important for protection. Face masks are best for limiting spread. Additionally, it's still important to social distance and avoid crowded indoor gatherings as much as possible. Wash your hands. Stay home if sick and get tested – even if you've been vaccinated. Also don't underestimate the importance of good air flow – keep windows open when possible. If your work place has a good HVAC system, thank your building manager.

This isn't easy. I've run out of ways to stay "Please continue to be vigilant." Public Health professionals are running on empty, but we continue to push on. Why? Because we care about our community. We care about people. And so much of what we're seeing now – the deaths, the hospitalizations, and the exhausted medical staff – is preventable.

Please be careful. If not for yourself, do it for the people you love and for the people who love you. Despite the division we are seeing, we are still all in this together, and your local public health professionals remain committed to serving everyone in our community and promoting better health for all.