

Kitsap Sun

NEWS

‘Extremely concerned’: Kitsap Public Health reports 23rd death as COVID-19 cases surge

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BREMERTON — Kitsap Public Health officials reported Friday another person has died from COVID-19 — the county’s 23rd fatal case — as the coronavirus continues to surge across the West Sound, Washington state and nearly every state in the country.

The latest death involved an older resident who had underlying health conditions, according to Kitsap Public Health. More than 80% of Kitsap’s fatal cases have been people aged 65 and older and all have been among people with underlying health conditions.

New COVID-19 cases have skyrocketed this month in Kitsap, where the infection rate hit its highest point of the pandemic and continues to rapidly escalate. More than 180 cases were reported last week, triple its level in mid-October and the largest weekly tally yet.

Coronavirus in Washington: Gov. Jay Inslee to hold televised address on COVID-19

“We are extremely concerned by the trajectory of new cases in our county, especially on the eve of the holidays and the start of cold and flu season,” Kitsap Health Officer Dr. Gib Morrow said in a statement Friday. “Right now, it is critical that every one of us is on high alert.”

The virus is spreading most rapidly in Central Kitsap, though every part of the county except Bainbridge Island is seeing a high infection rate. There were 100 active cases as of Thursday, along with more than 330 close contacts being monitored by Kitsap Public Health. Nine people are currently hospitalized with the virus.

The recent wave of new cases could have more dire consequences down the road. More infections are typically followed by more hospitalizations and more deaths — and health officials have become increasingly worried about the strain on hospitals.

“There is a real possibility that local health care services could be overwhelmed in the very near future if the rate of new cases continues to accelerate at this pace,” Morrow said. “We need to do everything we can to prevent those outcomes.”

Contact tracing, a vital tool in tracking the virus and slowing its spread, has also become

increasingly challenging because many people are not responding to calls, said Morrow, who is asking that residents respond as soon as possible if they are contacted by the Kitsap Public Health District.

'Crushed': Last-minute 'pause' on return to school in Kitsap prompts a range of emotions

Kitsap Public Health staff say they are seeing the virus spread in “virtually every setting in our community.” That includes health care and long-term care facilities; workplaces and government agencies; stores, businesses and restaurants; sports activities and places of worship.

The county has 19 active outbreaks, including outbreaks infecting more than 10 people at the Life Care Center and Martha & Mary nursing homes in Port Orchard and Poulsbo, respectively, along with the Olalla Recovery Centers.

Another outbreak has also hit St. Michael Medical Center in Bremerton, where a previous outbreak this summer had infected 73 people; the hospital announced Thursday four patients and two employees were infected.

South Kitsap School District on Thursday sent a letter to families advising them that over the last several weeks, the district has had four positive COVID-19 cases among staff members. The staff work in transportation and at John Sedgwick Middle School, Orchard Heights Elementary School and South Kitsap High School and no students were exposed, the district said.

South Kitsap, like other school districts, works with Kitsap Public Health District on case investigation, contact tracing and notification of impacted individuals. If a positive COVID-19 case is reported within a school site where students are receiving in-person services, the district communicates with families at that school in addition to communication by Kitsap Public Health District as part of their contact tracing process.

Coronavirus Washington: St. Michael Medical Center hit by another COVID-19 outbreak

South Kitsap and other districts have been providing in-person services to a limited number of students with special needs. All other students are receiving remote instruction.

Staff who were potentially exposed are being advised on next steps by the health district. Exposure is defined as being with six feet of a person with COVID-19 for at least 15 minutes or being in direct contact with secretions (cough, sneeze, sharing utensils) with an infected person.

Social gatherings and infections inside homes are also frequent sources of infection.

“Many of the positive cases in Kitsap County could have been prevented if people had have stayed home and fully isolated from all others when exposed to others with infection or when they experienced any symptoms whatsoever,” Morrow said.

The same dire trends are playing out nationwide as the United States contends with record-breaking infections and hospitalizations, and rising daily cases in 49 states. Over the past week, the country has reported an average of 134,000 new cases and more than 1,000 deaths per day. Fatal cases, however, remain well below peak levels this spring.

Washington state is also experiencing record-breaking case counts. The state Department of Health has reported more than 1,000 cases of COVID-19 per day this week. That was capped off Friday when state health officials reported 2,147 cases, the highest daily total since the pandemic began.

Opinion: When should you get a COVID-19 test?

Ahead of Thanksgiving, health officials are imploring residents to follow health measures, especially during the holidays.

On Thursday, Gov. Jay Inslee and his wife, Trudi, urged people to avoid holiday gatherings with anyone outside of their household. The state issued a travel advisory on Friday, with the governor asking residents to forgo travel plans and to self-quarantine for 14 days if they travel outside of the state.

Kitsap Public Health is asking community members to continue physical distancing with people outside of their family, wearing masks at all times around others, minimizing contact with others and avoiding gatherings.

Morrow says people should stay home, avoid others and get tested as soon as possible if they or anyone in their household feels at all sick or is concerned about being infected.

Echoing other health officials, Morrow reiterated that now is not the time to be socializing with others. And that includes the holidays. "I strongly encourage Kitsap residents to celebrate holidays at home with members of their immediate household," he said.

"It's the safest option for your family and the best way to protect our community," he said. "I know it's really hard to be apart this time of year, but we need to keep each other safe this season so we can look forward to gathering with friends and relatives next year."

Austen Macalus is the Kitsap Sun's social services reporter — covering health care, homelessness and how programs are serving people living in poverty. He can be reached at austen.macalus@kitsapsun.com or 360-536-6423.

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