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Contact Tracing Update from the Milwaukee Health Department

MILWAUKEE – The Milwaukee Health Department has dedicated significant and growing resources to contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Contact tracing can play an important role in limiting the spread of the virus by alerting people who might have been exposed to COVID-19 so that they can appropriately quarantine themselves.

With the recent, sharp increase in the number of positive COVID-19 test results, the Milwaukee Health Department is asking individuals who have tested positive to supplement the contract tracing work. People testing positive are asked – to the extent they are able – to personally reach out to their close contacts to alert them to exposure.

“Contact tracing is most effective when it is direct, prompt, and conveys actionable information. People who have tested positive for COVID-19 – those who are asymptomatic or have mild or moderate symptoms – can assist by communicating with their own close contacts,” Acting Health Commissioner Marlaina Jackson said. “As the case volumes grow, we want to speed the contact tracing work. The best way to avoid delays, or the real possibility of a contact not receiving information, is to encourage person-to-person contact tracing.”

A close contact is defined as someone who has been in direct physical contact with a person who has tested positive. That includes handshakes or hugs. People are also close contacts if they live in the same household or have spent the night in the same household as a positive individual. If someone has been within six feet of an infected person for a total of fifteen minutes within a 24 hour period, they would similarly be considered a close contact.

People who test positive for COVID-19 should be aware that they were able to spread COVID-19 starting two days before the first symptoms started. If no symptoms have appeared, someone testing positive was able to spread COVID-19 starting at least two days before a positive COVID-19 test was taken.

CDC and Wisconsin Department of Health Services recommend that close contacts quarantine in their home for 14 days, beginning the last day they were potentially exposed. This should be done regardless of whether the contact receives a negative test during their quarantine period because they could develop symptoms two to fourteen days after being exposed.

Some people who have tested positive are reluctant to say they might have exposed a contact to COVID-19. There is an option to anonymously alert close contacts through the online tool “Tell Your Contacts” at <https://tellyourcontacts.org>. Additional guidance on contact notification can be found at <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02803.pdf>.

The Milwaukee Health Department has 186 individuals on its contact tracing team and continues to onboard additional staff. Because of the high numbers of cases, the department has streamlined and prioritized its contact tracing protocols to focus on contacting individuals that have tested positive for COVID-19 for the duration of the current spike in cases.

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