

As You Consider Your Holiday Plans

By Kim McNamara, City Health Officer

I am appealing to the greater Portsmouth area to do everything in your power to slow the spread of COVID-19 within our community. The virus numbers are trending in a very poor direction and all of us are at substantial risk of contracting the disease. From the start of the pandemic we have shaped our public health response according to the data. We know that information reported today reflects conditions that were true a week or more ago. Unfortunately, based on our understanding of community transmission, the actual infection numbers are higher and will assuredly be getting worse.

Each week the City publishes a "Regional COVID-19 Dashboard," collecting data from several sources including NH Department of Health & Human Services. (You can find it along with answers to Frequently Asked Questions about life during this pandemic on this page: <http://www.cityofportsmouth.com/health/coronavirus-response>.) Infections, testing positivity, hospitalizations and cases in Rockingham County and in Portsmouth are all increasing, and have been for many weeks. A fractional increase in data equates to a substantial impact on our community.

In your travels, not just your immediate family is at risk. Every member of our community is, as well. COVID-19 is a very sneaky disease. It is so highly contagious that it can still spread when everyone is doing the right things. But those precautionary actions can substantially reduce the spread and may lessen the severity of disease if you are infected. COVID-19 is debilitating and even life-threatening to some. For reasons not yet fully understood, it can have unpredictable effects on otherwise young, healthy individuals. It can spread without a whisper of illness. It has already caused great disruption to our community, and sadly, the loss of some of us.

Let's try together to keep it from wreaking further havoc here.

Now is not the time for complacency, COVID-19 fatigue, or "returning to normal." This is hard. It is a whole new way of living and I applaud all of you who have taken this on and done your part. It is not forever, but it is the reality for now. We must continue our commitment to the personal responsibility that got us through the spring, allowed New Hampshire to mostly miss the "second wave" over the summer, and that might just get us through the winter if we remain vigilant. This community has risen to challenges graciously many times in the past and this is certainly one of the most important times any of us will likely face. Let's all resolve to protect each other.

Unfortunately, many people are still considering inviting family members or friends over for the holidays, or traveling to visit relatives for Thanksgiving. AAA says traffic for Thanksgiving is expected to decrease *just 10 percent*. Even knowing that travel outside New England means you must quarantine for 14 days when you get back to New Hampshire has not caused enough people to recognize that this is the year we must change our usual holiday plans. Especially as all of New England is now experiencing substantial transmission.

We at the Health Department understand that people are desperately hoping to have holidays “as usual” and are wondering what they should do. The answer is simple, if unwelcome: “Please stay home, with only your household family members.”

Traditions are hard to break and it can feel as if the precautions and protocols will never end. But that isn't true. As discouraging as this advice might seem, there is hope on the horizon. We as a community now know how to slow the virus – wearing masks, washing hands, distancing, avoiding others in public places. We've changed our normal routines to follow those guidelines. At least two vaccines are showing promise and a national distribution network is being activated. The hope is that we will see great progress with this soon and will be on our way to some relief.

But unless we all remain vigilant over the next few months, maintaining those same basic practices we have followed since last spring, we won't turn that corner. The impact of the virus on the Seacoast will get much worse before it can get better. Instead of slowing it down, the virus will spread faster, with greater impact on our hospitals, our economy and our residents. It is not just gatherings of six that are dangerous right now, it is gatherings of two.

So, for the holidays this year, please join the Health Department in modifying our Thanksgiving plans: limit your contact to the people in your own contained household for this holiday season. In all interactions outside of your home, keep wearing masks, maintaining a minimum of 6 feet in social distance, washing your hands, and not congregating in close-contact, poorly-ventilated spaces.

Send your love for Thanksgiving, not the virus. Be creative. Send cards and letters. Send a Thanksgiving meal and enjoy it together remotely by video chat. Zoom is suspending its 40-minute limit for the day, so Zoom-share your dinner or recipe preparations with distant family and friends. Perhaps reschedule Thanksgiving to when you can all eat outside, or at least until the most vulnerable members of our community and your family receives a safe and effective vaccine. Do something else together outside this holiday, instead of eating where masks can't be worn and it's too cold to sit outside. Meet somewhere to hike, go for a bike ride, take a walk. Don't stop on the way.

You don't have to cancel Thanksgiving, or Christmas, please just celebrate thoughtfully so that all members of our community have a fighting chance to celebrate the season fully next year with our families. Give thanks that we as a community, largely due to our ongoing teamwork, have escaped the worst of this to date and by spring, hopefully things will have started to improve. We have reason for that optimism.

We are living through history. The end is not yet written and the outcome depends on all of us looking out for each other, as this community has done so many times before.