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Social distancing, masks, small group sizes, hand washing still important as businesses ramp up

MORGANTOWN, WV (May 6, 2020) — While some businesses are starting to reopen as part of Gov. Jim Justice’s “Safer at Home” phase of his “Comeback” plan, small group sizes, wearing masks, maintaining a social distance of at least 6 feet and hand washing are still important elements in the fight against COVID-19.

“Numbers of diagnosed cases of COVID-19 continue to increase and have never stopped in Monongalia County,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, Monongalia County Health Department executive director and county health officer. “We have not reached the pinnacle nor gained the ability to look out from the maximum number.”

While Dr. Smith noted that MCHD supports the plans of President Trump and Gov. Justice to re-open businesses, “It needs to be done in a measured and reasonable manner.”

This is especially true of Monongalia County, which is considered one of the state’s hotspots, with more cases than all other West Virginia counties except Berkeley, Kanawha and Jackson counties. As of May 6, Monongalia County was at 110, up two from the previous day.

“Maintaining our status as a hotspot serves as a reminder that this is far from over,” Dr. Smith said. “We need to remain vigilant in monitoring the number of diagnosed cases. Because we are a hotspot, we will follow a more conservative approach.”

If there continues to be a low amount of new cases, he added, commerce can continue to open up; if there is a moderate amount of new diagnosed cases, commerce may slow.

“If we see a high number of cases, then commerce may halt or return to closure of all but essential services,” Dr. Smith said. “There is much at risk and we need to be reasonable in our decision making in an area where no one has ever been.”

Gov. Justice issued a stay-at-home order for all West Virginians on March 23. The order curtailed going out except for essential jobs, essential errands and other limited activities. The number of people who could gather in one location was limited to 10. On April 5, as COVID-19 cases continued to rise, the

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governor issued Executive Order 21-20 that mandated local health departments in counties identified as hot spots to establish limits on occupancy based on square footage and limited the number of individuals who could gather to five.

“Safer at Home,” which went into effect Monday, allows most counties to hold gathers of 25 or fewer individuals; however, hotspot counties such as Monongalia County will still maintain public gatherings to a maximum of five individuals.

On April 7, Monongalia County Health Department issued guidance for safe operation of businesses that are open or allowed to open. These guidelines continue to follow Executive Order 21-20 by allowing only two customers per 1,000 square inside at any one time, implementing social distancing practices, providing protective barriers between employees and customers and providing plenty of disinfectant wipes, hand sanitizer and hand washing stations to employees.

Businesses will continue to operate under the April 7 order that outlines safe measures of operation, including limited capacity, maintaining barriers between employees and customers as well as social distancing practices, and providing cleaning materials for both the employees and surfaces, Dr. Smith noted.

“Many store employees are experiencing a large increase of COVID-19 infections, especially those who are in close contact with the public, like cashiers,” he added. “We also know that persons infected may take up to five-seven-14 days before becoming ill. Therefore, the impact of what occurs this week will not be seen until the following week or later.”

MCHD Environmental Health sanitarians continue to work with businesses to ensure a safe environment for employees and patrons as well as responding to any concerns or complaints,

Dr. Smith noted that the launch of the “Safer at Home” phase coincides with West Virginia University’s move-out period, which is taking place this month.

Monongalia County Health Department worked with WVU and the Monongalia County Commission and landlords to develop a plan for students so that they arrive in stages to avoid a lack of social distancing at any location. Family members and students who were not moving into another Morgantown area apartment also have a 24-hour time limit before they must leave for home or else they will be asked to quarantine for 14 days, depending on the severity of COVID-19 in their home area.

“Some students will be coming from hotspot areas with higher rates of infection than Monongalia County, and county officials want to make every effort to not have our COVID-19 cases increase anymore than they already are,” Dr. Smith said.

At least 1 in 4 individuals with COVID-19 do not have symptoms, which can include fever, dry cough and trouble breathing. Also, individuals with COVID-19 can shed the virus, and therefore spread the illness, before they develop symptoms.

Wearing a mask in public is strongly encouraged. A mask affords the wearer some protection, but it mostly helps keeps others safe. Two individuals who are wearing masks and maintaining a social

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distance of at least 6 feet have low risk one passing the illness on to another. To recap, an individual's mask protects others, and that person is protected when others also wear masks.

“That’s why it’s so important that everyone wear a mask, as well maintain social distancing and wash their hands frequently with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds,” Dr. Smith said. “We can’t emphasize enough that everyone needs to take these measures seriously as we work to reopen. These are high stakes as we work to balance our need to slow the number of cases with opening up the economy again.”

Links to orders issued by the governor as well as Monongalia County Health Department can be found at monchd.org/covid-19.html.

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