



Media Information:

For immediate release:

March 14, 2020

First Positive Case of COVID-19 in Yellowstone County

Billings, MT – The Unified Health Command (UHC), made up of Billings Clinic, St. Vincent Healthcare, RiverStone Health and Yellowstone County Disaster and Emergency Services, offers this additional guidance in response to the first individual in Yellowstone County testing positive for the new Coronavirus that causes COVID-19. The individual was one of four people with positive test results announced in Montana late Friday, March 13, 2020. Other individuals testing positive reside in Gallatin, Silver Bow and Broadwater counties.

The Yellowstone County individual is a woman in her 50s who is self-isolating and cooperating with public health staff at RiverStone Health, Yellowstone County’s public health agency. She, and the three other individuals, have travel histories to affected regions and appear to have become infected with the virus outside of Montana.

On Thursday, the Yellowstone County woman was experiencing mild respiratory symptoms and was wearing a mask when she came to the Billings Clinic Emergency Department. Healthcare providers took appropriate precautions for respiratory infections. She was not hospitalized and remains in isolation at home. Public health nurses are following up with others who may have been in close contact with her.

“Knowing that Montana and Yellowstone County are now reporting cases of COVID-19, I urge people not to think that every cough, snuffle or fever means they are infected with the virus,” said John Felton, Yellowstone County Health Officer and President and CEO of RiverStone Health. “Everyone should already be taking everyday precautions like washing hands frequently, and staying home when sick.”

Testing Sites:

In anticipation of the public demand for testing, the Yellowstone County Commissioners and MetraPark approved the use of a centralized community-testing site in the Sandstone Building at MetraPark. Since that facility is not yet open, both Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare have set up interim testing sites.

On Monday, March 16, 2020 both hospital testing sites will be open for patients of their respective healthcare providers. Testing for COVID-19 will only be conducted once ordered

by a licensed healthcare provider following an appropriate clinical assessment. People cannot self-refer for testing.

- St. Vincent Healthcare’s site is in parking lot M, at the northwest corner of North 27th Street and 11th Avenue North.
- Billings Clinic’s site is located in the former dialysis unit on the west side of the hospital building.

All UHC healthcare facilities have set up health information phone lines:

- Billings Clinic HealthLine: 406.255.8400
- St. Vincent Healthcare: 406.237.8775.
- RiverStone Health Public Health Information line: 406.651.6415

If you think you have a respiratory illness, please follow this interim advice:

- If you are sick and have mild symptoms, stay home and self-isolate as much as possible.
- If you are sick enough that you would normally go to the doctor, call ahead to your care provider for instructions.
- To avoid spreading respiratory illnesses, please do not show up at a clinic, hospital, or testing site without calling in advance for instructions.

School Guidance:

Health Officers of the seven most populous counties agree on the following guidance with regard to school dismissal.

“We have no intention at this time to close a school unless there is a known case of COVID-19 associated with that school,” Felton said. If there is a close contact or a person who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, the Health Officer will make the determination to close that school for a few days to a week or more, depending on the circumstances. This recommendation does not in any way change the authority of local school boards or school superintendents.

Community Activities, Events and Gatherings:

The UHC recommends that community activities that require travel, such as conferences, meetings, sporting events and competitions, be cancelled.

The UHC also recommends that organizers and sponsors of community gatherings -- including events, fundraisers, concerts and the like -- consider recommended social distancing guidelines in planning those activities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends staying 6 feet away from other people to reduce the risk of exposure to respiratory infections. If a 6-foot distance cannot be maintained, look for a larger space or cancel the activity.

Everyday Precautions:

Since we are still in the midst of cold and flu season, we all have a responsibility to reduce risks of respiratory illness, including COVID-19.

- Wash your hands thoroughly and often.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Avoid large crowds, especially in enclosed spaces.

- Encourage all family members to cover their cough and sneezes with a tissue.
- Maintain social distance to avoid possible exposure to viruses.
- Avoid handshakes and hugs.
- Frequently clean “high-touch” surfaces in your home or workplace. Disinfect doorknobs, handles, keyboards, railings, remote controls, tabletops and counters.

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