



Media Advisory

For immediate release

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COVID-19 testing starts in Yellowstone County senior care facilities

Billings, MT – The health and safety of Montanans living in and working in senior care facilities is a high priority in the COVID-19 pandemic response.

That is why Yellowstone County nursing homes and assisted living facilities soon will be contacting residents and their family members about an effort to test all residents and staff for the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

RiverStone Health, Yellowstone County's local public health agency, has offered these facilities help in communicating about this voluntary testing.

Since early April, the Unified Health Command, upon request, has provided testing to symptomatic residents of senior living facilities using a mobile testing van.

Recently, Gov. Steve Bullock directed the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services to expand testing in nursing homes and assisted living facilities to include all residents and employees, even if they have no symptoms.

This week, Yellowstone County facilities are expecting to start receiving testing supplies from DPHHS. According to DPHHS, there are more than 2,200 licensed beds in nursing homes and assisted living facilities in Yellowstone County.

Checking symptom-free individuals

The tests will be voluntary for residents and employees. Those who want to be tested, or who are legal representatives of a resident, will need to fill out and sign a consent form. This free testing is expected to take place in the care homes, so residents and employees will not need to leave the facility campus.

The procedure will be more comfortable than the back-of-the-nose swabbing used earlier. The senior tests will use a swab inserted less than half an inch into each nostril and then placed in a vial for shipment to the Montana Public Health Lab in Helena.

Personal physicians will receive test results and they will share those results with their patients. DPHHS expects test results to be available within a week.

People testing positive (or their legal representative) will get a call from RiverStone Health with information about how to isolate. Senior living facility residents will need to be isolated from other residents and should the need arise, will be transferred to a hospital for further care.

As with all people testing positive, RiverStone Health will investigate to find the source of infection and trace everyone who has been in close contact with the positive individual.

Pro-active testing

“Montana’s licensed nursing homes and assisted living facilities are required to demonstrate excellent infection control measures every day,” said John Felton, Yellowstone County health officer and RiverStone Health president and CEO. “These senior care facilities have taken a pro-active approach to the COVID-19 pandemic by screening staff for symptoms, discontinuing group activities, restricting visitors and increasing the use of personal protective equipment.”

“As more people are tested, it’s likely that Yellowstone County will see more positive cases among people with no apparent symptoms,” Felton said. “Detecting the virus in people who aren’t showing symptoms of illness will help public health professionals intervene to prevent the spread to people at high risk for getting seriously ill from COVID-19.”

False positives

Testing of people who have no symptoms of COVID-19 has produced false positive results in other states. It is likely that testing of asymptomatic workers and residents in Montana senior living facilities will yield more positives and that some of those will warrant further testing to confirm that the individual is actually infected with the virus.

The difference between initial tests and confirmatory testing may be confusing, but it is important for appropriate care and providing residents, families and the public with timely, correct information. The public may call the Public Health Information Line at 406.651.6415 with questions about testing.

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