



**Frequently Asked Questions  
Re: Yellowstone County Health Officer  
Order and Amended Order  
October 12 & 14, 2020**

The guidelines contained in this FAQ document supersede any conflicting or differing prior statements or guidance, whether written or verbal, provided by RiverStone Health regarding the Yellowstone County Health Officer Order of October 12, 2020.

**Why was this Health Officer Order issued?**

- A. The Order is a serious effort to stop the steep rise in COVID-19 disease in Yellowstone County. Since the end of September, the average rate of new cases diagnosed daily has doubled. The pandemic is stressing our local healthcare and public health system. The Order calls on all Yellowstone County residents to do their part to reduce the virus spread by keeping their distance, washing their hands, wearing cloth face coverings, limiting their interactions with people outside their household, working from home when possible and staying home when they are ill.

**How do I get health department approval for my event in Yellowstone County?**

- A. RiverStone Health does not sign off on whether businesses and organizations are complying with the Orders associated with COVID-19. The Order from October 12 requires no more than 25 people in a gathering. If you feel you cannot guarantee 100% that no more than 25 people will gather, you will have to decide how to make certain you can comply. We understand that this is difficult, but we are trying to avoid having crowds of more than 25 people gathering together. Please continue to try to do all you can to help us curb this virus.

**Why are churches specifically mentioned in the Order?**

- A. Unlike people going to a restaurant or a store, people at a church service constitute a gathering. While the Order limits gatherings to not more than 25 people, it allows houses of worship to consider having a larger number if everyone can maintain physical distance between households, while also wearing cloth face coverings, observing careful hand hygiene and having sick people stay home. Houses of worship will need to give special consideration to cleaning, distribution of communion and socialization before, during and after services. Singing is also a concern in churches, because we know that the droplets that spread COVID-19 are more numerous and dispersed farther when singing than when people talk. The Order was written with concern that

many people who may attend worship services are particularly vulnerable to serious COVID-19 illness due to age or underlying health conditions and that great care is necessary to reduce their risk of contracting the virus.

**What can I do if I see that this Health Officer Order is violated?**

A. Complaints about violations of the Order and complaints about violations of the statewide restrictions to slow the spread of COVID-19 can be made using a [complaint form](#) posted at riverstonehealth.org under COVID-19. Complaints are forwarded to the Yellowstone County Attorney’s Office. RiverStone Health has sent more than 1,250 complaints from community members to the county attorney.

**Why haven’t violations of the COVID-19 restrictions been prosecuted in Yellowstone County?**

A. About one-third of the complaints received by the Yellowstone County Attorney’s Office are general concerns about the existence of pandemic emergency orders or complaints that “everyone” is failing to follow the directives. All are investigated. Those with enough information result in phone calls, spot checks or both. There have also been warning letters and investigations by the Billings Police Department and Yellowstone County Sheriff’s Office. There have been no further complaints on those who received warnings.

**My sports team practices in groups of less than 25, but there are more than 25 people at games. Can we play games under the Health Officer Order?**

A. Gatherings of more than 25 people indoors or outdoors are not permitted under the Order, so games would not be allowed because the two teams would intermix creating the potential for increased exposure. However, practices involving fewer than 25 people (including players, coaches, volunteers, etc.) are permitted. For purposes of this Order, a scrimmage between two different teams, even if held as part of a practice and not an “official” game, creates the same risk of increased exposure and is therefore also prohibited.

**K-12 schools are allowed exemptions from the 25-person gathering limit. What about colleges and universities in Yellowstone County?**

A. Colleges and universities are allowed to have classes, dining facility utilization, residence hall living, and other facets of college life that exceed 25 people, subject to compliance with the elements of their COVID-19 prevention and control plans. Colleges and universities are strongly encouraged to carefully consider the risks and benefits of activities that entail groups larger than 25 people before undertaking them.

**Why is it OK for restaurants and bars to have more than 25 people on the premises, but not theaters?**

- A. The Order limits gatherings to not more than 25 people. A theater audience is considered a gathering that must be limited to 25. The customers of a restaurant or bar are not considered a gathering if they come in smaller groups. A party or other group activity at a bar or restaurant that exceeds 25 people – including guests and staff – is considered a gathering and is therefore prohibited. Restaurants, bars and casinos must continue to follow all previous requirements for closing by 12:30 a.m., maximum occupancy load under the Governor’s Phase 2 reopening directive, enhanced sanitation, distancing customers and requiring both staff and customers to wear cloth face coverings unless they are eating or drinking. In addition, any Yellowstone County food service establishment that was required to submit a dine-in reopening plan to RiverStone Health must comply with all the elements of that plan.

**Our organization has planned an outdoor event during which each family group would keep distance from others. Total attendance is expected to be more than 25. Can we proceed?**

- A. Any gathering of more than 25 people is prohibited under this Order. Regardless of whether the event is indoors or outdoors, during this period of surging COVID-19 infections, the order is strict about the gathering size limit.

**My organization is holding a seminar for 50 people at a local hotel. If we split the attendees into two separate rooms, will that comply with the Order?**

- A. The seminar would be considered in compliance if each group is no more than 25 people and the groups are completely separated in different rooms with walls between the groups. All attendees would need to wear masks and be spaced six feet apart. Hotel and convention center gatherings are subject to the Order and the 25-person limit.