

An Open Letter to Syracuse and Surrounding Communities
From the City of Syracuse and Syracuse Area Health

Covid-19 is unfortunately the new norm in America and has now spread to Nebraska. Though there has not yet been a confirmed case in Otoe County, at least one person has been confirmed positive in Cass County just to the north of us. It is very likely that there are individuals in Otoe County who have been infected with Covid-19 but have not been diagnosed. These individuals likely think they are experiencing a bad cold or mild form of respiratory flu (which is common this year). In fact, these individuals are carriers of a highly infectious virus that is known to be deadly for the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, and may unknowingly be sowing the seeds of our own piece of the global pandemic.

While we have an exceptional hospital in our county and have easy access to the larger health systems in Lincoln and Omaha, you may not know that the majority of healthcare is provided in an outpatient environment (80% of Syracuse Area Health services are outpatient) and we all operate near capacity for our inpatient units with very little wiggle room even for the impacts of the seasonal flu. While we have surge plans in place, our hospitals will be quickly overwhelmed should Covid-19 spread unchecked.

We cannot keep the virus out of the county, it is more than likely already here; thus, we need to slow the transmission and spread the number of potential cases over as long a period as possible in order to lessen the flow into our hospitals and save lives. The only way to slow the transmission of the virus is to minimize contact with infected people. Since we don't know who is infected, the only answer is to minimize the overall contact we have with each other. This is called social distancing.

Covid-19 typically spreads in the droplets of mucus we all expel when we cough or sneeze. These droplets have a range of about six feet. So, we all need to stay out of this six foot radius...something that is almost impossible to do in modern society. This is why schools are closing, churches are not meeting, and people are being asked to work at home – even when no cases of the virus have been detected yet. If we do nothing, we guarantee that the virus will spread unabated to many of us.

Otoe County is not as populous as urban locations, however an infection rate of only 5% of the residents of Otoe County could result in a large number of people requiring hospitalization. If this were to happen

in the course of just a few weeks, it would overwhelm our local hospital. Depending on the amount of cases in Lincoln and Omaha, we may not have the ability to transfer to those hospitals if they are also overwhelmed with patients.

In the event of a devastating outbreak, we will need to take care of ourselves with the resources we already have in Otoe County. If we take the proper precautions, we can reduce the risk of high infection rates and the slow of the advance of the virus to the point that we do not overwhelm our own health care system. So, here is what you can do:

- Large gatherings should be cancelled (or skipped) including churches, concerts, conferences, and sporting events.
- Schools, daycares, and sports clubs should be suspended.
- Create distance between family units and individuals by stopping play dates, parties, etc., and if possible, begin working from home.
- Take care of yourself and your family, but maintain social distance. Go outside and enjoy the spring, but just with your family. If you go to public places, maintain at least six feet between groups. Reduce the frequency of going to stores, restaurants, coffee shops, etc., and try to go at off-peak times, maintain your distance, wash your hands often, and please don't use medical masks and gloves, these are going to be needed by healthcare workers. Let's support our local businesses during this time by purchasing gift cards and using them in the future.
- Make liberal use of phone and video connections to maintain relationships, but don't visit in person, especially nursing homes and hospitals.
- If you are sick, isolate yourself at home and contact your primary care physician office. If you do not have a primary care physician, please feel free to call Syracuse Area Health at 402-269-2011. If you are experiencing respiratory symptoms or believe you have Covid-19, please do not just show up at your doctor's office as you might infect others in the waiting room. Call Syracuse Area Health first and they will tell you what to do. As always, if you are having difficulty breathing, or are experiencing an emergency condition, head straight to the closest emergency room.

Community leaders are closely monitoring information from the State of Nebraska and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We encourage residents to use best practices as recommended by the CDC and make reasonable decisions based upon facts as we prepare for the potential spread of the virus in the community. Please reach out to neighbors and community members who are unable to leave their home and assist these neighbors as we monitor the situation.

If you utilize emergency medical services (EMS) in the next several weeks, there will be a modified screening used by 911 operators. The EMS will respond with appropriate gear and uniforms if the initial screening meets certain criteria. Our community EMS will be coordinating with Syracuse Area Health to conduct modified staffing and evaluations.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a true public health emergency. If we do everything we can to minimize the spread, we will minimize the long-term impact on our families and our communities. And this is not a one-week sprint, it is a new norm for the next several weeks and will require patience. The future of Otoe County rests in each of our hands – please take this seriously.

****Effective 3/17/2020 the city hall lobby will be closed to all public. Please use the drive-through on the south side of City Hall for all your business needs until further posted.****