

KENT COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT



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Adam London
Administrative Health Officer

STATEMENT REGARDING RECOVERY PHASE IN KENT COUNTY

February 17, 2022

The last two years have been difficult and have tested our communities in innumerable ways. As of the time of this writing, at least 1,275 Kent County residents have died because of the SARS-CoV 2 virus and complications from COVID-19 illness. Many thousands more have been severely harmed and hospitalized. Some continue to struggle with “Long COVID” symptoms and multi system inflammatory syndrome. The health of our community has also been harmed by the many other economic, academic, and social disruptions related to this pandemic.

December 2021 was the third deadliest month of the pandemic in Kent County with 143 COVID-19 deaths. The peak of Delta variant cases, with its impressive virulence, in December pushed our healthcare systems and other essential infrastructure to the brink of capacity. As the pace of cases started to decline, we learned of the inevitable arrival of the fast spreading but milder Omicron variant. As expected, the Omicron surge accelerated quickly in January to the highest daily case numbers observed at any point in the pandemic. January of 2022 was the fourth deadliest month in Kent County as we lost 105 residents to COVID-19. Due to these dynamic factors, I reconciled an existing public health order on January 11th after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presented revised guidelines for COVID-19 mitigation in the K-12 education setting. This reconciled public health order required schools to: 1) exclude COVID-19 positive individuals from the educational setting for the duration of their CDC recommended isolation period, 2) exclude unvaccinated household close contacts of COVID-19 positive individuals in accordance with the CDC quarantine recommendations, and 3) publicly post the school’s COVID-19 mitigation strategy. That public health order, re-issued on January 11th, has been the only COVID-19 related public health order in effect. The order which required facial covering use in educational settings expired on January 3rd.

Thankfully, over the past several weeks we have seen the surge caused by the Omicron variant diminish as quickly as it arrived. For perspective, in mid January, Kent County was experiencing a pandemic high of over 1,200 diagnosed cases on average per day and the positivity rate of COVID-19 tests was over 40%. We are now averaging 158 new diagnosed cases per day and the positivity rate of new tests is standing at an average of 15.4% and dropping quickly. The situation in our local hospitals has improved as well. In the course of the past couple of months we have seen COVID-19 inpatient numbers fall from near 400 people to less than 200. This decline in hospital caseload appears consistent and sustained. In response, the leadership of Spectrum Health West Michigan changed their emergency level from the most severe red category to a less dire level of yellow. Meanwhile increased access to rapid testing and an expanded range of therapies has improved the probability for successful outcome for those who do become ill. Finally, on February 16th, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services announced that the state is now officially considered in a post surge recovery

stage. At that time, the state also lifted the indoor mask advisory for most public places including schools but not including high risk congregate care settings.

In response to these improving conditions and the state's announcement, the Kent County Health Department is communicating the following:

1. As we approach the post pandemic future, we must recognize that COVID-19 is an illness that is likely to be with us indefinitely. The Kent County Health Department along with other medical and public health experts will continue to share information and resources useful for preventing illness and protecting health. We will do this in much the same way that we protect public health from other threats.
2. The Public Health Order dated January 11th of this year will expire at the conclusion of the school day on Friday February 18, 2022. There are no other public health orders related to COVID-19 presently in effect from the Kent County Health Department.
3. The CDC and MDHHS have published guidance for COVID-19 mitigation in schools and many other settings. It our understanding that those agencies will continue to produce evidence-based recommendations as the situation unfolds. That guidance is readily accessible and residents are encouraged to stay informed and make decisions that protect health and wellness.
4. We recognize that the harms caused by COVID-19 are real, substantial, and that each individual's decisions affect the safety of others. We also recognize that COVID-19 mitigation comes with costs and should be weighed against other concerns and priorities. In this post surge recovery stage it is appropriate for individuals, educational settings, and others to weigh these considerations carefully and make decisions that best fit their own unique circumstances. In the spirit of this recognition, public health recommendations are properly understood as advice and not directive.
5. Kent County Health Department will continue to monitor community-wide epidemiology, in accordance with our program requirements, and will intervene as appropriate when outbreaks and imminent dangers are identified.

The Kent County Health Department has also received numerous inquiries related to COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Be advised that this office will not issue a mandate for the COVID-19 vaccination for the public. The available vaccines have demonstrated their safety and efficacy for reducing transmission and significantly reducing the probability of severe COVID-19 illness and death. Eligible persons are encouraged to get vaccinated, however, this office will not mandate the vaccine for the public. This in no way adds to or detracts from the ability of individual employers or organizations to enact vaccine policies they deem protective of their workplaces. Further, the Kent County Health Department has no participation in the decision-making of state or federal policy makers relative to the issue of vaccine requirements.

Please also be advised that nothing in this bulletin has any effect on any of the requirements or authorities currently in place from the State of Michigan or federal public health agencies including:

- When school officials, local health department staff or personnel reasonably suspect that a student has a communicable condition (except HIV or AIDS), they may exclude the student for a period of time sufficient to obtain a determination by a physician or health officer as to the presence of the condition. Individuals who have incomplete immunizations may be excluded from a school or childcare center if a vaccine preventable disease is either confirmed or suspected in the program. A student may return to school when it is determined that he or she no longer represents a communicable disease risk to other students.
- Schools are still required to report COVID-19 cases, along with cases of other infectious disease, to the local health department under Michigan Public Health Code and existing administrative rules for communicable disease management.
- On January 29, 2021, CDC issued an ORDER that required face masks to be worn by all people while on public transportation (which included all passengers and all personnel operating conveyances) traveling into, within, or out of the United States and U.S. territories. The CDC ORDER includes school buses, both public and private.

Thank you for supporting your public health and medical workforce throughout the pandemic and for everything you have done to keep your neighbors safe during this unprecedented crisis.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam London". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Adam" and last name "London" clearly distinguishable.

Adam London, PhD, RS, DAAS
Administrative Health Officer
Kent County Health Department