STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES

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The Honorable Lucy Weber, Chairperson
Health and Human Services Oversight Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 205
107 North Main Street
Concord, NH 03301

Dear Representative Weber:

The global Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has now resulted in approximately 24 million cases globally with more than 5.8 million cases in the United States. In New Hampshire, we have identified more than 7,200 COVID-19 infections and more than 430 people have died. The State of New Hampshire has launched a robust response to the COVID-19 pandemic that spans across all state agencies and has involved numerous local community partners. We are pleased to provide this report on the public health aspects of the response to date.

Case Investigation and Contact Tracing

NH identified its first person with COVID-19 in the State on March 2nd. Since the beginning of the response, we have investigated every confirmed case of COVID-19 to identify close contacts, notify them and implement isolation and quarantine to prevent further spread. We have been able to scale the response infrastructure to maintain these activities as additional cases were identified. To date, the case investigation and contact tracing teams have engaged with >22,000 people, which includes >7,000 people with COVID-19 and their >15,000 close contacts. People with COVID-19 are instructed to isolate at home until no longer infectious. People identified as close contacts are instructed to quarantine at home for 14 days after their last contact to the person with COVID-19. The vast majority of individuals have been compliant with the investigation and monitoring process; however, when necessary the Department conducts home visits and will issue legal isolation and quarantine orders when voluntary compliance cannot be achieved.

When a cluster or outbreak is identified, infection prevention and control recommendations are provided to the affected facility. To date, the majority of outbreaks have occurred in long-term care and other residential care facilities. The Department maintains mobile testing teams that have been deployed to facilities that are experiencing an outbreak to conduct testing of residents and staff to identify early infection (including asymptomatic infection). In addition to healthcare settings, NH looks to identify cases occurring in other high-risk settings (e.g. corrections, homeless shelters, childcare, and schools) as well as workplaces. The Department maintains an isolation and quarantine site to house individuals who are experiencing homelessness. Once infections are identified, these organizations are contacted and supported in implementing infection control measures. The two local health departments in NH provide these same services within their local communities in partnership with the Department. A detailed overview of case investigation and contact tracing in NH is available online.

The Department is committed to ensuring all people in NH have access to COVID-19 testing and care. Department staff participated on the Governor's COVID-19 Equity Response Team, which assessed the impact of COVID-19 and identified needs for communities of color and other marginalized communities in NH. The equity response team issued a report summarizing the group's findings and the Department is working to implement many of their recommendations.

Laboratory Testing

Testing is one important component of the larger strategy to rapidly identify infection and prevent spread within our communities. The Department has maintained a robust testing program that provides access to COVID-19 testing, outbreak testing in residential facilities, and surveillance programs for residents and staff in long-term care facilities. The Department is in the process of transitioning from state-run fixed site testing sites to a statewide hospital system-based testing program. The Department maintains a listing of available testing options online, which includes the Department's fixed sites, hospitals, community health centers, local health departments, and commercial testing partners. Additional testing resources are added to the on-line resource list as they become available. The NH Public Health Laboratories and other laboratories distribute sampling kits to health care facilities. Additionally, the Department has distributed rapid point-of-care testing instruments and test cartridges to hospitals across NH, and the federal government has begun distributing rapid point-of-care testing instruments and supplies to long-term care facilities. In order to ensure the safety of certified staff performing specimen collection, the Department distributes personal protective equipment in partnership with NH Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

To date in NH, nearly 300,000 COVID-19 PCR tests have been performed and roughly 200,000 individual persons have been tested. While the turnaround times have varied across laboratories and throughout the response, current turnaround times for testing are low and average around 2 days (1-3 days depending on laboratory). Assuring timely access to COVID-19 testing will continue to be an important strategy in rapidly identifying and containing COVID-19.

Pharmaceutical and Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions

Medications to treat COVID-19 are still under investigation. However, one specific drug, Remdesivir may be effective in treating COVID-19. The Secretary of federal HHS has allowed for the emergency use of this investigational drug to treat severe illness in hospitalized patients. The Department facilitates distribution of Remdesivir to NH hospitals that are able to comply with the rules around the emergency authorization to use this medication, so hospitals in NH currently have access to this therapy.

Access to a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine for our NH population will be critical to long-term control of COVID-19 transmission, if and when a vaccine becomes available. The Department is actively working on vaccine distribution plans for when a vaccine becomes available. Our state has many already established plans in place to support mass vaccination during a pandemic and we will draw upon our experience during the 2009 Influenza A H1N1 pandemic. The exact dates we can expect to take receipt of a vaccine remains uncertain. It is possible that a limited supply of the vaccine could be available by the end of 2020, but this is dependent on the findings of ongoing studies looking at the efficacy and safety of the candidate vaccines currently in development. The distribution plan will be developed by the Department using federal guidance adapted to meet the needs of NH. Distribution will involve government/non-government partnerships throughout NH.

In the absence of a vaccine, non-pharmaceutical interventions remain the cornerstone of COVID-19 prevention and control (e.g. social distancing, cloth face mask use, hand hygiene, etc.), especially while relaxing restrictions, re-opening businesses, and returning to school and work. To date, these interventions have been successful in "flattening the curve" and NH has enjoyed very low case counts over the last two months. Currently, NH is averaging less than 20 cases per day and the percentage of PCR-based viral tests that are positive is less than 1%; both hospitalizations and deaths have also decreased substantially.

We believe, however, that there continues to be low but persistent levels of community transmission in many areas of NH, and given the national and global increases in COVID-19, NH communities remain at risk for a resurgence of COVID-19. All persons need to continue to follow public health guidance:

- Keep a safe distance of 6 feet or more from other people, especially when out in public places.
- Wear a cloth face covering or mask over the nose and mouth when in public settings where social distancing may not always be maintained.
- Older adults and people of all ages who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 should continue to stay at home as much as possible.
- Practice frequent hand hygiene.
- Stay home when sick or for 14 days after close contact with someone with COVID-19 or travel outside of New England.
- Seek testing if symptoms develop. Testing remains readily available for people with any symptoms of COVID-19, and even people without symptoms.

Public and Partner Communications

The Department's COVID-19 communications are extensive. We issue health alerts to share response information and recommendations on a regular basis to a diverse group of >14,000 recipients. To date, 20 such messages have been issued. Additionally, each week, the Department hosts a one-hour call for all healthcare and public health partners, a separate one-hour call for long-term care facilities, and another one-hour call for school partners. Brief updates are provided during these calls with most of the time spent answering questions from these key response partners. A 24/7 phone line is available for individual consultations. We have also hosted webinars for specific audiences including healthcare providers, long-term care facilities, corrections, youth residential providers, childcare providers, schools, town officials, voting/polling workers, and restaurants and hotels. Guidance documents for all of these stakeholders were developed early on in the response and are updated as needed.

Public COVID-19 prevention messaging is disseminated through social media, website materials, media interviews, and press releases that are issued daily. Additionally, the Department continues to increase the amount of publicly-available COVID-19 data through our data dashboards available online.

The Department remains vigilant in its response to COVID-19. We value our partnerships with organizations across the state and the public's commitment to following prevention recommendations as we all work together to control the spread of COVID-19 in NH.

Respectfully Submitted,

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