

Cases level off, but another death reported

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

As COVID-19 cases appear to be leveling off from where they were last month, yet another death has been recorded in Steele County.

Public Health Director Amy Caron reported that a man in his 60s, not in long-term care, has died from complications of COVID-19. This is the second death in the past month involving men in the same age group.

While no other details are available surrounding the most recent deaths, Caron said, "It's a little scary given their ages."

There have now been 15 deaths in Steele County attributed to COVID-19.

After a spike in late March and continuing into April, the number of new cases has leveled off, with 63 new ones reported in the past week bringing the county's total to 3,786, according to Caron. "We are trending back down," she said.

Caron said 54% of residents in Steele County have been vaccinated with at least one dose. That compares to the statewide average of 59%. She reported 4,094 have received first doses, while 3,364 have

completed their second dose.

"I am happy to see we are up over the 50% mark," said Caron, who admits she initially did not think the county would get that high. But, she stresses, it would be nice to go even higher.

Of those who have been vaccinated, 86% of the 65 and older group have received their COVID shots. Caron said the county isn't so strong in vaccinations for younger people.

There are varying reports of 25 to 75% needed to achieve herd immunity, Caron said. "It would be great if we

can get more people vaccinated," she said.

To those who haven't been vaccinated, Caron said: "If you're able to get a vaccination, do it for yourself, do it for your family and do it for others. We need to beat the virus, so we don't have to wear masks and do social distancing."

Caron said there are various reasons why people haven't been vaccinated, including worries over possible side effects and those wanting to wait it out longer. She has also seen myths floating around. One of the hottest myths right now is that the vaccine causes infertility. Caron

said that's simply unfounded.

In the coming weeks, Public Health plans to work with the area's larger employers to get workers vaccinated.

One of Caron's frustrations right now is that they are wasting vaccine because not enough people are coming in. Though she said only small amounts have been wasted, Caron doesn't want to

see anything thrown away. Once vials are tapped for shots, the medicine needs to be used within a few hours.

"Up until two weeks ago, we hadn't wasted any vaccine," Caron said.

Public Health will be focusing on targeted outreach in the coming weeks to underserved groups, including minorities and homeless people.

COVID-19 VACCINE WATCH

	First Doses	Second Doses
Steele:	4,094	3,364
Dodge:	2,177	1,684

Source: Steele County Public Health

Back in business



STAFF PHOTO BY DEB FLEMING

Central Park in Owatonna was bustling Saturday with the opening of The Farmer's Market. Traditionally, the market opens in May and runs through October. Last year, however, COVID-19 delayed the market's start until June. Above, Pres Mendez of Owatonna straightens items she and his wife, Vicky, operate. Vendors must make or grow the items they sell. The Farmer's Market opens at 7 a.m. on Saturdays.

Freeborn's fair canceled again

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

The six best days of summer have been put on hold—again.

The Freeborn County Fair has been canceled for 2021 due to continuing COVID-19 restrictions. The fair had been scheduled to run Aug. 3-8.

Officials cite the current restrictions on both indoor and outdoor entertainment events and the lack of information about when such restrictions will be lifted as their reasons for canceling the fair, which is billed as "the six best days of

summer."

Freeborn has always been known for having rich entertainment, typically featuring rising country stars in its grandstand. The Fair Board said it had to decide now to avoid spending money on entertainment that might have to be canceled.

According to the Fair Board, the expense of performer contracts, stage, sound and lights is typically around \$300,000. That expense is usually offset by other events held at the fairgrounds throughout the year. However, the fair-

grounds located in Albert Lea have been closed since last May because of the pandemic.

"This is a very difficult decision that the Board and I had to make, not taking it lightly," said Mike Woitas, manager of the fair. "We understand that people want to get out and enjoy the fair, but planning for a successful fair at this time when there isn't any guarantee the restrictions will be lifted, would jeopardize the fair for years to come."

The board plans to work with the 4-H pro-

gram for some type of show for livestock and non-livestock exhibits.

This is the second year in a row that the fair has been canceled. Before last year's cancellation, the last time the fair had been nixed was in 1946 because of polio. The fair was also shut down in 1903 due to heavy rain.

The fair, which traditionally offers a big grandstand line-up of entertainers, had several top acts booked for the past couple of years. Among them were Michael Ray, Oak Ridge Boys, Newsboys United and Sawyer Brown.

A teenager with a jolt of positivity

◀ **TEENAGER** from A2 defined by any physical handicap.

"God made me the way I am for a reason," Megan says. "I have an amazing life just the way I am, and it just happens to be that I can't see."

Life, Megan stresses, isn't about what or how you look. With not being able to see, Megan finds herself at an advantage over most people.

"I see the inner self and see people's true character," Megan said. "I think some people aren't able to see because they are looking too much on what a person looks like on the outside. We all have a character on the inside."

Contrary to what you may think, Megan

doesn't look at life as a struggle even though she can't see. "I haven't had a reason to feel any other way," she said. "I always feel happy and comfortable," she added.

Megan's parents, Rian and Jennifer Copeland, initially struggled with having a special needs child. That's until they came across a poem, "Welcome to Holland."

The poem shares about when you're having a baby, it's like planning a fabulous trip to Italy. After months of anticipation and preparation for Italy, the day finally arrives and you set off only to end up in Holland. You're forced to stay in Holland and do not get to Italy.

It ends by saying if you spend your life

mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special and lovely things about Holland.

Jennifer said that has rung true of having a child who just happens to be blind.

"If you think of all the things you're missing, you'll never notice what's in front of you," Jennifer said. "You have to enjoy all the beauty that's there."

Jennifer said she is so proud of Megan and what she has accomplished in her life. "It doesn't matter what the obstacles have been, she always comes out shining," she said. "She doesn't let too many roadblocks get in her way," she added.



Megan Copeland

Many people, Jennifer said, have commented how Megan has inspired them by her positive attitude.

After graduating next month, Megan will head off to the Academy for the Blind in Faribault. She wants to pursue a career in the legal field, possibly as a court reporter.

Something tells me Megan won't have any trouble going in hot pursuit of obtaining her goals.

Popular dairy promotion succumbs to COVID again

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

Steele County's largest dairy promotion has fallen victim to COVID-19 for the second straight year.

The Breakfast on the Farm has been canceled for June, according to Gail Zollner, spokesperson for the Steele County American Dairy Association. The one-day event has attracted as many as 1,200 people to a dairy farm for breakfast and other activities to promote the dairy industry during June Dairy Month.

"We just didn't feel we could get people out there on buses and be socially distanced," said Zollner, adding buses are the main way people typically come out to the event. This is the second

time during its 27-year history that the breakfast has been canceled. Last year officials called off the event shortly after the pandemic began.

There was one other time the event was postponed because of a deluge of rain. However, the promotion was moved to later in the summer as a supper event.

The breakfast had been scheduled to take place this year at the Aaron Schroft farm in rural Owatonna.

Zollner said the dairy association still hopes to have some sort of Dairy Days promotion similar to what it had last year at the Steele County Fairgrounds. In late June, the group had a Drive-In Dairy Days where people could get malts. Other food vendors also joined in the event.

County Board receives public health update

BY CHRIS BALDWIN
STAFF WRITER

During last week's meeting the Steele County Board of Commissioners listened to a presentation by Amy Caron, Public Health Director for both Steele and Dodge Counties. The big highlight of the presentation was the county's response to COVID.

Entering the second year of the pandemic, Caron and the county feel that things are beginning to stabilize. Steele County has had a total of 3727 cases of COVID-19 and 14 deaths. According to Caron, there were 65 new cases the week of April 19.

That's slightly down," Caron said. "However, we have been experiencing a spike here in Steele County over the past month. In fact, about a week ago, we were at the same spot as the middle

of January, so I'm glad to see this come down this past week."

Steele County led a spike of cases in the southeast region over the past month. "I'm hoping that we're on a downward slope now," Caron said. "We did have some clustered cases and some clustered spikes associated with schools."

Caron said she remains hopeful that new cases will continue the trend of decreasing. "The good news is that we've had about 52% of our residents in Steele County who are 16 years or older who have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine," she explained.

"We are holding vaccine clinics usually about twice a week, usually on Wednesdays and Thursdays, sometimes on Wednesdays and Fridays," Caron said. While the slots for the vaccine were filled

during initial clinics, now it seems that there are open slots.

After reaching out to other counties, Caron and her team confirmed that this was a trend. "Everybody seems to be experiencing this dive of people taking the vaccine," she said. "They're experiencing the same thing in the metro area."

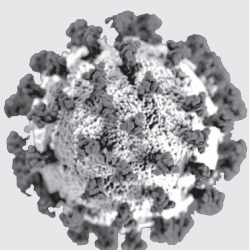
"I think we're at the point where we've covered those that really want the vaccine and now, we're at a point where we need to try to convince some people to get the vaccine," Caron said. Still, with 52% of residents vaccinated Steele County Public Health remains positive.

A big part of the county's success has been attributed to informing residents on public health. "We really wanted to get out and explain what public health does so the community

understands, and I think we've achieved that," Caron said.

Public health has worked with long-term care facilities, Mayo Clinic, and others within the community. "We have such outstanding healthcare partners within the community and I cannot stress just how great that relationship has been," Caron said. "That's been huge."

Caron also said public health has strived to reach under-served populations, including populations of color within the county. "This pandemic has been really rough on them," she said. Early on, public health established a testing site at the Armory and offered testing at long-term care facilities. "At this time, I really want to thank a lot of departments," Caron said. "It's been great to successfully run these vaccine clinics."



World.....	153,000,000
Deaths	3,200,000
Recovered.....	89,600,000
U.S.	32,400,000
Deaths	577,000
Recovered.....	22,265,000

COVID-19 UPDATE

MN	579,000	Steele.....	3,786
Deaths	7,253	Deaths	15
Recovered.....	480,000	Recovered.....	3,615

Dodge	1,804
Deaths	4
Recovered.....	1,755

Freeborn.....	3,381
Deaths	29
Recovered.....	
Mower	4,586
Deaths	32
Recovered.....	

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