

INSIDE

This week in Carlton County's only independent, locally owned newspaper.



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COVID SURGE

Caution urged as cases spike

Jana Peterson
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Covid-19 is here in greater numbers than ever before, Carlton County, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. How much worse depends on our residents, and how well we heed recommendations for masking, social distancing, hand washing and quarantining — that's the message local public officials sent during a press conference Tuesday.

"We have reached a critical time pretty quickly, and my fear is this is just the beginning," Community Memorial Hospital doctor and head of the CMH Covid-19 emergency response team Charles Kendall said. "I have been optimistic throughout this, especially in the spring, that we would not come to a point ... seen elsewhere with hospitals overwhelmed due to Covid-19. Just in the last week, I am much less optimistic."

The numbers tell the story. A month ago, from Oct. 7-13, when numbers were beginning to rise, Carlton County was averaging about 4.7 new cases of Covid-19 per day. A month later, between Nov. 4 and 10, the average was 40 new cases per day. "That's eight times higher," Carlton County Public Health and Human Services director Dave Lee said.

Over that same time period — Oct. 7 to Nov. 10 — the cumulative number of Covid cases in the county jumped from 320 to 907, almost tripling. The county is setting records for new daily highs almost weekly now, with 49 new cases on more than one day over the past week.

From Oct. 29 to Nov. 5, the numbers jumped in most local cities, with Cloquet showing the largest increase, from 209 positive cases to 311. Moose Lake is up to 86 cases, an increase of 19 since the week before. Barnum and Carlton both show 57 cases, an increase of 13 from Oct. 29, according to the state's weekly report of Covid cases by zip code.



Lab tech Jodie McCollough works out of the testing station in the Raiter Clinic parking lot in Cloquet. She said they've seen close to 80 people a day seeking tests early in the week because of pent-up demand from the weekend, but then it usually drops to between 30 and 50 later in the week. *Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

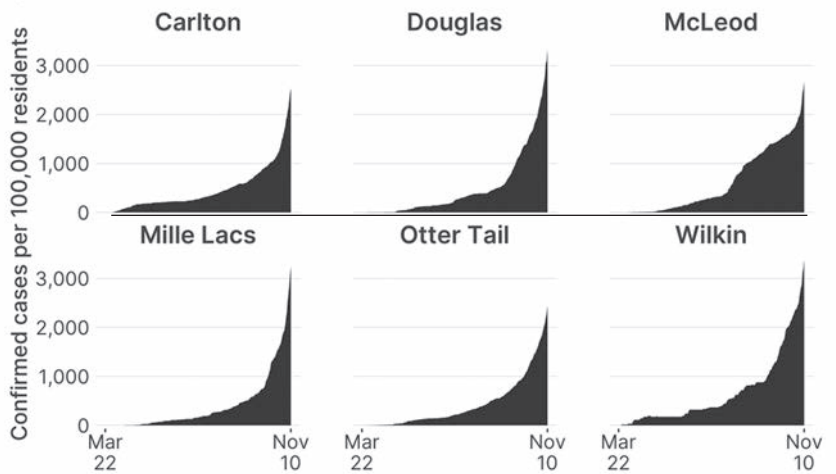
Lee listed all the ways the spike in cases is affecting the rest of our lives, from schools going to distance learning, to hospitals filling up and public health workers being unable to complete contact tracing because there are too many cases. Police Chief Derek Randall said the Cloquet department has four officers off work and in quarantine.

The average number of positive cases per 10,000 people in the county jumped from 20.26 in early October to 38.55, Nov. 5. The school numbers are 10 days old by the time they're reported, Cloquet superintendent Michael Cary told school board members Monday, stating that he didn't foresee a return to in-person learning even by next month.

Continued on Page 12

Recent COVID-19 hot spots in Minnesota

The six Minnesota counties with the fastest per-capita COVID-19 case growth in the past three days (min. 25 cases)



Carlton County had one of the largest spikes in Covid-19 cases per capita earlier this week. *MPR News graphic*

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CLOQUET SCHOOLS



The halls were empty at Cloquet High School this week as students have moved to fulltime distance learning after a spike in Covid-19 cases in the region. Sports activities, for now, are still allowed. *Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

Cloquet joins distance learning trend

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With the numbers of positive Covid-19 cases climbing rapidly, students in grades 7-12 started distance learning Tuesday and grades K-6 will make the switch next Monday, despite the fact that last week's numbers didn't meet the state benchmark for changing elementary school students to distance learning, a last resort.

Superintendent Michael Cary told school board members he doesn't expect the schools to change back to hybrid or in-person learning anytime soon at Monday's meeting.

"The numbers are rapidly going in a very wrong direction, so it will probably be a while," Cary said, pointing out that the 14-day Covid-19 case rate number jumped to 38.55 for Carlton County last Thursday, from 23.07 the week before. "Two weeks ago we were around the 19-20 mark and feeling pretty good. Then in one week it flipped on a dime."

Another reason for going to distance learning was staffing shortages, with lots of people out on quarantine for 14 days after being exposed to someone who later tested positive, Cary said.

"We were close to having to shut down buildings because we couldn't staff them," he said.

Because the 14-day Covid numbers from the state are 10 days old, Cary said they know in advance when things are going to get better or worse, because other state reports are more timely.

"We already had a good idea of what was happening so we knew we needed to take action," Cary said. "When the community sees the numbers this week and the next, they will understand." (The state releases the 14-day rate every Thursday; find the latest report at www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/stats/wschooll.pdf.)

Distance learning spreads in county

Other Carlton County schools already in distance learning or soon to transition include Esko K-12 (through at least Dec. 4), Barnum (K-12 through at least Nov. 27), Moose Lake (grades 3-12 through at least Dec. 4), Carlton (grades 9-12) and Wrenshall (grades 1-12).

The Fond du Lac Ojibwe School has been in distance learning the whole school year.

According to a Nov. 11 update on the school website, Cromwell-Wright schools will remain in hybrid learning for K-12 because community numbers remain low.

Because they aren't seeing person-to-person spread in school or sports programs, Cary said sports will continue for now.

"It's easy to shut down a sport for a week or two without having a drastic effect on families," he said, explaining that the district does not want to change learning models as quickly, so they can give families plenty of notice that change is coming.

Also on Monday, school board members approved implementing one "asynchronous" day of learning per week. That means rather than students logging into classes online just like they were sitting there in person — which is synchronous learning — students will receive assignments, but teachers won't lead any classes that day and kids can work at their own pace and time. Teachers will be available for help, make-up work, reteaching, or any other student needs, CHS principal Steve Battaglia explained. In addition, on asynchronous learning days, teachers will focus on outreach to

It's a statewide movement

Elizabeth Shockman
MPR News

Duluth, Bloomington and Hopkins public schools have announced plans to transition their students to distance learning as COVID-19 case rates rise across Minnesota.

According to Kirk Shneidawind, executive director of the Minnesota School Boards Association, those districts will likely be joined by many others in coming days and weeks.

"Our superintendents are watching their numbers and their county numbers are going off the chart," Shneidawind said. "And with the holidays coming up, with the risk of numbers going up even more this time and with the flu season, our administrators are preparing in the event that they would have to move everybody to distance learning."

In July, Gov. Tim Walz announced a plan that would allow local school and health officials to decide whether or not to transition their students to remote learning when COVID-19 case numbers get too high in their

students who are struggling.

During distance learning, the asynchronous day is Wednesday; if and when the schools go back to hybrid learning, it will switch to Friday.

Battaglia said he hopes that the change will help teachers reach students who have been falling behind this semester.

"We are already seeing an uptick in failure rates. Across the region it's about 30 percent [higher than normal]," he told board members.

Battaglia told school board members that Cloquet is the only 7AA school that has been doing

county and school buildings.

The governor has no intention to deviate from those plans.

School administrators have said the governor's plan allows them to make the best decisions for their communities based on local conditions.

Some districts put together COVID-19 dashboards to try to better communicate data on new cases in schools to families with more transparency and help families understand how decisions are being made about in-person vs. distance learning.

For many school administrators, students and families, halting in-person learning due to rising COVID-19 case counts, means yet another about-face in a year full of canceled, reworked and undermined plans.

"We're ten weeks into this [school year] and I think many of our districts were just starting to feel like they were kind of getting ... stuff figured out," Shneidawind said. "Many of our administrators feel like they're on a bed of sand, that we're constantly moving and trying to adapt."

all synchronous learning, a change from last spring when the distance learning was all asynchronous. He noted that 90 percent of teaching staff support the move.

"It will allow the kids to catch a breath, and give teachers time to answer questions," assistant principal Tim Prosen said, adding that the kids and teachers will still be putting in a full day's work. "It's a problem, trying to get kids back up to speed."

Cary said he hoped community members will work to take Covid precautions and slow the spread of the disease so that kids can return to school.

Crash ...

Continued
from previous page

At the hospital, according to the criminal complaint, Mattinas told law enforcement she had been using and was distracted by her GPS at the time of the crash. She also allegedly admitted she had consumed cough syrup earlier and had been drinking Fireball whiskey, which was one of the bottles found at the scene.

After she was booked into the jail, Mattinas allegedly told law enforcement that she had cough syrup in Brainerd, then drove to a relative's house in Cloquet, consuming a large can of Twisted Tea — an alcoholic iced tea beverage — along the way. She allegedly said she regularly drinks while driving and places the empty bottles under her seat because she is not allowed to drink at her mother's house, and admitted that she struggles with alcohol.

At Tuesday's hearing, Judge Rebekka Stumme ordered a chemical dependency evaluation and granted a public defender. Bail was set at \$10,000. An omnibus hearing in the case is set for Dec. 21 in front of Judge Dale Wolf.

The maximum sentence for criminal vehicular homicide is 10 years or \$20,000 or both.

Cop makes plea deal on DUI charge

Pine Knot News staff

Cloquet police officer Andrew Murray pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of driving while impaired at a hearing in district court last week. It means he will likely face probation and maybe a fine after an arrest three months ago.

Murray represented himself in the case that stems from his arrest Aug. 6 after crashing his car in Carlton. Police officers had been tipped previously about someone driving erratically in the area at the time. Murray fled into the woods near the South Terrace school, where police eventually found him.

Special prosecutor Shawn Reed agreed to drop two counts of DWI and one count of failure to stop for a collision.

An agreement calls for a 90-day jail sentence stayed in favor of probation, the terms of which will be left up to the court at sentencing. Murray would also be subject to a \$1,000 fine.

District judge Rebekka Stumme ordered an investigation of Murray's background prior to sentencing.

OUR VIEW

Don't lose sight of Covid wave that is upon us

Another presidential election cycle has come and gone. We'd like to bask in the glow of public engagement we witnessed in the past few months as nearly three out of four people of voting age in Carlton County filled out ballots. In Minnesota, we take pride in high voter-turnout and 2020 was no exception. We should celebrate that.

But we can't bask right now.

We'd like to acknowledge the extraordinary effort by election officials and volunteers during a trying cycle to make the election safe and efficient. They never get enough credit.

We'd like to praise them in many more words, but right now, we can't.

Obversely, we'd like to see the passion at the polls spread into every crevice of county life by having more people choose public service. We thank those who continue to serve, and those who put their name on a ballot, but there were far too many uncontested races this fall at the city, township, school and county level.

Presidential races bring out the voters, but presidents don't set property tax levels. They don't fix roads. They don't solve school budget crunches. People serving on the local level have the most impact on our daily life. If you care, take part.

We'd like to point out the myriad ways people can serve and make sure we have the at-home democracy we demand. But right now, we can't.

There's an apolitical elephant in the room, wearing a sash, that we can't ignore right now. It's been pacing back and forth at times, raising a ruckus. For too long now, it's been silent, in a corner, ignored.

But it's there. And it isn't going away, no matter the distractions set in our brains.

That sash reads "Covid-19."

It is here. It is real. It is deadly.

The pace of community spread in Minnesota is the highest it's ever been, and if the pace continues, one out of three people will acquire the virus, and some won't recover.

If we can't get a handle on it, it will permanently alter life as we know it in the county, state, country and world.

Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, was appointed this week to President-elect Joe Biden's Transition Covid-19 advisory board. Osterholm had stark words this week for those thinking we've gained any kind of edge over a virus we have lived with for eight months now.

"Right now, because of pandemic fatigue — where people just have assumed 'I'm done with the virus,' even though the virus isn't done with them — they're in public places, bars, restaurants, gymnasiums, churches, family reunions, weddings, funerals ... I can go down the laundry list of all the (reasons) we're seeing major outbreaks occur. And then we have those who bring it home."

Just in time for the holidays.

Many will get sick from Covid and recov-



er. But we're seeing a surge in hospitalizations locally and regionally that has officials rightly concerned. Our medical facilities are becoming overburdened. Our schools are playing whack-a-mole with learning models as both cases and staff shortages increase.

The dire messages were loud and clear this week.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz laid out new social restrictions Tuesday. "You have control over where this thing goes," he said. "This is not inevitable that we end up in a crisis. But if we don't do these things we certainly will be there."

Dr. Charles Kendall is the incident commander and head of the Community Memorial Hospital Covid-19 emergency response team. "My fear is this is just the beginning," he said at a press briefing at Cloquet City Hall Tuesday. "I have been optimistic throughout this, especially in the spring, that we would not come to a point that has been seen elsewhere with hospitals overwhelmed due to Covid-19. Just in the last week, I am much less optimistic."

Small hospitals like Community Memorial in Cloquet operate on very thin margins to provide adequate care for the region. They are dialed in to serve needs in normal times — accidents, heart attacks or other organ trouble, births, and aging care. When we flood the facility with Covid patients, we risk the overall health needs of the entire community. It's especially critical as winter comes in along with the flu and cold season.

So, what can you do?

Wear a mask. We are done with the political games on this simple step. It's time we respect everyone in our spheres of contact and protect each other.

Get tested if you feel you've been exposed to the virus or if you plan to spend time with people, who should also be tested. You need to make a plan, especially as the holidays approach.

Families really need to coordinate, and spend time together only if people are sure they aren't carrying a deadly virus over the river and through the woods.

Stay home. Plan your necessary trips with precision. Order from a restaurant. Get together with people socially online, or at safe distances, preferably outside.

There are those who think we can't fight Covid by avoiding everyday practices that stifle the economy. Osterholm had a message on this as well. "Let me make it very clear: Those who distinguish we have to choose between the economy and the public health — that's an absolutely false distinction," he said in his MPR News interview Monday. "When you see our towns, our cities or counties, our state overrun with this virus, we see hospitals not able to provide critical care that should be provided because they're overrun, that has a tremendous impact on the economy. So we have got to find a way to maximize our health and maximize our economies."

Staying safe from community spread does not require strict isolation. We all recall the early weeks of the pandemic. We'd like to not revert to that dark time, but we just may have to. Testing certainly helps. Mindfulness does as well.

We know our readership skews to an older demographic. We urge readers to share this message with younger people, many of whom have been key community spreaders as they congregate dangerously. Tell them you don't want to get ill. You don't want to die.

"This is dangerous because we can't see it," Walz said of younger people spreading the virus. "They are not sick but they are infected and they are contagious."

Take pause, be wary, and care. Care about your community, care about your family. Care about how we can come out on the other side of this.

Write it. Send it. We'll print it.

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Covid cases ...

Continued from Page 1

“Things are headed in the wrong direction,” Cary said. Deaths from Covid are up too. Carlton County went from one reported death for a period of months, up to two total deaths on Oct. 27. On Nov. 11, the state reported a cumulative total of seven deaths from Covid here. The rise in case numbers has Kendall and other community leaders and medical professionals extremely worried.

“There are now more Covid patients hospitalized in Minnesota hospitals, in our hospital here in Cloquet and the others in Duluth than there has been at any other point during the pandemic,” he said. “This has come at a time when hospitals — especially the two in Duluth — were already fairly full with other types of patients.”

This month, intensive care units around the state are now at maximum capacity and seeing an increase in Covid-19 patients. They are also seeing an increase at CMH. Because of the increase statewide, it’s become increasingly difficult for CMH to transfer some of its more serious cases to a larger hospital with more resources, Kendall said.

On the bright side, he said, hospitals and clinics across the region are working together, meeting and talking about capacities, ICU beds, staffing levels and details of providing care. They have enough PPE. They have well-made plans and partnerships in place.

CMH CEO Rick Breuer said the Cloquet hospital has accepted some Covid patients from St. Luke’s Hospital in Duluth to free up more critical care beds there.

Despite the arrangements, however, Kendall is concerned that CMH and other local hospitals may be overwhelmed at some point if the case numbers keep climbing exponentially.

What to do?

Do whatever it takes, Kendall and the others said.

Wear a mask in any public space, and make sure it’s clean, well-fitting, and placed over both nose and mouth. Stay 6 feet away from others. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer frequently, but especially before eating or drinking or after being outside your home. Don’t gather in large groups.

“A gathering of any size, especially one where you’re taking off your mask to eat or drink, I’d have a hard time recommending that,” Kendall said. “The same with sports at school. We have a big problem and anything we can do to limit that problem is imperative.”

Dave Lee offered pointers for people to help slow down the



City, county and health officials talked about the rise in Covid-19 cases in Carlton County during a press conference Tuesday at Cloquet City Hall. *Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

spread. He focused on symptoms first. “If you’re feeling sick and develop symptoms of cough, sore throat or congestion, fever, loss of smell or taste, headache or body aches, please stay at home, contact your primary clinic or schedule an appointment at a community testing site for Covid-19,” he said.

In Carlton County, test results are generally taking 2-5 days. While people are waiting for results, they should stay home and not assume they’re negative. Better to assume you’re positive. Start making a list of people you were in contact with for two days before symptoms started. Consider notifying those people that you got tested, the PHHS director said.

Getting a negative test result is not a “get out of jail free card” in many cases.

“If you were told that you were in close contact with someone with Covid-19 you have to stay at home 14 days from your last contact with that person, even if you get a negative test result,” he said.

For those who are well and need to go out, he repeated the mantra: mask, stay 6 feet away, wash hands, sanitize and keep interactions to under 15 minutes.

“Because of the fast spread, any gathering outside of the household poses a risk of spreading and contracting Covid-19,” Lee said. “You can potentially start spreading the virus 48 hours before you feel symptoms, and some people never feel symptoms,” he said. “Silent spread is contributing significantly to our increase lately.”

Although people need to take precautions, CMH CEO Rick Breuer said people should not delay needed health care. Winter is coming, and with it pneumonia and influenza. Other health care needs will go on and he wants people to take care of themselves and not be afraid. Waiting for needed care is part of the reason

the hospitals are so full now, because people waited this spring and summer and ended up making the trip in an ambulance, he said. That’s not the best way to take care of yourself, he said.

“If you’re comfortable walking around at Walmart, then you should certainly be comfortable in a health care facility,” Breuer said.

Covid updates

It’s been eight months since the coronavirus officially arrived in Carlton County. Things have changed since then.

In the spring, when a jump of 14 cases per day was a big number, it was congregate care facilities like nursing homes and prisons that were hit the hardest. In Carlton County, it was the Moose Lake prison where the disease ran rampant for weeks, and ended either because of massive testing and other precautions or herd immunity, depending on whom you ask.

A statewide shutdown of all non-essential businesses (including bars, restaurants, gyms and hair and nail salons), helped bring the numbers under control but lasted nearly two months and hurt the economy and small businesses across the state.

Over the summer, the numbers subsided. People became less afraid, and began to enjoy going to restaurants and bars again, first sitting outdoors only, then moving inside. Communities still avoided large events like parades, powwows and other community gatherings, but people began having weddings and funerals again, traveling to other parts of the country, and gathering with friends and family.

School started again in September and most Carlton County schools began the year with roughly 75 percent of students attending school in person every day. And the temperature dropped, but people’s tendency to gather did not.

Now, instead of congregate

living, the majority of the spread of Covid-19 is happening within the community.

According to the Minnesota Department of Health cumulative figures on Nov. 10, the likely exposure point (where people were exposed to the disease) is most frequently “unknown” (56,112 cases), closely followed by “community-no known contact with a confirmed case” (42,016) and “community-known contact with a confirmed case” (36,984). Congregate care setting (staff, resident or visitor) is next at 17,840 cases, followed by travel (15,185), community outbreak (11,842), health care staff or patient (5,511), corrections staff, inmate or visitor (3,751) and homeless shelter staff or resident (440).

The age of those who are getting Covid-19 is also declining. Instead of being mostly elderly, it’s now younger people getting sick and spreading the virus. (Older people are still affected the most severely, though.) Over the last two weeks in Carlton County, Lee said 14 percent of positive cases were seen in individuals up to 19 years old, 32 percent in ages 20-39, and 31 percent in ages 40-59. Just under 23 percent was seen in age 60 and older.

“We are seeing predominantly younger to middle-age range and it’s in the community, so we’re really requesting people take extra steps to take precautions.”

Just as some medical advice has changed — masks provide protection to both the wearer and those around them, the CDC says now, but wiping down groceries or other random surfaces is not as urgent as it felt in the spring — ways of treating Covid have also adapted.

CMH CEO Rick Breuer said the hospital has established a home management program for patients with Covid-19 who tested positive but who do not require hospitalization. They are

sent home with a small device that measures the level of oxygen in their blood and a nurse will check up on them.

“It’s an early warning system if they go downhill, but also helps keep people out of the hospital,” Breuer said. “To date, almost all of the Covid patients presented in Cloquet have been able to be successfully managed either at home by our primary care providers, or at CMH.”

CMH has an agreement with St. Luke’s to take more critical cases as needed.

Take care of each other

The people tell the story too. “If we thought this would never reach us, that was our first mistake,” Fond du Lac Chairman Kevin Dupuis Sr. said. A lot of people may not think it’s important to slow the spread of the disease or even think that it’s real, he added.

“But it is real,” Dupuis said. “When it hits somebody near your family or in your family, then the realism sets in.”

Most people now know at least one person afflicted with Covid. The longtime volunteer at a local veterans organization, the pastor at your local church, a neighbor, a family member, a Facebook friend, a soccer player, a parent, a kid, a health care worker.

Even more people know others who have missed school or work because they had to quarantine for 14 days after contact with someone who later tested positive for Covid-19.

Having teachers or coaches quarantine for 14 days is affecting our school districts and their ability to staff school buildings and classrooms. Having health care workers quarantine is having the same effect on local hospitals and clinics.

Dupuis compared the spread of Covid to an earthquake, with its epicenter in the more populated cities that were hit hardest first.

“The shockwave has reached us,” he said.

“It’s time for everybody to come together and do what we need to do as one,” Dupuis said. “It’s going to take everybody on Fond du Lac, it’s going to take everybody in the state of Minnesota. It’s going to take everybody across the country to make this work.”

Like the doctors and emergency workers before him, the tribal chairman stressed that it is simple measures that will help get us through these difficult times. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds. Wear a mask. Stay 6 feet away from people in public spaces. Sanitize surfaces.

“Remember, when you wear a mask, it’s not really about you. It’s about protecting everyone around you. If everybody has that same concept, I think we go a long ways with this and try to minimize the problems.”

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