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## **Broader Unified Command structure to guide ongoing COVID-19 response and recovery efforts**

*Equity, education, economic recovery, housing and human services, community wellness, vaccination planning and surveillance testing represented in new structure*

**LAWRENCE** – Douglas County’s Education Unified Command, which provided support and developed guidance for local K-12 schools and higher education in recent months, will move into a broader Unified Command structure that will continue to guide the community’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building on the community’s use of a Unified Command structure to lead a comprehensive COVID-19 pandemic response, local government, health, education and business leaders will continue to partner to provide a coordinated reopening and response strategy among education institutions. The goals are to minimize the spread and impact of COVID-19 while building resilience and recovery strategies for the community through unified, equitable and coordinated action.

The Unified Command will continue to be led by Sarah Plinsky, Douglas County administrator; Craig Owens, City of Lawrence manager; Dan Partridge, Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health director; Russ Johnson, LMH Health CEO and president; Douglas Girod, KU chancellor; Anthony Lewis, Lawrence Public Schools superintendent; and Bonnie Lowe, The Chamber CEO and president.

“Through the pandemic, this collaborative leadership structure has paid dividends both under the earlier Unified Command and more recent education-focused group,” said Robert Bieniecki, Director of Douglas County Emergency Management. “As we continue to focus on the community’s resilience and recovery strategies, we believe this reorganized structure will be more flexible as community needs evolve during the pandemic.”

Under the National Incident Management System, when a response involves a multi-agency or multi-jurisdictional approach, the Incident Command leadership of the response effort expands into a Unified Command, which will be responsible for overall management of the incident.

Equity impact advisers will continue to serve as command staff in the Unified Command structure.

“The way we have adapted the national incident command system here in Lawrence and Douglas County to formally embed Equity into the structure as a Command Staff function is probably an innovation that will catch on nationally and should,” Owens said. “The Equity Advisors have

provided great value to our thinking and this will ensure that continues.”

The Unified Command’s objectives include encouraging universal usage of masks when social distancing is not possible as well as seeking to prohibit or minimize activity that creates a high risk for COVID-19 transmission. Other objectives related to the ongoing response include rapidly and effectively responding to outbreaks and spikes in cases, establishing surveillance testing capabilities and developing a vaccination strategy to help plan for distribution in the future.

Ensuring a perspective for equity including tools and resources that are integrated within all planning and operations and planning for a strong community recovery from the impact of COVID-19 are objectives as well.

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