



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Nov. 12, 2020

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With recent spike in cases, community members asked to be vigilant with mask wearing, social distancing and isolating if symptomatic

Health officer reduces mass gathering limit to 15, education gating criteria updated to allow hybrid instruction in phase Orange with mitigation measures in place

LAWRENCE – Like many counties in Kansas and the region, Douglas County has experienced an increase in cases in the past two weeks. As of Thursday, Douglas County’s 14-day moving average of positivity rate has spiked to 13.8%, and the 14-day moving average of new cases per day has increased to 44 new cases per day up from a low of 17.5 cases per day in mid-October.

“We believe this spike is due to people letting their guards down with lapses in mask wearing, attending social gatherings that allow for transmission of COVID-19, and people who are experiencing symptoms being out in public instead of self-isolating to reduce chances for exposing others,” said Dr. Thomas Marcellino, Douglas County’s Local Health Officer. “It’s important for everyone now to double down on those public health practices, especially mask wearing, to get this turned around, and we are announcing these changes at a community level and in our education guidance today.”

Public Health Order Update

Marcellino has updated the county’s current [local public health order](#) to take effect Friday, Nov. 13, to reduce the mass gathering limit from 45 people to 15 people. Mass gatherings are defined as instances in which individuals are in one location and are unable to maintain a 6-foot distance between individuals — not including individuals who reside together — with only infrequent or incidental moments of closer proximity.

The public health order still requires people older than 5 to wear masks in all indoor public spaces — except when eating, drinking, swimming or if they have a medical condition that prevents it — and outdoor public spaces when unable to maintain 6-feet of social distance.

“It’s important that we all become more vigilant about mask wearing right now, especially inside gyms and exercise facilities where masks should be worn at all times when indoors,” Marcellino said.

Education Guidance Update

The Unified Command Safety Team has reviewed the [COVID-19 Smart and Safe School Guidance](#) and adjusted the guidelines, allowing for hybrid classroom instruction in phase Orange when proper mitigation is in place.

“Based on risk assessment and the evolution of data, it is clear that K-12 schools can operate with reduced risks when certain mitigation practices are in place,” Marcellino said. “This includes masks being used properly, proper social distancing, the following of cleaning guidelines, along with compliance with isolation and quarantine orders after contact tracing.”

Based on Thursday’s data, the school guidance recommendation is phase Orange, and local systems can take into account their own absenteeism and staffing levels to make a decision for how to operate.

Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health Director Dan Partridge said the UC Safety Team had been examining trends and working on how to best update the school gating criteria for the past two weeks. He said disease investigators have built relationships with schools in the county which has helped the effectiveness of the isolation and quarantine process and added that with more surveillance testing in the community and school system, it should help keep school environments more controlled, as right now most cases appear to stem from social gatherings outside of school.

Under the updated criteria, remote only instruction is recommended in Red. In Orange, low- and moderate-risk sports can be safely performed with proper precautions and mask usage, and may continue to operate. All activities that continue to operate must follow the mandated mask order which requires masking at all times while indoors, and the only exemptions are medical conditions and when eating. Red will require all athletic activities to cease.

UC Safety Team members Marcellino and Dr. Jennifer Schrimsher, an infectious disease specialist at LMH Health, said in addition to what we have learned with the data about the safety of classroom environments with mitigation practices in place, LMH Health and Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health are beginning surveillance testing in the community with a section focused on K-12 education.

“We feel with better testing and an ongoing robust isolation and quarantine process, our schools can continue to offer safe hybrid instruction options in phase Orange,” Schrimsher said. “However, we have many concerning trends right now in the community, and it is important for everyone to up their game with masking up, spreading out and staying home if you feel sick to help us all work to control the spread of the coronavirus in our community.”

The [recommended phase](#) moved to phase Orange as LDCPH updates its recommendation each Thursday. The full [guidelines](#) are available at douglascountyks.org/coronavirus or ldchealth.org/coronavirus.

