

## COVID 19 UPDATE FROM HEALTH OFFICER, September 4, 2020

Governor Larry Hogan announced at his press conference September 1, 2020, that Maryland would be entering the third phase of Maryland's Recovery Plan for COVID 19 beginning 5:00 PM Friday, September 4, 2020. Phase three allows theaters to open at fifty percent occupancy or up to 100 people, and retail businesses and religious facilities can move from 50% to 75% occupancy. Restaurants, personal services establishments, indoor recreation venues, fitness centers, and gaming facilities remain at 50% occupancy. Venues in Maryland at which live performances occur or motion pictures are shown outdoors and at which entry is limited to ticketed customers, may open with 50% of Outdoor Maximum Occupancy of the venue or 250 persons whichever is less. Senior Centers are still closed.

The Face Covering component did not change from the last Executive Order requiring all persons over the age of five years to wear a face covering when indoors where the public is permitted, outdoors when six foot distance can't be maintained, on public transportation, in healthcare offices and facilities, and when engaged in work in any area where interaction with others is likely or food is prepared or packaged. The same exceptions are listed for mask wearing.

A new Secretary Directive and Order was issued by Secretary Neall of Maryland Department of Health to supersede the **Directive and Order Regarding Community, Recreational, Leisure, Cultural and Sporting Gatherings and Events, dated June 12 and June 10, 2020**. All adult sports gatherings may open but without spectators; high school and college athletics may resume sports gatherings and events without spectators and with contact sports modified following CDC guidance. All people within an indoor sports facility are to maintain six feet social distancing whenever possible, and wear a face covering when social distancing is not feasible.

CDC guidance provides a range of sports conditions that equate to four risk levels with contact sports competition games being the highest risk. However, the CDC guidelines are vague about what level should be allowed according to the level of transmission of the virus in the area. Health Officers have posed many questions to the Maryland Department of Health for guidance relative to the new Executive Order and the Directive of the Secretary.

On August 3, 2020, The Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association (MPSSAA), in consultation with the Maryland State Superintendent of Schools, the Maryland Department of Health (MDH), and the Public School Superintendent Association of Maryland (PSSAM), decided to postpone the 2020 high school fall and winter competition season during the first semester.

Youth sports gatherings and events outside of public schools have been allowed to open since the Governor's Executive Order in June 2020 and these events can have parents and family as spectators with appropriate social distancing. The Secretary's Directive, reads, "For contact sports (wrestling, basketball and football) play should be modified to safely increase the distance between players following CDC guidance." Needless to say, no one has found a way to maintain distance between youth in a wrestling match or during tackle football.

Some parents want these youth leagues to require masks and other restrictions so there will be less risk for COVID 19 infection for their youth, but not all parents hold this view. The vagueness around contact sports guidelines will not likely be resolved with further guidance from the state. My recommendation now is that parents carefully consider the risk for their children and make their own decision about

whether they are willing for their child to play contact sports when masks and social distancing will be almost impossible to maintain.

It is accepted that as reopening continues the risk of infection with COVID will increase and an increase in cases will occur. Masks and social distancing will be even more critical to keep infection rates low. If we cannot keep our case rate low, then students may not be able to return to their classrooms.

Governor Hogan issued metrics August 26, 2020, to guide local boards of education in returning students to classrooms instead of having only virtual learning. An algorithm was provided using the testing positivity rate and the case rate per 100,000 population for guidance that still afforded some flexibility. Using that algorithm, if Talbot County averaged six cases a day over a seven day period, the case rate would be 16/100,000, and the county should consider limiting classroom teaching or having none at all. With 10/100,000 average case rate, a hybrid model should be implemented. And when the case rate decreases and is close to 5/100,000, then 'expanded in person programs' should be considered. For Talbot County to achieve this case rate, the county could have no more than an average of 1.9 cases a day over a seven day period.

The concern is that an Executive Order permitting more reopening at the end of June before the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday, was followed by a significant increase in cases especially among the younger age groups. It has taken all of August to get the numbers lower. During a short period in late August, Talbot County had an average of ten new cases a day which is a case rate of 26.8 per one hundred thousand. If the same happens with the Labor Day weekend, then the case rate would be too high to consider children returning to classrooms.

The seven day positivity rate was also in the algorithm, but this metric varies greatly depending upon the number of tests performed during the seven day time period. This fact makes this metric less valuable than the case rate for indicating the level of transmission of the virus in the community.

It appears that Maryland has three goals at this point in the pandemic: Reopen all the businesses and have them thrive; reopen schools and have in classroom learning; and keep the case rate low enough that people will not fear sending their children to school, leaving their senior relatives in nursing homes, patronizing restaurants, retail businesses, and other establishments. One might say that trying to reach all three goals is similar to wanting your cake and eating it too. If people are willing to wear masks and practice social distancing, businesses can be open and we can still keep transmission of the virus relatively low. But when we have large gatherings up to two hundred and fifty people listening to a band, dancing to the music and drinking alcoholic beverages, masks and social distancing are forgotten, and COVID spreads.

Residents of Talbot County over the past six months have called and written asking why I don't take actions to keep them safe from COVID 19. I have used what authority I have to temporarily suspend food permit licenses for establishments that don't comply with COVID precautions. Enforcing the Governor's Executive Orders using fines up to \$5000 and one year in jail, takes far more than a Health Officer to implement. This involves a criminal citation and not even state police use this to enforce the Order. I can continue to tell you what I believe are the best precautions to use to keep yourself safe from COVID as well as recommend actions that the Board of Health can take. However, at this point of the pandemic it is clear that we cannot depend upon a government policy or entity to protect us from this virus. That is difficult for someone with thirty-three years of public health experience to say, but it

is reality in today's environment. While our individual decisions and behavior to protect ourselves seem trivial in the big picture of a pandemic, they can be very effective, and they are all we have. Just because big gatherings are allowed doesn't mean we should go. And when businesses are not safe, don't spend your money there. And since wearing masks and social distancing decreases the spread of COVID 19, let's at least do that so that our children may get back to their classrooms again.