

Our Vision: Healthy People in Healthy Communities
Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties

For Immediate Release: April 10, 2020
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When SHDHD receives a positive COVID-19 test result, what's next?

Hastings, Neb – The South Heartland District Health Department (SHDHD) has initiated more than 30 contact investigations since March 18, 2020 – one for each of the positive COVID-19 tests and a few additional ones for suspect or pending cases.

“When the health department receives a lab-confirmed positive COVID-19 test result, we immediately initiate a contact investigation to try to determine where the individual may have been exposed to the virus,” explained Michele Bever, SHDHD’s executive director.

“We look for a history of travel, including international travel, travel to other states in the U.S., and travel within Nebraska,” she said. “Travel to certain areas that have significant numbers of cases or that have their own community spread means an individual could have been exposed while they were there.”

“We also determine whether the individual might have been exposed to a known positive case,” she said. “If a person has no suspect travel history and no contact with known positive cases, we define the source of exposure as community transmission of the virus.”

Community spread is when the source of the exposure is unknown. Bever said this can happen easily when the majority of COVID-19 illness is mild to moderate, with no or few symptoms.

“If a person has mild symptoms or no symptoms at all, he or she can unknowingly be infected and unintentionally pass the virus to their family, friends, co-workers and others,” Bever said.

Bever said the department’s investigations include looking into all of the close contacts of each positive case – these are the people who might have been exposed and could potentially develop COVID-19 illness. “We make a list of close contacts – people who were closer than 6 feet for more than 10 minutes - and where and when these close contacts occurred.”

Close contacts with other people can occur at home, at worksites, at public places, at private gatherings, at public events, in healthcare settings, at restaurants and bars, in sports activities – “there are lots of places where an individual might spend time with people in a close setting,” Bever said.

Next, the health department notifies all close contacts and provides guidance and instructions on next steps, which can include quarantine/isolation and/or testing.

“We frequently are able to identify all of the close contacts of a positive case, and then everyone who needs to know they may have been exposed is notified privately,” Bever said. “The investigation part of the process is then closed and we shift to monitoring, quarantine or isolation activities and testing, if needed.”

However, in situations where there could be unidentifiable or unknown close contacts with the general public, Bever said the health department provides notice to the public about particular places and dates/times to inform them that they may have been exposed. “We publicize locations if there may have been exposure

to people that we couldn't identify through a contact investigation. An example is the birthday event at the Doniphan Event Center on March 14, or Walmart between March 26 and April 5, 2020.

Bever said that since the health district now has community spread, the department is encouraging everyone to limit where they go and take precautions everywhere they go.

SHDHD and the other local health departments in Nebraska join Governor Ricketts in urging every Nebraskan to do all we can to **Stay Home, Stay Healthy, Stay Connected** over the next 21 days, and following the Governor's Proclamation from April 9.

All Nebraskans need to act today to limit the impact of coronavirus on our communities.

"We encourage everyone to do their part to protect each other, especially those who are more vulnerable, and to help keep the cases numbers low in our counties," Bever said.

South Heartland District case counts by county are updated daily on SHDHD's COVID webpage: <https://southheartlandhealth.org/public-health-data/corona-virus.html>. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides daily updates to Nebraska's coronavirus COVID-19 cases on their Data Dashboard at <http://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Coronavirus>.

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