



**PRESS RELEASE**

**March 13, 2020**

## **PORTAGE COUNTY MONITORING & ONGOING RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

As of Friday, March 13 (5:00pm), there have been no reported cases of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Portage County. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) has reported nineteen confirmed cases (one has fully recovered) in the state, and each case is being handled appropriately by local public health officials.

There is a growing worry throughout the community that needs to be addressed, as we are at a moment in time where the focus needs to be on protecting our most vulnerable populations. In their latest guidance, DHS emphasized this by stating:

*“The current outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in significantly more severe illness and deaths for elderly individuals and those with underlying health conditions. In order to protect these most vulnerable members of our communities we strongly recommend these individuals immediately begin to avoid non-essential mass gatherings. We also recommend that those who provide gathering opportunities for older adults, such as senior centers and congregate dining facilities, plan for alternative ways to remain engaged with them in ways that minimize their risk of COVID-19 disease transmission.*

*We understand that these recommendations are very difficult for individuals and for communities. Public health officials are doing all they can to try to minimize these impacts and move as quickly and safely as possible to a period when these restrictions can be reduced or removed. These recommendations will apply for the next 30 days. At the end of that period, or if needed before that point, the Department will reassess whether to continue, relax, or tighten this guidance.”*

To be very clear, it is incredibly likely that a majority of people in the community will deal with COVID-19 at some point, and for that majority of people it will be a mild illness that people recover from.

That said, the reason for canceling classes, postponing conventions, minimizing large gatherings, and even exercising self-quarantine measures by those who have traveled through certain states where community spread is sustained are *all* measures put in place to help slow the spread of the disease and to help our healthcare systems and vulnerable populations successfully navigate what is and will continue to be a challenging situation.

The health and safety of the senior population in Portage County is one of our top priorities. With the evolving situation around the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) here in Wisconsin, effective Monday, March 16th, the Portage County ADRC (the Lincoln Center) will be closed, and onsite congregate meals will not be hosted throughout Portage County at the Senior Dining locations until further notice. We understand the importance of proper nutrition and that the noon meal is important. If you are a participant or know one who resides within the community and is in need of the noon meal, arrangements can be made to have that meal delivered. The home delivered meals will continue in Portage County through services provided by the ADRC Nutrition Program and Meals on Wheels of Stevens Point. All classes and activities of the Senior Center are cancelled. Staff will be available by phone. Please contact the ADRC at 715-341-1401 to learn more information.

Also, effective as of 2:00pm today (3/13/20), the Portage County Health Care Center has elevated its response to the COVID-19 situation by adopting proactive restrictions that will limit access to the facility. Family members of people in the center are receiving a telephone call to update them, and a mailing will be sent out this afternoon as well. Any additional measures or changes that take place will be communicated. The restrictions in place will help to protect the patients in the center, and screening will be occurring prior to staff entering or leaving the building.

The more we can work on keeping our community focus on protecting vulnerable populations, the better. It will undeniably present some short-term complications for a lot of people, but paying close attention to all guidance coming out of DHS, the CDC, the Portage County Division of Public Health and doing our part to help will be what defines our experience of COVID-19.

Portage County Division of Public Health officials have been and will continue to be engaged in extensive community outreach and education. This includes working directly with our school districts, local health system partners, emergency medical services, the local business community, and other community organizations. As we continue to monitor the situation locally, across the state, in the U.S., and abroad, Portage County residents will receive regular updates from the county, even if there is nothing new to report. Given the amount of misinformation and speculation that is occurring, it is important for the public in Portage County to know they have a local source of timely information that they can rely upon.

Portage County has also activated its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) this week at the "monitoring" level. The initial focus for the EOC will be to monitor the situation in Portage County and Wisconsin. As we move forward, the EOC will serve as a centralized location for current and future operations related to COVID-19 on an as needed basis.

Next week, officials from across the county will be meeting to work together on further coordinating our community response to the situation(s) posed by COVID-19. Our ability to communicate with each other so that our local responses are working together and supporting each other will be key. Portage County will also be communicating with local municipal leaders so that any concerns they have are heard, and to ensure that all relevant information is being disseminated to local leaders.

Planning across the county continues to take place, and the Executive Operations Committee and County Board will be considering a resolution to grant temporary administrative flexibility to county leadership as we work through this situation. A specific policy as a result of COVID-19 is near completion, and county departments will be updating their Continuity of Operations Plans over the next week in preparation for possible prolonged absences from county employees. As of today, business is as usual at the county. We are drawing upon multiple strategies to both successfully work through the

challenges that will be posed by the various responses to the COVID-19 situation. We will also focus on balancing all guidance from DHS and others with the need to provide essential services. Any and all updates to county operations will be provided on a timely basis to the press and the public.

Local and state election officials are also monitoring the COVID-19 situation and its potential impact on the upcoming election. Municipal clerks throughout the county have been advised to review their emergency preparedness plans and have a contingency polling location in the event of an emergency. Polling locations will be equipped with the necessary tools to sanitize surfaces frequently throughout the day.

Voters are encouraged to vote by absentee ballot, which starts March 17. Voters can request an absentee ballot be mailed to them by going online at [www.myvote.wi.gov](http://www.myvote.wi.gov) or by completing an application by-mail or in-person. Voters can also cast an absentee ballot during early in-person absentee voting, which starts March 17 in most municipalities. In-person absentee voting ends in most municipalities on April 3. The last day to request a ballot be mailed to you is April 2. Ballots must be received back by 8 p.m. on Election Day to be counted. Contact your municipal clerk for more information on voting absentee.

More important information on COVID-19 and preventative measures can be found at the links below:

Wisconsin DHS Outbreaks and Investigations (updated by 2pm on weekdays)  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/outbreaks/index.htm>

For more information from DHS:  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/disease/covid-19.htm>

Everyday Preventative Actions  
<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/prevent/actions-prevent-flu.htm>

In the face of so much information and media coverage, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Here are some things that you can do to help:

- Continue to follow all guidance for improved personal hygiene such as regularly washing your hands with soap and for 20-30 seconds to ensure that your hands are clean and covering your sneezes as a precautionary measure or if you have a cold or seasonal flu.
- Stay home when you are sick. This is as true for COVID-19 as it is for other diseases.
- Droplets from coughs or sneezes that can contain the COVID-19 virus can travel up to six feet, so maintaining a distance of at least six feet from anyone who is ill will help to lower your chances of becoming sick.
- Keep informed about our local flu situation. It can be easy to feel as if what's happening somewhere else in the world may be happening here or may soon happen here. Rather than speculate, follow the information that is being updated and made available for the state of

Wisconsin and Portage County.

- It is not known how long COVID-19 can remain viable on surfaces. Cleaning frequently touched surfaces and objects lowers the amount of the virus that can be spread when you touch an infected surface and then your eyes, nose, or mouth.

I am grateful to the Portage County Division of Public Health and all of their partners across the state and county for the incredible job they have done in working together. I am also happy to see our community reaching out to the Division of Public Health for guidance and then basing some hard decisions on the recommendations that they receive. We are in the midst of an extraordinary situation that is presenting new challenges to the economy, health care systems, and governments across the United States. The decisions people are making are difficult but necessary. Resources are sometimes limited, but we will do the very best with what we have, and our biggest resource in all of this are the individuals involved in our community's response. That includes every Portage County resident, as we can all do our part to help.

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