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Unvaccinated pockets in state population remain at risk for COVID-19's impacts

Cass-Crow Wing cluster shows how virus can spread among susceptible people

A cluster of COVID-19 cases in Cass County has spread to Crow Wing County, where health officials found 18 new cases in the last two weeks. Despite efforts to provide vaccinations to area residents, health officials are concerned the cluster will continue to grow if more residents do not take preventive measures such as getting vaccinated or, if not vaccinated, wearing masks in public and practicing social distancing.

The Cass County cluster now includes 29 cases with specimen collection dates between May 12 and June 11. So far, officials have found 15 cases in Pine River, 9 cases in Backus, 2 in Longville, one in Pequot Lakes, one in Motley and one in Pillager. Six of the cases have been hospitalized, and one person has died. The cases range in age from 5 to 74, with a median age of 50.

The 18 cases in Crow Wing County residents include 11 cases in Brainerd, with 3 cases in Breezy Point, 2 in Baxter, one in Merrifield, and one in Pequot Lakes. Specimen collection dates range from May 8 to June 3. Two of the cases have been hospitalized, but to date there have been no deaths among the Crow Wing County cases. Overall, these cases range in age from 15 – 80 years with a median age of 61 years.

Among the total cases in both counties, 5 attended the same Mother's Day celebration and are believed to have been the source of infection for several other cases in the clusters. However, health officials said the fact that only some but not all of the new Crow Wing and Cass County cases have ties to earlier cases suggests that community spread is occurring in the area.

Most of the cases in the clusters attended gatherings, school or social activities while infectious or were exposed to infectious people. The cases in the Cass and Crow Wing clusters are all of the P1 or Gamma variant, the variant first identified in Brazil. Statewide, Minnesota has seen an increasing number of P1 variant cases, with a total of 476 to date.

While Minnesota continues to make progress in beating back COVID-19 and vaccination levels continue to rise, Minnesota Commissioner of Health Jan Malcolm said the risk of COVID-19 disease still exists for those who are not vaccinated and in those areas of the state where vaccination rates are low.

"We're in a new phase of COVID-19 in which we can expect outbreaks of illness among pockets of unvaccinated people," Commissioner Malcolm said. "The lower vaccination rates of some counties in greater Minnesota make this risk particularly concerning there."

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As Minnesotans gather for summer festivals and other events, it's important to keep localized spread under control, health officials say. According to Minnesota Department of Health Infectious Disease Director Kris Ehresmann, even localized outbreaks can impact the function of communities if they grow large enough. "It only takes one infected person coming in contact with unvaccinated people to spread the disease to several more people," Ehresmann said. "That's been clear throughout this pandemic and with the rise in more contagious variants in the state, that's an even bigger risk now. The best way to end this pandemic pain is for everyone to get vaccinated when they are eligible, but if you are not fully vaccinated yet it's incredibly important that you protect yourself and others by doing those things we know can slow or stop the spread of the virus, such as masking, social distancing, staying home when sick, and getting tested when appropriate."

The Minnesota Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention strongly recommend that anyone who is not fully vaccinated continue to wear face coverings indoors in businesses, public settings, and when around people from other households, as well as outdoors when social distancing cannot be maintained. People who are fully vaccinated do not need to wear face coverings except in certain high-risk situations, such as health care settings.

Statewide, Minnesota's overall vaccination rate stands at 67.2% of people 16 or older who have received at least one dose. In Crow Wing County, the vaccination rate to date is 57%.

"The vaccines are safe and effective, and they are important tools for protecting not only yourself but your family, your neighbors and the people in your community," said Michelle Moritz, Crow Wing County Public Health Supervisor. "You get vaccinated to protect those you love and to help bring an end to the disruption and worry this virus has caused for so long."

Crow Wing County Public Health will be offering COVID-19 vaccine at community events including Bean Hole Days in Pequot Lakes on July 14 and the County Fair August 3-7. For more details on vaccine opportunities in Crow Wing County go to <https://crowwing.us/>

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