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ACHD Launches New Contact Tracing Strategy in Fight Against COVID-19

(MEXICO) – A recent steep increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in Audrain County has led the Audrain County Health Department (ACHD) to modify how contact tracing for new COVID-19 cases in Audrain County will be managed. ACHD is asking those that positive for COVID-19 to take immediate action to isolate and contact individuals that they have been in close contact with.

The increase in cases has created significant workload that requires new contact tracing measures in order to expedite communication with close contacts. This new process will eliminate the wait time and help stop people from unknowingly spreading the virus.

The new process will begin on Wednesday, December 16th.

Audrain County has gone from 82 cases on average in the first week of November to 141 at the end of the month. Along with the rise in cases comes the challenge of contact tracing with each case.

“The disease portion of COVID-19 is just one piece of this puzzle,” said ACHD Administrator/CEO Craig Brace. “Another piece is the number of people a patient, that tests positive in the previous 48 hours before the first symptoms, encounters. That number can be a few to a group.”

Since the beginning of the pandemic in April in Audrain County, contact tracers at ACHD have devoted the majority of their working day to following up with not only the patients affected by COVID-19, but those that came in contact with the patient who now find themselves at risk and having to quarantine.

“We have five full-time nurses here at the department,” Brace explained. “Each one of them are assigned a certain number of patients and their contacts to follow through the course of the disease in the patient when we are notified of a case. Then, if that contact becomes sick, the nurses must contact trace their contacts. The rapid rise in COVID-19 cases has made the current approach to contact tracing unsustainable. In the best interest of individuals testing positive and the county at large, a change in our approach is needed.”

ACHD Communicable Disease Registered Nurse Katie Swaim explains the change will benefit both the ACHD, its mission and the patient.

“With patients getting the instructions at the time of testing or mailed to them once we are notified of a positive result, they will no longer have to wait for a call from the health department to know what to do,” she said.

ACHD’s hope is by letting the patient take control of contacting people they believe they may have exposed, there will be a faster response to getting individuals to slow the spread of the virus. By moving to this new strategy, ACHD staff will be able to devote more time to other issues attached to COVID-19 such as being able to respond quicker and offer more help to those facilities that may be affected through a potential outbreak.

“Our tracers have found the patient usually has already been in contact with their medical provider because that’s where they got the order to be tested,” Brace said. “So, they have more than likely already been

told how to care for themselves by their doctors and what we would tell them when contacting them, they've already heard.”

Brace says the ACHD is not just leaving those that are identified as close contacts out in the cold by not calling them through this new strategy.

“We will be providing testing sites and doctors offices a flyer to give to those getting tested that will have instructions on it on how the patient and their identified contacts should quarantine and care for themselves,” he said. “We are just as interested in getting those positive patients well and quelling the spread of the virus as much as possible through them contacting their close contacts as all residents are.”

The new guidance will also be available on the department’s web site (www.audraincountyhealth.org) and on their Facebook page for residents to download and print off on their own and, at doctor’s offices and testing sites.

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