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**Department of Health
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STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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As COVID-19 cases rise, health officials expand contact tracing workforce and prioritize check-in calls to at-risk individuals

July 3, 2020— The Alaska Department of Health and Social and Services (DHSS) is working to expand Alaska’s public health contact tracing workforce to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. DHSS has roughly doubled the statewide contact tracing workforce since the COVID-19 response began and stands out among states as having one of the more intensive contact tracing programs.

However, the recent increase in cases has strained the ability of the current workforce to provide ongoing outreach to all close contacts.

“We’re working extremely hard to expand our workforce but with so many recent cases, we are not able to continue daily check-in phone calls to people in quarantine,” said Dr. Anne Zink, Alaska’s Chief Medical Officer. “Our contact tracers are now contacting most people who have been identified as a close contact to a confirmed case only once to inform them of their exposure, the need to remain in quarantine for 14 days and monitor for symptoms, and what to do if symptoms arise.”

Close contacts who public health staff determine might need additional support during their quarantine may receive additional follow-up calls.

“We need to focus on the individuals who need the most assistance and guidance,” said Tari O’Connor, Deputy Director of the Division of Public Health. “People who may need more support include individuals in rural areas who do not have access to medical care, those who live in group settings such as long-term care facilities, and older individuals or those with underlying health conditions that put them at risk for serious illness if they were to become infected with COVID-19.”

“Early on, people who tested positive usually had a short list of close contacts,” said Dr. Joe McLaughlin, State Epidemiologist. “Now, as people are mixing more with others, it’s not uncommon for someone who tests positive to have had dozens of close contacts, sometimes too many to name and call. That’s making it really difficult for our contact tracers to keep pace.”

With the rise in cases, Alaskans are urged to take the following precautions to protect individuals and our state’s public health system:

- Keep close contacts limited to your own household or trusted bubble. Stay six feet away from anyone outside that bubble.
- Wear a face mask when in public around others, especially indoors.
- Keep a record of anyone you have been in close contact with. If you test positive for COVID-19, that information is helpful for contact tracers to be able to efficiently and rapidly notify those at risk of exposure.

Until recently, all contact tracing had been done by the Alaska Division of Public Health as well as Anchorage Health Department, Maniilaq Association, North Slope Borough, Anchorage School District, CDC Arctic Investigations Program, Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, and Fairbanks Memorial Hospital. The state is now increasing statewide capacity for contact tracing by:

- Hiring additional nonpermanent staff in the Division of Public Health
- Partnering with Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) and other Alaska school districts to engage school nurses
- Deploying Alaska Air National Guard members with health and public health experience
- Working with the University of Alaska Anchorage, College of Health to create a rigorous training system for contact tracers and to directly hire additional contact tracers

In addition to the scaling up of its contact tracing workforce, DHSS has also recently implemented new HIPAA-compliant software to securely manage information related to COVID-19 cases and close contacts, centralize workforce assignments, and support our efforts to assure and improve the quality of this service to Alaskans.

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