

## **A Message from the Essex County Director of Public Health, Linda Beers**

April 17, 2020

As the director of your local health department, I wanted to take this opportunity to answer some questions during this uncertain and stressful time. We hope that you continue to look to us not only as a source of reliable information, but as an accountable, trustworthy organization that strives to meet your needs.



### **Testing**

One topic we field questions on daily is the testing capacity here in Essex County. How do people get tests? Where can they get tested? Why aren't more tests available?

These are valid questions and we share your concerns. We hear daily from our state representatives and Governor Cuomo – and all the way up to Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx at the federal level - that the best way to begin to relax some of the precautions and restart our economy is to implement widespread testing to determine our infection rate. Our limited access to tests here in Essex County has - and will continue to hamper our efforts to identify and isolate cases, trace and track exposures, and prevent further infection. Expanded testing will ensure we are prepared when some of the current restrictions are relaxed.

One way to lessen the impact of limited testing is to identify, isolate, and track suspect cases of COVID-19. This is something we have been doing for two weeks now and it has been an important mechanism to limit transmission. Implementing this type of surveillance has to date, almost doubled the number of people isolated for COVID-19 symptoms, ensuring that further spread is limited through the tracing and quarantining of close contacts.

I want you to know that beyond tracking suspect cases, I am working hard to advocate for improved testing capability here in Essex County. Our Office of Emergency Services Director Don Jaquish submits daily requests to the state for testing supplies and we are starting to see an improvement in testing availability. I communicate frequently with our healthcare partners - the University of Vermont Health Network at Elizabethtown Community Hospital, the Adirondack Medical Center, and Hudson Headwaters Health Network - to ascertain test supply availability and assess utilization and capacity. All partners are working on expanded testing criteria, which will be rolled out as supply allows. Please call ahead to any of these locations to determine how to proceed with getting a test.

Several days ago, Warren County opened a regional testing site in Glens Falls, which is available to Essex County residents. This site has increased their testing capacity since opening, and can now perform up to 75 tests per day. Residents do need a doctor's script (or order) and must call ahead to make an appointment. Residents who are unable to access testing in Essex County can call the NYS Coronavirus Hotline at 1-888-364-3065. Although we recognize this is not ideal, those willing and able to travel farther may be given the option to receive testing in Albany.

Essex County's challenges around testing are not unique. I am working with my counterparts in Warren, Washington, Saratoga, Franklin, Clinton, and Hamilton Counties to align strategies and improve our response efforts. Positive cases in one county can lead to quarantines and follow up in other counties.

We are working together to share best practices and solve problems - the regional testing facility in Warren County is a good example of these efforts.

### **Essential Business**

Another concern we have heard is that of our essential employees and the risks to them, their families, and our communities. We know businesses and services that have remained open can be hot spots for disease transmission, so we are working with representatives from these businesses to ensure that there are plans to keep their employees and the larger community safe. I have been in ongoing contact with International Paper in Ticonderoga, the Warden and Medical Director at the Federal Correctional Institution at Ray Brook, and Mountain Lake Services, to name a few. Businesses deemed essential can require that essential employees return to work while on quarantine under strict circumstances; however, I want to assure our residents that this is only the case for people who are NOT ill. Businesses must have identified the employees that are actually essential to operations and calling individuals to work who are under quarantine is only done as a last resort. We have commitment from these businesses that they will not do so unless it's absolutely necessary. We have provided similar guidance to Essex County Office of Emergency Services, who in turn, worked with local fire marshals, EMS personnel and other first responders to ensure that if there are employees or volunteers who can step in for individuals who are out due to COVID-19 exposure, they will call on those individuals first. There is NO exception made for employees who are positive for COVID-19. Release to work for these individuals only occurs when specific recovery criteria are met.

We are also working with all of our skilled nursing and adult care facilities to offer training on proper donning and doffing of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and collaborating with Emergency Services to offer fit testing for N95 masks. We know that protecting this vulnerable population from an outbreak at these facilities is paramount to limiting the spread of COVID-19 here and keeping the most severe outcomes from the virus to a minimum.

### **Transparency**

Finally, I know the fact that our case numbers remaining the same over the last several days has raised questions. I want you to know that with the exception of personal identifying information, we are reporting, daily, everything we know to be true for Essex County, as quickly as we can report it. We review and update our data each day and this information is reported to you, our County Executives, Board of Supervisors, and media partners. There are instances where our data may differ slightly from what is reported on the NYS Department of Health website. I can only tell you that this happens with systems that compile and coordinate data and we are working to resolve the discrepancies. The reason has been related to addresses being given that do not match where a resident actually resides permanently. Also note that the state is not reporting suspect cases on their dashboard, but this is something we've further committed to share with you, our residents.

We know that this is a scary, confusing, and frustrating time. Being cooped up, missing our friends, our family members, and having limits on what we can do **is hard**. We are doing our very best to respond appropriately and thoroughly to this unprecedented crisis. With our very small staff here at ECHD, we have managed to track close to 200 individuals under our isolation and quarantine orders. These are our friends and neighbors. We have not left them to navigate this process on their own. Everybody under our monitoring guidelines receives daily contact from our health department. Our nurses have

conducted hundreds of check-ins – both in person and via phone or text. We ensure needs are being met - beyond just basic necessities. We communicate with you as often as we can – through our media partners, and on our website and social media platforms. Our staff work long hours to answer questions, connect you with services, and listen to your concerns and suggestions. We maintain a 24/7 response capacity for all urgent matters, and we have expanded our hours of operation to include Saturdays and Sundays for the duration of this crisis. This emergency has resulted in the issuance of over 250 guidance documents from the state. This highlights the ever evolving nature of this pandemic - and our understanding of the novel virus that has caused it. Please know that we are doing everything we can to advocate for your health & safety through all channels possible and we will continue to coordinate our efforts and adjust our practices as we learn more about how our actions can improve our outcomes.

In good health,

Linda L. Beers  
Director of Public Health  
Essex County Health Department