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For Immediate Release

“You might be done with COVID-19, but COVID-19 might not be done with you”

MORGANTOWN, WV (June 19, 2020) — The area has seen some nice, sunny days recently and summer officially begins on Saturday. It’s understandable that individuals want to go outside and spend time with friends, especially after a difficult spring.

But as evidenced around the country and in some parts of West Virginia, a result of that activity can be a spike in COVID-19 cases when precautions aren’t taken.

“You might be done with COVID-19, but COVID-19 might not be done with you,” said Dr. Lee B. Smith, Monongalia County Health Department’s executive director and county health officer.

“It’s important to keep certain safety measures in mind as we wait to see what happens with COVID-19,” he added. “Clearly, there are other areas of the state and the country that are seeing upticks in COVID activity in the wake of large gatherings.”

Of course, safety measures include wearing a mask in public, keeping a social distance of six feet from others and washing hands thoroughly and often.

“Also, as people begin to have parties and celebrations, it’s important to remember that we need to avoid behaviors that we might not have considered dangerous in the past,” Dr. Smith said. “For instance, don’t share drinks or utensils or a cigarette.”

As of June 15, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States has had more than 2 million cases of COVID-19, more than any other country in the world. There have been 115,644 deaths, nearly twice the number of U.S. military casualties in the Vietnam War. The U.S. surpassed that number — 58,220 — in late April.

While West Virginia has fewer COVID-19 cases than many states — 2,400 as of the morning of June 18 — about 21 states are seeing cases decrease. This is not the case in West Virginia, where the increase did slow down before outbreaks, some from churches, as well as travel-related cases, saw numbers begin to rise more quickly again.

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As of June 18, Monongalia County was at 133 cases, with an additional 14 probable cases, and five deaths as the result of COVID-19.

Health officials, of course, would prefer a decrease in cases.

“When we begin to see more businesses and restaurants opening back up in May, we said that if cases begin to surge, the governor has said that commerce may halt or return to closure of all but essential services,” Dr. Smith said. “We obviously don’t want that to happen.”

The slowdown in COVID-19 cases in Monongalia County has allowed health department staff to return to many of their previous duties. However, staff at programs such as MCHD Dentistry and MCHD Clinical Services are working hard to make up appointments missed during the pandemic closures and others, including nursing staff and epidemiologists, continue to work seven days a week.

During the pandemic, MCHD’s public health nurses have been conducting all the disease investigation of positive individuals and most contact tracing in Monongalia County, during the pandemic, and that work continues. A positive individual will be called daily for 14 days; that person’s close contacts within the symptomatic period of time — usually about 48 hours — must be called daily for two weeks.

“For instance, we just got a new positive as a result of a large gathering in another county,” Dr. Smith said. “Just that one individual results in someone from our staff locating them, calling them daily to check on their symptoms and make sure they have what they need while in quarantine, and also following up on the person’s contacts. It is quite labor intensive.”

What’s more, it’s ramping up to be a busy time for MCHD Clinical Services, which provides, among other treatments, back-to-school vaccines and, in the fall, flu vaccines.

Those duties will have to be balanced with MCHD’s next big project: conducting the disease investigation and assisting contact tracing after West Virginia University tests about 35,000 students, faculty and staff members in July and August.

“We really have our work cut out for us,” Dr. Smith said. “So for us, while things seem quieter now than in the past few months, we are seeing cases on the rise in some areas and we know it’s the calm before the storm.”

Dr. Smith added: “We have encouraged some well-deserved time off for some of our staff before we have to saddle up for the coming event. This fall, we hope most everyone gets an influenza vaccine which will help with the number of sick days when COVID-19 is projected to return.”

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