



NEEDHAM PUBLIC HEALTH



Statement from Health and Human Services Director Timothy Muir McDonald on the Release of COVID-19 Cases

NEEDHAM – March 17, 2020 – “The Town of Needham understands that the outbreak of the infectious disease COVID-19 is a cause of tremendous concern for the entire community. Our emergency management team has been working for several weeks, taking daily action to keep the community safe and informed as this situation rapidly evolves.

As we have been informed of additional cases of COVID-19 in Needham by State Public Health officials (which is how we are made aware), those cases have been tracked and monitored by the Needham Public Health Division. Everyone who is considered a close contact to that person has been and will continue to be called and told to quarantine. Please see the attached graphic depicting current state and local guidelines for quarantine.

Because of the continued lack of access to testing kits for COVID-19, we believe that COVID-19 infections are underreported. It is likely that the actual number of cases across the state – and across the country – are much higher. The COVID-19 epidemic has reached the stage of “community transmission,” and we must consider that our community is much larger than the Town of Needham.

As reported in today’s Boston Globe (3/17/2020 <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/03/17/metro/mass-official-coronavirus-count-is-197-experts-say-true-number-could-now-be-high-6000/>) while the state has reported 197 positive cases, the true number may be as high as 6,000 individuals. This is why reporting numbers is a dangerous and misleading precedent. We know that it is in fact the UNREPORTED cases that are the biggest source of concern, as those individuals are likely not quarantined and are a high risk to spread the disease.

It has been suggested that having more information, including trends, will help community members assess if they are doing enough or if they need to change their own behavior. The truth is that we all need to drastically change our behavior. Residents should only associate with their existing household contacts. Activities outside the home, including exercise, should be conducted in such a way as to minimize exposure to other people. Commercial interactions (to get groceries or pickup medicine, for example) should be carefully planned and organized to minimize contact with other people. Non-essential shopping activities should be deferred, and social interactions like playdates should be canceled.

To date, we have taken the following actions to help stop the spread of coronavirus in Needham:

- Closed the Center at the Heights on 3/10 as a precautionary measure, following the state of emergency declaration by Governor Charlie Baker that day;
- Alerted residents via email, social media, website and AlertNeedham on 3/11 that we had been notified of one confirmed case of COVID-19 in a resident;
- Sent a notification on 3/11 to the public that all Town-sponsored non-essential meetings were to be canceled or postponed and advised that all externally hosted events on Town property would also be cancelled or postponed. Residents were urged to do the same.
- Schools announced on 3/12 they would shut down beginning Friday, March 13th
- On 3/13, School and Health officials presented an update to the Select Board, which was livestreamed for the public. The Town also warned the public to expect a reduction in services in the coming days.
- On 3/14, the Needham Free Public Library was shut down as a precautionary measure;
- On 3/15, the Town notified the public that Town facilities would have modified staffing and services would be impacted;

- On 3/16, the Town notified the public that all Town buildings would close as of 3/17. The Town also closed playgrounds and fields and let daycares know they would need to shut at close of business.

Each of these decisions was made with careful consideration of public health and safety. And each of these decisions was proactively communicated to the public through a variety of channels including updates to the Town and Public Health websites, Town social media, news flash emails and AlertNeedham.

The MA Department of Public Health reports cases daily by county, gender, source of exposure, and hospitalizations. A link to that source has been added to the Town website to make it easy for Needham residents to access that information.

The Town of Needham and Needham Public Health will continue to provide daily updates on important developments in strategies to stem the epidemic. We will provide information about precautions we and other officials are taking, along with other information that will help you keep you and your families safe. We appreciate your understanding, patience and adherence to safety practices in this challenging time for all of us.”

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