



NEWS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 5, 2021

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Douglas County implements emergency mask mandate to help protect community, healthcare system from spread of COVID-19

Health order takes effect Jan. 7; County Commission to discuss extending order Jan. 12

LAWRENCE, KS – An emergency public health order that requires face coverings for those ages 2 and older inside public spaces in Douglas County will go into effect Friday, Jan. 7, to help protect the community as COVID-19 cases have rapidly increased during the past week.

As of Jan. 3, there were 1,538 active cases reported in Douglas County, according to Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health. The 14-day moving average for new cases is at 89 cases per day, a record high for the county.

The ongoing impact of the delta variant along with the arrival of both the highly contagious omicron variant as well as the influenza season is creating challenges for the community and healthcare providers throughout Douglas County.

“We recognize this pandemic has taken a deep toll and the community is weary; unfortunately, the virus rages on,” Dr. Thomas Marcellino, local health officer, said. “Now is the time we must act to protect our community from a potential crisis.”

LMH Health President and CEO Russ Johnson said they expect inpatient numbers to increase - at least to levels the county hasn't seen since the beginning of COVID response - all at a time when resources and staff are taxed.

“Our current emergency room wait times are longer due to patient volume,” he said. “At the same time, the large number of patients hospitalized for COVID and other serious issues are significant, and we are routinely required to hold patients in our emergency department until a staffed bed is available.”

Additionally, Johnson said staffing has been a challenge at LMH Health as it has been for the entire healthcare industry. “Every hospital's ability to respond in the coming weeks and months will be limited not by supplies or number of beds available for patients, but by the staff members and providers able to care for them.”

“With this in mind, our physicians and hospital leadership support an indoor mask mandate,” Johnson said. “Masking will help slow the spread of COVID, influenza and other respiratory

viruses in our community. It also serves to protect our team members, our single most valuable resource at LMH Health.”

The emergency public health order was issued by Marcellino and Douglas County Commission Chair Shannon Portillo. The public health order, recommended by Douglas County Unified Command, includes:

- **An individual mask order.** Any person in Douglas County should wear a mask or face covering when: inside or in line to enter any indoor public space, obtaining healthcare services, waiting for or riding on public transportation, or while outdoors and unable to maintain a 6-foot distance between individuals who do not reside together.
- **A business mask order.** All businesses or organizations in Douglas County must require employees, customers, visitors, members or members of the public to wear a mask or face covering when: working in any public space, working where food is prepared or packaged, or in any enclosed area where people are present and unable to maintain a 6-foot distance.

There are exemptions to the order. These include:

- Persons with a medical condition, mental health condition or disability that prevents wearing a face covering.
- Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Persons engaged in religious services, ceremonies or activities.
- Persons who are seated at a restaurant or other establishment that offers food or beverages while they are actively eating or drinking.
- Persons engaged in a court-related proceeding.

The order will remain in effect until Wednesday, Jan. 12, unless it is otherwise rescinded or modified by the Douglas County Commission. Commissioners will discuss extending the public health order during their business meeting at 5:30 p.m. Jan. 12 at the County Courthouse, 1100 Massachusetts St. The meeting also will be available by Zoom.

To review the full emergency public health order and Douglas County COVID information, visit: douglascountyks.org/coronavirus. Anyone with a question about the public health order can email: phorders@ldchealth.org.