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To: Wisconsin Local Health Officers, Tribal Health Officials, Infection Preventionists, and Health Care Providers

From: Jeanne Ayers, Wisconsin State Health Officer and Public Health Administrator
Wisconsin Department of Health Services

New Mass Gathering Guidance for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

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Summary

Person-to-person transmission of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is occurring in a growing number of regions globally. There is now sustained community spread in a growing number of locations in the United States, necessitating concerted efforts by public health and clinical partners to contain the spread of this epidemic.

The purpose of this memo is to provide guidance in accordance with Wis. Stat. ch. 250, on **limiting all non-essential gatherings of over 250 people in order to slow the spread of this disease within and between communities in Wisconsin**. Mass gatherings and large community events bring people from multiple communities into close contact with each other, which has the potential to increase COVID-19 transmission. One method to slow the spread of respiratory virus infections, including COVID-19, is by increasing social distancing (reducing close contact). There is evidence from the scientific literature that limiting the size and number of mass gathering events is an effective tool for preventing the spread of disease and slowing the progression of epidemics.

Additional details on this outbreak are available on the [DHS Outbreaks and Investigations page](#) and the [CDC website](#).

Limit Large Community Events and Mass Gatherings

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) recommends that all non-essential gatherings of 250 or more people be cancelled or postponed statewide to help protect Wisconsinites from the spread of COVID-19, particularly those who are most vulnerable to infection and severe disease. DHS supports the decisions of any event organizers that elect to cancel or postpone events with less than 250 attendees in order to protect their communities. Organizers should consider the following:

- Potential for attendance from older adults, individuals with underlying health care conditions, or other vulnerable groups
- Potential for attendance from individuals from a wide range of geographic areas across Wisconsin, the United States, or other countries
- The setting of the event, particularly if it involves sustained interaction between attendees in close physical proximity

By implementing limitations on mass gatherings, DHS is intending to slow the spread of this epidemic to a level such that the healthcare system is able to maintain quality care for patients. Mass gatherings during an outbreak of a particularly infectious disease such as COVID-19 have the potential to result in large numbers of ill people that can quickly overwhelm local hospitals and clinics.

At this time DHS is not recommending closing schools as part of this guidance. However, there are also important considerations for essential gatherings. Essential gatherings include health care facilities, schools, most routine business operations, manufacturing, and government meetings. While in operation these facilities should employ enhanced precautions to reduce the potential for spread of disease. These operations may also be suspended to control an outbreak in individual facilities and communities depending on local conditions at the authority of local public health officials.

Individuals at Greater Risk

The current outbreak of COVID-19 has resulted in significantly more severe illness and deaths for elderly individuals and those with underlying health conditions. In order to protect these most vulnerable members of our communities we strongly recommend these individuals immediately begin to avoid non-essential mass gatherings. We also recommend that those who provide gathering opportunities for older adults, such as senior centers and congregate dining facilities, plan for alternative ways to remain engaged with them in ways that minimize their risk of COVID-19 disease transmission.

We understand that these recommendations are very difficult for individuals and for communities. Public health officials are doing all they can to try to minimize these impacts and move as quickly and safely as possible to a period when these restrictions can be reduced or removed. These recommendations will apply for the next 30 days. At the end of that period, or if needed before that point, the Department will reassess whether to continue, relax, or tighten this guidance.