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SUBJECT: To Del Norte County Residents,

We thought it would be good to talk a little about some recent developments with COVID-19. As many of you know, the State Health Department (CDPH) released some guidance last week about schools. It's a complicated document, but the main take home message is that readiness in a county for schools to open will depend on where the county is overall with respect to the monitoring program for counties in California. Our county is not on the monitoring program currently, but the tricky thing about the school guidance is that if we get on the state monitoring program for more than three days at the time school is supposed to open, the schools are not going to be allowed to open except by "distance learning," which means our kids start school at home. And it means a huge mess for schools, and parents who have to work while kids are in school.

So, this is another reason for us all to be more careful, and for those not being careful, to start being careful. It does not take much to get on the "monitoring list," if we get enough cases in any two week period, and/or a low enough ICU capacity to treat potential cases, we could be "flagged." That would be it, not only schools would go into home learning only mode, but a number of additional businesses would need to be modified and some would close. I think that it is clear that nobody in our community wants to see those things happen. The best way to make sure it doesn't is to do everything we can to keep disease transmission low. Every little thing that can be done should be done, because everything helps. It's all part of the picture to keep all of us safe and keep our community functioning, which leads me to the main message of this week's bulletin; gatherings.

If you go to our website, you will see an increase of a handful of cases over the weekend, and the website describes the change as related to a "private gathering." All too true, a small outdoor event in a private setting, but it still resulted in 4 cases. I am glad that the people involved kept it small, but clearly there were not enough other protective measures in place. Keeping events small helps us in public health with our jobs as contact tracers, but it does not help anyone who gets sick because people were not being careful

There are other stories too; cases related to family reunions, and other parties, it has become one of the biggest drivers of cases here, and in other parts of the state. Technically speaking, the state shelter-in-place order has never been lifted-there is no allowance for gatherings of people, any size, public or private. Most health officers have realized that some people are not going to pay attention to the state order, and most people will want to gather for something or other, so we have given out advice about this, if you plan a gathering keep it small, and keep it only family and/or the closest of friends. Most of the time we say ten or less.

But that advice only really helps if people are still doing the other things we ask them to do, keeping social distance, using good hand hygiene, and wearing masks. If those things are in place, a small gathering will likely go off without a hitch, if they are not being done, then all bets are off. For people who think that it will not happen to them, well, we have a group of people right now recovering from this virus who thought the same thing last week.

So, please don't take chances. Nobody is going to want to hold a party, and realize later that someone near and dear to them ended up in the hospital because of it. Even worse, nobody will want to learn that someone near and dear to them didn't make it home from the hospital. We haven't had our first death from this disease in Del Norte, but it is likely to only be a matter of time. If you can put off a gathering, put it off, if you get together for any reason, keep it small, and keep it outdoors. But most of all, just because its family or friends does not make it safe, keep your distance, keep that safe bubble of space around you, wash your hands as often as you can, and wear a mask!

And this brings up the last point, mask wearing. There is really no good reason to not wear the mask, or the facial covering, whatever you want to call it. The data supporting mask use is building and many tests have been done now that demonstrates their usefulness. They are not perfect, but we are not trying for perfect protection. We are trying to reduce risk, like so many other things in public health and medicine in general.

People do this all the time with medicines. People take blood thinners, blood pressure medicine, cholesterol drugs, sometimes for decades, all to reduce risk of heart attacks and strokes. None of those drugs can guarantee that heart attacks and strokes could not still happen, but they reduce the risk, they improve the odds, or put off that stroke or heart attack for years. People take them to reduce that risk, even paying a big price in side effects, but they take them anyway.

I can hear people responding already, "but doc, those people are taking those things to reduce risk to themselves, It doesn't have anything to do with anybody else, it's personal." Not true, I say. If someone has a stroke or heart attack, it affects everyone in their family, sometimes altering other people's lives for decades. If you are prescribed antibiotics for a respiratory infection, yes, you are taking it mostly for yourself, but you are also trying to get better in a hurry, so that you reduce the chance of giving it to someone close to you. If you get vaccines at any age, you are helping yourself to stay healthy, but you are also helping those around you, by not ever becoming a source for those infections.

So, a mask is the same principle. If you put a barrier in front of your mouth and nose, it will block some, maybe even most of the droplets going back and forth. If you are sick, you will be spreading less (not all) virus to the air around you, and there will be less chance that someone nearby will breathe in enough to get infected. And the opposite is also true, you will breathe in fewer (not all) droplets, and there will be less chance of getting infected, or getting severely infected. We think that dose and route of infection with coronavirus matter, probably a lot. Anything at all that we can do to minimize that dose of virus, or where it lands is going to help. It's really that simple. It's one of our best protections in this pandemic, and wearing a mask is well worth the effort.

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