NDDoH takes action to prioritize faster results on COVID-19 tests, adjust contact tracing process

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Gov. Doug Burgum and the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) today announced changes to the state's contact tracing process to more quickly notify individuals who test positive for COVID-19.

North Dakota added 400 contact tracers and case investigators last summer to help quickly trace and quarantine close contacts, allowing contact tracing to continue long after many other states had to suspend their efforts. However, a sharp increase in coronavirus cases in recent weeks has put increased pressure on contact tracing teams at the state and local level, leading to tracing delays and a backlog of positive cases that have yet to be assigned to a case investigator.

As a result, the time it takes to notify a positive case of his or her result has increased from 24 hours to approximately 72 hours from when the lab confirms the result. In addition, significant community spread of coronavirus and a lack of compliance with close contact investigations have diminished the effectiveness of contact tracing.

"This temporary situation required an immediate and significant shift in resources to provide results in a timely manner to individuals who test positive to protect their health and slow the spread of COVID-19," Burgum said.

To reduce the backlog and shorten notification times:

- The North Dakota National Guard has shifted 50 soldiers from contacting close contacts to notifying positive individuals. By refocusing these resources, the backlog of notifications should be eliminated by Thursday, Oct. 22.

- Close contacts will no longer be contacted by public health officials; instead, positive individuals will be instructed to self-notify their close contacts and direct them to the NDDoH website, where landing pages will be created with video and written resources explaining the recommended and required actions for both positive patients and close contacts. The exception is contact tracing for health care settings, K-12 schools and university systems which will continue as usual.
- The state is building a process to deliver automated notifications to positive individuals. Currently, the system only delivers automated notifications to individuals with negative test results. Positive patients will still receive a follow-up call from a case investigator after their initial automated notification.

"Speeding up the notification process and conducting thorough case investigations of positive patients will help us to better identify potential clusters and allow patients to more quickly seek treatment and notify other individuals who may have been exposed to the virus," Interim State Health Officer Dirk Wilke said. "It's critically important to understand that the quarantine recommendations for close contacts haven't changed."

The changes were developed through collaboration between the NDDoH, Governor's Office, Department of Human Services, National Guard, North Dakota Information Technology, the state's chief health strategist, Dr. Joshua Wynne, dean of the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, and Dr. Paul Carson, infectious disease specialist and professor at North Dakota State University.

"Case investigation and contact tracing are just two of the tools used to combat COVID-19. Now, more than ever, we need to prioritize what's most important and this includes quickly identifying positive cases, strengthening community mitigation efforts and taking personal responsibility," Burgum said. "Wearing a face covering, social distancing, avoiding large gatherings and staying home when you're sick all play a role in limiting spread and saving lives and livelihoods."

For more information on North Dakota's COVID-19 response, visit www.health.nd.gov/coronavirus or www.ndresponse.gov.

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