Maine DHHS Redeploys Team of Call Center Staff to Support People Testing Positive for COVID-19

December 7, 2020

AUGUSTA - The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) announced today that starting this week, 17 call center specialists will join the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to provide notification and support for people newly testing positive for COVID-19. This is part of a comprehensive plan to adapt Maine's response to best contain the spread of coronavirus in light of the surge in cases in the state.

The team from the DHHS Call Center, who currently answer questions about eligibility for Maine health and human services programs, will be temporarily redeployed to conduct case notification for some individuals. Case notification involves reaching out to people whose test came back positive for COVID-19 at the State lab or other labs and who are not otherwise prioritized for investigation by Maine CDC. This call center team will provide basic information and answers on how to isolate and where to go for help as needed.

In light of the significant increase in COVID-19 cases, starting today, Maine CDC is focusing case investigation and contact tracing for people at greater risk of contracting or spreading the disease. All other cases will get a call from the DHHS Call Center.

Maine CDC will continue to conduct case investigations of the following groups:

- Personsage 18 and younger
- Personsage 65and older
- Persons who are hospitalized
- Personsidentified on the lab report as a minority
- Persons identified as having a disability
- Personsidentified on the lab report as ahealth careworkeror first responder
- Persons known to beliving or working in congregate settings including:
    - Healthcare facilities
    - Nursing facilities
    - Homeless shelters
    - Group homes
    - Correctional facilities
- Individuals known to be associated with schools orchild carefacilities

"These changes are necessary to best support residents affected by this contagious and potentially deadly disease," **said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew**. "While Maine continues to rank better than all states but Vermont and Hawaii on major public health metrics, this surge has strained the state's response. We will continue to adapt to ensure those most at risk have the information and resources they need."

"Amid widespread community transmission, Maine CDC has had to adjust case investigation and contact tracing protocols to assist those at the greatest risk for contracting COVID-19 or the highest risk of spreading it," **said Dr. Nirav D. Shah, Director of the Maine CDC**. "The Call Center staff join Maine National Guard members and newly hired and redeployed Maine CDC staff to complement the work our team has done since before the first case in Maine was identified."

In the past week, the average daily number of cases of COVID-19 has risen from 168 to 291. Maine's 7-day positivity rate has also risen from 3.96% to 4.72%.

Maine CDC currently has 135 people conducting case investigation and contract tracing. Over 30 new case investigators and 50 new contact tracers are in training and expected to become active in the next month. Some of these workers are redeployed temporarily from other parts of DHHS and State government or the National Guard. The Call Center has a total of 45 workers, with 17 redeploying this week and the remainder being trained to help as contact tracers or case notifiers as needed for the short-term as Maine CDC brings on new people. The Maine Department of Education has also coordinated with Maine CDC to deploy a cadre of nurses for school-specific contact tracing.

The need for extra support comes as Maine CDC faces a significant backlog of test results for the first time since the pandemic began due to the recent surge in cases. Maine CDC is receiving a high volume of positive test results from the State lab and other labs, leading to delays in the next step in the process of assigning positive results to case investigators. In the coming days, the case count will significantly increase as 4,500 positive test results from November 30 to December 6 are reviewed to determine if they are new cases. Not all positive tests become a new case, as some are from people who test positive more than once and others are out-of-state residents whose results are reported to their state of residence. The additional support announced today will help to alleviate this backlog and ensure that people diagnosed with COVID-19 have information about how to avoid spreading the disease to others and get any support they need to stay in isolation.

With this redeployment of call center staff, DHHS continues to urge Maine people interested in applying for health and human services programs, including MaineCare, Food Supplement, and TANF, to visit MyMaineConnection (//apps1.web.maine.gov/benefits/account/login.html) , the online application portal.

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DHHS Home

Sitemap

DHHS Address

Department of
Health and Human Services
109 Capitol Street
11 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Phone: (207) 287-3707
FAX: (207) 287-3005
TTY: Maine relay 711

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