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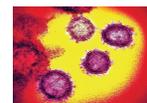
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COVID-19 virus detected in person connected to MEMS

Posted Monday, March 23, 2020 12:54 pm

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By Darren Marcy, Manchester Journal

MANCHESTER — The first case of COVID-19, caused by the novel coronavirus, has been reported in the Northshire.

Superintendent Jackie Wilson of the Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union said in a letter to the community that she had been informed of the positive case "within our Manchester Elementary Middle School community."

"I know how potentially frightening this news is," Wilson said. "I have been in contact with the Secretary of Education, Dan French, and senior officials at the Vermont Department of Health."

Wilson said the health department indicated that the case was "community-acquired."

"Community spread is happening all over Vermont and, unfortunately, our BRSU communities are not immune," Wilson said. "I expect that we will see many more confirmed cases over the next few weeks."

Friday, the Department of Health confirmed that community spread was taking place in Vermont and the state encouraged Vermonters to stay home when possible to slow the spread of the virus.

As of Monday, the state Department of Health reported 75 cases of COVID-19 in Vermont with five deaths. At the time of the report, 1,173 people had been tested in Vermont.

Rep. Kathleen James, in a post on Facebook, expanded on the idea of community spread.

"Here in Vermont, the virus has now moved into the broad community spread phase," James said. "This means it's no longer practical, or perhaps even possible, for the Vermont Department of Health to trace back every confirmed case to its source, or to identify and contact anyone and everyone who might have been exposed. That said, the VT DOH is fully aware of every confirmed case, including our MEMS community member."

No information about the person or what role in the school the person played was available.

Wilson said she couldn't address that topic and the state announced Monday it was no longer releasing information on individual cases. Until recently, the state would release the patient's age range, county and sex.

The announcement created concern about who might have been exposed and to what degree.

Wilson said the state's opinion is that everyone should assume they have been exposed.

"We all need to assume we have it and we need to be careful," Wilson said. "They just said, there are many of us walking around we're asymptomatic right now. There are many of us out there who are carrying this right now. It's not about one-person right now."

And the ability of the state to trace those who have had contact with an infectious person is beginning to overwhelm the system.

To this point, the state has pursued those who have had close contact with a person who tests positive.

But, Monday the state said it would be prioritizing contact tracing and response efforts to those cases that were hospitalized, residing in long-term care facilities, incarcerated and those who are immunocompromised.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER THESE ADS

Even that may change, said Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, who shared information she received from the Department of Health legal department. Sullivan said the number of cases is going to force the state to soon change their plan to reach out to people who have tested positive and ask them to inform those with whom they have had close contact.

"This is a recent shift," Sullivan said. "VDH is currently developing public messaging on this topic."

An email Sullivan received detailed that.

"At this point, the number of people who have interacted [with] someone who is positive for the virus is in the many hundreds, if not the thousands," said David Englander, senior policy and legal adviser in the Department of Health. "Individual follow up would be impossible. We must rely on our own good sense and the sense of fellow Vermonters to keep us safe and well."

Wilson said health department officials told her parents and guardians should be monitoring their children for symptoms, such as coughing, fever and shortness of breath.

If those symptoms are present, parents should call their health care provider. Do not just show up or go to the emergency department of a nearby hospital.

Wilson said the district continues to improve its practices to fight the spread of the virus.

"We're constantly upping the protocol for disinfecting," Wilson said. "We have to keep our building accessible to teachers."

Wilson said currently people have to sign in and sign out of rooms, which are then cleaned.

"We're doing everything we can in our buildings," Wilson said. "Our kids have been out of school 10 days. It's not like the school has been open and running."

Wilson said the BRSU is encouraging residents to take care of one another and continue to maintain their distance.

"Over the past few weeks, the team at BRSU, as well as our community, have shown that we are there for each other," Wilson said in the letter. "Together we will face this challenge and support and care for one another. There is great uncertainty in our future, every day brings a new challenge for us to overcome, but together we will get through this. Take care of each other while keeping a safe distance. Keep your kids home. Love them. We will get through this."

Wilson said the need to stay away from others is important and she hopes parents will educate their kids and enforce the need to socially distance themselves.

"Kids are going to want to be outside and be with their friends," Wilson said. "I think parents need to think about it. They're putting [their kids] at risk."

The coronavirus pandemic has infected more than 353,000 people around the world and killed more than 15,430. In the United States, there are more than 38,000 cases and more than 462 deaths.

The COVID-19 illness causes mild or moderate symptoms in most people, but severe symptoms are more likely in the elderly or those with existing health problems.

This story was updated on March 23, 2020 at 7:24 a.m. Contact Darren Marcy at dmarcy@manchesterjournal.com or by cell at 802-681-6534.

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3	3	Chase Elliott (https://racing.ap.org/berkshireeagle/driver/chase-elliott)