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November 9, 2020

Illinois continues to exceed daily records for new COVID-19 cases. As healthcare professionals, we understand that many in our communities are experiencing pandemic fatigue, giving rise to complacency. As the weather turns cold several activities, including gathering indoors without masks and distancing, are contributing to this surge.

We are better at identifying and treating this disease, and survival rates are improving slightly in COVID-19 patients since the start of this pandemic. This is good news, but has not changed the overall trajectory and danger of the pandemic. COVID-19 hospitalizations in Illinois have doubled over the last three weeks, a very dangerous trend. Analyses of IDPH data project that Illinois will surpass its ICU bed capacity by Thanksgiving, and deaths per day will peak mid-December. These trends affect not only COVID-19 patients; if hospitals are overwhelmed, care will suffer for those with other unforeseen emergent conditions, such as heart attacks, appendicitis, cancer diagnoses, and motor vehicle accidents, all common conditions. When hospitals hit capacity, if doctors and healthcare professionals lack hospital beds to treat people mortality will increase amongst all seriously-ill patients. While the news regarding the efficacy of the Pfizer vaccine is encouraging, its approval and widespread distribution could still take months, and in the meantime thousands of Illinoisans will get sick and need hospitalization.

Immediate action will flatten the curve and prevent overwhelming our hospitals:

**Enforce universal masking:** Reinforce the importance of wearing masks whenever leaving the home or interacting with anyone outside of the immediate household. Add steeper penalties for those who do not wear face coverings, and incentivize those who do wear face coverings. Incentivize businesses to enforce universal masking and turn away customers who do not follow the rules.

**Emphasize no indoor gatherings, even in private homes, especially during the holidays:** Epidemiologic data shows strong evidence that indoor gatherings transmit COVID-19. Everyone needs to avoid inviting others into their homes and attending gatherings in others' homes. Gatherings of any size increase the risk of spread of the virus. Having a negative COVID-19 test does not mean someone is safe to attend a holiday meal indoors. This message is critical as we enter the holiday season. Families should explore other ways to gather, such as outside meals or meals using Zoom and Facetime.

**Emphasize and simplify messaging on isolation and quarantine:** Simplify messaging on quarantine, testing, and isolation. Anyone with symptoms or exposure must get tested. Anyone with NO symptoms but with exposure or travel to a high-risk location MUST quarantine for 14 days. If found to be COVID-19 positive, an individual must isolate for at least 10 days after onset of symptoms. Many of our patients struggle with the nuances of these terms and believe a "negative test" can substitute for quarantine.

**Work from home:** Support employers to allow as many people as possible to work from home. Illinois contact tracing data identify office and non-office workplaces among the top 7 reported possible exposure locations amongst those diagnosed with COVID-19.

**Prepare and highlight the threshold by which we can restrict indoor, non-essential business:** No one wants to go through a shut down again. What we need is to ensure that people understand we will have no choice but to restrict indoor, non-essential business if cases and hospitalizations continue to rise. It is important to incentivize businesses to move to alternative models of commerce that avoid indoor transactions. Contact tracing data identify restaurants, bars, and business/retail among the top 6 possible exposure locations amongst those diagnosed with COVID-19.

**County and state governments should require stronger surveillance and mitigation programming at all private and public grade schools and universities:** Schools and universities remain sources of COVID-19 transmission. Our government needs to put immediate guidelines in place to regulate testing, quarantining and social distancing in all schools in our state.

As we head into a dark and long winter, the above actions could help slow the spread of COVID-19. A shelter-in-place order would bring severe economic hardship to many small businesses, but may be needed. At this perilous moment, we have choices: impose more restrictions, follow the rules and hopefully, avoid more economic and public health hardship, or face the most challenging winter of our lives. Urgent action now can not only save lives, but save livelihoods .

Sincerely,

The Illinois Medical Professionals Action Collaborative Team ([IMPACT](http://impact4hc.com))