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## **Gallatin City-County Health Department Disease Investigation Efforts to Move to Full Automation and Updates to CDC Community Levels**

The Gallatin City-County Health Department announces a switch to automated COVID-19 case investigation and contact tracing, and an updated CDC Community Level in Gallatin County of low.

In late January, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE) released a statement jointly supporting state, local, territorial, and tribal health departments in transitioning away from universal case investigation and contact tracing at this point in the COVID-19 pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced this week [updated guidance](#) to reflect a similar recommendation.

In light of these updates, the Gallatin City-County Health Department has moved to automated case investigation and contact tracing using SMS text messaging to alert all positive COVID-19 cases in our county and provide them with isolation information. Text messages will originate from the number 406-224-6446. This is a phone number specifically used by the health department for this purpose. For those without a cell phone or number that can receive text messages, the health department will follow-up with a phone call to ensure that all necessary information is reaching community members.

The use of the automated system will notify cases of their need to isolate using a HIPAA-compliant platform that will not compromise protected health information. The automated system will also prompt cases to [notify close contacts](#) of potential exposure. Close contacts should follow quarantine recommendations and consider testing at least 5 days after exposure and certainly if they experience symptoms.

The rationale behind this transition is based on several key factors that have impacted case investigation and contact tracing efforts that were established at the onset of the pandemic:

- The availability of a safe and effective vaccines that can prevent disease transmission and mitigate severe illness;
- High level of immunity due to an infection or vaccine;
- Variants, such as Omicron, with shorter incubation periods and rapid transmission making it more difficult to identify close contacts to slow transmission; and
- Increased availability and use of self-tests, which allow people who test positive for COVID-19 to quickly notify their own close contacts.



“As a public health agency with guidance provided by the CDC and DPHHS, it is appropriate for us to transition our resources towards strategies to lessen the impact of COVID-19 by focusing efforts on the most severe outcomes—hospitalizations and deaths—now that we have more tools for prevention and care,” said Lori Christenson, Health Officer for the Gallatin City-County Health Department. “Specifically, the department will focus on disease investigation efforts in high-risk congregate settings such as long term care facilities, homeless shelters, and the detention center.”

As the department transitions to support and focus efforts in settings and groups at increased risk, the health department’s position has not changed as it relates to the importance of staying home, testing, and isolation of cases as an effective public health measure. The health department will continue to promote prevention strategies such as the benefit of staying up to date on COVID-19 vaccinations, testing, and supporting public education about how to protect [yourself and others](#).

The CDC also announced COVID-19 Community Levels that help individuals and health departments know what prevention measures to take based on data related to the proportion of hospital capacity devoted to caring for COVID-19 patients, the number of new patients with COVID-19 admitted to the hospital in the last seven days, and the number of new COVID-19 cases in the county in the last seven days. These data tell us how much the virus is spreading, how many people are getting sick enough to require medical care, and if the local healthcare system has the resources to provide care for all patients whether they have COVID-19 or not. The combination of these numbers will determine the COVID-19 Community Level—low, medium or high. What each level means [can be found here](#).

Based on local data, Gallatin County is currently experiencing a **LOW** COVID-19 Community Level.\* This means people, households and communities can take minimal, practical precautions such as staying up-to-date on vaccines and testing if you have symptoms of COVID-19. Masks will remain a critical public health tool and a strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19. When the community is experiencing LOW or MEDIUM we may not need to wear masks most of the time or at all. At all levels, people can wear a mask based on personal preference, informed by your level of risk. People with symptoms, a positive test, or exposure to someone with COVID-19 should wear a mask regardless of the COVID-19 Community Level.

At this time, the recommendation in the new COVID-19 Community Levels does not apply to healthcare facilities such as nursing homes and hospitals. These settings should continue to use [community transmission rates](#) and follow CDC’s infection prevention and control measures.

“We are not at the end of the pandemic yet, but we do need to adapt to a new phase based on our current situation. Using the COVID-19 Community Levels to understand COVID-19 impacts on our community does not mean we should stop taking proven steps to reduce the risk of spreading or getting COVID-19,” Christenson said. “In this new phase of the pandemic, we have additional tools to help protect us from serious illness and death and slow the spread of the virus. How we layer our individual and community prevention strategies should be informed by the goals of this phase of the pandemic—minimizing the impact COVID-19 has on our health, our healthcare system, and society. This approach still relies on all of us to protect each other and our community. ”



\*Please note, the Community Level data on the CDC website may display data that differs from the health department's website. For the most up-to-date data for the county-level please visit [healthygallatin.org](http://healthygallatin.org).

The Gallatin City-County Health Department Call Center is open five days a week, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. to answer questions about COVID-19. Any calls received after business hours will be returned the following business day. You can reach the Call Center by phone at 406-548-0123.

The most accurate local source of information remains the GCCHD [website](#).

