

Message from the Tompkins County Health Department

Community Resilience, Vigilance, and Commitments Moving Forward

Tompkins County's resilience has been nothing short of incredible in the face of COVID-19. In these past six months we've risen to the moment by staying home, staying apart, and staying vigilant. I'm writing to you as your Public Health Director and Mental Health Commissioner, and I know that these months have been both unpredictable and unsettling, but because of your vigilance we're on the right path in managing this disease.

The Tompkins County Legislature has just made a historic investment to maintain our local COVID-19 testing capacity by funding surveillance testing at the Cayuga Health System sampling site. This investment comes at a significant financial cost but will have a determined impact on our ability to track positive cases, stop the spread, and keep our community healthy. I am confident that today we are doing everything that we can do to manage this disease in our community. Alongside this commitment made by our local elected officials, it's on all of us to make compassionate decisions and investments towards the wellbeing of our neighbors.

Broadening our Public Health Response Amidst Ongoing Challenges

This disease has asked a lot from all of us, and even while our community is reopening and we continue to keep close watch to stop the spread – we can't lose sight of issues that pre-dated COVID and have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

Just as our community is rightly concerned about the potential for a surge in COVID cases, we must also be concerned about the surge of intensified, ongoing public health crises. Our community's needs for access to mental health and crisis services, healthy and nutritious food, and other social supports are rising and present challenges that we must respond to with sustained vigilance parallel to our COVID response. We're seeing amplified needs for childcare so people can get back to work to support their families, increased calls reporting tragedies of domestic violence, and the exacerbation of health concerns and disparate outcomes based on race and socioeconomic status – these are just a few pressing examples of the challenges that we're faced with, challenges that I know we can approach with that same level of vigilance and care.

I'm asking you to join me in broadening our definitions of what it means to protect the public's health, and to reflect carefully on the challenges in front of us. We all must ask ourselves what role we play in caring for those around us, whether they be a friend, family member, neighbor, or stranger.

Assessing the Impact of Decisions Made by our Local Institutions

In the past few weeks, we've all been inundated with a series of impactful and difficult decisions made by local institutions. The nature of a crisis is that it is unpredictable - every organization needs to make the decisions that are right for them and that meet the needs of their immediate communities. I acknowledge that these decisions carry immense weight, and reflect honest tensions regarding the best paths forward – I have had the privilege of working closely with many of the leaders making these decisions, and I can assure you that they are not being made in haste.

Cornell University is instituting an unprecedented plan to reactivate their campus that requires an immense and nearly unrivaled investment in testing capacity. To-date we have seen very few new positive cases from returning students, and while we hope this trend continues, we must acknowledge that as thousands of individuals arrive in Tompkins County we may see jumps in positive cases. Our commitment, alongside Cornell is to continue to take testing, quarantine, isolation, and enforcement of the behavioral compact seriously. Your Health Department will do everything in our power to conduct thorough contact tracing investigations, isolate positive cases, and quarantine those at risk of spreading the disease - this is what we have been doing successfully all along, and we are committed to continuing and strengthening as we are called to do so.

Ithaca College has made the difficult decision to continue remote learning through the fall. IC shares our commitment to the health of our community, and takes their commitment to an on-campus learning experience seriously. Their leadership expressed concern that in this case, returning for this semester would put that experience at risk of being cut short. We respect and support this decision and recognize that IC is working diligently to implement their health and safety plans through the rest of the summer and fall, and will continue to do so when it hopes to welcome students back to campus in the spring.

Local school districts are navigating complex reopening challenges and varied public pressures. It's a reality that people in our community – and many communities around New York State and the entire country are uncertain as to what the right reopening strategies are, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Tompkins County continues to have a low prevalence of COVID-19, and with increased and sustained testing, tracing, isolation, and quarantine capacity, we are in a good position to continue with that low prevalence and reopen with caution. We will do everything we can to support districts and their students and staffs, and to recognize and address the additional public and mental health consequences that come with not having students back in our classrooms full time.

Tompkins Cortland Community College's reopening plan has been approved by SUNY. Their return-to-campus protocols are thorough, and a majority of their students are from our region and would reflect our low prevalence of COVID-19.

No plan can account for all variables, but as our legislature pointed out in a recent letter to the community, *the only constant is our responsibility to one another.*

Our Commitments Moving Forward

Our Health Department's motto is "Your partner for a healthy community." We are a publicly funded organization, and part of a larger public system – and it is our intention to engage that larger public system to help meet the public and mental health needs of our community. People of all different backgrounds and abilities have been called upon in the COVID-19 response. We have an opportunity to respond to parallel crises with the same vigilance and care.

Moving forward we will be bringing additional voices and expertise to our virtual community [town halls](#), showcasing the compassionate work that our partners do, and strategizing ways to make that work more sustainable and effective.

In conjunction with our County's commitment to ongoing surveillance testing, we will continue and strengthen our commitments to contact tracing, supporting quarantine and isolation, and communicating closely with our local institutions as they navigate this crisis and make decisions.

We are asking everyone to join us in investing our energy into caring for one another and leveraging our resources to help meet the needs of our community. We are your partner in this work.

Frank Kruppa, Tompkins County Public Health Director and Mental Health Commissioner

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