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New health officer offers guidance for employers, employees to minimize spread of COVID-19 in Crawford County

One of Dr. Linda Bean's first priorities as the new deputy health officer for Crawford County is to educate and create awareness among employers and employees in an attempt to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which gained a foothold in the county last week.

First and foremost: it is important to isolate at home if 1) you show symptoms of COVID-19 (such as fever or chills, cough, difficulty breathing, extreme tiredness, muscle aches, headache, sore throat, diarrhea, or loss of taste or smell), or 2) you have been tested and are awaiting results, regardless of whether you have symptoms, until you get the results.

Currently, there are 192 identified active cases in Crawford County — the highest of any county in Southeast Kansas — after an outbreak at Sugar Creek Packing Plant last week.

In Southwest Missouri numbers also have climbed dramatically in the past week. Many residents in Southeast Kansas and Southwest Missouri commute across the state line for work.

“Because of that increase, we want to help employees and employers understand the importance of isolation and quarantining while awaiting test results and while sick,” said Bean, a physician and Chief Clinical Officer for the Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas. “It’s vital to peoples’ health, and to our economy.”

One big misconception, Bean said, is what “asymptomatic” means.

“It means people can test positive — meaning they have COVID-19 — and can be spreading germs, or what we refer to as shedding the virus, when they’re in public

or at work, but they don't feel bad at all, or maybe have very mild symptoms," she said.

Those who test positive even if they are without symptoms should isolate at home for at least 10 days from when they were tested, and until they are released to return to work.

For those who haven't been tested and don't show symptoms, that's where masks can be important, Bean said.

"It's a very simple way to reduce risk to your co-workers and your company," she said. "As we saw locally, it can come into your place of business in a matter of a few days and spread very quickly. It can seriously impact your workforce."

"And then, a very serious concern is when you start losing critical employees in health care or other essential jobs because they contract it. Those are the people we depend on to take care of others."

Bean said it is important for Crawford County employers and employees to work together to minimize spread of the virus in the community, particularly to those who are most vulnerable and can become very sick and require hospitalization. It could be a "significant positive" for the community by keeping the healthcare system from becoming overwhelmed, and for and the business economy by allowing businesses to continue to stay open and staffed.

Initially, it was thought that asymptomatic individuals awaiting test results could continue to work with masks until they got their results.

"Our goal was to try to keep as many healthy people working as possible for our economy – to keep things as close to normal as possible," Bean said. "But as we started getting test results back and began seeing how many asymptomatic positives there were, we had to change our recommendations. People need to stay at home until they get their test results back."

Based on the current case load, that's two to five days; priority is given to the tests of health care workers and other essential positions.

Recommendations:

- To reduce the impact of a COVID-19 outbreak on businesses, workers, customers, and the public, employers should address specific exposure risks and sources of exposure.
- Employers who have not prepared should prepare themselves and their workers for the possibility of a potentially worsening outbreak.
- A COVID-19 planning guide is available online from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to help employers and employees help identify risk levels in workplace settings and to determine any appropriate control measures to implement.
- Prompt identification and isolation of potentially infectious individuals is a critical step in protecting workers, customers, visitors, and others at a worksite.
- Employers should inform and encourage employees to self-monitor for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 if they suspect possible exposure.
- Employers should develop policies and procedures for employees to report when they are sick or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.
- Actively encourage sick employees to stay home — a practice that some businesses have been violating, Bean said.
- Establish alternative days or extra shifts that reduce the total number of employees in a facility at a given time.