

**Marathon County Board of Health**  
**REVISED November 6, 2020**

**Tuesday, November 10, 2020 at 7:45 AM**

**Meeting Location: 1000 Lake View Drive, Suite 100  
Wausau, WI 54403**

**The meeting site identified above will** be open to the public. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health directives, Marathon County encourages Board of Health members and the public to attend this meeting remotely. To this end, instead of attendance in person, Board of Health members and the public may attend this meeting by telephone conference. If Board of Health members or members of the public cannot attend remotely, Marathon County requests that appropriate safety measures, including adequate social distancing, be utilized by all in-person attendees. Persons wishing to attend the meeting by phone may call into the telephone conference beginning five (5) minutes prior to the start time indicated above using the following number. When you enter the telephone conference, put your phone on mute.

Dial +1 312 626 6799 US (Chicago)  
Meeting ID: 851 2896 1112  
Password: 882227

**Committee Members:** John Robinson, Chair; Craig McEwen, Vice-Chair; Lori Shepherd, Secretary; Sandi Cihlar; Dean Danner; Kue Her; Tiffany Lee; Corrie Norrbom

**Marathon County Mission Statement:** Marathon County Government serves people by leading, coordinating, and providing county, regional, and statewide initiatives. It directly or in cooperation with other public and private partners provides services and creates opportunities that make Marathon County and the surrounding area a preferred place to live, work, visit, and do business. (Last updated: 12-20-05)

**Marathon County Health Department Mission Statement:** To advance a healthy Marathon County community by preventing disease, promoting health, and protecting the public from environmental hazards. (Last updated: 5-7-13)

- 1. Call to Order**
- 2. Public Comment Period**
- 3. Approval of the Minutes of the October 13, 2020 Board of Health Meeting**
- 4. Operational Functions Required by Statute, Ordinance, or Resolution**
  - A. None
- 5. Policy Discussion and Possible Action**
  - A. Update on the Board of Health training session focused on health equity
  - B. Share letter from the WI Department of Health Services regarding findings from the 140 Review
  - C. 2021 Funding for the Marathon County Start Right Program

- D. Report from the Health & Human Services Committee November 4, 2020 meeting on policy issues impacting public health
  - i. Public Engagement Strategies for Local Communicable Disease Ordinance
  - ii. Declaring Every Third Thursday in November as Rural Health Day
  - iii. Wisconsin Changes Policy relative to Medicaid Coverage for Incarcerated Individuals <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/news/releases/101620.htm>
- E. Discuss local efforts to controlling the spread of COVID-19 in Marathon County

**6. Educational Presentations/Outcome Monitoring Reports**

- A. Update on Marathon County’s COVID-19 response efforts and focus for the next 30-60 days to include: disease investigation/contact tracing, community testing, vaccination plans, communication to the public, and demands on community resources
- B. Update on Staffing

**7. Announcements**

**8. Next Meeting Date & Time, Location, Future Agenda Items:**

- A. Confirm December 8, 2020 meeting date and determine agenda topics
  - i. Formalizing the reporting relationship between the Board of Health and the Health & Human Services Committee

**9. Adjourn**

FAXED TO: Daily Herald, City Pages,  
Marshfield News, Mid-West Radio Group

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

THIS NOTICE POSTED AT THE COURTHOUSE

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

By \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Time \_\_\_\_\_

*Any person planning to attend this meeting who needs some type of special accommodation in order to participate should call the County Clerk’s Office at 715-261-1500 or e-mail [infomarathon@mail.co.marathon.wi.us](mailto:infomarathon@mail.co.marathon.wi.us) one business day before the meeting.*

**MARATHON COUNTY BOARD OF HEALTH**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
October 13, 2020

Present (Via Zoom): Sandi Cihlar, John Robinson, Craig McEwen, Kue Her, Dean Danner, Lori Shepherd, Corrie Norrbom, Tiffany Rodriguez-Lee

MCHD Staff: Joan Theurer, Dale Grosskurth, Judy Burrows, Chris Weisgram, Eileen Eckardt

Others Present: Tim Buttke

**1. Call to Order**

John Robinson called the meeting to order at 7:45 a.m.

**2. Public Comment Period**

Erin Crawford, 234906 Clay Road, Aniwa.

**3. Approval of the Minutes of the September 8, 2020 Board of Health Meeting**

**Motion to approve made by Sandi Cihlar. Seconded by Craig McEwen. Motion approved.**

**4. Operational Functions Required by Statute, Ordinance, or Resolution**

A. None

**5. Policy Discussion and Possible Action**

A. Update on the Board of Health Plan of Work to further strategies for a half-day retreat focused on health equity and formalizing an agreement on the reporting relationship between the Board of Health and the Health & Human Services Committee

John Robinson provided a summary of discussion held at the previous Board of Health, such as the possibility of bringing in people from various community groups, as well as potential topics for a retreat.

Discussion on how to plan and hold the retreat given the current situation with COVID-19, and potential difficulties bringing in guests.

Kue Her cautioned against relying on just one or two people from each community because of sub-groups that may adhere to more traditional culture versus western culture.

Discussion on the timeline for holding a retreat, which would be likely in the first quarter of 2021.

Discussion on how to frame the conversation of the retreat on the social determinants of health, and related impacts of COVID-19.

John Robinson shared that County Corporation Counsel provided a memo outlining statutory authority of the Board of Health, and the relationship between the Board of Health and the County Board of Supervisors. John provided background information on how the Board of Health has previously sent policy decisions through the County Board for the purpose of building consensus within the County.

Discussion on the need formalize in writing the reporting relationship to the Health & Human Services Committee, how the Board of Health can act on its own, and when the County Board has the ability to override.

B. Update on the WI Department of Health Services 140 Review conducted on September 15, 2020

Joan Theurer shared that the review was conducted on September 15. The review was abbreviated due to the response to COVID-19, and the additional burden on health departments as a result. A written summary of the review is expected within the next month. Joan included the Foundational Public Health Services document in the meeting packet. Joan reviewed the impact of the COVID-19 response on delivery of services from the Health Department, including what is being put on hold, and what has continued.

Joan shared that areas of infrastructure have also been put on hold, due to response efforts, but as capacity returns, those areas will need to be looked at again.

Judy Burrows shared examples of partnerships that have been developed through working with areas of the community that have seen bigger impacts due to COVID-19.

C. Update on the Marathon County School-Based Mental Health Consortium

Judy Burrows shared a brief overview of the program, with the Health department being one of ten health departments in the state working under the Changemakers grant from Medical College of Wisconsin. Currently the second phase of the grant project is underway. The consortium worked to determine how delivery of services would look, given the return to school for students across the county. Therapists are receiving ongoing training to better learn how to provide telehealth services to students.

Discussion on how school districts are adjusting to the changes with education, and how staff might better be able to identify student needs.

Discussion on what additional data could be collected to provide better information on what needs students have.

D. Update on the 2020 and 2021 Marathon County Health Department budget

Joan Theurer shared a brief update on the remainder of the 2020 budget, and what 2021 looks like at this point. The County has received Routes to Recovery funds, which are being utilized as much as possible. The WI Department of Health Services is being billed for COVID-19 grants, but are very specific as to how funds can be used. Joan shared that medical assistance reimbursements are less than anticipated, due to a lower level of Start Right

services being delivered. For 2021, the budget was proposed with the intent of carrying out pre-Covid-19 services. The budget does not reflect what will be needed for the COVID-19 pandemic response. Additional funding will be available from the state level, but it is still being determined how those funds can be utilized.

- E. Report from the Health & Human Services Committee September 30, 2020 meeting on policy issues impacting public health

John Robinson shared recent activity at the Health and Human Services Committee.

- A weekly bus service pilot program was proposed for the Rib Mountain and Weston communities
- Adult Protective Services transfer to Aging and Disability Resource Center has been slowed to address some logistical issues
- Discussion was held on the committee's role in considering a communicable disease ordinance, as well as identifying a strategy to develop broader community engagement.

Joan shared the Health Department is working with partners to further develop ways to share stories regarding the impact of COVID-19 on community members.

**6. Educational Presentations/Outcome Monitoring Reports**

- A. Update on Marathon County's COVID-19 response efforts and focus for the next 30-60 days

Joan shared that with the substantial increase in cases during the last 3-4 weeks, the response has shifted to carrying out crisis standards for disease investigation and contact tracing. Cases are being prioritized based on populations that are more vulnerable, including child care, schools, long term care facilities, and health care workers. Current capacity is to handle 25-30 new cases per day, but numbers are currently around 80-100 per day.

Joan shared that NW-HERC recently put in a system for health care organizations to share their capacity for admitting patients, available beds, staffing, impact on elective surgeries, and availability of PPE and testing. An additional impact is the ability of hospital systems to return patients to skilled nursing care at long term care facilities.

- B. Staffing Update

Joan Theurer shared Season Welle, Director of Operations, is transitioning to a position at the Finance Department as of October 18, 2020.

John Robinson shared appreciation on behalf of the Board of Health, for her years of service to the Health Department.

**7. Announcements**

**8. Next Meeting Date & Time, Location, Future Agenda Items:**

- A. Confirm November 10, 2020 meeting date and determine agenda topics

**9. Adjourn**

**Motion to adjourn made by Craig McEwen. Seconded by Dean Danner. The meeting adjourned at 9:27 a.m.**

Respectfully submitted,

Lori Shepherd, Secretary  
Chris Weisgram, Recorder

DRAFT

**Health Officer Notes  
November, 2020**

To facilitate diverse perspectives, consider the following questions during the policy discussion.

- Who benefits from or will be burdened by your proposal?
- What are the strategies for mitigation unintended consequences?

**Policy Discussion and Possible Action**

**A. Update on the Board of Health training session focused on health equity**

The Board of Health will further define the scope of the training session and timeframe.

**B. Share letter from the WI Department of Health Services regarding findings from the 140 Review**

Enclosed, find letter from the WI Department of Health Services dated October 14, 2020.

**C. Report from the Health & Human Services Committee November 4, 2020 meeting on policy issues impacting public health**

John Robinson, Board of Health Chair and Joan Theurer, Health Officer will provide an update on policy issues discussed.

**D. Discuss local efforts to controlling the spread of COVID-19**

Board members will share and discuss local efforts underway in controlling the spread of COVID-19 in Marathon County. Enclosed, find Members in Action "Community Collaboration during COVID-19: Reaching Hmong and Latino Residents in a Rural Setting".

**Educational Presentations/Outcome Monitoring Reports**

**A. Update on Marathon County's COVID-19 response efforts and focus for the next 30-60 days to include: disease investigation/contact tracing, community testing, vaccination plans, communication to the public, and demands on community resources**

Joan Theurer, Health Officer will do an overview of the department's response efforts for the next 30-60 days, fielding questions and concerns from Board of Health members.

**B. Update on staffing**

Patti Poverski, Administrative Specialist retired on November 2, 2020. Patti has served the Health Department for over 30 years in supporting Family Health program services.

Kim Wieloch has accepted the Director of Operation position and will be starting on November 30, 2020.

**Announcements**

**Next Meeting Date & Time, Location, Future Agenda Items:**

- A. Confirm December 8, 2020 meeting date and determine agenda topics

Tony Evers  
Governor



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PO BOX 2659  
MADISON WI 53701-2659

Andrea Palm  
Secretary

**State of Wisconsin**  
Department of Health Services

Telephone: 608-266-1251  
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October 14, 2020

John Robinson  
Chair, Marathon County Health Board  
500 Forest Street  
Wausau, WI 54403

Dear Mr. Robinson:

The Department of Health Services (DHS) congratulates the Marathon County Health Department for demonstrating the infrastructure and program capacity to be certified as a Level III health department. I am happy to report the Marathon County Health Department met all of the criteria reviewed by the DHS review team.

The DHS 140 review is an opportunity to assess quality improvement opportunities in addition to Wisconsin statute and rule compliance. This focus helps assure a strong statewide public health system. During this time of limited capacity for local health departments and DHS, we are reviewing health departments with the goals of maintaining legal compliance and reducing regulatory stress. DHS anticipates returning to quality improvement focused reviews in either 2021 or 2022. The Marathon County Health Department and the 21 other local health departments who will undergo these limited capacity reviews will be the first departments given a quality improvement review.

I want to acknowledge the work of the Marathon County Health Department staff. Joan Theurer, health officer, did an excellent job of representing and explaining the work of the health department. The stress of operating a health department and the demands on public health directors and professionals have increased exponentially during this state and global pandemic. I applaud the dedicated efforts of Joan and the Marathon Health Department staff to keep your jurisdiction healthy and safe.

I also appreciate the support of the Marathon County Health Board for maintaining a strong public health department. Pandemic response has potentially caused you and your jurisdiction to think about public health issues you may have not considered before. I am sure with ongoing support for evidence-based quality public health initiatives by you and your fellow board of health members, the Marathon County Health Department will continue to protect and promote the health of the people in your jurisdiction.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephanie Smiley".

Stephanie Smiley  
Interim State Health Officer & Division Administrator

c: Joan Theurer, Marathon County Health Officer  
Lance Leonhard, Marathon County Administrator  
Angela Nimsgern, Director, Northern Region



**RESOLUTION R-\_\_\_\_-20**

**PROCLAIM THE THIRD THURSDAY IN NOVEMBER  
"RURAL HEALTH DAY" IN MARATHON COUNTY**

WHEREAS, one in three Marathon County residents lives in a rural community; and

WHEREAS, these rural communities have historically had an agriculture based economy; and

WHEREAS, the residents of our rural communities face unique health needs due to limited public transportation options, lower personal incomes and a larger percentage of uninsured and underinsured people, and limited access to telemedicine and telehealth resources due to limited access to broadband; and

WHEREAS, the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health, the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, and the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield, UW-Extension/Cooperative Extension have joined together to acknowledge the assets of rural America while raising awareness of the unique health issues of rural America during National Rural Health Day on the Third Thursday of November; and

WHEREAS, Marathon County's Strategic Plan 2018-2022 is in support of providing leadership for greater cooperation and collaboration among state, regional and local public and private entities.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Marathon County Board of Supervisors proclaim the Third Thursday in November as Rural Health Day in recognition of the special challenges to maintaining good personal health in a rural community and in celebration of all that our rural communities contribute to the quality of life we all enjoy in Marathon County.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the County Board of Supervisors will support efforts to address the challenges of meeting the health care needs of residents living in rural communities.

Dated this 10<sup>th</sup> day of November, 2020.

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

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**Fiscal Impact:** To reduce Marathon County costs associated with healthcare and lost productivity and wages.

References:  
Wisconsin Office of Rural Health – National Rural Health Day ([www.worh.org](http://www.worh.org))  
Rural Assistance Center – Health and Human Services Information for Rural America. ([www.raconline.org/states/wisconsin.php](http://www.raconline.org/states/wisconsin.php))

## Overview

Communicating crucial health information is key in preventing the transmission of COVID-19 and mitigating its spread. For populations who speak a language other than English, communication is particularly important since health and health care disparities that already exist put them at higher risk for more severe illness during the pandemic. Advancing health equity and protecting all populations during the pandemic both are paramount.

Immigrant communities are particularly vulnerable to health, educational and economic challenges. In rural north central Wisconsin, messaging about the COVID-19 pandemic was not consistently reaching the Hmong and Latino communities. Local and state organizations now are partnering to meet this challenge.

## Approach

To address existing communication barriers, a small group of people from across central Wisconsin met virtually to discuss the challenges and develop an innovative approach. This group began reaching out to gather more partners and write and submit a grant. The initial group included representatives from Ascension Wisconsin, Marshfield Clinic Health System, Aspirus, Medical College of Wisconsin—Central Wisconsin, Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, E.A.G. Interpreters Hispanic Outreach, and the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce.

The collaborators developed a proposal that focused on strengthening communication channels and facilitating regular information exchange between local health systems, public health officials, resource agencies, and people in the Hmong and Latino communities, by establishing community coordinators and a network of community liaisons. Project partners contribute in many



different ways including sharing cultural insights, making trusted community connections, grant writing, in-house printing, providing financial support, offering evaluation expertise, providing educational resources, collating available resources, providing IT support, enhancing health care access, linking to basic needs, and donating masks and materials.

The initial grant proposal was not funded. However, by building on small successes and additional efforts, the partnering organizations obtained local funds and began implementing a pilot project. For this pilot, E.A.G. Interpreters Hispanic Outreach and the United Way of Marathon County coordinated a grocery distribution event for Latino families in north central Wisconsin. This event helped project partners further identify community needs as well as individuals in the community who could serve as liaisons and share information to and from their own community.

Building on the momentum, several new partners joined the effort, including Marathon County Health Department, Hmong American Center, North Central Health Care, United Way of Marathon County, Bridge Community Clinic, Family Health La Clinica (a federally qualified health center), United Way of Wisconsin, 2-1-1 Wisconsin and the Free Clinic.

In May 2020, eight people began training as part-time community liaisons. Four of these individuals are liaisons with the Hmong community, and the other four are liaisons with the Latino community. The training included learning about COVID-19 prevention measures and testing, and how to answer anticipated questions and address challenges. Role playing and modeling preventive behaviors, such as masking and handwashing, were emphasized during the training.

## Impact

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From May through July 2020, the project has helped more than 1,000 Latino and Hmong families in central Wisconsin share their concerns and needs, and at the same time receive information and resources about COVID-19 in their preferred language.

Strengths of the project include:

- Having a backbone organization is key. The Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service took on a substantial leadership role in coordinating, fundraising, communicating and training. WIPPS' flexibility and dedication assured the effective launch and maintenance of this project.
- The design of the project — including in-person, appropriately distanced, verbal sharing of information — has been very effective. Reading literacy among some Hmong elders is low, and thus translated, written communications are less effective. The in-person, socially distanced contacts are more effective for communicating essential health information.
- Liaisons with the Marathon County Health Department identified the need for developing guidelines for



Hmong funerals. A guide that is relevant to all funeral practices — not just for people observing Hmong traditions — was created and published in English and Hmong.

- Liaisons with the Latino community shared that some individuals are reluctant to take advantage of community resources and services because they fear that their citizenship status would be revealed. Liaisons addressed this concern by explaining what is to be expected in each situation. For example, Latino liaisons worked with health department personnel at a free COVID-19 testing site and explained to interested participants that they would not be asked about their immigration status, but if tested for COVID-19, they would need to answer phone calls, even from unfamiliar numbers, to receive test results. Liaisons also have been instrumental in building community trust to facilitate the ability of health departments to conduct contact tracing.
- The Spanish word for “quarantine” implies 40 days, which can cause confusion since COVID-19 quarantines are 14 days. Project liaisons have reduced that confusion by providing accurate information about quarantining in a culturally and linguistically knowledgeable way.

## Lessons Learned

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- Build on existing partnerships and relationships. The project group came together relatively quickly because many of the individuals already had connections and working relationships with each other. Without that trust and prior collaborative experience, the planning would have proceeded more slowly — and may have faltered.
- Understand that credibility matters. The liaisons are reaching out to people in their own communities. They are invited into homes — where they are candidly spoken to and listened to intently — because of their history with and connection to that particular community.
- Act nimbly. When Latino liaisons visited a dairy farm to share information with Spanish speakers, they encountered some workers from Kenya who inquired about getting information in their own language. After taking this request to the community coordinator and



project manager, resources in Swahili were located and then shared with the Kenyan workers.

- Build on the basics. More than 500 Latino families participated in grocery distribution events. At those events, community liaisons shared additional information about COVID-19 prevention and testing.
- Remember it doesn't hurt to ask. The Hmong American Center in the city of Wausau has been a constant for the Hmong community for 35 years. Since spring 2020, the Hmong American Center has become a central physical location for this project, as needed. The center has been welcoming and flexible in accommodating requests for storage space (e.g., for masks and hand sanitizer), leadership education and training, emergency food and rental assistance, employment and immigration information, and other activities for Hmong and Latino participants in the project.
- Use technology. One of the small grants received funded the purchase of iPads, which are used to share and play videos with coronavirus information. Reading is difficult for many individuals receiving services, so the videos are a primary means of communicating messages effectively.
- Include and increase visibility of community members' voices. The informational videos are created by individuals who are Latino or Hmong. These videos are recorded in the first language of the listener, but the presenter is a member of the respective racial or ethnic group. For example, the Hmong Medical Association has created several videos on the coronavirus that feature experts who are Hmong.

One overall success of the project is how it has empowered some of the community liaisons. The liaisons are taking the opportunity to become leaders and advocates in their community. They have stepped up with integrity, strength and confidence to help fight the spread of the coronavirus. For instance, Latino liaisons found their way around a dairy farm, earning the trust of not only the farm workers but also the farm employers, and learned how to handle arguments that arise but are contrary to the facts they are providing.

## Future Goals

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The individuals and organizations collaborating on this project are passionate about reducing the impacts of COVID-19. Now there is momentum to implement further work to strengthen communication channels via the Hmong and Latino community liaisons. The project costs approximately \$10,000 each month to fund the coordinators and liaisons' time and expenses, with additional in-kind support provided by the Medical College of Wisconsin—Central Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service. Funding is available through late fall 2020.

Project partners will continue to collect data to tally the number of people being reached, directly and indirectly; collect basic demographics; assess knowledge about COVID-19 and community behaviors; and identify resources needed by the communities. Partners also will continue to apply for funding for the project.

Existing relationships and communication pathways have been strengthened, and new ones have been built. These relationships and pathways will be essential as the coronavirus continues to challenge communities.


## Contact

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### **Corina Norrbom, M.D.**

Health Policy Fellow

Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service

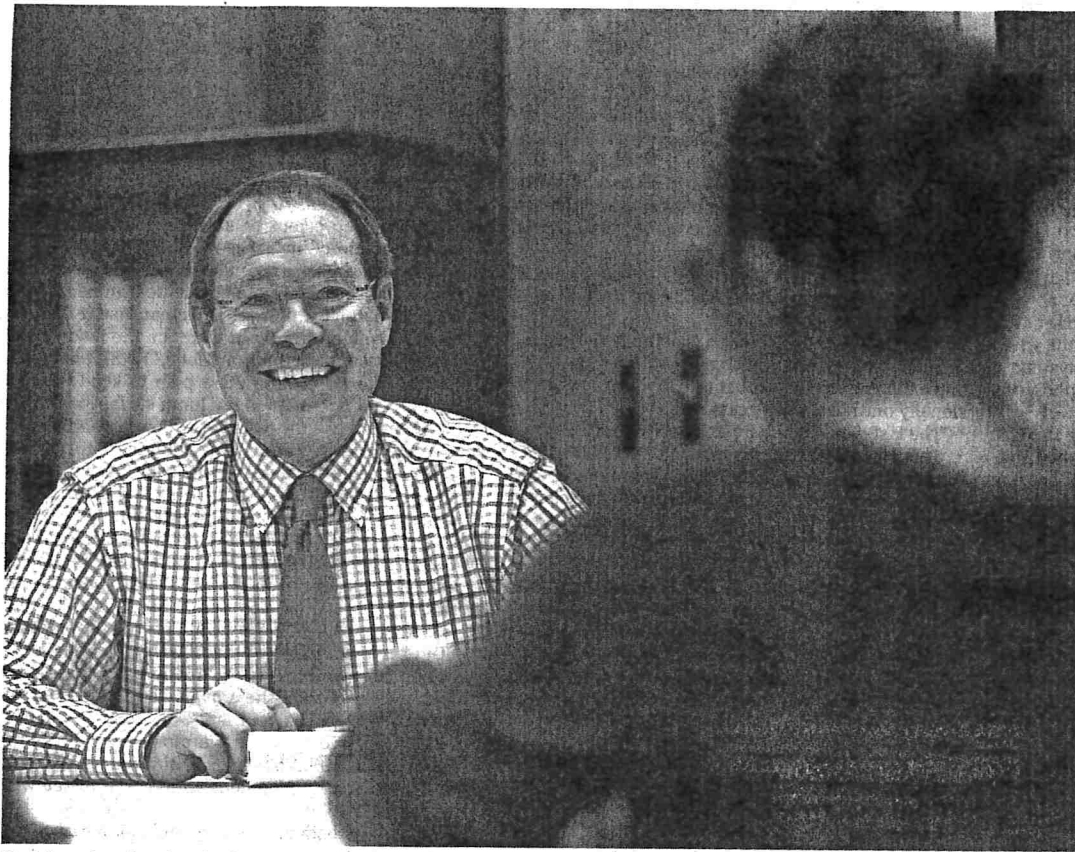
 [cnorrbom@mcw.edu](mailto:cnorrbom@mcw.edu)

### **Sarah Beversdorf**

Northern Region Manager, Community Benefit and  
Community Health Improvement  
Ascension Wisconsin

 [sarah.beversdorf@ascension.org](mailto:sarah.beversdorf@ascension.org)





Kurt Eggebrecht, the city health officer for Appleton, discusses an issue with public health nurse Jessica Moyle earlier this year. DAN POWERS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

# 'At what point is enough enough?'

## As COVID-19 cases surge, Wisconsin's contact tracers 'cannot keep up'

Madeline Heim

USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

From the beginning of the pandemic, contact tracing has been a cornerstone of Wisconsin's plan to contain the coronavirus.

Public health employees would promptly notify people who tested positive and ask them to stay away from others. Then they'd give a heads-up to those who had contact with the infected person, and ask them to stay home, too. If everyone who was infected or exposed locked down, the virus would be locked down.

Public health officials implemented the strategy, long used to control infectious disease, and continue to push ahead with it. But with an average of 3,400 new cases pouring in each day just in the last week - the third highest per-person rate in the U.S. - contact tracers are now so overrun that some have begun to wonder whether the job is

futile.

"That's a very valid question. I've been in many meetings where it's been asked," said Kim Goffard, communicable disease nurse supervisor in Winnebago County, among the state's hardest-hit places. "At what point is enough enough?"

The math is dismal. Many Wisconsin residents continue to gather, often without a mask, as cases surge, so a person who tests positive might report 10 or more close contacts who need to be reached quickly. Multiply that by 3,400, and the task becomes Sisyphean: close to 40,000 people for the state's little more than a thousand tracers to reach with each new day.

Some Wisconsin counties are now stopping short of reaching out to an infected person's contacts, instead asking the infected person to do that work themselves. That includes Dane Coun-

See **TRACERS**, Page 4A



Spc. Kami Henning talks to a recently tested person about the results of their test for COVID-19. MARK HOFFMAN / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

**"In an ideal world, contact tracing works, and we ought to be doing more of it. But in a situation when there is a tremendous surge of cases, localities have to ask a couple of additional questions."**

**Anand Parekh**, physician and chief medical adviser for the Bipartisan Policy Center

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# Tracers

Continued from Page 1A

ty, the second-most populous in the state, which said in a news release this week it has switched to a "crisis model" of contact tracing.

Officials at the state Department of Health Services have declined to provide specific metrics about the success of Wisconsin's tracing efforts, like what percentage of people are reached and how quickly, but recent press briefings have included bleak assessments from top officials.

DHS chief medical officer Dr. Ryan Westergaard told reporters last week that Wisconsin's entire public health infrastructure — including state, local and tribal health departments — "cannot keep up."

"Public health is so strained that you can't count on us to tell you (where the virus is), which is really, really not where we want to be," he said.

The state hasn't given up; it plans to hire more tracers who can chip in where spread is most rampant. Local health departments, too, are adjusting their priorities to protect the most at-risk populations, such as those in nursing homes or homeless shelters.

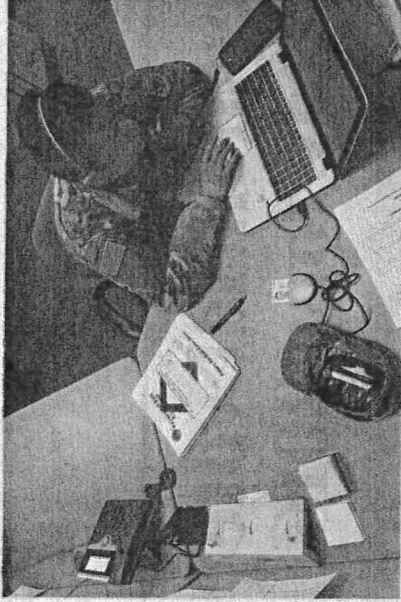
But if the state's public health departments have any chance of doing contact tracing again like it ought to be done, they say, residents will need to redouble their efforts to get the virus back under control. And given the number of people who have turned ignoring the virus into a political litmus test, that may be a tall order.

## Little known about state's efforts

Ideally, contact tracing and testing work hand in hand to produce a controlled and effective response to a disease outbreak.

Today, 118 labs across the state can process more than 42,000 tests per day, and expanded Wisconsin National Guard community testing sites are making it easier for people to get tested close to home.

Much less has been revealed about the number and effectiveness of the state's contact tracers — even before they were overwhelmed by the current surge. What little we know about the state's contact tracing efforts has been pieced together from USA TODAY NET-



**Spc. Ger Yang tells a recently tested person their results for COVID-19 were negative over the summer. About 40 Wisconsin National Guard soldiers and airmen volunteered to help local health officials notify people of their results.**

MARK HOFFMAN/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

some of the data contained in those files after a leading business lobby sued to prevent the release of information about businesses tied to COVID-19 cases.

The state took three months to respond to a records request filed in July asking how many tracers were hired, where surge tracers had come and what basic training materials were being provided.

DHS said this summer it was working on a framework to track the success of contact tracing efforts, and as of Sept. 1, an administrator said it would be released "in the coming weeks," but there has been no public word of it since.

In response to a list of questions asked Wednesday by USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin reporters, a spokeswoman said she would try to get answers, but said Thursday night that people hadn't gotten back to her.

## Speed is everything

The most seasoned public health nurse can plow through about five contact tracing investigations in a day, provided a lunch break is skipped.

Each investigation can involve upward of an hour to review the case file, reach the person, conduct the interview and enter their responses in a statewide database, Marathon County health offi-

cer Joan Theurer said. If the case involves a nursing home, or if the person needs extra support like an alternate housing situation while isolating, it can take longer.

In early September, when the county was recording fewer than 50 new COVID-19 cases a week, Theurer's staff was notifying people of their positive test result in less than a day, and reaching their close contacts in less than two.

But then those numbers started to grow. Last week, she said, the health department saw 730 new cases in fewer than seven days.

At best, her two dozen tracing staff members might get through 100 cases a day and that doesn't include the infected people's close contacts. In that week alone, and with those calls alone, they would have fallen more than 100 cases behind.

Conventional wisdom about viral outbreaks says a virus will stop spreading when the average number of people who get the virus from an infected person is below 1.

According to a July study published in *The Lancet*, if the average COVID-19 patient was infecting 1.2 people, a combination of quick testing and robust contact tracing could bring that number down to 0.8.

But if either testing or tracing is delayed — which might happen either because labs are behind or tracers can't keep up with volume — the effectiveness decreases.

With a zero-day delay between symptom onset and tracing, up to 80% of future transmissions could be prevented, the study says. At three days, you stop up to 42%. By seven days delayed, you're under 5%.

DHS training documents say tracers should attempt to reach a person by making three different calls, three different times of day and by three different methods (like texting or mailing a letter), plus two additional tries over the next two days, before giving up.

Some local health departments, particularly in the northern and western parts of the state, had reported success until the recent surge.

Back when the caseload was manageable in Winnebago County, nurses would routinely follow up with a patient to see how they were doing in isolation. In Waushara County, tracers would call every few days for 14 days if they

See TRACERS, Page 5A

## CORONAVIRUS IN WISCONSIN



President Donald Trump arrives to his Make America Great Again event at Central Wisconsin Aviation Sept. 17 in Mosinee. SAMANTHA MADAR/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

# Caution urged at mass gatherings

## Health officials warn of 'super spreader events' ahead of Pence rally in Mosinee

Allison Garfield Wausau Daily Herald  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

MOSINEE - Marathon County public health authorities warned that mass gatherings of any kind can become "super spreader events" ahead of Vice President Mike Pence's planned campaign visit to Mosinee Wednesday.

Pence will hold the first in a series of rallies across the Midwest at Central Wisconsin Airport in Mosinee on Wednesday amid a continuing outbreak in COVID-19 cases in the region and on his own staff. The vice president seeks to drum up enthusiasm for President Donald Trump in the waning days of the election as polls continue to show Democratic former Vice President Joe Biden leading in Wisconsin.

Trump was scheduled to return to Wisconsin on Tuesday for his second visit in less than a week, and Biden plans a stop in the state on Friday.

Pence's chief of staff, Marc Short, along with at least five people in the vice president's circle, have tested positive for COVID-19 in recent days. Pence and his wife, Karen, tested negative for the virus Saturday, and Pence is not curtailing his campaigning or following public

health guidance to quarantine.

Marathon County had totaled 4,495 confirmed COVID-19 cases through Monday. The county's health department has designated the disease activity level "very high," with a sizeable increase in cases in the past two weeks.

"Mass gatherings of any kind can become super spreader events. Anyone attending (a) large gathering should wear a face mask and social distance to protect each other from the spread of disease," Judy Burrows, Marathon County's health department spokesperson said.

"This is incredibly important to slowing the spread of COVID, keeping kids in school, employees working and businesses open."

A recent USA TODAY analysis shows the growth in new COVID-19 cases sped up in at least five places after Trump held rallies there in the past two months, including in Marathon County.

Marathon County's case count surged by 67% after Trump's visit compared with Wisconsin's overall growth rate of 29% during the same time.

Marathon County Republican Party spokesperson Kevin Hermening said the vice president's visit to the area high-

**"Mass gatherings of any kind can become super spreader events. Anyone attending (a) large gathering should wear a face mask and social distance to protect each other from the spread of disease."**

Judy Burrows  
Marathon County's health department spokesperson

lights the importance of central Wisconsin to the Trump re-election strategy.

"Everyone is happy to hear that those individuals in the vice president's close circle and staff are recovering well from their recent bout with COVID-19," Hermening said. "Locally, Republicans are motivated to send a message to the nation that we want to deliver for President Trump, and give his team four more years."

He encouraged those who chose to attend Pence's rally to adhere to local health guidelines.

The Committee to Protect Medicare, a national physician group advocating for patients and the preservation of their health care, asked the Trump campaign last week to stop all future rallies in Wis-

See RALLY, Page 6A

# Letters threaten 'war' on local Biden supporters

Allison Garfield Wausau Daily Herald  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

ROTHSCHILD - The Rothschild Police Department is investigating anonymous, threatening letters sent to local Joe Biden supporters, calling them an "enemy" who are easy to target in a "conservative and white neighborhood."

The letters were sent to residences with Biden presidential campaign signs on their lawns and state that "public support for a party that is literally destroying our cities before our eyes" will not be tolerated in the neighborhood.

"Not only are you and your families not welcome in this neighborhood, you are considered a direct threat to the safety and well-being of our families and children," the letters say.

The Rothschild Police Department received a complaint about one letter on Friday afternoon. They are investigating the incident and trying to determine the source.

While political campaign signs have been vandalized or stolen in the area recently, these personalized notes are more serious, according to Police Chief Jeremy Hunt.

See LETTERS, Page 6A

# High court rejects change to voting rule

Patrick Marley Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

MADISON - The U.S. Supreme Court upheld Wisconsin's voting laws Monday, rejecting an effort to require the counting of absentee ballots that are sent back to election officials on or just before Election Day.

The court's 5-3 ruling means that absentee ballots will be counted only if they are in the hands of municipal clerks by the time polls close Nov. 3.

Democrats, their allies and nonpartisan groups argued the state law requiring absentee ballots to be returned by Election Day should be loosened because of the coronavirus pandemic and a slowing of mail. They wanted ballots that are postmarked on or before Election Day to be counted.

See BALLOTS, Page 5A



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support for a party that is literally destroying our cities before our eyes nightly tolerated in our neighborhood.

nearly 100% conservative and white neighborhood, thought your side considers "ge" and racist? Funny you don't choose to live with the animals in the ghettos or the road why is that?

ment a housing plan during the last administration (has said he will implement would have Mandated section 8 housing be forced into subdivisions like our own "age" and by that we mean civilized society.

ur families not welcome in this neighborhood you are considered a direct Threat being of our families and children.

your side that has forced us into this situation. Our side goes to work every day to believe in god and country while building strong and successful communities. Education and destruction, teaching our kids to hate a false history of this country and the things this nation has accomplished. You can see the results of this nightly as they burn their own cities.

support on your front lawn for the side of destruction and Evil, you have made it easy and help us prepare for the war that your side keeps pushing.

easy, so get in line."

Wausau Mayor Katie Rosenberg asked residents of the area not to take matters into their own hands and to let the police investigate. She hopes residents in the area still vote despite intimidation tactics.

"We're better than this," Rosenberg said.

"I hope it's not encouraging people to stay home," she said.

Contact Allison Garfield at 715-351-9799 or [agarfield@gannett.com](mailto:agarfield@gannett.com). Follow her on Twitter @aligarfield\_.

## Rally

Continued from Page 1A

consin during the swell of COVID-19 cases in the state.

Dr. William Hocking, a retired Marshfield Clinic physician and member of the committee, said the Trump and Pence rallies lack the two measures known to prevent the spread of the virus: masks and social distancing.

"I think Trump campaign visits that include these mass rallies are extremely reckless and irresponsible and violate their own government, as well as state, guidelines," Hocking said. "The Pence

visit, in particular, is dangerous given that five of his immediate staff have recently tested positive for the virus.

"The bottom line is that these campaign rallies are not essential business, they are putting Wisconsinites and our health care systems at risk and they should be canceled."

Along with Pence's visit to Mosinee on Wednesday, President Trump will hold a rally Tuesday in West Salem, marking his third visit to the state in the past two weeks.

The details of Biden's planned visit on Friday have not yet been released.

Contact Allison Garfield at 715-351-9799 or [agarfield@gannett.com](mailto:agarfield@gannett.com). Follow her on Twitter @aligarfield\_.

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