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**February 11, 2022**

**Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department News Release**

**Health Department to lift K-12 mask mandate  
effective 11:59 p.m. February 17**

Due to improving conditions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department is announcing that the [First Amended Order](#) which requires masks to be worn in school settings will be lifted in one week, with rescission effective at 11:59 p.m., Thursday, February 17, 2022.

Although the lifting of the mandate does not take effect for one week, the announcement was made by Health Officer Lisa Peacock and Medical Director Dr. Josh Meyerson on February 10 to give school leaders advance notice prior to lifting the public health order so they had time to notify their school boards, prepare staff, make necessary policy changes, and notify families and their communities. This notice was expressed as preferable by many of the school superintendents across the jurisdiction throughout weekly discussions with the school leaders.

“The purpose of the [First Amended Order](#) was to protect students, school staff, as well as the community and was originally issued on August 27, 2021, and amended on November 9, 2021,” Peacock said. “It was based on overwhelming medical evidence and support as well as then current and ongoing COVID-19 epidemic conditions including rapid growth of case and positivity rates, rising and ongoing strain on healthcare capacity, and a student population that was largely unvaccinated with no opportunity for vaccination of the youngest school-age children who weren’t yet eligible,” she said.

Ongoing review of local, regional, and state data has revealed the following information which supports the decision to rescind the emergency order:

- Ongoing weekly monitoring of pandemic risk indicators demonstrating weekly cases per 100,000 have decreased by 67% statewide over the past three weeks and decreased by 56% in the Traverse City Michigan Economic Recovery (MERC) region.
- While an increase in hospitalizations has typically followed a similar pattern as cases in previous surges, hospitalizations did rise but not as sharply as cases in the recent COVID-19 Omicron variant surge. Modeling projections estimate that an increase in deaths will also follow but are also not expected to rise as sharply as previous surges and it is predicted that this will continue to become evident over the next 1-2 weeks.
- Parents have had ample opportunity to get their eligible school-age children vaccinated and there continues to be [available appointments](#) in all counties for COVID-19 first doses, second doses, or booster vaccinations. In the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department jurisdiction, 36% of 5-11-year-olds and 55% of those 12-15 have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccination.
- Regular discussions with hospital partners reveal that several elements of healthcare capacity are in the early stages of improving, including staffing shortages and absences, general and ICU capacity, and the volume of COVID inpatients.
- We now have access to additional tools and strategies for mitigating risk of COVID-19 including widespread vaccination opportunities, increasing availability of testing both at home and at community sites, broad access to effective masks and public health information for the general public. The health department continues to prioritize equitable access to these protective resources.

In general, due to the changing conditions of the pandemic, the public health response across local, state, and national agencies is shifting its focus from mandates and restrictions to individual personal protection responsibilities. One example of this is the recent transition away from universal case investigation and contact tracing which opens resources for more effective targeted strategies in high-risk settings and outbreak situations.

“As we have discussed in the past, a public health emergency order is only a temporary strategy, only exercised when other methods of protecting the public’s health haven’t been possible or effective,” Peacock noted.

Dr. Meyerson emphasized that the lifting of the order is not intended to indicate that masking is no longer important.

“Masking indoors and in crowded settings continues to be recommended by major health authorities and schools are urged to maintain masking policies especially when transmission levels remain substantial or high,” Dr. Meyerson said. “The CDC offers [key messages](#) on properly wearing and choosing an appropriate mask. Masking on buses and other forms of public transportation continues to be a federal requirement,” he added.

The health department continues to provide easy and free access to the COVID-19 vaccine in all its counties. Appointments and walk-in clinics are available [via this link](#). In addition, while supplies last, the health department is distributing free KN95 masks at all office locations in Benzie and Leelanau counties.

Individuals are encouraged to get tested if they show any [symptoms of COVID-19](#) and to isolate while they are [ill or if they test positive](#). Free and easily accessible [testing sites](#) are located throughout the health department jurisdiction.

In addition, health department professionals are available to help school families and any other community members navigate any questions they may have about COVID-19 symptoms, vaccinations, or what to do if they are exposed to the coronavirus and [need to isolate or quarantine](#). To discuss health concerns with health department staff during normal business hours, call 231-882-2197.

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