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FILE PHOTO

New restrictions target COVID-19 spread in state

Bars, restaurants, large gatherings will feel impact

BY JEREMY JONES AND BRENT SCHACHERER
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Bars and restaurants, wedding receptions and social gatherings are the targets of new restrictions Gov. Tim Walz announced last week in answer to rising COVID-19 case numbers.

Meeker County Commissioner Beth Oberg sees the numbers, worries about public health and knew the governor was likely to act.

But as the manager of the Nelsan-Horton American Legion restaurant and bar, Oberg struggles with the plan.

"At first I thought, 'well, it could have been worse,'" Oberg said of the restrictions announced Nov. 10. "But as I sat back and thought about it ... it's not good at all."

The restrictions, Oberg said, are likely to have a negative effect on the lunch time business at the Legion. Many lunch regulars sit alone at the bar, which already has a socially distanced seating arrangement. The new rules forbid bar seating, so those single customers will likely take up a table themselves, impacting the number of clients who can be served over the noon hour.

"We're going to have to figure it out," Oberg

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Beth Oberg

'We all have to make sacrifices'

Surging COVID-19 cases strain local, state healthcare system

BY BRENT SCHACHERER
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Dr. Deb Peterson would like nothing more than to see her 87-year-old mother. And her newborn grandson.

But she is going to wait. With coronavirus raging, now is not the time to risk a visit, even with close family members, she said.

She would like to see everyone make those kinds of tough decisions over the coming weeks.

"We all have to make sacrifices," said Peterson, chief medical officer at Meeker Memorial Hospital and Clinics. "If we want things to stay open to the degree they're open, we better start doing these things now, or there will be a complete shutdown, I'm afraid."

Minnesota Department of Health reported 7,559 new cases on Sunday in the state, one day after seeing a record high 8,689 cases reported on Saturday. That lifted the state's total confirmed COVID-19 cases since the outbreak began to 201,795. The state has seen 2,861 deaths from confirmed cases. MDH also reported 12,443 hospitalizations, with 3,086 of those ending up in intensive care units.

As of Sunday, Meeker County had 727

confirmed cases. Meanwhile, surrounding counties were seeing even higher numbers, with McLeod County at 1,261, Kandiyohi 2,698, Stearns 9,883 and Wright at 5,025.

Those numbers — in particular, the hospitalizations and ICU numbers — worry Peterson and others at Meeker Memorial Hospital and throughout the state's health care system.

As numbers and hospitalizations rise, the system is being overwhelmed. COVID-19 cases flooding into hospitals needing respiratory care mean fewer options for other medical emergencies.

"It's a serious situation, and it's hard for us as healthcare workers to get a patient in that we know needs a higher level of care and we know we don't have anywhere to transfer them," Ann Lien, chief quality officer at Meeker Memorial Hospital, said. "It's awful for the families and the patient."

Peterson said Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar and the St. Cloud Hospital both were near capacity at the end of last week. Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis had about 60 patients in its emergency room because there were no beds available elsewhere in the facility or other facilities, she said.

"That's the reality of what this is doing to the healthcare system," Peterson said. "It's hard for families, emotional and hard for the staff (to know) there may be a delay in sending a patient to a hospital with a higher degree of care ... and that can impact outcome."

Meeker Memorial triage line

If you're experiencing symptoms that have you wondering if you've contracted the COVID-19 virus, Meeker Memorial Hospital & Clinics offers a triage line to offer medical advice.

People can call the triage line at Call via Mitel 320-373-1026.

Call volumes have increased tremendously during the past couple of weeks, according to Marc Vaillancourt, vice president of development and operations at MMHC, but medical staff stand ready to help as quickly as they can.

"We just need people who call to know that they may not get a live person right away because call volumes are so high," Vaillancourt said. "They need to leave a message, and our staff will call them back."

When calling the triage line, people should leave their name, birth date and phone number in their message.

Beyond the number of COVID-19 cases showing up at hospitals is the impact the virus is having on healthcare staff. Meeker Memorial, like other healthcare facilities, has had to

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Veterans Day salute

The coronavirus pandemic put a bit of a damper on Veterans Day observances last week, but veterans and students still found a way to salute those who have served.

The biggest local program took place in the afternoon Nov. 11 outdoors at the School of St. Philip, where members of the Litchfield Military Honor Guard offered a program that included a 21-gun salute and demonstration with explanation of folding a United States flag. Veterans also recorded a program and shared it virtually earlier in the day from Litchfield High School.

At St. Philip's students offered the veterans a bookmark with a poem on one side that was signed by all of the school's students on the other side.



STAFF PHOTO BY BRENT SCHACHERER

Members of the Litchfield Military Honor Guard offer a 21-gun salute during their program at School of St. Philip. More photos on page 2.

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