

LCPH from page 1A

LCPH’s epidemiological (Epi) team, including Dr. Jess Seifert, has been looking at Florence’s cases, and how the data showed a sharp increase in mid-December. The team went through the transcripts from Florence’s recent cases.

“What we know is we have two clusters. Between the two clusters, there’s about 21 cases,” Davis said. “When we look at the first 10 cases, eight of them within those two outbreaks had to be hospitalized. So that gives you a sense of how serious it was and how it tore through that population.”

The Epi team identified at least one commonality between the 21 cases: religious functions.

“I want to make it very clear that Lane County Public Health in no way, shape or form discriminates against anyone’s religion, nor do we single out any religious organization,” Davis said, choosing not to identify the church or churches involved in the clusters.

He continued, “I think what’s most important is that those people who are pursuing faith-based activities that might be skirting or altogether disregarding health recommendations hear this. We absolutely, 100 percent are seeing a rise in cases and a commonality is those faith-based activities.”

In particular, these were from small intimate gatherings like Bible studies or religious gatherings from the winter holidays.

“That’s where we’re seeing those 21 cases originate. And unfortunately, two folks have passed away from those two outbreaks,” Davis said.

The Florence COVID-19 cases range from ages 49 to 92; the rest of the county has had cases as young as 13.

In addition to church activities, people also were exposed to the virus at small gatherings, such as game day or dinners with friends — “Very innocuous things,” Davis said.

But the Epi team looks at any interaction with households outside of someone’s home.

“The governor’s orders allow for a certain amount of socialization to an extent,” Davis said. “I think that even people who are well-meaning are embarking upon small gatherings. Unfortunately, that’s where we’re seeing the majority of what we’ve entitled the ‘community spread.’”

Some bigger gatherings have also happened, but thus far have not resulted in reported cases of COVID. Davis said that was because people were persistent about safety measures, especially since they would be in the public eye.

“There’s a lot of perseverance when it comes to the safety part of having those large gatherings and maybe skirting the governor’s orders,” he said. “There’s so much scrutiny around it, and you don’t see a lot of transmission. And the same thing goes for some restaurants or other businesses that are choosing

to open. I think that once they do that, they know they’re under heavy scrutiny. And so that can contribute to them taking measures appropriately.”

This is compared to small gatherings, where people are sometimes less likely to wear masks or maintain distance.

“And that’s where we’re seeing the community spread,” Davis added.

That’s also where LCPH is limited by its staff size, the scope of the

county itself and its surge protocol, making it hard to track every confirmed case of

COVID-19 and where they might have gone and who they might have been in close contact with.

“One piece of this that is causing complications for us is noncompliance when it comes to contact tracing,” Davis said. “With the cluster from the two faith-based organizations that resulted in 21 cases, it was like pulling teeth to get that information out of those folks. They absolutely did not want to say where they went to church, or what their gatherings were. ... We haven’t heard one restaurant that anybody has gone to. We have over 100 cases, and yet no one’s been to a restaurant? No one’s been to a religious function? It’s kind of hard to believe, right? That noncompliance is really slowing us down as well.”

For Davis, he said he understood the urge to not make trouble for other people or businesses. Ultimately, though, people’s safety is at stake.

“I think people need faith right now and they need those gatherings. However, there are ways to approach that in a way that is pro-health and you can still minimize the spread,” he said.

For people who want to meet up, he suggested calling over the phone or meeting virtually on a platform like Zoom. People can also meet outside, as long as they maintain distance and wear masks.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think that was the case in some of these gatherings,” Davis said. “I think it was a very conscious effort to not abide by masking or distancing. And that was really unfortunate. But nevertheless, that’s where we’re at. This is not a position that anybody wants to be in right now. With this situation, how do we make sense of someone wanting to see their family? How do we make sense of someone wanting to see grandma in the long-term care facility, when she maybe has a few months to live? You can’t prioritize that. There’s no government algorithm that’s going to account for that.”

Davis emphasized that the people involved in outbreaks are not crim-

inals.

“We are dealing with people who have the best of intentions, who may not agree about a few points here and there. And I think that as a community — and speaking directly to the Florence community — we really need to keep that in mind. Even though you might not agree with what someone’s doing, they’re still not a criminal. These are people that are looking in their heart and they’re making a choice based on

“We’re looking at death tolls based on percentages. But those are real people. Those are your parents, your siblings, your neighbors. And it doesn’t matter what the percentages are. The fact is, that’s still a human life. And if there’s something I can do that is rather minuscule in nature — putting a cloth mask on and maybe avoiding some of the things that I enjoyed and want to do — if it was your brother, sister, mom, dad or grandparents, you would say, ‘Absolutely, please do that.’”

— Jason Davis, PIO for Lane County Public Health

their own reservations and the facts they are receiving. For whatever reason, maybe they’re not making the choice that public health will have them make, or the choice that will help us slow the spread of cases. Nevertheless, you really can’t judge them too harshly.”

Despite that, growing community spread puts everyone at higher risk, especially as the pandemic continues to impact every aspect of people’s lives.

“I think that this is a tough spot. It’s a tough spot for us and a tough spot for Florence,” Davis said. “But I will underscore the fact that the only way to get through this is by participating in the effort that we know works. We have about 80 years of research that says that contact tracing and basic isolation works.”

He talked about the reason for public health entities, and how they are essential to life in civilization, just like plumbing, sewers and roads.

“All these things go into what makes people living close to each other possible. Public health is absolutely one of those because, up until about the 1800s, we died like flies. We really did,” Davis said. “The closer we got to each other, the shorter our life expectancy was, until we figured out that maybe these diseases might be resulting from us getting together so close.”

As people figured out best practices for sanitation, food preparation, healthcare and technology, public health groups formed to make sure cities could live healthily and sustainably.

“That is public health in a nutshell. All we’re trying to do is make your concentrated areas, in Florence, Eugene/Springfield, Cottage Grove, Junction City, Dexter and Oak Ridge, possible. And for you to enjoy the same comforts, life expectancy and basic human needs as someone who makes half a million dollars. That’s what our aim is, and that’s what we do,” he said.

So, what can people do? Follow current guidelines, Davis insisted.

“Any kindergartner could figure

this out. If you’re sick, you stand over here, and you stand over there, because you shouldn’t be close to each other. But what happens if you don’t know you’re sick, but you are able to pass it on? Well, maybe we should have everybody stand over here and over there.”

He added that the use of face coverings also helps limit the spread of water molecules, which transmit the virus.

“That’s not perfect by any means.

... Our estimates are, if everyone wears cloth masks, we can reduce transmission by maybe 20 or 30 percent,” he said. “And if that saves one human life, it’s worth it. So, we should do it.”

Davis wondered if people were too caught up in the statistics. For example, Lane County has had 7,879 cases of COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic. Currently, 433 people are infections, with 30 people hospitalized. In all that time, there have been 103 deaths.

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It comes down to empathy, Davis said, and considering the effect each person has on those around them.

“We really have to be preaching that message of community right now — and having kindness, understanding and empathy for those people who may not agree with you,” Davis said. “When we come out of all this, community is going to be more important than ever.”

On top of Florence’s increasing cases of COVID-19, other virus-related incidents have also popped up in the area, including businesses opening outside of Gov. Kate Brown’s orders for the county that is still at “extreme risk” of community spread. In addition, social media is abuzz about an alleged confrontation between a Florence resident opposed to mask measures and her purposefully coughing at a visiting woman and her 9-year-old daughter.

Davis said that intent would have to be considered if people were to create a legal suit.

“Just for the sake of argument, if someone was intentionally intending to cough on other people, then that is absolutely an anti-social act that would border on assault, and certainly is prosecutable. It’s go-

ing to be really difficult to prove, however; our local law enforcement are absolutely our allies in that sort of instance,” he said.

Siuslaw News is continuing to look into the accusations initially made through a social media post.

As for people opposing the current health mandates, Davis said he encourages dissent and disagreement, and wants people to have conversations. What he doesn’t want, however, is for people to be put in harmful situations.

“Think about all the people whose lives you might be taking into your hands when you make some of these choices,” he said. “It’s too much for one person. I’m not saying that I’m going to shake my finger at you. It’s that I don’t want to accept that kind of responsibility. Don’t be responsible for someone dying.”

LCPH advocates for a pro-social messages and wants to see people promoting health and safety just as loudly as people who are opposed to the recent measures.

“Unfortunately, some of individuals have latched on to this and made it political. ... And it’s ridiculous. We need to stop it. This is health, this is not politics. Let’s just focus on keeping people well, preventing death and doing what it takes to get through this.”

For many people, that will include eventually receiving a COVID-19 vaccination. Lane County is working on its vaccination plan. That will be dependent on the amount of vaccines LCPH receives and when.

“Vaccines are a huge development that we’re trying to manage,” Davis said. “We put in a request for 2,500 doses for public health. We received 100.”

Florence will be included in any vaccination plans, though there is no set timeline yet.

“We know that you have a lot of folks who are older or who are medically fragile. We want to make sure that we protect your community. So, the first opportunity we have to make that publicly available, we will do so,” Davis said.

It comes down to community, not just within the Florence area, but the whole county.

“We have the opportunity to come together like we’ve never come together before and support each other in ways that are not based on supply and demand. It’s based on giving and kindness,” Davis said. “If we could take those lessons away and come out of the pandemic like that, what a better world we’d live in. And I still think we have that opportunity. It may sound naive, and I know some people will inevitably roll their eyes at that sort of statement. But that’s the opportunity we have.”

“The stakes are very high. We have people in our community who don’t need to die yet. And they are. You have 14,000 people in the Florence zip code. Two of them have died. That’s too many.”

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