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Hood County Public Health Authority COVID-19 Risk Assessment Update – May 19, 2021

In light of the latest US Centers of Disease Control (CDC) COVID-19 Guidance for Fully Vaccinated Individuals and Governor Abbot's latest Executive Order GA-36 issued this week, I am providing a local update.

It you have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, you are not currently at risk of getting ill from or transmitting COVID-19 to others, with or without wearing a mask or social distancing. If you have not been fully vaccinated, continue to respect the rights of others and follow public health guidelines to protect yourself and others who remain at risk. This is my best recommendation as your Hood County Public Health Authority.

The global and national COVID-19 pandemic has not ended. Variants of the COVID-19 virus continue to cause severe illness in local residents, including hospitalizations, intensive care stays and deaths, now thankfully at a much lower rate than we saw at the first of the year.

I downgraded my COVID-19 risk assessment for Hood County from Substantial to "Moderate Risk of Transmission" effective 3-22-2021, based on CDC criteria. I continue to work with Jay Webster, Hood County Emergency Manager, state health dept epidemiologists, and local hospitals and clinic representatives to review local COVID cases each week. We continue to have between 3-5 people locally hospitalized with COVID-19 positive illnesses like pneumonia or respiratory failure each day. Approximately 11% of people locally tested for COVID-19 continue to be positive, with between 18 and 78 new lab-confirmed cases each week.

According to our local numbers and this week's reports from Texas Dept of State Health Services, Hood County has recently achieved some important milestones, with over 65% of seniors 65 and older completely vaccinated against COVID-19, as well as over 35% of the adult population. COVID-19 vaccination is now available to everyone 18 years and over through local pharmacies and medical offices, as we phase out the current county volunteer efforts. More on that below.

CDC and Texas Dept of State Health Services (TX DSHS) now recommend that fully vaccinated adults may resume normal activities without masking outside of medical healthcare environments or other specified occupational or institutional circumstances. The updated CDC guidance does not impact the risk of spread to or between unvaccinated individuals, rather this reflects evidence that people who have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 are not currently at risk of getting infected or spreading the COVID-19 virus.

Gov Abbott's Executive Order GA-36 does not end state-level pandemic response activities, but it specifies that most state and local government entities and officials cannot mandate (require) face coverings outside of hospitals, judicial/justice departments, jails, and state-supported living centers. To me, this means that every Texan should make their own decisions to vaccinate, social distance, wear face coverings, handwash and use other infectious precautions outside of those specific settings. Schools are allowed to continue to follow Texas Educational Association COVID-19 guidance through the end of the 2020-2021 school year. After June 4th, Gov Abbott has ordered that they can no longer require use of face coverings in public schools.

Every one of us has made personal, financial and family sacrifices to minimize the spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses for over a year now, particularly in the interest of protecting our at-risk family and community members. I will be eternally grateful for the tireless efforts by dozens of healthcare workers, county and city officials and employees, and other volunteers from Hood and surrounding counties who have donated thousands of hours of their time to administer over 23,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine at our Hood County vaccination hub over the past three months.

This is absolutely incredible that a community without an official public health department can mount such an effective and prolonged response! Jay Webster and Ricky Reeves, Director of Texas EMS, deserve all of the credit for organizing this effort. Every single person who volunteered or otherwise supported the Hood County vaccination hub is part of our local health department!

One of my key goals for Hood County is to work with state, county and city officials to leverage available relief funds and interest to build local public health infrastructure where we can focus and organize future efforts in response to public health emergencies as well as to better support unmet health needs of our population. With your support, we can leave this COVID-19 pandemic stronger and better prepared than ever to support our amazing community.

Key References:

CDC Guidance for Fully Vaccinated Individuals, 5-16-2021

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html>

Gov Abbott's Executive Order GA-36, 5-18-2021

<https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-executive-order-prohibiting-government-entities-from-mandating-masks>

Texas Dept of State Health Services COVID-19 Info Page

<https://www.dshs.state.tx.us/coronavirus/>