



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members
Travis County Commissioners Court

THROUGH: Stephanie Hayden-Howard, Assistant City Manager

FROM: Adrienne Sturup, Director, Austin Public Health *Adrienne Sturup*

DATE: April 9, 2024

SUBJECT: COVID-19 Reporting and Dashboard Update

We want to update Mayor, Council Members, and Travis County Commissioners regarding COVID-19 reporting and dashboards. The Austin Public Health's (APH) Epidemiology and Public Health Preparedness (EPHP) Division continues to monitor and respond to COVID-19 in Austin and Travis County; however, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed new respiratory virus guidance to include influenza, COVID-19, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). While clusters and outbreaks continue to be reportable, the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) removed laboratory confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases as a reportable condition in Texas. This update will provide operational changes based on CDC and DSHS's changes.

Background: On March 1, 2024, CDC issued updated Respiratory Virus Guidance to "provides practical recommendations and information to help people lower their risk from a range of common respiratory viral illnesses including COVID-19, flu, and RSV."

CDC's reasons for this specific respiratory virus guidance were because: 1) fewer people are getting seriously ill from COVID-19, 2) people now have increased immunity from vaccines and prior infection, and 3) effective tools and treatments for fighting serious respiratory illness are now widely available. Although COVID-19 remains a public health threat, the new respiratory virus guidance balances protecting the public's health while avoiding undue burden on the population.

Of note, the new respiratory virus guidance recommends that people stay home and away from others until they are both fever-free for at least 24-hours without the use of fever-reducing medication, and their symptoms are improving. Upon returning to normal activities, people are encouraged to take additional prevention measures -such as masking, distancing, and testing - for an additional five days to curb further disease spread.

The new guidance is based on 5-core prevention strategies including 1) immunizations, 2) practicing good hygiene, 3) taking steps for cleaner indoor air (ventilation/air filtration), 4) treatments, and 5) staying home when sick.

On March 8, 2024, DSHS removed COVID-19 from the list of Texas Notifiable Conditions. This change means that providers, hospitals, laboratories, and clinics are no longer required to report individual case reports of individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 to public health. As with all diseases, outbreaks and disease clusters are still required to be reported to public health – and this applies to COVID-19 outbreaks, particularly in congregate settings.

Current situation: APH anticipated this reporting change since the number of COVID-19 cases being reported within the community was affected by the increased availability of at-home rapid antigen tests. Because this reporting is no longer required, case numbers are no longer accurate nor representative of what is happening in our community and elsewhere. For this reason, APH plans to discontinue its public COVID-19 dashboard effective immediately.

Additionally, long-term care facilities have been notified by their regulatory agency that they are no longer required to report cases to public health.

APH has also discontinued gathering COVID-19 illness reports from school districts. However, APH has redesigned our online outbreak reporting form to allow schools, day cares and camps to report possible outbreaks for follow-up.

The future for COVID-19 surveillance will likely include wastewater surveillance, monitoring COVID-19 deaths, tracking COVID-19 associated outbreaks in vulnerable populations, including long-term care facilities, schools, and childcare centers, and congregate settings such as jails and shelters. This will eventually resemble the current system for influenza (a non-reportable condition) surveillance in our communities. APH will instead use a combination of these surveillance activities to maintain aware of and responsive to COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses in our community.

Plan going forward: The COVID-19 dashboard will be archived. Information about COVID-19 vaccination and other timely and relevant health updates will be shared on our website, via social media, or other outreach methods. APH will continue to respond to reported outbreaks and provide timely updates to the community about COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses, just as we do with other diseases and conditions.

cc: Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager
Desmar Walkes, MD, Health Authority/Medical Director
Janet Pichette, CEM, Chief Epidemiologist
Ana Almaguel, Division Director, Travis County Health and Human Services