



Health Officer Statement of Unity and Call to Action:

Urging all Businesses and Residents of La Crosse County to Take a Stand Against COVID-19

On May 13, 2020 the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that Emergency Order #28 (Safer at Home) is not enforceable. This ruling is effective immediately with no 6 day stay.

Regrettably, the state of Wisconsin and La Crosse County are not ready to go back to 'business as usual.' A complete return to pre-COVID function will result in a dramatic rise in infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, and could necessitate future prolonged shutdowns. Such events would cause widespread devastation to both our community and our economy. To prevent this, we must work together to respond in a united, informed way that balances livelihood with saving lives. Specifically, we must: (1) track local data, (2) use that data to guide our decisions, and (3) act together. La Crosse County believes in openness, honesty and transparency, and we are sharing this information because we know that it will help our residents understand the plan that will keep our families and community safe.

Data-driven Decision-making

The State of Wisconsin's Badger Bounce Back plan has specific criteria to be met before a staged re-opening is advised. The related dashboard shows that the State of Wisconsin has not yet met the metric of a "downward trajectory of influenza-like illness (ILI) reported within a 14-day period."

La Crosse County has both an overall strategy with goals and objectives as well as our own metrics that align with the state. Our goal is simple: proactively prevent disease and death from COVID-19 as well as its economic impacts.

Towards achieving this goal, we are tracking data specific to La Crosse County and our region that fall into 3 categories:

1. Epidemiology – including new cases, doubling time, the percentage of tests that are positive, and testing levels;
2. Public health capacity – including interviewing cases within 24 hours of receipt and contacts within 48 hours of the case interview;
3. Healthcare – including capacity to handle a future surge (ie-availability of ventilators, ICU beds available, and personal protective equipment supply) and to care for severely ill patients.

We will know that our community is prepared for widespread reopening when the metrics in these categories demonstrate that we are adequately identifying and curbing the spread of disease, and that our public health and healthcare systems are prepared for a new wave of infections. We have made progress, but we are not yet there. For example, the current status of our four epidemiology metrics as of May 13th was as follows:

Epidemiology Metric	Status of Metric in La Crosse County
Observe a 10% decrease in the number of new cases, comparing recent 2 weeks with prior 2 weeks.	Not Met (266.7% change/increase)
Observe doubling time of 6 days or more.	Met (40 days)
Observe less than 10% of test results are positive.	Met (1.1%)
Ensure daily testing is at least 75% the number needed for surveillance.	Not Met (28.3%)

Our most significant gap at the state, regional and county level can be attributed to a lack of adequate testing. The number of tests needed for disease surveillance, set by the State of Wisconsin, is 85,000 tests/week, equating to 209 tests/100,000 people per day. When multiplied by the population of La Crosse County, our goal is 247 tests per day, leaving a gap of 177 tests per day.

Closing the Testing Gap

We are fortunate to have two of the State’s best healthcare systems in our county. Both have made great strides at increasing the average number of daily tests by 40% over the past month. However, our testing gap is still significant, which is why we are working to help close the gap. Through the Emergency Management Coordinator, the Health Department has applied for a National Guard Testing Site which received final approval in the early evening of Wednesday, May 13th. This testing event will take place on Thursday, May 21st from 11am-7pm at the Omni Center in Onalaska. The site offers free testing to anyone with symptoms, no matter how mild. The goal is to test 400 people at the event.

This testing event is just the first step to increase testing. Our healthcare partners continue to ramp up testing and the Health Department will work closely with long-term care facilities in our county to reach the state’s goal of testing all residents and staff (over 1,600 people) in La Crosse County. Testing additional target groups to include first responders (ie-EMS, police, fire) and frontline workers (ie-staff at grocery stores and more) are also part of our testing priorities and planning process.

Call to Action

This is a time for unity.

Thousands (10,902) of people in Wisconsin have contracted COVID-19, thousands (1,908) have required hospitalization, and hundreds (421) have died.

COVID-19 is a virus that spreads through droplets from those infected who may or may not have symptoms. This virus is not political. We must use the tools we have available to minimize the spread of the virus and the disease, destruction and death it can cause.

As the Health Officer and Director of the La Crosse County Health Department, I urge all businesses and customers, residents and visitors to do ALL of the following:

1. Stay at home if you are sick
2. Minimize close physical contact with those outside of your household
3. Minimize travel, especially to areas considered “viral hotspots” within and beyond our state borders
4. Wear a fabric face covering if you must be in public
5. Maintain 6-foot distances with others whenever possible
6. Minimize congregating in groups of any size
7. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water
8. Avoid touching your face

Businesses must take action to protect their workforce and customers. Follow the guidance documents available through the La Crosse County Health Department (ie-business toolkit) and Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.

La Crosse County government will lead by example and will not open our buildings until it is safe. We ask others to join us in waiting for the data to guide our decisions and fully adopting all recommendations. We will not open until we can protect our workforce and the public. We strongly encourage all businesses, churches, events, and others to do the same.

We do not need an order to know what to do. We should not need an order to require we do the right thing. We can choose to protect ourselves and each other, and thereby protect our community and economy, by changing our behavior in accordance with the actions listed above.



Jen Rombalski, RN, MPH

La Crosse County Health Officer/Department Director