Press Release

COVID-19 Data Updates for Woodbury County

At Siouxland District Health Department, one of the biggest challenges this pandemic has brought us is the need for reliable COVID-19 data. The need for data is very understandable, and with decisions being made based on disease activity, it’s crucial that the data those decisions are relying on is as accurate and transparent as possible. In light of recent questions about the data that the Iowa Department of Public Health is reporting, we believe that now is the time to implement changes in the daily data reports that SDHD provides.

For some time now, SDHD has been concerned about how the daily positives we report don’t always line up with the daily difference in total cases on the IDPH website. The reason is due to the existing database used for managing communicable disease cases in Iowa and how it handles people that have been tested for COVID-19 more than once. This system is intended to track individuals, or “cases”, not total tests. When an individual gets tested for the first time, that test result is entered into the database under the person’s name and reported in the IDPH website’s total test count as well as the positive or negative count. The problem arises when a person that originally tested negative later tests positive, the system records that positive result back on the date the original test was done instead of the date this new test was actually done.

This obviously is problematic and SDHD has struggled with this when trying to report data for Woodbury County. The primary reason we haven’t changed our daily report is because this problem of capturing people that have been tested more than once doesn’t just affect positive results. As we get farther into the pandemic, more and more people are being tested multiple times. Some of them are positive, but many are negative. And while the positives are getting counted somewhere (even if it’s not on the accurate date), the negative results are not. People testing negative multiple times are only counting as one test, therefore, negative results are underreported on the IDPH website. SDHD strongly believes that reporting positive numbers without the proper context of the number of total tests done, and how many of them were negative is also inaccurate reporting and can lead to improper decision making.

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There have been concerns raised that the positivity rate stated by IDPH is falsely low because of positives not getting reported on their correct day. While we understand that is a problem, the problem applies to negative results as well, and SDHD believes that the data is likely over-emphasizing the positive cases because the negative results are absent.

This belief is supported by SDHD’s weekly indicator report. This report is published weekly and includes ALL tests based on the date the test was done, and not the date the results were reported, which better illustrates the timeframe during which people were sick and seeking care. We do remove any duplicate positives because we don’t want to count actual cases twice. When people have had multiple negatives over a period of time, those tests are included. Our numbers on this report reflect weekly positivity rates that are very similar to rates shown by IDPH, and perhaps even a little lower.

IDPH is in the process of implementing a new database to manage COVID-19 information that we hope will resolve many of the data problems that we are experiencing. However, moving forward SDHD will be changing our data reporting to make sure that the information is as accurate and transparent as possible.

Beginning tomorrow, our daily reports will now include total positive case count for Woodbury County, but will not include a new daily total. The report will also include COVID-related deaths and recovery information. Additionally, we’ll be including information about people currently hospitalized in the county. This daily report will be in addition to our indicator report, published weekly, that we believe provides the best reflection of current COVID activity in Woodbury County. These reports will continue to be provided via our social media accounts, and on the SDHD website at http://www.siouxlanddistricthealth.org/home.html

Managing the data that is available to us and getting that out to the community has been a challenge and we’re sure that these challenges will continue. We share everyone’s concerns about accurate data and SDHD will continue to make getting the best information into your hands our top priority.

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