



CORONAVIRUS

Dahlkemper: No Erie County mask mandate unless local hospitals fill with COVID-19 patients

Erie County's number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has risen each of the past four weeks, though hospitalizations remain relatively low

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Story Highlights

Starting Tuesday, everyone must wear a face mask when they are inside a county government building

County to use up to \$360,000 from American Rescue Plan funds to pay its nearly 1,200 employees who get vaccine

Despite a recent rise in the number of COVID-19 cases, Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper has no plans to impose countywide face masking or social distancing mandates unless one of two conditions is met.

One is that Gov. Tom Wolf or the state legislature mandates face masking and social distancing across Pennsylvania, which is unlikely. The other is if Erie County hospitals begin to fill with COVID patients like they did in late 2020.

"If we get to the point where the health systems are overloaded, then that is a whole different scenario," Dahlkemper said. "If we reach the point with COVID hospitalizations that people can't get a hospital bed, that becomes a huge issue."

Mapping CDC's new guidelines: High transmission areas where you need to wear a mask indoors

The county's number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has risen each of the past four weeks as the more transmissible Delta variant takes hold across the country. The number of newly confirmed cases rose from 51 cases the week of July 23-29 to 137 cases the week of July 30-Aug. 5, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

More: 'Delta has changed the game' as Erie County moves closer to 'substantial' spread of COVID-19

It was enough of a spike to push the county into a level of substantial community spread, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention reported last week. As a result, CDC officials recommend that people in the county should wear a mask indoors, whether or not they are vaccinated.

"People should be following these recommendations," Dahlkemper said. "But how do you enforce them when they aren't enforced on a state or national level?"

More: PA school districts to dictate COVID-19 mask policies, unlike 2020's statewide mandate

Mask mandate in county buildings

Dahlkemper is mandating that, starting Tuesday, everyone must wear a face mask when they are inside a county government building, including the Erie County Courthouse. They can be removed only when a person is alone in an office.

The county policy had been that people who showed proof of vaccination didn't have to wear a face mask.

Dahlkemper also defended the county's decision to pay its employees \$300 each to get vaccinated or show proof of a previous COVID-19 vaccination. It is using up to \$360,000 from American Rescue Plan funding to pay its nearly 1,200 employees.

"County government is self-insured (for health insurance). Our hospital costs for the first quarter of 2021 was about \$500,000 and that was only for a few COVID-19 patients," Dahlkemper said. "We are trying to keep our employees out of the hospital and actually save taxpayers money."

Overall, the county has seen its average daily number of COVID-19 patients triple over the past month, though the 14-day moving average remains below eight patients a day.

But Dahlkemper said she doesn't like the trend. Erie County Department of Health staff have told her that numbers will continue to rise exponentially.

"They believe case numbers will continue upward and unfortunately reach a really high level of transmission over a short period of time, probably weeks," Dahlkemper said. "The

problem is that we only have 47.2% of our population fully vaccinated, including none of our children under 12. People need to get vaccinated, it's our best tool against this surge."

The weekly numbers

Here is a look at the rest of the county's weekly COVID-19 measurements from the state health department, comparing July 23-29 to July 30-Aug. 5:

The incidence rate per 100,000 people increased from 18.9 to 50.8.

The COVID-19 test positivity rate rose from 4% to 7.9%.

The average number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients increased from 4.1 to 9.

The average daily number of COVID-19 patients on ventilators rose from zero to 0.3.

The percentage of emergency department visits due to COVID-19 symptoms declined from 1.2% to 1%.

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