

TOP STORY

Community leaders implore Warren County residents to take COVID-19 seriously

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Warren County Judge-Executive Mike Buchanon urged local residents Thursday, Nov. 11, 2020, to wear a mask and social distance while in public as the coronavirus worsened across the commonwealth.

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With coronavirus cases surging across Kentucky, local government, health care and education leaders on Thursday urged Warren County residents to take the virus more seriously or be prepared for consequences.

“We are now completely within the virus’ grip, and immediate action must be taken,” Warren County Judge-Executive Mike Buchanon said. “We don’t want our community to become like those communities that we’ve seen on the news at night.”

The Bowling Green-Warren County Coronavirus Workgroup held a virtual news conference to communicate “urgent messages to area citizens in response to a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases and the impact it is having on health care, education and the economy,” a news release announcing the event said.

Event participants included Bowling Green Mayor Bruce Wilkerson; Buchanon; Med Center Health CEO and President Connie Smith; Tri-Star Greenview Regional Hospital President Mike Sherrod; Bowling Green Independent School District Superintendent Gary Fields; Warren County Public Schools Superintendent Rob Clayton; Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College President Phil Neal and Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni.

“If you’re a business owner, and you’re not enforcing the mask mandate, you’re not putting your employees and customers first. You’re putting them at risk,” Buchanon said. “You are putting your own livelihood at risk, and you’re welcoming a shutdown. No one wants to see an economic shutdown like we witnessed earlier. If you are carelessly going about your business every day with little regard for the power and potential of this virus, every point shared this afternoon should be a wake-up call.”

The warning from local leaders comes as Kentucky is entering a new, deadly chapter of the pandemic.

Most of the state, including all of Warren County, is blanketed in red on a virus incidence rate map maintained by the state Department for Public Health.

On Wednesday, as Gov. Andy Beshear announced a record single-day high for new cases (2,700), 14 new deaths and a state positivity rate that topped 8%, the governor pleaded with Kentuckians to wear masks in public and follow other health guidelines aimed at slowing spread of the virus.

“This entire state is in danger,” he said, according to an Associated Press report. “It is absolutely everywhere.”

People in red-zone counties are urged to avoid hosting or attending gatherings of any size. Employers should allow employees to work from home when possible, and noncritical government offices should operate virtually. In-person shopping should be reduced, and people can opt to order online for pickup. People are urged to avoid nonessential activities outside their home, the AP reported.

Schools in red-zone counties are urged to hold only virtual classes because of high coronavirus transmission rates – something local school district leaders said could be a possibility if the public doesn’t take the virus more seriously.

On Thursday, local leaders warned about potential consequences of not adhering to public health guidelines. They include overwhelmed hospitals, school closures and potential local enforcement efforts.

In urging local residents to wear a mask in public and practice social distancing, Wilkerson acknowledged disruptions many have endured in the pandemic.

“We’re at that point where, when the hospitals tell me that they’re running out of room for all of their patients – not just COVID – it’s time that we have to step up,” Wilkerson said.

Buchanon and Wilkerson said both local governments are considering what kind of enforcement actions they could take to ensure compliance with public health guidelines. But Wilkerson stressed that both want to first urge businesses to comply voluntarily with those guidelines before taking any enforcement actions.

“I’m afraid that we’ll have to assist people in the businesses to come into compliance ... but we want to do it from a voluntary standpoint,” Wilkerson said. “We’re going to have to do something. ... We didn’t bring this virus here, but we’re going to run it out if we can.”

Buchanon and Wilkerson said the issues were confined to social gatherings or a few select bars or restaurants. Buchanon called on management to enforce compliance within their business establishments.

“I don’t think that most businesses are out of compliance. I think that most people are trying to do it,” Buchanon said. “Once it starts there, it really doesn’t take much for one person to be careless or reckless to spread it among thousands of people in a very short period of time.”

Smith and Sherrod said they are treating about 70 COVID-19 patients between both hospitals. There are more than 100 COVID-19 patients in regional hospitals, Sherrod said.

“The biggest challenge is not so much beds as much as it is staffing,” Sherrod said.

Those who need treatment for other health conditions should continue to seek it, the CEOs said, as worsening co-morbidities can make COVID-19 more severe.

Should the virus continue to remain out of control, local K-12 and postsecondary leaders said, it would jeopardize their ability to offer in-person classes and a somewhat normal education experience to students.

“Many of us have been doing this for many months and these protocols work,” Neal said of mask use and social distancing.

Caboni echoed that call.

“We can only fight this virus if we fight it together,” Caboni said.

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