

Where can I get tested for COVID-19? Pierce & St. Croix Area Providers			
Organization and location	Who can be tested?	Is a visit required for testing?	Call to schedule a test
Allina Health River Falls and Hastings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone with symptoms Can schedule at: Allina.com 	Virtual or office visit required	RF: 715-307-6600 Hastings: 651-480-4200
Hudson Physicians Hudson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone requesting a test Can test new patients 	Screening required	715-531-6800
Mayo Clinic Red Wing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone requesting a test Can test new patients 	Screening required	651-267-5000
Stillwater Medical Group Stillwater	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone with symptoms Other concerns contact provider Can test new patients 	Screening required	651-439-1234
M-Health Fairview River Falls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone with symptoms Asymptomatic as low priority Can test new patients 	Virtual or in person visit required	715-425-6701
Western Wisconsin Health Baldwin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anyone with symptoms or by provider referral Can test new patients 	Screening required	715-664-1111
Westfield Hospital & Clinic New Richmond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online scheduling available for travel, exposure, and symptomatic testing 	Online screening required	715-243-3400 or online at healthpartners.com

All symptomatic individuals should be tested
Symptoms of COVID-19 include: fever, cough, chills, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, fatigue, muscle aches, loss of taste and/or smell, nausea, abdominal pain, and diarrhea.

As Covid cases rise, PCPH is overwhelmed

Board of Health examines nursing positions

By Sarah Nigbor

ELLSWORTH – As Covid cases spike in Pierce County, Public Health Officer AZ Snyder told the Board of Health at its Sept. 8 meeting that her department is overwhelmed.

As of Sept. 8, Pierce County and 90 percent of Wisconsin counties were well into the Centers for Disease Control highest disease category, Snyder said. Last week, the PCPH logged 121 new confirmed Covid cases, a significant increase from 88 the week prior and 32 the week before that.

Last year, during the first week of September, 22 cases were confirmed. That's almost 100 higher cases in the same week in 2021.

"This is not a good place to be starting the school year," Snyder said.

The department has officially shifted into "crisis mode" as far as contact tracing goes, Snyder said. With the number of confirmed and possible cases overwhelming staff, shortened interviews are being conducted. PCPH will make two attempts to call someone; if they don't reach them, a letter will be sent. PCPH is documenting household close contacts, but not social contacts, Snyder said. However, staff is asking people to reach out to their social contacts themselves.

If case numbers continue to increase, staff will not be able to reach out to people within 24 hours, Snyder explained. They simply don't have enough time with the number of cases. Volunteers have been helping with contact tracing and notifications.

Ellsworth Elementary has had one outbreak in a fourth-grade classroom which resulted in the classroom's closure. Students learned virtually Sept. 1-3.

"I cannot emphasize enough what a danger-

ous time this is for schools," Snyder said.

She said many area school districts are not following CDC and PCPH guidance as far as masking, social distancing and proper mitigation efforts.

According to a letter sent to parents by Ellsworth Superintendent Barry Cain on Friday, Sept. 10, the district at that time had had 36 confirmed Covid cases among students (total student population is 1,633) since the beginning of the interim session days Aug. 24. As of Sept. 10, 14 Covid cases, or .08 percent of the overall student population, are active.

"It is important to note that a number of cases happened in the earliest days of our school year and likely came from outside of our schools," Cain wrote. "We did identify spread within one classroom at the elementary level that likely occurred during the three interim school session days."

Four cases were identified in that classroom the day before school started officially Sept. 1; three other cases were identified later.

"Our school board approved school start up plan provided for face coverings to be optional for all students and staff," Cain wrote. "This is still in place. We have worked with our students and staff to highlight the need for all to respect the individual choice that any individual makes in regards to wearing face coverings."

Ellsworth is also contacting all families in which a student has been defined as a close contact by being within 3 feet of a known case for longer than 15 minutes. These students are not being quarantined, but notified. Parents are being asked to keep children home who are ill or exhibiting symptoms. Cain noted in his letter that children have been coming to school with various symptoms and should not.

Snyder said an outbreak has occurred in one

Surge in cases, Public Health unable to contact all COVID-19 cases / close contacts

Due to the surge in recent COVID-19 cases, Pierce County Public Health is asking for people who test positive to help with their own contact tracing. Local health departments throughout the state of Wisconsin are overwhelmed by the number of positive cases and have to prioritize which disease prevention activities to continue.

"Pierce County will prioritize reaching out to cases who are under the age of 18, households with children, and those that work or live in long-term care or other congregate settings. We will try our best to reach out to others within 24 hours. If we can't, we'll send a letter to the address listed by their healthcare provider with instructions for isolation, quarantine of household members, and contacting their close contacts," said Brittany Mora, Public Information Officer for Pierce County Public Health.

Pierce County went from receiving 34 cases the week of August 21st to 121 new cases last week. School aged children reflect a significant portion of new cases. Over 50 children who attend school in-person have tested positive since school started September 1st. Five Pierce County residents were hospitalized in the past week.

"We don't know if this is the peak or the tip of the iceberg for Pierce County. We're doing

our best to keep up with the illness spreading in our community, but we need help from schools, businesses, individuals and elected leaders to be successful this fall," said AZ Snyder, Pierce County Health Officer.

For guidance on what to do if you test positive, if you are told you have been exposed, or if someone in your business has tested positive, please use these web resources:

- Next steps after testing positive (<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02627.pdf>)
- A tool for confidential close contact notification (<https://tellyourcontacts.org>)

- Next steps after close contact with someone who tested positive (<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02598a.pdf>)
- Next steps for businesses after identifying someone who tested positive (https://cms5.revize.com/revize/piercewi/Document_center/Department/Public%20Health/Publication%20and%20Data/Publication/Workplace%20Next%20Steps.pdf)

Pierce County continues to urge those not yet vaccinated to talk to their doctor or make an appointment to receive the vaccine in Ellsworth (<https://piercecountycovid19vaccine.as.me/schedule.php>) or River Falls (<https://freemandrug.as.me/schedule.php>).

assisted living facility, while suspected outbreaks are being investigated in two skilled nursing facilities. The outbreak has been traced to unvaccinated staff member(s), Snyder confirmed. A large outbreak was identified in a residential complex as well, she said.

As far as vaccine distribution, almost half of vaccinations distributed recently have been to Minnesota residents jumping the border, Snyder said. PCPH and other health departments are having trouble receiving Johnson & Johnson vaccines due to a shortage. And concerning booster shots, those are not yet available in Pierce County.

"If incidents of disease keep increasing, we may have to choose between distributing booster shots or notifying residents and contact tracing," Snyder said. "The vast majority of outbreaks were unvaccinated individuals. No one in Pierce County has died of Covid who's been vaccinated."

Public health positions

The board voted to forward registered nurse and public health nursing manager job descriptions to the Finance & Personnel Committee for review.

Recruiting for open public health nursing positions is tough, Snyder said. Public health nursing positions are outlined in state statutes and administrative rule. A public health nurse must have a four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree. Simply put, the county doesn't pay public health nurses enough to recruit them, Snyder said.

"Everyone is desperate for nurses right now," Snyder said. "We just can't compete with the Twin Cities market."

Some places are even offering \$25,000 sign-on bonuses for nurses, Snyder explained.

"I think we have a lot to offer at the county," Snyder said. "But our salary is just not competitive."

A county public health nurse receives about \$24 to \$25 per hour. The trade-off is set hours, no weekends, and a relatively low-stress environment compared to an intensive care unit or emergency room, Snyder outlined.

Pierce County has four full-time public health nurses: Manager Dianne H-Robinson, two in River Falls at reproductive health, and one in Ellsworth, who is the lead for all clinical services in Ellsworth and surrounding areas, as well as the county's epidemiologist.

Last week, one of the River Falls Public Health Nurse Courtney Seipel submitted her resignation; her last day was Sept. 13. She has been with the county for nine months.

In light of the nurse shortage, Snyder proposed recruiting for a BSN candidate, but also opening up the position to two-year registered nurse degree recipients. Ideally, the county wants a someone with a BSN, but if that's impossible to recruit, having a two-year RN is better than having none at all, Snyder said.

"In this specific position the scope is very clinical rather than focusing on policy planning, community outreach, etc.," Snyder said. "We are unlikely to have a BSN drop in our laps and accept this salary."

Both existing public health nurses have young children and appreciate the sane schedule, Snyder said. Hopefully by creating another type of job classification and having two scales in one recruitment, a candidate will come forth.

"Public health nursing has certainly not been a low-stress environment the last 18 months," Snyder said. "We cannot provide reproductive health services without this position."

The nursing manager position, currently held by H-Robinson, will likely be filled by an internal candidate when she retires in a couple of months, Snyder said.

The next Board of Health meeting will be held at 4 p.m. Oct. 13.

Public safety equipment in need of upgrades

K-9 Jet to replace K-9 Odin

By Sarah Nigbor

ELLSWORTH – Pierce County Emergency Management Director Christine McPherson presented a solution to the Finance & Personnel Committee related to public safety equipment upgrades at the Sept. 7 meeting.

The current system was installed in 2017 and includes a public safety services radio system, one master site core, one simulcast prime site, five RF remote sites, one dispatch site with MCC7500 dispatch positions and network equipment.

The current contract with Motorola (for one year) includes technical support, onsite infrastructure response, network preventive maintenance and infrastructure repair. This cost the county \$98,993 this year and \$123,700 last year.

The contract does not include replacement costs for any hardware or components, software updates or security patches, due to end of life of software programs.

"Pierce County spent a lot of money to purchase public safety equipment," McPherson said. "But no money has been spent on software patches or updates. We have only bought maintenance."

According to McPherson, the issues with an annual maintenance only contract are:

- No set or locked pricing year over year. It fluctuates and is renegotiated annually.
- The existing system is still on original hardware and software
- Existing software will no longer be supported after Oct. 1, 2022.
- Third party hardware and software are already in non-supported/best effort condition
- Security patches and updates are no longer available or supported
- No lifecycle plan is in place to continue guaranteed support and extend the system's life

The solution? McPherson proposed a six-year system upgrade agreement with Motorola. Every two years, the system would receive one upgrade, including labor, hardware and software. The security update service would provide pre-tested third-party software security updates, which would be available monthly or quarterly.

McPherson said that if the county continues with the maintenance only annual contracts, there's a good chance new equipment would need to be purchased once software is completely obsolete, resulting in a price tag of \$600,000 to \$1 million, plus the annual

\$125,000 in maintenance. It would be cost prohibitive to switch to a new system.

The dispatch software is currently running on Windows 7, which will be out of support by Oct. 1, 2022.

"Will it keep working?" McPherson said. "Yes, it might. But we're more vulnerable to have issues. We would be on our own to figure it out."

With the six-year contract, the price would be locked in, McPherson said.

"Plus we will be so far out of support" if the county chooses not to get updates that to enter the program later would cost much more, McPherson warned. The equipment in the dispatch center is aging out and could cost another \$1 million-plus to replace if updates are not done.

The existing maintenance only services are projected to cost the county: \$102,799 in 2022; \$105,883 in 2023; \$109,059.88 in 2024; \$112,328.91 in 2025; \$115,700.73 in 2026; and \$119,175 in 2027, totaling \$664,947.64 over six years.

The proposed six-year upgrade agreement would cost \$398,011.47 (which includes a \$71,208.92 discount). In total, the upgrade agreement and maintenance contract would cost the county \$991,750.19 over six years.

Features of the upgrade agreement would include:

- Major system releases as they become available
- Hardware and software updates necessary to maintain the system at the highest level of support and availability
- Labor and technical resources
- Access to the latest standard and optional features of each system
- The county is in its final year of eligibility
- Provides ability to maintain performance and functionality of system operations
- Ability to expand the system if needed
- Provides fiscal stability mitigates risks of unplanned expenses
- Ensures investment and protects against premature deterioration or obsolescence, saving taxpayer dollars

The committee voted to send the proposal to the full county board.

K9 donation

The committee approved a resolution accepting a donation from McDonough K-9 of a new K-9 for the Pierce County Sheriff's Office. The dog is a 20-month-old German shepherd named Jet; he will replace K-9 Odin.

Because of issues with Odin, McDonough recommended replacing him with a new dog, which would cost \$17,500 with training. McDo-

nough is covering this cost.

According to Lt. Herman Kreig, Jet will start bonding with his handler soon, before the new training class starts. Jet should hit the streets in late November, after his training for patrol and narcotic detection is complete.

"I can't say enough about the value of a K-9," Kreig said. "It saves us a ton of man hours ... It's an asset that really saves a lot of time, money and effort when we get to some of these scenes that we deal with."

Jet's job will include performing essential public safety duties, such as patrolling the streets, tracking missing person, apprehending suspects and locating evidence.

The resolution will go before the full county board for a vote before it's official.

"There were training issues which were affecting canine Odin's certification and it was decided to replace him," Kreig said by email.

Redistricting

Redistricting Committee Chair Brad Lawrence updated F&P about the redistricting process after the 2020 U.S. Census data was released. Pierce County saw a population increase of 2.9 percent. In 2010, the population was 41,019; that number grew to 42,212 in 2021. The committee is proposing keeping 17 supervisory districts (with roughly 2,483 residents in each), though counties can have up to 31. That number "seems a bit unwieldy," Lawrence said.

The U.S. Census Bureau is required to deliver census data to states for redistricting by March 31. However, the pandemic delayed the release and Pierce County received data in August. Gov. Tony Evers vetoed a Republican-authored bill in July that would delay local redistricting efforts until 2023 for municipalities and until 2024 for most counties. Evers said the elections next year would not be fair if current maps are kept in place, because they wouldn't reflect population changes.

Due to the compressed timeline, the Redistricting Committee kicked into high gear and last week sent a tentative map to municipalities for approval. Once those municipal wards/districts are adjusted, the map will go before the full county board in November.

"It's ambitious, but workable," Lawrence said. "But we need municipalities to do their diligent work to keep this on track."

Lawrence said the committee strived to make districts contiguous and compact.

"It's a lot like squeezing a balloon," Lawrence said. "The driving goal is having all districts relatively equal (in population) and they're presumed to be Constitutional if they're within a 10 percent deviation."

No changes occurred to Districts 9 (Gilman,

Spring Valley, part of Spring Lake), 10 (Rock Elm, El Paso, part of Spring Lake, Elmwood), 17 (Salem, Union, town and village of Maiden Rock) or 13 (Trimble, part of Oak Grove).

Districts 11 (part of village and town of Ellsworth), 14 (Hartland, Isabelle, Bay City, part of Trenton), 8 (Martell, part of town of River Falls) and 1 (part of Prescott) were below the desired 5 percent threshold and needed more people.

In districts 8 and 12, the committee chose to follow the school district boundaries, rather than County Road J.

"This allows us to eliminate one or two splits" when creating ballots for that area, County Clerk Jamie Feuerhelm said.

Districts 7, 6 and 4 (all City of River Falls) were way above the 5 percent threshold, Lawrence said, and saw the most changes. The committee shuffled boundaries to accommodate for the population increase. In Prescott, the St. Croix Bluffs neighborhood north of Highway 10 was incorporated into District 1.

The map can be viewed at the courthouse or on the county website.

Other business

- The committee voted to authorize the implementation of the Prime Choice Benefits Plan and a one-time start-up fee of \$1,000. The number one reason people don't retire is they fear they can't afford health insurance, County Administrator Jason Matthys said. This benefit plan will allow county employees two choices when they either leave in good standing or retire: Their accrued sick time/paid time off can either be rolled into an employee health retirement account or distributed through a deferred play plan. This would help some employees bridge the gap until they are Medicare eligible. It also save employees from paying taxes if the current plan is used, which pays out the accrued funds in the next payroll check.
- The committee approved the purchase of a 2021 Chevy Equinox LS from Quinn Motors for \$25,955.50. The vehicle will join the county's vehicle fleet.
- F&P voted, with Mike Kahlow dissenting, to supplement county employees' high deductible health plans beginning Jan. 1, 2022 as a retention and recruitment incentive. The county will pay families who enroll \$1,000 and individuals \$500 out of the health insurance budget; 2022 budgets will be adjusted accordingly.
- The committee entered into closed session to discuss possible litigation regarding the Elmwood communications tower and reviewing wages and benefits for the recommended Veterans Service Officer candidate.