

Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022

Mayor's Update

Deaths

The pandemic continues to take its toll. We lost another two Newtonians over the past seven days who died with COVID-19. We have now lost 227 neighbors since we reported the first death twenty-one months ago.

Newton-Wellesley Hospital

Newton-Wellesley Hospital, as of Tuesday, Jan. 11, reports they are caring for a total of 54 patients hospitalized with COVID-19. Six (6) of these patients are in the ICU, three of whom are critically ill as a result of respiratory failure from COVID-19, and the other three are critically ill as a result of another illness but have also tested positive for COVID-19. Slightly more than 50% of the patients hospitalized with COVID-19 at NWH are unvaccinated while 15% of the population in Massachusetts has not received any vaccination doses. (Last week, NWH had 41 patients in the hospital with COVID-19, two of whom were in the ICU.)

The number of patients hospitalized with COVID-19 continues to rise and has surpassed the peak number of patients hospitalized with the virus last winter according to NWH. NWH also reports, “The current variant of COVID-19 appears to be a milder illness than previous variants and NWH is seeing lower numbers of critically ill COVID-19 patients and lower mortality rates.”

The experience at NWH appears to reflect the hospitalization trends across the Commonwealth. Yesterday, Massachusetts hospitals had 3,087 total patients with COVID-19, the highest number of patients since the first surge in May 2020.

While positive cases in Newton are rising at their fastest pace since the pandemic began because of the highly contagious Omicron variant, deaths are not rising at a similar pace (see the first two charts below).

Early in the pandemic's initial surge in the spring of 2020, both cases and deaths rose quickly (see the third chart). In last winter's surge, with positive cases again surging, deaths began rising, but at a slower pace than in the pandemic's initial surge (see the fourth chart). So far in the current Omicron tidal wave, with the vast majority of Newtonians and people in Massachusetts vaccinated, thankfully far fewer people are dying compared to early in the pandemic even though we have a lot more positive cases (see the last chart). (Positive cases and deaths in the charts are listed on the date we reported them weekly.)

Positive Cases

Over the past seven days from Jan. 6 to 12, 1,156 people in Newton tested positive and had their cases reported to the State, up from the 960 we saw last week.

While these case numbers are by far the highest we've seen (and are likely even higher since positive results found through "home tests" may not be reported to health officials), we may be nearing the peak. Health experts and epidemiologists looking at a number of factors, including wastewater analysis, see signs that cases may start waning toward the end of the month.

Our positivity rate in Newton during the State's two-week tracking period from Dec. 26 to Jan. 8 is now 13.2% (i.e., the percentage of the 17,366 Newton residents' tests that came back positive), a significant increase from the 9.2% (15,206 tests) last week and the 3.3% (23,798 tests) the week prior. The State's positivity rate now stands at 21.5% compared to last week's 15.0%.

The daily average incidence rate in Newton, which measures the number of cases per 100,000 population, is now 166.3, a significant increase from last week's 102.3 and 57.3 from the week prior. The State's incidence rate is now 267.3, compared to last week's 151.7.

Of the 2,135 people who tested positive during the State's two week reporting period, just 1% were students at one of Newton's Institutions of higher education where most students are still on winter break.

Digital Vaccine Card

Worried about losing your vaccination card? Those of us who got our shots in Massachusetts can now get a digital vaccine card showing our COVID-19 vaccination history. The State this week launched [My Vaccine Records](#) which generates a QR code that can be used to verify vaccination.

Newton Public Schools COVID-19 Data

In last week's Mayor's Update, I reported the positive school case data in our schools compiled by our Newton Health and Human Services Department (HHS). I knew our data for the first time showed significantly fewer cases than that reported by the State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and noted that in the write up. We tracked down the reason.

Prior to the winter break, both DESE and the City reported only verifiable positive tests (PCR or antigen tests done by a healthcare provider, at a pharmacy/testing site, or as part of Newton Public School (NPS) testing) for NPS students and staff.

Over the December winter break, DESE made a change. They started including unproctored at-home antigen tests in their reporting. Our HHS staff, however, reported only verifiable positive tests, consistent with prior practice. (Also, DESE's data report posted on Jan. 6 covered a two-week period from Dec. 23 to Jan. 5 while the City's report covered a one-week period from Dec. 30 to Jan. 5, another discrepancy.)

HHS has adopted the DESE reporting protocols when reporting school cases. HHS updated the data for the last reporting period which spanned two weeks during the holidays, Dec. 23 to Jan. 5, on the City's website to reflect this change. During this two week period, we had 717 positive student cases and 155 amongst our staff.

During the past seven days from Jan. 6 to 12, NPS had a total of 441 positive student cases and 63 among staff.

As the table below shows, we began to see an increase in December with a significant increase the week of Dec. 16 to 22, just before the holiday break, and a surge of cases in the last three weeks. Kudos to the teachers, aides and educators

who are pivoting daily to make sure classes are covered and students can be in school.

NPS has had a cumulative total of 1,761 positive cases, 1,480 reported among students and 281 among staff for the 2021-22 school year.

Find more information on the Newton Health and Human Services webpage [here](#), and at the NPS Testing Data Dashboard [here](#).

Housing Choice

A new law signed last January 2021 by Gov. Baker puts the ball in the hands of communities along the MBTA, including Newton, to allow more housing near public transportation. Our City Council is deciding whether to update our zoning in at least one geographic area proximate to a T or commuter rail station to permit multi-family housing (3 units or more).

Specifically, the [Housing Choice Zoning](#) reforms include a requirement (Section 3A) that communities serviced by the T should seek to designate a zones or zones which would allow a certain amount of multi-family housing by-right within a half mile or closer to MBTA or commuter rail stations by the end of 2023 to continue receiving certain State affordable housing and economic development grant funding.

The state law specifies that the zoning district or districts must meet the following criteria:

- Not more than 0.5 miles from a commuter rail station, subway station, ferry terminal or bus station
- No age restrictions for residents of the building(s) and suitable for families with children
- Minimum gross density of 15 units per acre

(Photo: This multi-family home on Willow Street in Newton Centre would comply with the minimum density requirement of the Housing Choice legislation.)

There are a number of types of grants in jeopardy if Newton chooses not to comply with these reforms. They include Housing Choice Initiative grants, the Local Capital Projects Fund, and the MassWorks infrastructure program, as well as other funding at the discretion of the Department of Housing & Community Development. In the past, these grants have funded improvements along Route 9 and at the intersection of Oak and Needham Streets and more recently, affordable housing feasibility funding to assess the West Newton Armory for use as an affordable housing site.

Interested in learning more? Read the Planning memo about the Housing Choice legislation [here](#).

Also, the Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) recently released [draft compliance guidelines](#) to Section 3A.

The public comment period on these state guidelines will be open through Thursday, March 31 with final guidelines expected this summer. The Planning Department will work closely with the City Council on reviewing the draft guidance, providing feedback to the State if appropriate, and then helping to develop zoning recommendations if the City Council chooses to pursue compliance.

A Farewell and a New Beginning

We're fortunate that the Newton City Charter created the position of Citizen Assistance Officer in the Mayor's office – a single point of contact to hear the concerns of residents, and to help them navigate the many departments at City Hall.

(Photo: Left to right with Amalia Timbers and Linda Plazonja)

The Mayor's office hears from residents every day and our goal is to respond with accurate information, helpful resources, kindness and understanding. From pot holes to pot and permits to paving, the Citizen Assistance Officer listens carefully and helps residents connect with City Hall staff on the issues that are on their minds.

For last four years, Linda Plazonja has filled that role beautifully. You might not recognize her name, but you would certainly recognize her voice from the snow or other emergency calls the City sends out. Linda has decided to leave her position. We will miss her welcoming, patient manner and her encyclopedic knowledgeable of the inner workings of the City. We wish her well on her next adventure.

I am pleased that Amalia Timbers, who has worked part time in both Human Resources and on the Mayor's staff managing communication with Newton's Boards and Commissions, is taking her post. Amalia knows the City of Newton well. She is a great listener and problem solver. Next time you're in City Hall stop by the Mayor's Office and say hello.

A Newton Hero

With the death on Tuesday of Newton Fire Lieutenant Raymond McNamara, our Fire Department lost a beloved member, and our City lost a hero.

Lt. McNamara, known affectionately as "RayMac," rushed into a burning building on Needham Street on a fateful night 29 years ago. Chemicals exploded, injuring 11 Newton firefighters. Burned over 90% of his body, Lt. McNamara lay in a coma for months, endured operation after operation, and lost his sight. Yet, his love for the profession, his dedication to the department and his fellow fire fighters, and his boundless enthusiasm for life inspired us all.

In the words of Fire Chief Gino Lucchetti, "He was always giving, always looking out for the little guy, and was a mentor to many of us. This one hits hard; he was special."

My heart goes out to Lt. McNamara's two sons serving on the Newton Fire Department, Deputy Chief Michael McNamara and Firefighter Brian McNamara, and to his entire family.

Warmly,

Ruthanne

P.S. **Congrats to Boston Globe All-Scholastic athlete Will Rooney**, a senior soccer midfielder on the Newton North Tigers, and to **Division 1 Volleyball Coach of the Year Nile Fox**, who brought the Newton North girls team to the state finals in his first year at NNHS.

P.P.S. Join us Monday for a morning of reflection and music to **celebrate the life and legacy of Martin Luther King** at the City's 54th Annual Celebration. The virtual program begins with an opening video inspired by Dr. King's book "*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*" and includes BIPOC student monologues, a solo performance by Newton South teacher Katani Sumner and performances by Newton Public Schools' student choirs. The program on Monday, Jan. 17 begins at 9:30 a.m. Register [here](#).

P.P.P.S. Donate to the **Community Food Drive** to help Newton's three food pantries. We need canned tuna in water, kid-friendly breakfast cereal, plastic bottles of jam or jelly, hearty soups, full size tubes of toothpaste and body lotion (12-16 ounces). Drop off items at The Village Bank locations, City Hall, Police Headquarters or the Scandinavian Living Center through this Saturday, Jan. 15 (by noon at Village Bank locations). Thank you Newton Rotary for sponsoring this drive.

P.P.P.P.S. Newton photographer Sharon Schindler's explorations of architecture and vintage collectables are **on display on the second floor at City Hall** for the rest of January. New work goes up each month. Are you a Newton artist interested in displaying your work at City Hall? Email Danielle Moriarty in Newton's Cultural Development Office at dmoriarty@newtonma.gov.

P.P.P.P.P.S. **Christmas tree collection is delayed** due to COVID related staffing shortages. Tree collection for residents with a Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday collection day will be picked up next week so please keep your tree out at the curb. Our apologies.



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