

*Friday, Feb. 11, 2022*

## **Mayor's Update**

### **Mask Mandate**

Health and Human Services Commissioner Linda Walsh and I are rescinding the City of Newton's mask mandate in all indoor public spaces effective at the end of the day next Friday, Feb. 18.

Why now?

We considered several factors.

- Newton residents of all ages who are eligible are highly vaccinated. More than 95% of Newton residents ages 5 and older have at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 88% are fully vaccinated. The youngest group that became eligible most recently, those aged 5 to 11, are well vaccinated as well. For example, 80% of our elementary students in the Newton Public Schools have at least one dose and 74% have at least two. Thankfully, vaccines and boosters are highly effective in preventing serious illness.
- The most recent COVID-19 data indicates that we are approaching the end of the Omicron surge with case numbers, the incidence rate, and the positivity rate showing a significant and ongoing decline over the last four weeks. Importantly, hospitalizations due to COVID-19 are also declining in Massachusetts.
- Home tests are readily available now and the cost can be reimbursed through health insurance.

While the City of Newton will no longer be requiring masks at the end of next week in indoor public places, we support people who may choose to wear a mask. People have many reasons and circumstances for choosing to wear a mask, including vaccination status, desire to have an extra layer of defense against infection, being

in a crowded gathering, visiting vulnerable family or friends, or living with someone who is immunocompromised.

Individual businesses and employers may also choose to require masks in their establishments.

Please remember that masks must continue to be worn, according to CDC and/or Massachusetts Department of Public Health guidelines, in a number of situations:

- Wear a mask around others for an additional five days after a five-day isolation or quarantine period.
- Wear a mask when using school buses, public transportation and rideshare, in healthcare and congregate care facilities, and certain [other settings](#).

Newton Health and Human Services staff continue to recommend that all of us use risk reduction measures:

- Get vaccinated and boosted
- Stay home when feeling sick
- Get tested if experiencing symptoms of COVID-19
- Maintain good hand hygiene

I know there are also a lot of questions about the mask requirement in the Newton Public Schools. The district will be sharing its timeline for decision-making on the mask requirement in school buildings later today. NPS families should watch their email for an update from the Superintendent.

## **COVID-19**

### Cases

We had 267 confirmed new cases of COVID-19 in Newton over the past seven days from Feb. 3 to 9. This continues the downward trend we've seen since the peak of

1,156 cases we saw in Newton between Jan. 6 to 12. Last week we reported 365 cases from Jan. 27 to Feb. 2, and 675 during the seven days prior to that.

Notably, 47% of the cases in Newton during the State's two-week tracking period from Jan. 23 to Feb. 5 were college or university students, primarily at one of Newton's institutions of higher education. Please know that these institutions are doing surveillance testing to identify positive cases and students and faculty are required to be vaccinated and boosted.

Newton's positivity rate during the two-week State tracking period is now 3.6% (i.e., the percentage of positive tests among the 25,459 performed on Newton residents). This percentage is down from the 4.7% last week and the 6.7% from the previous week.

The daily average incidence rate in Newton which measures the number of positive cases per 100.000 population is also moving downward. The rate is 62.5 over this two-week State tracking period, compared to 100.8 last week and 134.8 during the week prior.

#### Newton-Wellesley Hospital

Newton-Wellesley Hospital, as of Tuesday, Feb. 8, reports they are caring for a total of 27 patients with COVID-19, two (2) of whom are in the ICU. In comparison, last week there were 40 patients hospitalized, two (2) of whom were in the ICU.

Approximately 45% of the patients hospitalized with COVID-19 were admitted primarily for management of COVID-19, and the rest are hospitalized with other conditions but also have COVID-19.

#### Deaths

While the peak appears over, the heartbreak continues. This week we lost another two Newtonians who died with COVID-19. The pandemic has now claimed 239 of our family members, friends, and neighbors.

#### Newton Public Schools COVID-19 Data

During the past seven days from Feb. 3 to 9, the Newton Public Schools (NPS) had a total of 58 positive student cases and 27 among staff. Last week there were 99 positive student cases and 17 among staff. The week prior there were 199 cases among students and 29 among staff.

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

### NPS Vaccine Data

As of Monday, Feb. 7, 86% of NPS students K -12 have at least one vaccine dose, and 81% have gotten at least two doses.

At the high schools, 93% of students have at least one dose (89% have at least two); 86% of middle school students have at least one dose (83% have at least two); and 80% of elementary students have at least one dose (74% have at least two).

## **Respect and Dignity in the City of Newton Workplace**

My goal for Newton is that everyone who works for our City is treated with respect and dignity.

On Monday, the City Council approved settlements of \$1.5 million and \$65,000 reached on two separate lawsuits filed by members of the Newton Fire Department involving allegations of discrimination based on race.

We know we have work to do, urgent work, to create, implement and nurture a more equitable and inclusive workplace.

We have taken some important steps.

For the first time in the City's history, we have a Director of Community Engagement and Inclusion.

We are in the process of hiring an experienced firm to help us expand and institutionalize diversity, equity and inclusion actions.

All of our department heads and next layer management, City Councilors and member of the School Committee have completed two sets of training on Unconscious Bias and Inclusive Leadership.

Every member of the Newton Fire Department has been trained on harassment, discrimination, and respect in the workplace. This training in the Newton Fire Department will continue with more sessions and related programs.

The Newton Police Department supervisory staff is underway with training on instilling the values of diversity, inclusion and equity into department operations. NPD joined the Active Bystander for Law Enforcement program to prepare officers to successfully intervene with each other in a culture of peer intervention.

Systemic change is essential. I know building an anti-biased workplace is important and I am committed to this work.

### **Smell Gas?**

Sometimes it's just a whiff of gas that seems to be seeping from a sewer grate or pavement as you walk by. Sometimes the smell may be more distinct, perhaps even over-powering.

No matter how strong the smell, whether it's coming from outside or from inside your home, call National Grid's Gas Leak Emergency Line at 1-800-233-5325 immediately if there is a scent of gas in the air. If the smell is inside, go outside to make the call.

If it's an emergency, a broken gas line in your home for example, call 911 and the Newton Fire Department will respond immediately. If the problem is indoors, they will investigate and isolate the cause of the gas leak, and if needed, ventilate and evacuate the building. If the smell is outside, fire fighters will confirm the leak, notify National Grid and investigate nearby buildings for gas inside.

responsibility falls solely on National Grid.

The City of Newton has no authority to repair leaks. That

National Grid is required to arrive within 60 minutes of a call and arrival times in Newton average about 22 minutes, according to National Grid. Once at the location, a National Grid technician will take a variety of gas readings in the area, looking specifically for places where gas could be accumulating. They pay particular attention to the proximity of gas to structures.

National Grid then grades the leak on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 considered an emergency needing immediate repair. In these Grade 1 cases, a repair crew arrives immediately, finds the exact location of the leak in the underground pipe and seals it, making sure there are no longer any readings of natural gas at the site.

National Grid repaired 193 Grade 1 leaks in Newton during 2018, 209 in 2019, and 141 through the end of November 2020.

If the leaks are not classified as an immediate emergency, they are judged as a Class 2 or 3.

Class 2 leaks are considered “non-hazardous” and are monitored every six months and scheduled for repair within one year. Grade 3 leaks are also considered “non-hazardous” and are rechecked periodically. In these cases, National Grid is not required by the State to repair them until gas mains are replaced. (Find more detailed classification information [here](#).)

Unfortunately, gas leaks are not uncommon. The gas line infrastructure in New England is among the oldest in the country. Under Newton, the 305 miles of gas pipes are made up mostly of cast iron and steel with a startling 78% of them “leak prone,” according to National Grid. It’s a potential danger not only for fires and explosions, but a real danger to the environment. Leaking gas is made up mostly of methane, a major contributor to climate change.

So, what’s the solution?

We are working with National Grid to coordinate our street repairs with the replacement of gas lines. For example, the gas lines were replaced under Chestnut Street from Route 9 to Beacon Street before we repaved it last summer. National Grid is now working on Chestnut Street from Beacon Street to Commonwealth Avenue in preparation for the repaving of that section later this year.

Along with National Grid upgrading the infrastructure, the City of Newton is also moving to greener energy with our electric fleet, expanded solar program and considering a Home Rule Petition to allow the City to require new construction and major renovations to use electricity for heating, cooling and hot water.

## WinterFEST

Join us for this weekend's WinterFEST: a complimentary hot bowl of soup donated by Newton restaurants on Saturday evening at the Hyde Community Center Playground (plus music, Olaf from Frozen and cookies), a family friendly/dog friendly walk at Cold Spring Park on Sunday morning, and/or a Newton Centre Sunday afternoon with ice sculptures, music, dancing, singing, shopping and merriment (before heading home to watch the Super Bowl and then, on Monday, enjoying Valentine's Day). Find all the WinterFEST details [at Newton Community Pride.com](http://at.NewtonCommunityPride.com).

Warmly,

Ruthanne

**P.S. How Should Newton Invest our Federal ARPA Dollars?** Please continue to make recommendations at our next zoom community ARPA input session on Wednesday, Feb. 16 at 7:00 p.m. Join the meeting at [us02web.zoom.us/j/85410319248](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85410319248), or email ideas to [ARPAinput@newtonma.gov](mailto:ARPAinput@newtonma.gov).

P.P.S. **Love songs** will be playing on Valentine's Day at the Newton Senior Center. Head over to the Senior Center, 345 Walnut Street in Newtonville to hear Tommy Quigley and Samara perform (masks are required in the building), or tune in from home from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. Register in advance [here](#) to attend.

P.P.P.S. Are you looking for help paying for college and need help on where to start? A virtual workshop, **College Acceptance & Financial Award Review**, can help you understand the FAFSA application, grants, work-study options and loans. The workshop on Thursday, Feb. 17 from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. is presented by MassBay Community College in partnership with Newton Youth Services and the Village Bank.

Pre-registration is required and organizers highly encourage students to attend the workshop with a parent or caregiver. Click [here](#) to register.

P.P.P.P.S. Eating local at **Tango Mango** this Sunday, Feb. 13 or Monday the 14<sup>th</sup>? Mention the **Newton South Nordic Ski team** when you order and a donation will be made to the team.

P.P.P.P.S. **Congratulations to 6 month- old Leo** on passing the AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy Test on Wednesday. (Congrats to Newton Police Officer Justin Lau, too).



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