



**ORANGE COUNTY  
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

*Improving health. Inspiring change.*

Quintana Stewart, MPA - Health Director

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Chancellor Kevin M. Guskiewicz  
Provost Bob Blouin  
Vice Chancellor George Battle

**FROM:** Quintana Stewart, MPA, Health Director

**CC:** Erica Pettigrew, MD, JD, MPH  
Medical Director, Orange County Health Department  
Medical Director, Occupational Health at UNC Health Care  
Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina

**RE:** Public Health Recommendations for Fall 2020 Reopening Plans

**DATE:** July 29, 2020

The Orange County Health Department (OCHD) appreciates the partnership and cooperation from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) during our response and planning efforts to COVID-19. As you know this has been an unprecedented Pandemic and the virus has not spread in the manner predicted earlier by several public health experts. This has required everyone to make multiple adjustments to our plans to ensure the safety and well-being of our respective communities.

**Current Situation in Orange County, NC**

To date, Orange County has been home of approximately 1,241 lab confirmed positive COVID-19 cases and 45 deaths. Over the past month we've watched our daily case count nearly double with record highs in early July of 38 new cases per day. We've also seen an increase in cases for those in the 18-24 age group (22%) and the 24-49 age group (37%). While the data reports that our local cases appear to be stabilizing the last couple of weeks, we at public health know this is not a totally accurate picture of what is happening in our community. As the State moved into Phase 2 and things began to open up, we saw an increase in our cases. As students have begun to return to campus prior to the official start of the Fall Semester we've experienced a small fraction of what we will see if the campus fully reopens and all the students return for in-person class. In the last 4 weeks we've seen positive COVID clusters among UNC staff and athletic teams. We've experienced the increased activity and gathering on Franklin Street that resulted in clusters that visited a couple of local restaurant/bar establishments. We've seen the off campus parties and gatherings at Greek Houses. We've also experienced the lack of cooperation from students with the communicable disease investigation and control measures mandated by NC General Statute §130A-144. For multiple cases staff had to spend several hours trying to gather information and cooperation from students. As a last resort, legal remedies were suggested to gain cooperation. This is absolutely not the desired outcome for our campus students. Due to the reporting structure for positive cases, our data does not necessarily capture each of these cases as they are attributed to the home county of residence, however the reality is Orange County Health Department Staff and UNC Campus Health Staff have been tasked with the monitoring and investigation of these cases here in Orange County.

While everyone has worked tirelessly on mitigation plans for COVID-19, to date there are still capacity issues with testing and contact tracing. There is a national supply shortage for the chemical reagent used to process the COVID PCR test (most reliable diagnostic COVID-19 Test). This shortage has resulted in a significant

delay in test results. Many of the labs used to process tests from Orange County now see a 5-7 day turnaround time for results. When waiting for results to begin case investigation and issue quarantine orders, this is a significant amount of time and can result in further spread of the virus. We continue to recruit and train case investigators and contact tracers, but our ability to stabilize this group is challenging as many are temporary staff from the community or via a contracted position with the State.

To date, a major piece of our planning efforts remain incomplete. As a college town, Chapel Hill is highly dependent on public transportation. The public buses are not only used by local college students that do not physically live on campus, but a large percentage of our healthcare workers also utilize the buses to commute to work at the medical center. At this time we do not have solid plans to maintain the volume of riders while simultaneously adhering to the mask mandate and the physical distancing of six feet or more. To keep the town operational we could potentially create several clusters of cases from one single bus ride.

In addition to the afore mentioned concerns that public health highlights, I have received a massive amount of emails from community members, UNC staff, faculty and students sharing their concern for fully reopening campus for the Fall Semester. If students begin to move back on campus next week, we could quickly become a hot spot for new cases as thousands of students from all across the country/world merge onto the UNC Campus and begin to interact in a manner very normal for college students in a congregate setting. The recent outbreak among the football team was informative of how challenging it will be for the student population to practice the 3 W's even with the best of intentions. We believe the student athletes are likely some of the most disciplined and motivated groups of students on campus and despite their best efforts, the virus spread rapidly between teammates.

Orange County has attempted to control the spread of COVID-19 by adopting policies and mandates to encourage healthy and safe behaviors during this pandemic. We adopted a Countywide Mask Mandate and we close restaurants at 10pm daily to prevent the pop-up club/bar scene during late night operations as observed in early July. While these are valiant efforts, I fear it will not be enough to contain the full campus community upon return for the Fall Semester.

At this time, the Orange County Health Department recommends that the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill consider the following:

- Restrict on campus housing to at-risk students with no access to equitable educational resources and those with true housing needs (i.e. International students, Carolina Covenant & marginalized students)
- Consider virtual classes for the entire Fall Semester but at minimum begin the first 5 weeks of the semester with online instruction only with plans to reassess the situation at the 5 week mark

#### *On-Campus Housing*

The goal of limiting on-campus housing is to create a situation where students that need to return to campus are able to do so in a single occupancy room. Significantly lowering the census of students in the dorms will also allow for additional capacity for isolation & quarantine measures as needed.

#### *First Five Weeks - Online Instruction only*

As we continue to watch the data in Orange County, we want to ensure the community's ability to respond to new cases. Earlier in this Pandemic, our numbers were driven by the older age group, most of whom lived in one of the long-term care facilities in our community. Today we are seeing more cases with the younger age group and more community transmission and asymptomatic cases than originally seen. For this reason, if the first five weeks of instruction is virtual, we may be able to reduce further spread of the virus by eliminating in class instruction which would create more opportunities for close contact and possible viral spread.

There are still so many unknowns about this virus and how it will continue to spread throughout North Carolina and Orange County. The data trends over the past couple weeks seem optimistic, however we've seen this all

change drastically in a short period of time when we move too quickly to reopen our communities. This is the time to double down to maintain the hard work we've done with mask wearing, distancing and frequent hand hygiene to slow the spread. At minimum the five week start of online exclusively would allow the University, the Orange County Health Department, and the UNC Healthcare system more time to monitor the spread of this virus and prepare for any unanticipated campus impact. Additionally, this delay for classroom instruction would give us additional time to see how seasonal influenza may present in our community this fall. As you are aware, we may see a spike in influenza cases as students return and it will be challenging to differentiate these symptoms from COVID-19 since they are very similar. This additional time would also allow the hospital to prepare for possible surge capacity of both COVID-19 and Influenza.

OCHD understands that this decision is difficult and requires consideration of many perspectives. We do not offer this recommendation lightly, and we recognize that there will be educational, economic, and logistical challenges. OCHD is providing this recommendation from the public health perspective with the best information we have at the current time during these extraordinary circumstances.