

COVID-19 Update Press Conference

Friday, September 25, 2020

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information for Volusia County

Jim Judge – Director of Volusia County’s Division of Emergency Management

Jennifer Winters – Protected Species Manager of Volusia County

Holly Smith – Communications Manager and Government Liaison for the Florida Department of Health in Volusia County

Dr. Margaret Crossman – Chief Medical Officer, Halifax Health

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information for Volusia County

I’m Kevin Captain, director of Volusia County Community Information. Thank you for joining us for today’s briefing. Today you will hear from Jim Judge, he’s the Director of Volusia County’s Division of Emergency Management; Jennifer Winters, she is the Manager with Volusia County’s Protected Species at the Marine Science Center; Holly Smith, the Communications Manager and Government Liaison for the Florida Department of Health in Volusia County, and Dr. Margaret Crossman, the Chief Medical Officer at Halifax Health

Before we begin, I’ll give a quick plug for the discussion that we had earlier today with Dr. Scott Klioze. Dr. Klioze simplified the anatomy and physiology of COVID-19 using some great videos. I’ll warn you though, it may bring back some memories of high school biology. But, it’s very educational and breaks down the disease in a much more understandable manner. And, you can watch that video any time on the Volusia County Emergency Management Facebook page.

With that, I’ll invite up Jim Judge, Volusia County Emergency Management Director. Jim?

Jim Judge – Director of Volusia County Emergency Management

Thank you very much Kevin. And, I have to admit, I didn't do very well in high school biology, but I do have a couple of important topics to bring up today. And first of all, is the County testing site out at the Volusia County Fair Grounds. Right now it is a drive-thru site. You can get both a COVID-19 test, as well as an antibody test. That will run through the day of September 29th, and then it's going to close that Wednesday for the market, and then we are going to open up on October 1st. That will then be a walk-up and a viral test only. So, if you want an antibody test, between now and at 4:00 o'clock on the 29th is your time to get that taken care of.

We will use the Hester Building. It will be open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 7 days a week. So, with the Wednesday market, that will not interfere with using the Hester Building. We will have signage and information out there. But also, I really want to emphasize the preregistration, and to do that you need to go to DoINeedACovid19test.com. So it is really important to preregister before you go out to the fairgrounds. Again, October 1st is going to be a walk-up site, again, at the Hester Building. Kevin and his staff will be sending information out on social media a little bit later today and through the week to make sure everybody is updated on that.

And then also moving on to the County as far as the hurricane season goes. So far we have had 23 named storms. We've had eight hurricanes, two of which were major storms. Right now we are in pretty good shape for the next seven to ten days we don't see much going on in the tropics, but we can see potentially increased activity as we get into a La Niña. You know we have the El Niño, La Niña. The El Niño is the winds blowing from west to east; we like that. Unfortunately now the La Niña winds are blowing from east to west, which actually can bring those storms up into the coast of Florida. So, with that, we still need to continue to monitor the weather coming off the coast of Africa. And, at this point we begin to see and focus our attention more to the Gulf of Mexico and also to the Western Caribbean. Because, as we get into the end of September, the beginning of October, that's where we see the development of those systems taking place in those areas. So, we still have a lot to look forward to here as we get through the hurricane season, but with that El Niño it may mean that we may have a little bit more weather in November. Traditionally we get through October, November is fairly quiet with possibly a tropical storm, but with the La Niña we may see the conditions move into the early timeframe for November. So, we still have a long ways to go, still plenty of time to update your preparedness plans, because we still have the month of October and then possibly the beginning of November. So, with that, I'd like to turn it over to Jennifer Winters. And, my grandkids absolutely love to come over there, and especially with the turtles.

Jennifer Winters – Protected Species Manager of Volusia County

That's great. Good afternoon everyone. I was invited to come here today to give you an update on our sea turtle nesting situation along the beaches, and we've had an exciting year as usual. The turtles did not stay in quarantine. They were busy making over 900 turtle nests along our Volusia County beaches. We counted 903 nests actually, which is our third highest nesting number on record since 1998. And, just below our record high year, last year, which was 984 sea turtle nests.

We saw nests laid by four species of sea turtles and we still have a few remaining on the beach today that we are watching closely. And, I also want to touch on an update because our beaches have been experiencing higher than normal tides. We've experienced beach erosion. Some of our sea turtle nests were actually washed out and lost. Thankfully we are at the tail end of the nesting season when we are not expecting to get many more new sea turtle nests. But, as the storm came in and approached, we had about 130 nests that were vulnerable to those effects and so with that we lost about 50 of those. And unfortunately there is nothing that we can do other than to watch and wait, and see what happens with those nests. And the reason is, that once the eggs are laid in the sand, they are very vulnerable to any kind of disturbances. And, they are protected under Florida State and Federal laws, and so we are not allowed to go in and dig up the eggs and move them out of the way, but we do get out there as soon as possible after the storm has passed and try to reset the barriers. If there is any chance of those eggs developing, we will check them daily until they do that, and thankfully we have seen successful nest hatches since the storm passed. So, right now there are just under 70 nests along our beaches, probably through the end of October we will be checking all of those daily, and then you won't see them anymore.

But, what you might see are wash back sea turtles. So, right now as we get into the tail end of the nesting season and we are in the peak of our hatching season, we've had hundreds of 1,000's of sea turtle nests throughout Florida and other parts of the region in the Atlantic basin. All of these nests have hatched and produced 1,000's of sea turtle hatchlings, which swim out into the ocean, and they live in the floating Sargasso Sea weed. And, as they are living and floating out there they are subject to the things that Mother Nature throws at them, including the tides and storm effects. So, as that sea weed starts to get pushed back onto our beaches, particularly during the months of August and November, we will find these young turtles mixed in with the sea weed, and we refer to them as wash backs, because they've been washed back into the sand.

So, those wash back sea turtles are at risk of dehydration or they can be picked up by predators. On Volusia beaches we have a unique activity, where they can get run over by cars, and so we have a very robust program to search for these at-risk sea turtles, to get them collected, and taken down to our Marine Science hospital where they can be rehabilitated and then released back off shore.

So, right now we are in the midst of our wash back season. It really just picked up because we started to see sea weed for the first time last weekend with the storm affects, and we've had over 30 wash back sea turtles collected off of our beaches this week. So, we anticipate that there could be more found if the sea weed keeps coming in.

And also with that, to kind of wrap it up with what is happening at the beaches. Ironically the storm came in on the same weekend we had planned our annual International Coastal Clean Up event, and this is a worldwide event that Volusia County participates in with the Ocean Conservancy. We usually have 1,000's of volunteers throughout all of our County beaches and intercostal waterways, getting out there and collecting garbage to get it out of the waterways to keep our animals safe. There were some cancellations due to the rain and weather and so we've extended that event. And that is good timing, because with all of that sea weed, sometimes you will find a lot of plastics and garbage that accumulates in the sea weed. So, I want to let people know that it is time to get out on the beach; the weather's clearing up a little bit, and there's a lot of fun stuff that you might be able to find out there. If you do want to conduct your own clean up, all you have to do is get on your phone and you can download an app called CleanSwell. It is sponsored by the Ocean Conservancy and it allows you to collect the information of how many people are out and how much garbage you are collecting while you are out there. So, again, that is an international effort that we participate with every year.

And so we thank you for your time, and for inviting me here to give the update, and with that I am going to pass it off to Holly Smith, who is our Communications Manager and Government Liaison for the Florida Department of Health in Volusia County.

Holly Smith - Communications Manager and Government Liaison for the Florida Department of Health in Volusia County

Good afternoon, again, Holly Smith from the Florida Department of Health. It's been two weeks since we provided an update in this forum on the COVID-19 numbers here in Volusia County. The good news is that overall the data has remained stable. As of this morning, the total number of cases here in Volusia

County has 10,738 cases of COVID-19. 239 people have died from COVID-19 in Volusia County. About half of those deaths were residents or staff associated with long-term care facilities.

Here's a look at the number of new cases reported daily beginning August 9 and running through last week. The new number of new cases have been on a downward path. You'll notice one uptick in the middle of the line on this graph and that reflects a bundle of positive lab results dating back weeks that were received from a private lab on Aug. 31. The overall trend of new cases each week has remained stable over the past two weeks. This chart is updated weekly. It will be updated again on Monday to reflect the data from this week.

The 14-day positivity rate also is better than it was this time last month. Right now we're hovering right around 5 percent for the 2-week average. As of today, the 14-day positivity rate is 4.4 percent. Again, that is the 14-day positivity rate. The Department of Health in Volusia County monitors the 14-day positivity rate since it shows a current trend over the past two weeks.

When we look at the number of emergency room visits with COVID-like illness, that also has been on a downward trend and it looks like it's beginning to level off. In fact, almost all of the data points the department of health uses are either trending downward or they have stabilized.

There is one exception though. We're starting to see an increase in emergency room visits for flu-like illness. This is something we expected as we head into flu season. And, in Florida, a typical flu season can run from October and as long as into May. With COVID-19 this year, it's even more important, more important than ever to get a flu shot.

To ensure you are protected before the season really ramps up, you should get a flu shot before Halloween. Once you get a flu shot, it takes your body a couple of weeks to develop the antibodies to help fight off the flu if you are exposed. That's why the CDC recommends getting vaccinated early, before the season is in full swing.

If you'd like to get a flu vaccination but are not sure where to go, the Department of Health has a flu shot locator on its website. Just log on to [FluFreeFlorida.com](https://www.flufreeflorida.com). That's [FluFreeFlorida.com](https://www.flufreeflorida.com) and look on the right side for the flu shot locator. And speaking of the flu, we have Dr. Margaret Crossman, the Chief Medical Officer at Halifax Health with us today and she might be adding on to that flu message. Dr. Crossman?

Dr. Margaret Crossman – Chief Medical Officer, Halifax Health

Thank you Holly, Yes, and thank you for the invite to come and share a little bit about what's happening at Halifax Health. In our Special Care Unit we currently have 15 patients. And, as you may recall, mid-July was our high. We were seeing over 40 patients for COVID related hospitalizations in that time, down to 15 patients, so that is great news. We have five of those today who are on ventilators. And, of course our capacity is good throughout Volusia County and throughout the State of Florida. We are doing very well in that regard.

We do have some hospitalizations in Volusia County, numbers that show that back in mid-July, as I said, 160 or so people on any given day were hospitalized for COVID, and now with that being down to 50 or 60 throughout the County of Volusia, that is good news. We are seeing that even though we've seen more people get COVID throughout this County, the numbers have risen, we are just not seeing as serious or severe an illness. There are not as many hospitalizations related to that. And, in fact, has Holly eluded to, in our Emergency Department we are not seeing as many COVID-like illnesses coming in to be evaluated. What we are starting to see, and again, is no surprise, is flu-like illnesses that are just a little bit different. We are testing to determine, "Is this is flu or is this COVID?" We also have more colds and coughs, and maybe a few Strep throats even, and that is not unexpected. We've had some of our schools that have gone back in, so . . . Remember, if your child is in school and comes home with a sniffle, don't immediately assume that it's going to be COVID. There are a few other things circling around out there.

But, it is very, very important that we continue doing those things that we know are helping. Mitigation really matters. Remember earlier in the season, maybe six months ago we were talking about a transmission rate, or not, of 2.5, and what we had hoped to do, as you recall, was to drive that under one, so that this pandemic would fizzle out and take the least toll as far as sickness or hospitalizations, and certainly death. That number according to State data is around .8, so that is less than one, and that is what we like to see. But there are a couple of things that are making this thing work. Of course, all of the good mitigation that we have seen done throughout, not only this County, but throughout the State. I just want to remind and encourage everyone to do the C's. To do the things that you know to do. Avoid the C's: closed spaces, crowded places and close up contact with people, and to encourage your children to continue to do the same. And in Volusia County, we have of course, the "Step Up Volusia" campaign. So we are washing up, backing up and masking up. And I am going to add a fourth to that, and that is roll up. Roll up your sleeve and get your flu vaccination. As Holly said, the vaccines will strengthen your

immune system, help promote herd immunity within our community, specifically to the flu virus, and the less we see the flu, the less confusing it's going to be in trying to navigate whether we are dealing with COVID infections or flu surges throughout our community. It is very, very important to continue to do this.

So, get your flu shot and get it early. And, as Holly said, it takes three or four weeks to really build that immunity to you really need to do that soon. And, I thank you for allowing me to come and give you an update from Halifax Health, and now I will turn this back over to Kevin.

Kevin Captain – Director of Community Information for Volusia County

Thank you Dr. Crossman. And thank you to all our speakers.

A reminder that there is a County Council meeting this upcoming Tuesday, Sept. 29, at 10 a.m. with the final budget hearing that same evening at 6 p.m.

Also, don't forget, that there are still CARES funding dollars available for COVID-19 rental and mortgage assistance, as well as small business. So, if you're in need, and you meet the qualifications, help is still available. The application is online, and to apply online or to learn more, visit Volusia.org.

I'd also like to just say thank you to SLS Interpreters for always supporting Volusia County government with interpretation services for all press conferences and panel discussions that we've had. And as a final reminder that, Dr. Scott Klioze reminded us this morning, coronavirus is here to stay. While we know we need to continue living our lives, it's imperative that we also take appropriate measures to protect ourselves and others every day.

Don't let your guard down. Continue to Step up, Volusia. Wash up. Back up. Mask up. With that, we'll close today's briefing. Thank you, stay safe and help your neighbor.