

COVID Update/Personal News - Sept. 24, 2021

Hi All-

It's been a while since I've put out an update. There's a reason for that, and I'll explain shortly. But first, a high-level update on the evolving COVID pandemic.

As the state continues experiencing the Delta variant, Idaho has seen COVID-19 cases increase rapidly since July. On July 1<sup>st</sup>, the state recorded 91 positive cases, and in the month of September, the state has been averaging over 1,000 new cases per day, with several days nearing the 2,000 mark. As a result, hospitals statewide have become overwhelmed and the state has instituted crisis standards of care.

We're not immune to what's happening in the community. Within IDOC, we've seen the number of **staff testing positive** increase significantly. In April, May, June and July, we saw less than 10 cases in each month, but in the last 30 days (8/23-9/23), we've had 72 new positives. That's 10X the cases we had in July. On the resident side of the house, we saw **total resident cases** stay under 50 for April, May and June. In July the number climbed to 56 and continued climbing to 137 in August, and 156 so far in September.

Moving forward, you can expect weekly updates out of my office or the Incident Command Team. As a reminder, we also update the website weekly with updated figures on testing, positive cases, and vaccination rates.

Now some personal news. I've tried to be open and honest about my thoughts and experiences throughout this pandemic, and not doing so now feels disingenuous. COVID visited the Tewalt family.

My wife, two kids, mom, dad and I all tested positive over the last several weeks. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, my dad lost his battle with COVID and passed away. My dad wasn't vaccinated. Like a lot of people, my dad had some questions about the vaccine, but his decision not to get vaccinated wasn't a political statement. He had an appointment to get vaccinated in June, but work got in the way and he had to postpone it. And then, like a lot of other people, he saw COVID numbers significantly decline, thought the worst was behind us, and didn't see a sense of urgency to reschedule.

It's still really hard for me to believe, let alone talk about, but I want to share what the last couple of weeks have looked like for my dad and my family. My dad was admitted to the hospital on September 8<sup>th</sup> with COVID pneumonia. Like a lot of patients requiring care, he spent hours in the emergency room before a bed opened up. What happened over the ensuing week was heart wrenching. COVID took my dad from us piece by piece, starting with his lungs and eventually leading to clotting, strokes, and the cumulative effects on his mind and body. Ultimately, it was a war being fought on too many fronts and it became unwinnable.

From the moment my dad entered the hospital, he was alone. We weren't able to visit or be with him in person until he was transitioned to comfort care in his final minutes. In addition to the loss of someone so loved, I'm struggling with the knowledge that in his final days, my dad was alone, confused, scared and hurting. And I don't know how to reconcile the loss and grief with the belief that it didn't have to happen.

I don't share this looking for sympathy or to make some political statement. So many people have experienced grief and loss, and there's not a shortage of people looking to politicize pain or fear for their own gain. But there are some things I hope you take away from my experience.

First, if you've based your decision to not get vaccinated on how someone else experienced this disease, please don't. Six of us got COVID in my immediate family. Three were vaccinated, and one adult and two kids were not. Five of us experienced really mild illness, but COVID presented differently in all of us. None of us had the same experience, and it really surprised me how different the experiences were.

Second, the Delta variant is different and more and more people are experiencing severe illness. In the time since my dad died, I've had to reach back out to three separate and unrelated people who initially reached out to comfort me because they too lost close loved ones in the last week. And it's with increasing frequency that I learn of staff members who have loved ones who have passed or are really sick. My heart goes out to everyone who is hurting, and it's shocking to me how much more severe the outcomes are with this variant.

Finally, make sure the people you love know it. I know how lucky I am to have had someone in my life that hurts this much to lose. Don't miss an opportunity to express that love and gratitude while they're still with you.

In that same spirit, please know how much I appreciate you. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be part of the IDOC family. Please do everything within your power to protect yourself and the people around you.

Thanks-  
Josh