ASHLAND COUNTY
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT

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For Immediate Release

September 25, 2020

Ashland, Wisconsin- Ashland County Public Health is reporting an ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 within Ashland County and specifically within the City of Ashland. The current outbreak within the City of Ashland, as of this time, consists of 39 known positive cases and 70 known exposures. Through contact tracking we have identified these cases are directly associated with bars/taverns. There are numerous other individuals with reported known exposures, associated with bars/taverns, who have declined to identify their specific source of exposure, and have since tested positive. Ashland County Public Health is currently monitoring 287 individuals with known/reported contact, suspected exposure, and/or pending test results.

Many COVID-19 infected individuals have no symptoms or only mild symptoms for which they never seek medical attention. Additionally, a significant number of Ashland County residents have barriers to accessing healthcare services including no or limited transportation, underinsured or uninsured, poverty and/or no medical primary care provider, which influences the level of testing available for sick individuals. Therefore, the actual number of infected and exposed individuals is grossly underestimated by local testing.

Through contact tracing, we have been able to identify known sources of exposure and these include, but are not limited to; The Airport Inn, Deepwater Grille, Mugs, Neighborly Bar, Office Bar, Scott & Ar's, The Barrel Inn, The Oredock Saloon, The Safari. Note that these establishments have been commonly named by many of the known positive cases as well as many of the individuals reporting known exposures.

There has been substantial guidance from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, and other public health officials throughout the United States and the world. However, circumstances that are present in bars and taverns are known to accelerate the spread of COVID-19. These circumstances include the increased likelihood that these settings attract people from broad geographic areas who could be infected; the prolonged period of time in which people gather in close proximity and could be exposed to COVID-19; the difficulty with tracing exposure when these people gather; and the likelihood that individuals will visit more than one location on a single outing increasing the likelihood of their exposure and/or transmission of the virus.

An Order for the temporary closure of bars/taverns within the City Limits of Ashland and up to 2.5 miles from the City Limits was issued on September 22, 2020, to be effective September 25, 2020 at 12:01 am and expiring on October 11, 2020 at 11:59pm. This Order was issued based on evidence of increasing transmission of COVID-19 within Ashland County and specifically within the City of Ashland. The Order was issued based on scientific evidence regarding the most effective approaches to slow the transmission of communicable disease generally and

COVID-19 specifically. The Order was issued with the best practices as currently known and available to protect members of the public from avoidable risks of serious illness or death resulting from exposure to COVID-19. Although some people who contract COVID-19 do not become seriously ill, people with mild symptoms and asymptomatic people with COVID-19 place all vulnerable members of their family, their coworkers, and their neighbors at risk for life threatening disease. In addition, previously thought to be a benign disease in otherwise healthy people, there is growing evidence that even among those who have experienced a mild case of COVID-19, there are very high rates of long lasting heart, lung, and/or neurologic disease.

The Order would have reduced the likelihood that people would be exposed to COVID-19 at a single location and thereby slow the spread of COVID-19 within the City of Ashland and Ashland County. The intent of the order was to limit non-essential gatherings under which conditions facilitate the rapid and uncontrolled spread of COVID-19. By temporarily closing bars and taverns, which are currently identified as a common source of transmission within our community, the cycle of this rapid and uncontrolled spread would have been broken. This would have then enabled essential services to continue, facilitated in the protection of our school-age children as they move to attend in-person school or a combination of in-person and virtual school, protected our elderly population and medically vulnerable, and helped to protect the long-term viability of our economy in Ashland County. In consideration of the anticipated spike of COVID-19 cases in northern Wisconsin, a temporary closure had been determined as an appropriate intervention to break the cycle. This order had been reviewed and supported by the Ashland County Health and Human Services Board in accordance with the mission statement to support and protect the health and well-being of all residents in Ashland County.

At this time, the afore mentioned order will be rescinded, effective immediately, pursuant to identifying alternative means to assure the health and well-being of all residents in Ashland County.

Dated this 25th day of September 2020

Elizabeth Szot

Elizabeth Szot, Health Officer/Public Health Administer
Ashland County Health Department