



Candice S. Miller

Public Works Commissioner
Macomb County

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Media Contact:

Norb Franz 586-201-5732 norb.franz@macombgov.org

Sewage testing shows that COVID numbers are continuing to climb

The increase this month in COVID-19 infections in Macomb County is higher than clinical numbers show and will likely increase further, according to automated sampling of sanitary sewage directed by the Macomb County Public Works Office.

The number of county residents who have tested positive has increased 125% in the last 14 days, putting residents at a “very high risk level”. That jump in cases exceeds the statewide increase of 101% for the same period.

In Macomb County, the number of official positive tests likely will continue to rise. Sewage samples pulled from sites across Clinton Township show the rate of actual infection is higher than numbers currently reported by state health officials. Laboratory testing of sewage to detect the coronavirus is considered more accurate in determining overall community infection because it includes sampling of waste shed by individuals who are already infected but who haven’t been tested. As some infected individuals await test results – or don’t get tested at all -- the data from testing of sewage provides a quicker and more thorough snapshot of infection in the population.

“Testing shows the trend line of what’s coming about a week before, it’s a precursor. Unfortunately our testing is showing that COVID cases will continue to climb into next week,” Macomb County Public Works Commissioner Candice S. Miller said.

Vaccine eligibility in Michigan was expanded Monday, March 22, to include all Michiganders age 50 and older, and to anyone age 16 and older with disabilities or medical conditions that put them at high risk of negative COVID-19 outcome. Beginning Monday, April 5, all Michiganders age 16 and up who were not previously eligible will become eligible to receive a vaccine.

Using leading-edge technology, the testing of sewage for the presence of COVID-19 in the sanitary waste stream also reveals when and where an outbreak of clinically reported cases is likely to occur.

The pulling of sewage samples, and subsequent laboratory tests to detect the level of the coronavirus, started as a pilot program in Clinton Township. The goal was to assist the Macomb County Health Department with the huge task of contact tracing and other efforts to reduce the spread of the highly infectious virus.

ADDRESS: 21777 Dunham Road, Clinton Township, Michigan 48036 • Phone: 586-469-5325 • Fax: 586-469-5933

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At one point last fall, analysis of lab results showed the level of COVID-19 in Clinton Township was approximately five times higher than what clinical reporting data showed.

The pilot project became a leading edge program in Michigan, drawing interest from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy. Macomb County Public Works and its partners expanded testing to all of Sterling Heights and a portion of Lenox Township – including the Michigan Regional Correctional Facility prison on 26 Mile Road. Testing in Sterling Heights and Lenox Township wrapped up at the end of December.

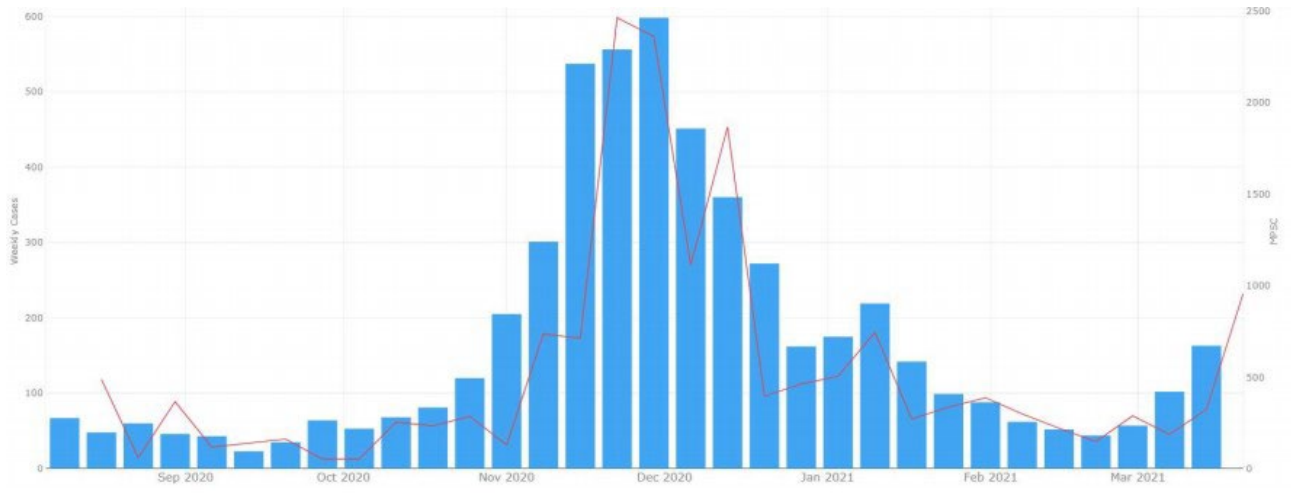
PHOTOS:

Workers pull samples of sewage in Clinton Township.

A worker pulls sewage in Lenox Township.

GRAPHIC:

This graphic shows the rising numbers of positive COVID-19 tests in Macomb County will continue for at least another week, based on laboratory analysis of sanitary sewage.



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