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### **Contact Tracing: First line of defense against COVID-19**

(Oklahoma City) - Oklahoma's public health officials are emphasizing the importance of contact tracing of positive COVID-19 cases, particularly as discussions continue around the feasibility of lifting stay-at-home recommendations and reopening businesses.

Contact tracing is a process used by public health officials to slow the rate of community spread of an infectious disease by interrupting the chain of transmission. According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) current recommendations, contacts include household members, caregivers of COVID-19 patients in a household and anyone who has had close contact of 6 feet or more with the confirmed case for a prolonged period of time.

"Contact investigations are the number one tool right now in this fight against COVID-19, and will be even more critical once society reopens," said Hieremila Haile, OCCHD epidemiologist.

"We urge everyone to remember that by limiting the number of individuals you come in close contact with (within 6 feet for 10 minutes or more), this will limit the spread of the virus and also decrease the time and resources required to conduct an epidemiological investigation," Haile added.

Contact tracing investigations are initiated by identifying close contacts to a confirmed case during the initial investigation with a confirmed case. Close contacts are defined as individuals who were within 6 feet of the confirmed case for more than 10 minutes during the confirmed case's contagious period. The

contagious period is considered to be two days prior to symptom manifestation and 14 days after.

OCCHD epidemiologists have been completing contact tracing investigations related to COVID-19 since early February 2020. Initially, travel related cases made up a large portion of cases requiring investigation.

However, with widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the United States, and a large portion of domestic and international travel decreased, travel related cases no longer make up the bulk of tracing investigations.

Since early March, the OCCHD team has made direct contact with more than 4,000 individuals in central Oklahoma as part of their contact tracing investigations of positive COVID-19 cases. During the investigation, epidemiologist and public health personnel identify persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 and discuss symptom monitoring and quarantine requirements.

Simultaneously, through the initial investigation, the public health team will identify and evaluate individuals considered to have had close contact with a confirmed case during their contagious period and provide appropriate guidance to also include symptom monitoring and/or self-quarantining and isolation, as needed. Individuals who were in close contact with a positive case have a higher risk of having contracted the virus. This makes cooperation vital because it notifies those individuals who are positive and isolates them from others.

The information gathered during any investigation is confidential. Any information obtained is only used to identify and provide important guidance to confirmed cases and anyone identified as a close contact.

“It is about stopping the chain of transmission,” said Haile. “By identifying these individuals and having them isolate themselves, it reduces the probability of spreading the virus.”

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