

Opinion: Public health officers care about communities, not politics

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Every person in Michigan has been impacted in some way by COVID-19 over the past 16 months. Few want this pandemic under control as much as your local public health officer. Instead, it is rapidly overtaking our cities and small towns once again, and local health officers are now put in a terrible position.

The Michigan Association for Local Public Health has intentionally stayed out of the COVID political battles coming from Lansing and Washington, D.C., simply because we do not see a path forward for our communities when public health becomes a political fight.



But the fight is happening in our communities regardless, and health officers are stuck in the middle. Federal and state health authorities have offered “guidance. Many of our local schools are asking for mandates, particularly on measures like mask use in schools. Many health officers have been told, either implicitly or explicitly, that a formal health order will mean our jobs will be at risk, funding cuts to our local health programs from Lansing or petitions to eliminate our authority to protect our towns in the future.

Limiting the authority of public health officers to do their job will have consequences well beyond COVID-19. But we hear over and over the same arguments: Some people want community level protections reinstated, and some people want their freedom to make personal choices. If local health officers offer only guidance to the schools, the fight moves to local school board meetings where parents on both sides threaten to pull their kids out of school.

Controlling a contagious disease requires a united community effort everywhere. As long as our communities remain divided, things will not get better. Some county health officers recently have issued mandatory mask orders for schools, and it’s likely more will take that step as we watch the school year commence. They do this at tremendous personal and professional peril, fully aware of the consequences because they believe it is absolutely necessary in this moment.

We know public trust in government was diminished by this pandemic. Too many leaders spoke too confidently about a rapidly evolving situation with plenty of unknowns. The continually updated and sometimes conflicting guidance has shaken public confidence in government. We understand.

But the nature of viruses is change. They shift and evolve to survive, which means the strategies for controlling waves of variants will need to change. Managing public health in this pandemic isn’t about vaccines and social distancing and mask mandates. It’s about risk management.

For example, the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends wearing a mask indoors in most Michigan counties. If you are among the people confused by the change in policy, consider it this way: A cloth or disposable mask can offer some measure of protection. It lowers risk. Does it eliminate risk completely? No. But lowering risk, from a public health standpoint, has a cumulative positive effect, and that matters when weighing risk factors.

If you're skeptical about getting a vaccine, talk it over with a medical professional you trust and weigh the risk of getting or spreading COVID-19 against the benefits the vaccination provides.

Your local public health officers are keeping their focus on ways to manage the pandemic for entire communities. We approach our work recognizing our actions have impacts socially and economically. We live in the communities we serve, and we've shared in the losses of the past year.

But the COVID-19 pandemic clearly is not over. It is time for everyone in Michigan to take steps to manage their risk. Get vaccinated. Stay home if you're sick. Get tested if you experience COVID symptoms. Wear a mask indoors. Avoid crowded indoor places. These are things we can all do.

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