Cameron County Hospitals Unite With Local Government to Keep Community Safe amid Mask Mandate Lift

CAMERON COUNTY – Harlingen Medical Center, Valley Baptist Health System and Valley Regional Medical Center unite with Cameron County, City of Brownsville and the City of Harlingen to launch the Cameron County Community Safety Initiative. The initiative is aimed at keeping residents safe and informed on how they can best continue to protect themselves, and their loved ones, even after being vaccinated, amid the ending of the state mask mandate.

Effective March 10th, an executive order from Texas Governor Greg Abbott ends the mask wearing mandate in public settings, including the elimination of capacity restrictions on public businesses which include restaurants and bars. However, health experts from across the Rio Grande Valley warn that declining mask usage may lead to another surge in COVID hospitalizations, putting excess strain on the region's healthcare system.

"The continued use of masks along with other recommended preventative measures will help us avoid yet another surge of hospitalizations and preventable deaths due to COVID-19," said Cameron County Health Authority Dr. James Castillo. "We are so close to the end of this pandemic and have incredibly effective vaccines available. It would be a shame to see another surge or a prolonged decline in cases because we dropped our guard too soon."

The initiative is a collaborative effort between the healthcare systems and the larger cities in Cameron County, which will feature various Public Service Announcements from county health leaders, city leaders and hospital leadership and their medical experts. The PSA's are scheduled to run on the social media platforms of all initiative partners starting the week of March 8th. The initiative will request support from public and private businesses and agencies to help reach the public.

"The main message that we want to communicate to the public is to remain vigilant against COVID-19, even after the mask mandate ends," said Manny Vela, CEO of Valley Baptist Health System. "Continue to practice social distancing as best you can and continue to wear a mask when in public - especially in areas where social distancing in limited."

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention continues to recommend that people wear a mask that fully covers their mouth and nose as a good method of protection against COVID-19. The CDC advises people wear masks in public settings, at events and gatherings and anywhere they will be around other people.

"While the mask mandate may not be in place, our hope is that our community members will continue to focus on the goal here, which is to mitigate COVID-19 as best we can," said Art Garza, CEO of Valley Regional Medical Center. "As a community we have made such positive progress in lowering the hospitalizations of COVID-19 cases and we wish to continue on that path."

Throughout the yearlong COVID-19 pandemic, the healthcare community has relied on the support local residents to follow best practices to help slow the spread of the virus. Leslie Bingham, CEO for Valley Baptist Medical Center-Brownsville, urged local residents to continue supporting their healthcare workers in those efforts.

"Our hospital doctors, nurses and staff have been so committed to caring for our patients; they have worked so hard over the last year and continue to give their best care, so that patients can go home to their families," Bingham said. "We are doing our part to bring about healing to our community and we simply ask that our community do their part to do the same."

Since the start of pandemic, last March, the CDC has recommended that people:

- Wear a mask in public, which covers both their nose and mouth
- Practice social distancing
- Avoid large gatherings, and
- Wash their hands consistently and for at least 20 seconds

Due in large part to local residents and businesses working with the healthcare community to adhere to CDC best practices, in addition to the deployment of COVID-19 vaccines throughout the region, the Rio Grande Valley has seen a decline in COVID hospitalizations following a surge during the holidays. Following those best practices has been proven to slow the spread of COVID throughout the community, and those guidelines should be followed until more local residents have the opportunity to receive a COVID vaccine, Castillo said.

While the vaccines are incredibly effective, their full benefit will come when the majority of people in our community have been vaccinated," he said. "Until then it's important for people who have been vaccinated to continue to wear masks in public spaces and follow the recommended precautions regarding distancing and avoiding crowds."

As vaccination efforts ramp up, health experts are hopeful that the pandemic has entered its final stages. However, until COVID-19 no longer threatens the most vulnerable members of our community, hospitals and are urging local residents to remain steadfast partners by continuing to practice diligent COVID safety measures.

"The hospitals of Cameron County are committed to caring for our residents, that is what we do, and we want residents to join us in the on-going battle against COVID-19," said Matt Walthoff, CEO of Harlingen Medical Center. "Beating the pandemic will only happen if we do it together."

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How to Select

When selecting a mask, there are many choices. Here are some do's and don'ts.

DO choose masks that

Have two or more layers of washable, breathable fabric

Completely cover your nose and mouth

Fit snugly against the sides of your face and don't have gaps

Have a nose wire to prevent air from leaking out of the top of the mask

DO NOT choose masks that

Are made of fabric that makes it hard to breathe, for example, vinyl

Have exhalation valves or vents which allow virus particles to escape

Are intended for healthcare workers, including N95 respirators

Rectangular Snip