

# Mask mandate goes into effect in Erie County; Niagara County not following suit

With coronavirus cases skyrocketing in Erie County, Executive Mark Poloncarz on Monday announced a mask mandate for all patrons and public-facing staff inside all public locations. He said this is the first of up to four phases of action designed to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

The mandate began at 6 a.m. Tuesday. Masks must be worn by all people ages 2 and older who are able to medically tolerate a face covering and all publicly facing staff at bars/restaurants (staff, patrons who are not seated); grocery and all other stores; theaters (movie and live); barber shops/beauty parlors; gyms and fitness centers; entertainment venues (hockey rinks, bowling alleys) for both players and spectators; places of worship, including during prayers; and hotels, banks and all other places open to the public.

The Erie County Department of Health said, "Masks are strongly recommended for all other non-public work settings if social distancing cannot be maintained."

"Venues that have strict vaccine requirements for entrance, such as Highmark Stadium and KeyBank Center, would not have to require masks for vaccinated individuals under these orders."

Poloncarz said, "We know the greatest way to reduce transmission is to wear a mask."

Phase two is a vaccine mandate. Phase three calls for capacity restrictions, with shutdowns the ultimate deterrent in phase four.

"We only want to do phase one," Poloncarz said. "Nobody wants to go to phase two. And phase two is unnecessary, if we act appropriately."

There were 371 new COVID-19 cases on Nov. 21, with more than 4,300 total cases over the past seven days. The positive test rate percentage is 9.3% – the highest



rate since May 2020, when testing availability was limited. COVID-19 cases have risen 22% from the previous week, and 100% over the past month. Hospital admission has increased 50% in the past two weeks, with almost 91% of beds full.

"We really need to keep the hospitals from being inundated," Poloncarz said.

Nov. 18 and 19 were the fourth- and third-highest new case days on record, with 774 and 778 cases, respectively.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has set a case rate threshold of 100 or more cases per 100,000 residents over the past seven days for a community to be considered a "high transmission" area.

Commissioner of Health Dr. Gale Burstein said, "We're seeing sustained, high levels of COVID-19 cases diagnosed throughout the community. We are seeing widespread community transmission. We're seeing people that are getting infected among households. We're seeing people iden-

tifying that they've been infected in parties – even private parties; gathering with friends at bars, at restaurants. But people can be infected anywhere.

"We don't know exactly where people are getting infected. You can be infected talking to a friend in a grocery store aisle. You can be infected talking to the person that's cutting your hair for 10 or 20 minutes in a hair salon. You can be infected anywhere where you are not wearing a mask, and the person you're with, or the people you're with, are not wearing a mask.

"We are seeing most of the transmissions in situations where people are not wearing masks. We know that the delta variant is very, very contagious – and it is spreading like wildfire in our community – especially among people that are not wearing a mask.

"People that are living in closed, contained spaces that are fully vaccinated – like people in nursing homes – we're not seeing a lot of infection. With our most re-

cent nursing home data, there were only 28 confirmed cases out of a total of 4,525 residents."

She noted, "These infections can be prevented, if people take the right precautions."

Erie County continues to be in a state of emergency.

Poloncarz said sanitarians will be out monitoring compliance.

He noted a tentative reevaluation date of Dec. 13.

Gov. Kathy Hochul said, "I want

to commend Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz for taking strong actions today to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Western New York. This is an example of the leadership we need to see at the local level to combat this deadly virus.

"As part of our ongoing engagement with local leaders, I spoke with county executives yesterday from every region of the state to hear firsthand their plans to combat the delta variant and pledge state resources and support to make vaccines and boosters even more widely available as we approach the holiday season.

"Let's avert a spike this winter with the tools we know will help stop the spread of COVID-19: Get vaccinated, get the booster if you are already vaccinated, and wear a mask when in public places indoors. Don't put it off any longer."

### Niagara County

Niagara County Legislature Chairwoman Becky Wydysh released the following statement:

"While we are certainly concerned about rising COVID-19

numbers in Niagara County, we are not implementing any mandates at this time. First, unlike Erie County, Niagara County is not under a state of emergency and has not been for months. This means any decision on new COVID-19 restrictions would require a vote by the legislature in consultation with our director of public health.

"I can say safely say that, at this time, a majority of the legislature does not support any such mandates. We believe businesses, employers and other institutions across Niagara County should implement the safety protocols that make sense for their particular operations.

"We also have been saying for months, even when our county's numbers were lowest in the state, that opening schools and reengaging in many public activities would lead to increased positive cases. We believe the best step that could be taken right now is for New York State to reestablish a free testing facility in Niagara County so people have easy access to testing and those positive can be isolated.

"Our public health director has been clear that people should keep social distance, wear masks and, above all else, get vaccinated, including booster shots. That is where the focus must be, so people can enjoy their holidays and we can avoid a holiday surge."

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## NCCC board approves recognition of Native American Heritage Day

A resolution was approved by the Niagara County Community College board of trustees on Tuesday, Nov. 16, recognizing the Friday prior to Thanksgiving as Native American Heritage Day.

This recognition was made possible through efforts of NCCC's equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) committee. Created in 2016, this group serves to actively engage the whole college community in recognizing the importance of belonging among stakeholders for assuring the success of all members of the college community, including students, staff, faculty and administration, in an ever-increasingly global environment.

A press release said, "Native American Heritage Day is tradi-

tionally celebrated on the Friday after Thanksgiving, but NCCC is typically closed that day. Officials at NCCC wanted to ensure this important day received appropriate attention from the campus community, maximizing engagement from students and staff, so the recommendation was made to

move this special designation to the Friday before Thanksgiving."

The Native American club is leading efforts during Native American Heritage Month this November to honor Indigenous People through educational events where attendees can learn about Native American history,

the Haudenosaunee people and other tribes around the U.S. On Friday, representatives from EDI and the Native American Club encouraged the campus community to wear orange or purple in recognition of Native American culture lost to assimilation.

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