

H-F community deals with rise in COVID-19 Omicron variant

BY CHRONICLE STAFF

January saw COVID-19 numbers climb as the South Suburbs were hit with the Omicron variant. The Homewood and Flossmoor communities made the necessary adjustments to keep everyone safe while schools, businesses and government agencies stayed open.

The Homewood and Flossmoor village halls didn't reopen after the holiday break due to the spike in COVID-19 numbers. Most village services were available online.

Local restaurants and the H-F Park District Racquet & Fitness Club are now asking guests to verify their vaccination status in compliance with a Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH) order issued Dec. 23.

After returning from the holiday break for one day on Jan. 4, Homewood District 153 was forced to shut down the next three days as staff members took sick days due to COVID-19. The "adaptive pause" was approved by the Cook County Department of Public Health. The district's schools reopened Jan. 10.

On Jan. 18, the District 233 school board approved an agreement with the Homewood-Flossmoor Education Organization that teachers infected or quarantining due to COVID-19 and feeling well enough to continue working remotely from home be allowed to do so. H-F High has remained open this school year while other high schools in the South Suburbs have been forced to shut down due to high COVID-19 numbers.

The area was already experiencing a surge in cases that started picking up steam in November. On Dec. 15, the first case of the new Omicron variant of the virus was detected in suburban Cook County.

From that moment, the surge became a dramatic spike, with case numbers far surpassing the worst days of the surge the previous winter. From Nov. 6-13, 2020, the state reported about 85,000 new cases. During the week ending Friday, Jan. 14, 2022, the number of new cases exceeded 207,000.

The bad news about the Omicron variant was its transmissibility, which was much higher than the Delta variant. Omicron also proved adept at infecting people who were fully vaccinated, including boosters. The bad news was mitigated somewhat by the fact that fully vaccinated people were much less likely to become seriously ill from Omicron infections.

The sheer numbers, though, still sent many mostly unvaccinated patients to the hospital, and area health care facilities were overwhelmed.

UChicago Medicine-Ingalls closed its urgent care center in Flossmoor for Dec. 29 to Jan. 18 shifting staff to other facilities



Marilyn Thomas/H-F Chronicle

Brianna Merrill, 13, a student at James Hart School, gets ready for her booster shot during the vaccine event Jan. 7 hosted by the Illinois Department of Public Health.

for additional help due to the numbers of COVID-19 patients. UChicago Medicine-Ingalls Hospital in Harvey received help the week of Jan. 17 from a 26-member federal surge team to assist staff with the rising number of COVID-19 patients for 14 days.

Health officials continue to urge vaccination as the best tool to fight the pandemic. They also are recommending people switch to N95 or KN95 masks rather than cloth masks, which apparently are less effective in protecting from Omicron infection.

CCDPH opened a special clinic in Matteson on Jan. 20 to administer vaccine and booster shots to residents. The Illinois Department of Public Health sponsored vaccination drives in December and January in cooperation with District 161 in Flossmoor and District 153 in Homewood.

The federal government is making N95 masks and at-home COVID-19 test kits available to all Americans. Information is at www.covidmasks.gov and www.covid-tests.gov.

Local case numbers started to fall in mid-January, which suggests the Omicron surge here might behave similarly to other places, where dramatic spikes were followed by equally dramatic declines in cases.

In the state, the peak of more than 207,000 cases Jan. 14 was followed by a report of 183,000 new cases on Jan. 21.

During the last two weeks of December, Flossmoor's new case numbers were 450% higher than the previous two-week period. As of Jan. 21, the rate was in decline by 29%. Homewood's rate didn't reach quite that level. The last two weeks of December saw cases increase 162% over the previous two week period. On Jan. 21, CCDPH reported Homewood's increase had slowed to 12%.

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