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CITY OF NEW ORLEANS

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PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

Date: June 9, 2021

From: Jennifer Avegno, MD
Director of Health, Orleans Parish

Memo: Public Health Advisory Related to Non-Congregate Sheltering for Unvaccinated, Highly Vulnerable Individuals in Orleans Parish

I, Dr. Jennifer Avegno, as the Health Director for Orleans Parish, hereby declare the continued need for Orleans Parish to take continued appropriate measures to mitigate and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic that now disproportionately affects unvaccinated, highly vulnerable individuals. These measures should include plans to institute non-congregate sheltering (NCS) when possible, which will provide temporary housing solutions to shelter the unhoused during the appropriate period needed to educate and inform individuals about the benefits of vaccination, provide full immunity via a two-dose vaccine series, and provide a safe place to recover from any vaccine side effects. In doing so, Orleans Parish will protect human life and minimize hospitalizations and severe outcomes. The advisories and declarations contained in this memo should be read as applying to all corresponding activities within Orleans Parish since March 11, 2020, when Mayor LaToya Cantrell declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19.

This advisory addresses measures needed to prevent and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and the drastic effects it could have on the lives of those unvaccinated, highly vulnerable citizens. Consistent with the Mayor's Emergency Proclamations, Louisiana Governor's Executive Orders, and the guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the New Orleans Health Department finds that Orleans Parish should take steps to protect those who are unvaccinated, vulnerable, and at elevated risk of being exposed to COVID-19.

The use of NCS is recommended for unvaccinated, highly vulnerable individuals at greatest risk for complications from or exposure to COVID-19. Isolating these persons in individual rooms and keeping them away from common areas will allow proper social distancing to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, NCS will allow for a safe and stable environment in which to educate these individuals about the importance of vaccination and allow recovery from any vaccine side effects while building full immunity through the course of a vaccine series (at least 6-8 weeks). In particular, the unsheltered, street-dwelling population is at significant risk of exposure to outbreaks if unvaccinated, given the close proximity of individuals residing in street encampments and the high degree of medical comorbidities present in this group.

New Orleans has been severely impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, over 29,000 known cases have been diagnosed in Orleans Parish, with nearly 800 resident deaths (*data as of 6/7/2021*). Louisiana has seen over 400,000 cases and 10,000 deaths, and is among the lowest-ranked states in terms of vaccination rates – leaving the population susceptible to continued outbreaks and spread of potentially more infectious variants.

Furthermore, in Orleans Parish, the impact of COVID-19 has been disproportionately felt by Black residents. Death rates for White individuals were 155 per 100,000 overall while those for Black residents were nearly 60% higher at 247 per 100,000 (*data as of 6/6/2021*). Black individuals overall tend to have poorer health outcomes, and make up a disproportionate share of the most vulnerable unsheltered individuals. Furthermore, Black vaccination rates lag those of Whites (35.1% vs 63.9% receiving at least one dose by 6/6/2021, respectively). As such, to mitigate the effects of systemic and disease inequities, NCS is critical to provide appropriate access, education, and intervention (vaccines) for highly vulnerable, underserved residents of color.

Since vaccine was made widely available in the first quarter of 2021, the City and its health care partners have made multiple attempts to vaccinate highly vulnerable residents, particularly those who are unsheltered or street dwelling. While the latest point in time count estimates approximately 600 individuals are unsheltered on any given night, attempts to vaccinate these individuals in their environment with a complete series have not been successful; though exact counts are challenging, it is estimated that fewer than 100 of these residents have received at least one dose of vaccine. This leaves a large, highly vulnerable, often transient and mobile population susceptible to continued widespread disease transmission and spread to other areas.

Therefore, in order to protect the health and public safety of our unvaccinated, highly vulnerable residents, as well as lessen the threat of development of and widespread exposure to potentially more deadly COVID-19 variants, I hereby advise the implementation of NCS in all sheltering plans for these individuals when possible, practical, and available, with the understanding that this may not be the case in all sheltering locations. This advisory is retroactive to the date of March 11, 2020, and is effective through the end of the COVID-19 emergency, unless terminated sooner.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Avegno', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jennifer Avegno, MD
Director of Health, Orleans Parish