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SD officials warn of COVID-19 exposure at Sturgis

By Deb Holland, Black Hills Pioneer
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Sturgis hosted its first COVID testing of city and school district employees as well as front-line Rally workers and residents on Friday following the 80th Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. Mass testing will continue Monday and Tuesday at the Sturgis Community Center parking lot. Pioneer photo by Deb Holland

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PIERRE — South Dakota health officials warned Thursday that a number of people who attended the 10-day Sturgis Motorcycle Rally this month, including some who came from out of state, have come down with COVID-19.

Department of Health officials did not give an exact number of rallygoers who tested positive, but they said it was under 25. The Rally, which ended Sunday, brought hundreds of thousands of people from far and wide to the city.

This news comes as the city of Sturgis hosted its first post-Rally COVID testing of city and school district employees as well as front-line Rally workers and residents on Friday.

The state's health department has received reports from other states that people who traveled from the Rally have tested positive, state epidemiologist Josh Clayton said.

Dan Daly, spokesman for Monument Health, said Thursday that between Aug. 5 and Aug. 16, Monument Health recorded 169 positive COVID tests. He said 22 of those testing positive were out-of-state residents, the remaining were from South Dakota or eastern Wyoming. The testing could have been done at any of Monument Health's five locations throughout the Black Hills.

Kim Engle, Panhandle Public Health District director in Scottsbluff, Neb., said cases traced to the Sturgis Rally are widespread in western Nebraska.

"We cover 12 counties in western Nebraska and as of today we have seven cases. We're expecting that to increase," she said.

All the tests were done in Nebraska after the individuals returned home, Engle said.

She said after staff realized the cases were leading back to the Rally they began tracking Rally-related cases specifically.

"I hope it's not a big blowup, but I heard it was the largest gathering in the world since the pandemic started," she said.

Clayton said contact tracers have been able to work with most people to determine who they were around and may have infected.

The health department has issued public warnings for two bars and a tattoo parlor in the region because the department is not able to track all of the people who may have been exposed to COVID positive individuals at the businesses.

On Thursday, the South Dakota Department of Health announced that an employee of Asylum Tattoo Sturgis at 1304 Main St. in tested positive for COVID-19.

The individual worked at the business while able to transmit the virus to others on Aug. 13-18.

Also, a person who was at the One-Eyed Jack's Saloon in Sturgis from noon to 5:30 p.m. Aug. 11, later tested positive for COVID-19, State Health officials said.

Also, an employee who worked at the Bumpin' Buffalo Bar and Grill in Hill City during the dates of the Rally tested positive for COVID-19.

And the False Bottom Bar in Spearfish closed Wednesday for deep cleaning and disinfecting after an employee tested positive.

Even before this year's Rally kicked off, some locals and officials expressed concern that COVID-19 could spread rapidly at the Rally and that it would be hard to track rallygoers who got infected before heading home.

The Rally news comes amid an increase in the COVID-19 infection rate in South Dakota. Health officials reported Thursday that there were 125 new confirmed cases of the disease and two new deaths. Over the past two weeks, the average number of daily new cases has increased by 32, which is an increase of about 43%.

With schools in the state set to welcome back students to the classroom in the coming days, health officials said they plan to track and release data on infections among students, teachers and staff. They have found fewer than 40 school-related cases statewide so far, but they said they would not be breaking those infections down by the school districts where they occurred.

Clayton said the schools will notify students and parents when they find cases, but the health department is reporting the total number of cases to give a statewide view on infections in schools.

Since the pandemic started, South Dakota has had 10,691 confirmed cases of COVID-19. The state's death toll from the disease caused by the coronavirus stands at 157.

The state's coronavirus dashboard shows that new COVID-19 cases in Meade County, which includes Sturgis, have risen sharply since the Rally began, though daily cases remain in the single digits.

On Monday and Tuesday, Meade County reported a record of nine new cases each day. On Wednesday there were eight new cases and a daily positivity rate of 53.3%. That means eight of 15 tests were positive.

The day before the Rally began, Meade County reported just two positive COVID-19 cases.

Steve and Kat Harker of Ogden, Utah, took precautions concerning the coronavirus by wearing masks during their time at the 80th Sturgis Motorcycle Rally this year.

The Harker's report that they are still COVID-free.

"We mostly came to Sturgis to ride the Black Hills. We stayed away from large crowds," Kat Harker said.

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