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BISMARCK, N.D. – Gov. Doug Burgum today announced steps to help reduce the pressure on North Dakota hospitals and health care workers as a result of increasing hospitalizations for COVID-19 and other care needs.

Burgum also announced that all remaining counties in the moderate risk (yellow) level under the ND Smart Restart guidelines are being moved to the high-risk (orange) level, indicating the seriousness of the situation. Businesses and events/gatherings are recommended to reduce occupancy to 25 percent, with a cap of 50 people. No standing room options should be allowed, and face coverings should be required.

“Our hospitals are under enormous pressure now,” Burgum said. “We can see the future two, three weeks out, and we know that we have severe constraints.”

Despite some hospitals already hiring traveling nurses, suspending elective surgeries and implementing their surge plans, maintaining staffing levels continues to be a challenge amid heavy patient counts, Burgum said, noting hospitalizations due to COVID-19 account for 14 percent of current hospitalizations.

To help address staffing issues, Burgum announced an amended State Health Officer order that now allows asymptomatic, COVID-19-positive health care workers to work in the COVID unit of a licensed health care facility, so long as they remain asymptomatic and additional precautions are taken as recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) to protect the worker and the community.

The state also is directing additional rapid testing resources to health care workers to help identify cases more quickly and get staff back to caring for patients. Starting this week, 12,000 BinaxNOW tests will be delivered weekly to local public health units across the state for testing of health care workers, first responders and public health staff. BinaxNOW tests also are being directed to long-term care facilities, tribal nations, K-12 schools and colleges and universities.

In addition, the NDDoH is expanding efforts to hire emergency medical services personnel to provide valuable support for testing efforts, including assisting with testing site management, data collection and specimen collection. The NDDoH is hiring paramedics, emergency medical technicians and advanced EMTs for testing missions throughout the state on a full- or part-time basis, helping to free up nurses who are working on testing and allow them to support inpatient care.

State officials today began holding a daily standup meeting with the state's major health care systems to share information and discuss potential ways to address issues such as capacity and staffing.

Citizens also can do their part to help slow the spread and reduce pressure on the health care system by:

- Physical distancing
- Wearing masks in public
- Seeking regular routine outpatient care
- Washing hands
- Avoiding or eliminating opportunities for mask-less crowding in public, including bars
- Ensuring flu immunizations
- Limiting all private social gatherings to the immediate household.

For more information on North Dakota's COVID-19 response, visit www.health.nd.gov/coronavirus or www.ndresponse.gov.

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