



Questions remain

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WEATHER



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Storms early tonight

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LOCAL

Talbot to 'clamp down' on virus spread among immigrants

By **CANDICE SPECTOR**
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EASTON — Talbot County's Hispanic population, while making up only 7% of the county, has seen a disproportionately high number of coronavirus infections when compared to other ethnicities — leaving local health leaders clinging to better communication to tame the spread.

County Health Officer Dr. Fredia Wadley said in a press release Friday, July 17, 19.5% of Talbot's confirmed cases have occurred among Black people, 28.7% among Hispanics, 35.2% among whites and 3.1% among "other ethnicities." The remaining 13.5% of cases were unidentified because race data were not collected at some test sites.

These data are significant against the backdrop of the county's population breakdown by ethnicity, which shows that white people make up 83% of the county, while Black and Hispanic people make up roughly 12% and 7%, respectively.

Wadley said she's not surprised the majority of Talbot's infections have occurred among white people because "we are the biggest number." But when she looks at the infection numbers among mi-

nority populations, she said, "they're relatively high for the percentage of the population they make up."

"That would make them disproportionately hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic," Wadley said.

The health officer attributed the high case count among the county's immigrant population, specifically, to those individuals being "very much out in front, working, sometimes traveling together to a job, sometimes living more to a household than others."

In response to the increasing infections, Wadley said her department partnered with the Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center, an organization that assists limited-English-speaking immigrants with societal integration, in order to "communicate directly to the county's immigrant community."

She said her department also plans to "begin visiting Hispanic churches to better communicate methods for slowing the spread of the virus."

ChesMRC's Executive Director Matthew Peters, who has been helping surrounding counties with contact tracing



MATTHEW PETERS

efforts, said in a phone interview with *The Star Democrat* on Tuesday, July 21, he's "very concerned" about the implications of the virus's continued spread among immigrants.

Peters said his organization received a total of \$65,000 from Talbot and Caroline counties — which came from the federal government's Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds — to help their respective health departments better inform immigrants about preventative measures and reactive resources.

The money went toward establishing a hotline for clients to call and get connected to a Haitian Creole- or Spanish-speaking ChesMRC staff member, who, Peters said, can help answer any questions callers might have about the virus — such as where, when and how often they should get tested, and what to do if they test positive for the virus.

"If you're having a language issue, you can go ahead and call that and we can right away provide an interpretive service over the phone," he said.

The ChesMRC director said while his organization will serve residents of all Eastern Shore counties in Maryland, his staff's main focus will be on helping the immigrant populations of Talbot and Caroline



PHOTO BY SETH TOW

Talbot County's immigrant community has been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the county reporting Hispanic residents have accounted for 28.7% of Talbot's overall case count. Pictured is the Easton High School coronavirus drive-through test site.

counties during the pandemic.

"Right now, my staff and myself, we're really just becoming experts on Caroline and Talbot, so that's what we'll focus on," he said, adding his staff has an "inside track and deep knowledge" of the two jurisdictions.

Peters acknowledged that one of the biggest issues contributing to the virus's spread among his clients, many of whom he said are not United States citizens, is a general lack of job security.

"Race aside, we just kind of look at our society, and people with those low-income, no-ben-

efits jobs, have no job security. They don't have contracts, they don't have unions, no paid days off or sick days off," he said. "If they do get sick and can't come to work, they're at a much higher risk of not having a job when they come back."

Plus, Peters said, now that more businesses are reopening, immigrants are "the first ones in" — performing physical labor in the agriculture, landscaping, hospitality, construction, cleaning and restaurant industries.

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“They don’t have the luxury of jobs where they can stay home, work remotely and still get an income,” he said. “Most of our families, if they’re not out doing physical labor, they’re not getting an income.”

As for whether recent in-

fections can be linked to any specific industry or workplace that employs immigrants within Talbot, Caroline and Queen Anne’s counties, Peters said “it’s kind of across the board, from fast food joints to small businesses, to little construction crews — you name it.”

“As we’ve opened up, it’s harder for us to pinpoint things because they’re all over the map now — but we do treat each one like a little

outbreak,” he said. “So if we know a couple guys in a crew have it, we have to treat that whole small business as an outbreak.”

Peters said it’s “tough” to work with local small businesses, many of which have been waiting for their time to reopen, only to find out that one or more of their employees contracted the virus.

“A lot of the small businesses I talk to say, ‘Well, we were doing the right thing. We got everyone tested. We’ve been practicing social distancing,’ and then it still ends up that a couple people tested positive, and then they have to shut down for two weeks,”

he said. “Those are not easy conversations to have with business owners while they’re struggling with so many other things.”

Despite his concerns regarding an overall “uncertainty” surrounding messaging from federal, state and local health officials, Peters said he hopes his organization can streamline communication with Talbot and Caroline’s vulnerable populations.

“Everyone’s struggling to make sure communications are getting out. We’re just making sure it’s a two-way lane,” he said. “We’re excited to start working more in Talbot and Caroline counties and

share our experiences from Queen Anne’s County.”

“As things start to reopen, especially now with schools, we’re going to have to really kick it into high gear to make sure communication is back-and-forth because there are going to be a lot of questions from everybody, not just in other languages,” Peters said.

Talbot County, he said, won’t be able to determine whether his organization’s and the local health department’s “clamping down” on virus hotspots will have an impact on the virus’s spread for at least a couple of weeks.

“We hope it does, but you really won’t know if all that

effort has paid off until two or three weeks from now,” Peters said.

As of Tuesday, Talbot recorded 265 coronavirus infections and four related deaths, state data show. Of the county’s 265 confirmed infections, 214 occurred among Easton residents, 12 among Trappe residents and 18 among St. Michaels residents.

The locations of the remaining 21 cases were not disclosed because the state zip code data exclude cases in zip codes with fewer than seven cases.

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