

Massachusetts Health Officials Say State is Prepared for Coronavirus

By Katie Lannan, State House News Service

Stressing that the risk of contracting coronavirus remains low in Massachusetts, state public health officials said Tuesday that they are prepared for a potential outbreak.

Tens of thousands of cases of the respiratory illness now known as COVID-19, caused by a new coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, China, have been diagnosed worldwide. Public Health Commissioner Dr. Monica Bharel told reporters Monday that there is still one confirmed case in Massachusetts – that patient “continues to recover,” she said – and that there is not “community-level spread” of the virus in Massachusetts.

Bharel said the department is monitoring 231 people in self-quarantine, who returned from travel in China, for potential symptoms. Another 377 people have completed monitoring and were released without symptoms.

“When we look at this current COVID-19 situation, we don’t speculate on how or when it will spread, so the most important thing I can tell people today is that we at the Department of Public Health are prepared,” Bharel said. “We are prepared to address what comes our way. People should live their lives normally and go about their normal activities.”

President Donald Trump and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials conducted a 6 p.m. briefing on the illness.

Bharel said state public health officials are in daily contact

with federal agencies. The department has issued guidance for clinicians, schools and businesses, and launched a website to update the public on COVID-19.

The department is also in regular communication with health care providers and local boards of health, Bharel said. It is supporting hospitals in their “surge planning” procedures, to make sure beds are available if needed, and directing clinical labs to take steps to prepare in case they receive specimens from patients under investigation.

Bharel said the department is monitoring impacts to the supply chains for personal protective equipment like masks and gloves, and providing health care facilities with strategies to “optimize” the use of such equipment.

“We have been in touch with our colleagues throughout the health care system, and we have been told that at this time there are adequate supplies throughout the health care facilities,” she said. “We anecdotally have heard of some spot shortages but overall, the supplies have been adequate.”

Members of the public should not wear face masks unless they are sick, Bharel said.

She said individuals who have traveled and develop symptoms of respiratory illness should contact their health care provider and discuss their travel history. The department is advising Massachusetts residents to follow CDC guidance on future travel.

Bharel said the risk for contracting coronavirus is “much, much lower than the risk of contracting influenza,” and that Massachusetts residents should get flu shots if they have not already done so.

Many of the steps for preventing the flu, colds and COVID-19 are the same, she said: wash hands regularly, cover coughs, and stay home when feeling sick.