

MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 4, 2020

TO: State of Wisconsin Legislators

FROM: Local Public Health Officers representing many communities across the State of Wisconsin

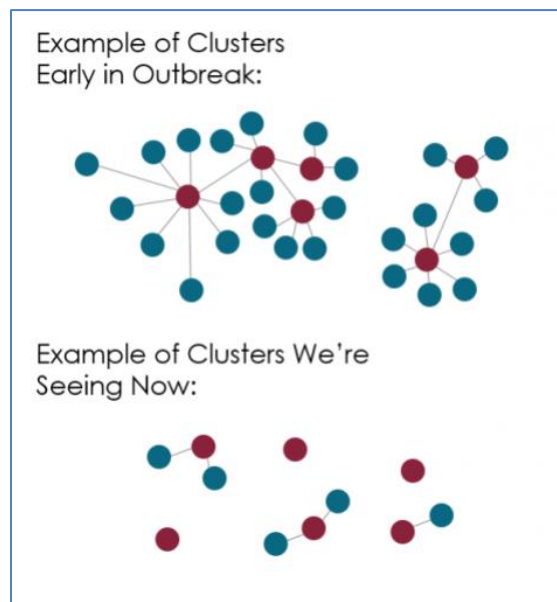
SUBJECT: **April 7th election and COVID-19: Urgent need to postpone election and promote mail-in ballots**

We strongly recommend that the April 7 election in Wisconsin be postponed, possibly to June 2nd and mail-in voting continues to be allowed until the date of the postponed election. This is a statewide election and we need a statewide solution to the real risk posed by an in-person election on April 7th. While the challenges are differentially experienced across the state the public health risk posed is statewide and significant.

The in-person elections scheduled for April 7th present a serious challenge to controlling the spread of COVID-19. In absence of a vaccine or cure, our public health tools to combat this epidemic are few: **preventing exposure** to the virus is the best way to prevent illness, and **flattening the curve** of cases that are occurring is the best way to prevent exceeding the capacity of our health care system. Hosting an in-person election that would promote gathering of people throughout the state is in direct conflict with critical steps the state has taken, through closures and iterations of Safer at Home orders, to require social distancing to protect its population.

Every day, Public Health Nurses throughout the state interview people who test positive—we do this primarily to understand with whom they have been in contact so that we can intervene with contacts to prevent further spread. As social distancing orders were strengthened, the size of our contact investigations will decrease over time. This means that the number of contacts someone has looks very differently compared to even a few weeks ago.

Rather than entire workplaces or restaurants needing follow-up, it is more common now for someone newly diagnosed to name only household contacts. At this point in the progression of illness of COVID-19 in WI, an in-person election has the potential to reverse this progress by expanding the network of contacts surrounding a person who is asymptomatic but contagious. Our case counts have been increasing steadily—but not exponentially—since mid-March. **Holding elections is a walk back to the fragile, but effective, system of social distancing we have established in Wisconsin and a risk we should not willingly take.**



In addition to the public health risk of holding in-person elections, the strain on polling logistics is significant. Across the state, jurisdictions do not have enough poll workers needed to support the election. The number of polling locations across the state are going down which puts people in closer contact with each other. Communities of all sizes across the state are in similar situations. The engine of polling infrastructure is traditionally powered by older adults. People aged 65 and older are at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Poll workers are often adults over 60, and many are understandably cancelling the shifts they have signed up for. Shifting to a younger demographic of poll workers does not offset risk. Younger people are more likely to have mild symptoms and may not even be aware they are infected with COVID-19, so having poll workers from this age group still poses a significant risk of transmission to voters, particularly if adequate safety materials are unable to be obtained due to national and global shortages.

Polling places across the state are scrambling to find Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks, goggles, and gloves, are even considering fabricating plastic face shields and plexiglass barriers to protect both poll workers and voters from interfacing directly with each other. Some are making sure each polling location can accommodate curbside voting to the extent possible, and supplying each polling station team with hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray, and gloves. Utilization of PPE in this way further challenges our already low supply and has the potential to compromise the ability of our healthcare partners to have adequate supply of PPE to care for those in their service.

Everyone is stressing the importance of maintaining at least 6 feet between poll workers and between voters in line to obtain ballots. Everyone is doing all they can to promote absentee voting and to keep up with the absentee requests, Clerk's staff are working around the clock and foregoing sleep to support election preparation, which can be detrimental to their own immune systems. And, they're receiving hundreds of calls from frustrated voters—mostly older adults without the technological capacity to request absentee ballots on-line—who feel disenfranchised, as if they have to make a choice between obeying public health advice to stay safe at home and going to the polls on April 7 to vote. **Instead, mailing ballots to every Wisconsin resident and extending the election deadline is the urgent step that we should continue to take now.** This is both an act of public health best practice as well as a preservation of civic engagement.

Wisconsin has been a leader at enacting statewide public health interventions throughout this epidemic. While it took other states critical time to restrict gatherings to 50 people, Wisconsin implemented this restriction early—merely days after reaching 20 cases (*Figure 1*).

ACTIONS: Restrict gatherings to 50

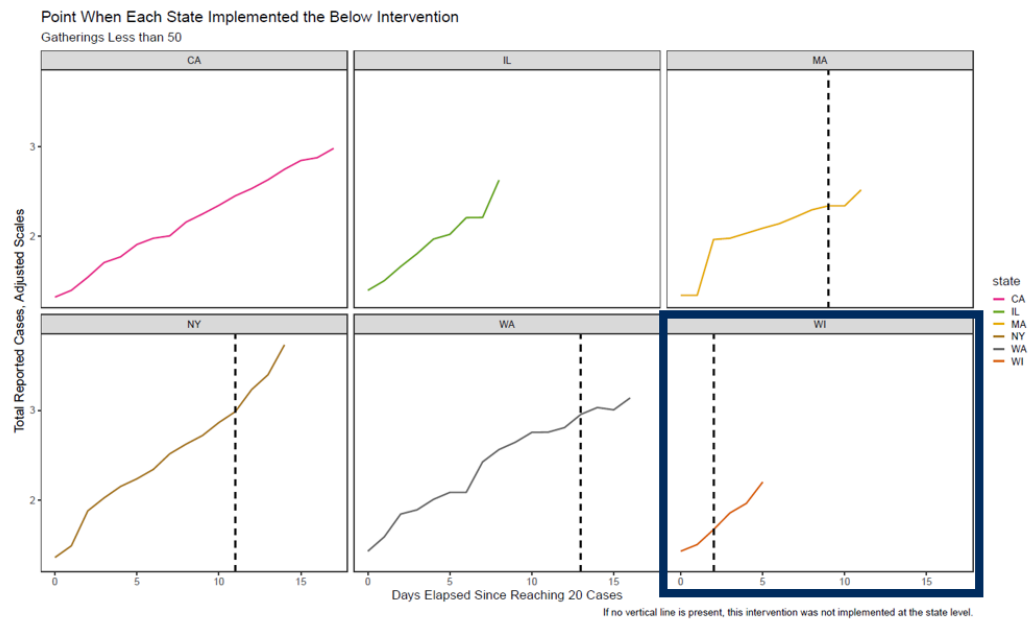


Figure 1: Timeline of state orders restricting gatherings to 50 people or less (Wisconsin in blue box)

Compared to other states, Wisconsin was also a leader in school (Figure 2) and restaurant (Figure 3) closures.

ACTIONS: School closure

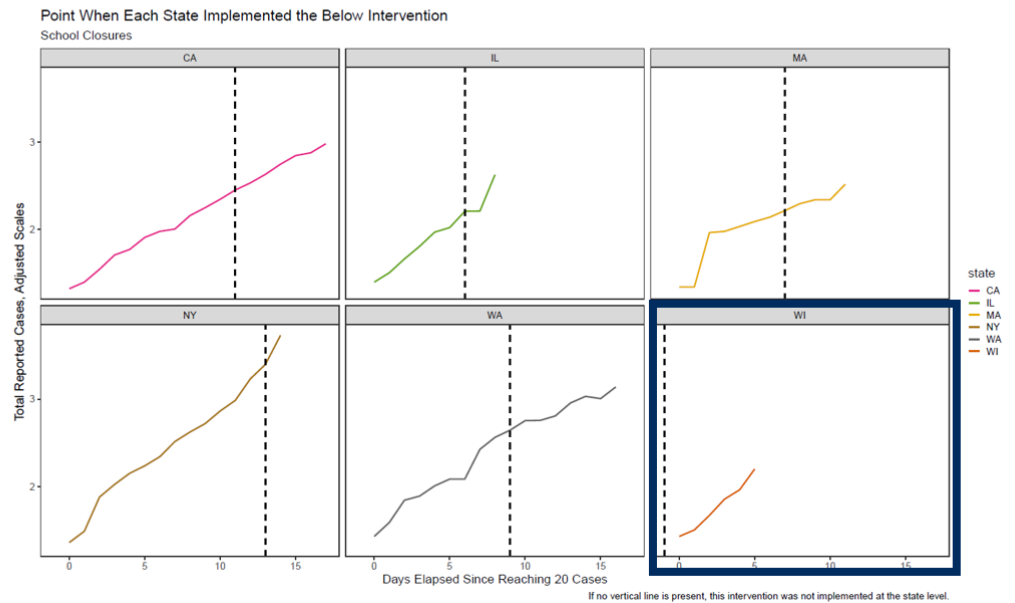


Figure 2: Timeline of state orders closing school (Wisconsin in blue box)

ACTIONS: Restaurant closure

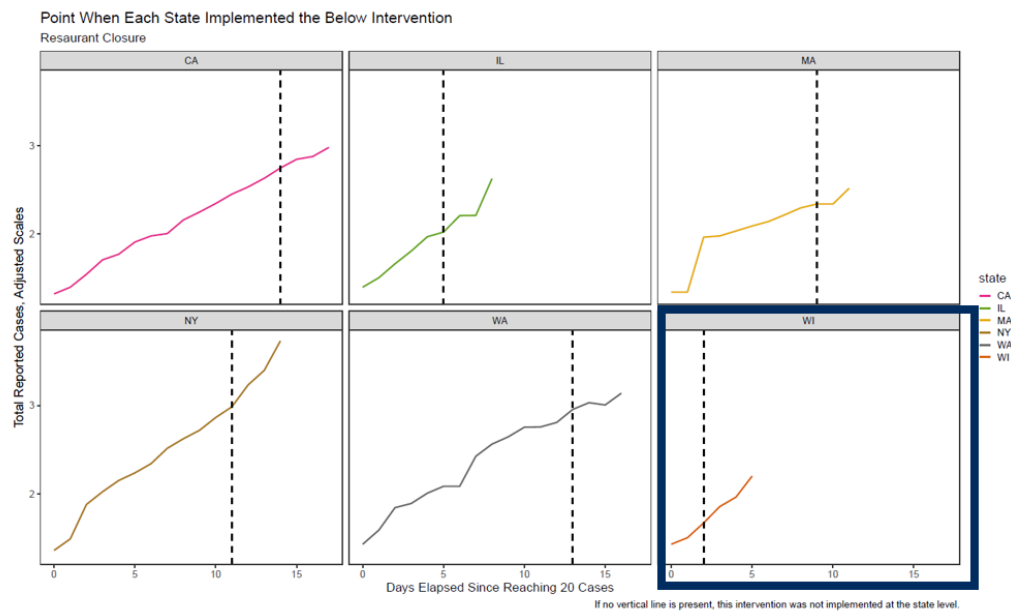


Figure 3 Timeline of state orders closing restaurants (Wisconsin in blue box)

When it comes to elections, Wisconsin would be a significant outlier if it hosted an in-person election on the scheduled date of April 7th.

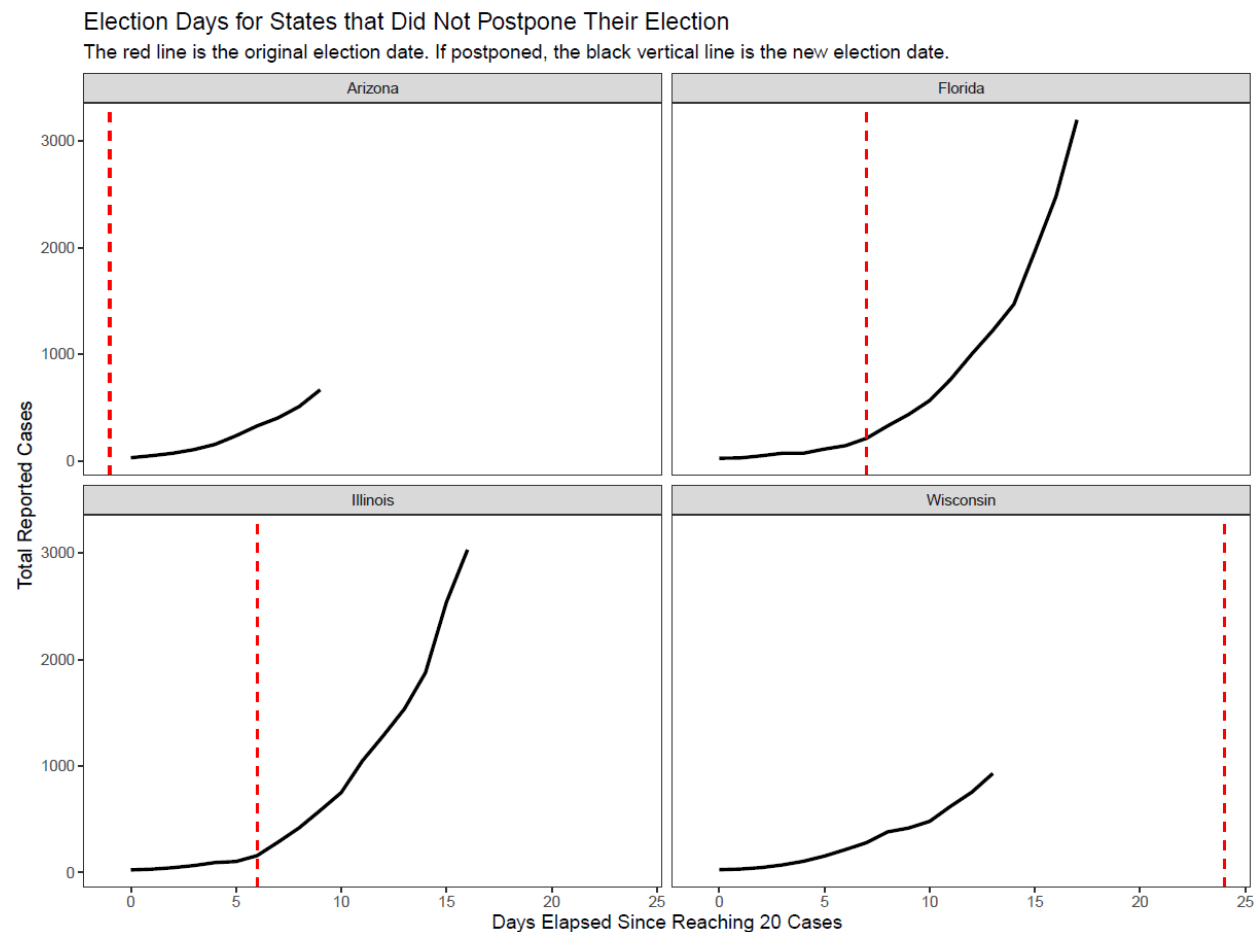


Figure 4: Election dates for states that did not postpone their election^{1,2}

Three other states with primaries after the start of the epidemic (March 17th) did not postpone their elections. Illinois, Florida, and Arizona went forward with their primary elections, but did so far earlier in the epidemic (6 days past 20 cases, 7 days past 20 cases, and 0 days past 20 cases respectively) and had far fewer cases and less community spread (*Figure 4*). On March 17 when they voted, Illinois had 159 confirmed cases of COVID-19, Florida had 210 confirmed cases, and Arizona had 20 confirmed cases. Wisconsin had 1,112 cases as of March 29th, which will only increase before the scheduled election on April 7th. **Wisconsin's election is planned to take place 24 days after we reached 20 confirmed cases—putting Wisconsin out of alignment with election practices actively being implemented across the country.**

¹ Election dates sourced from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html>

² State COVID-19 data sourced from <https://github.com/nytimes/covid-19-data>

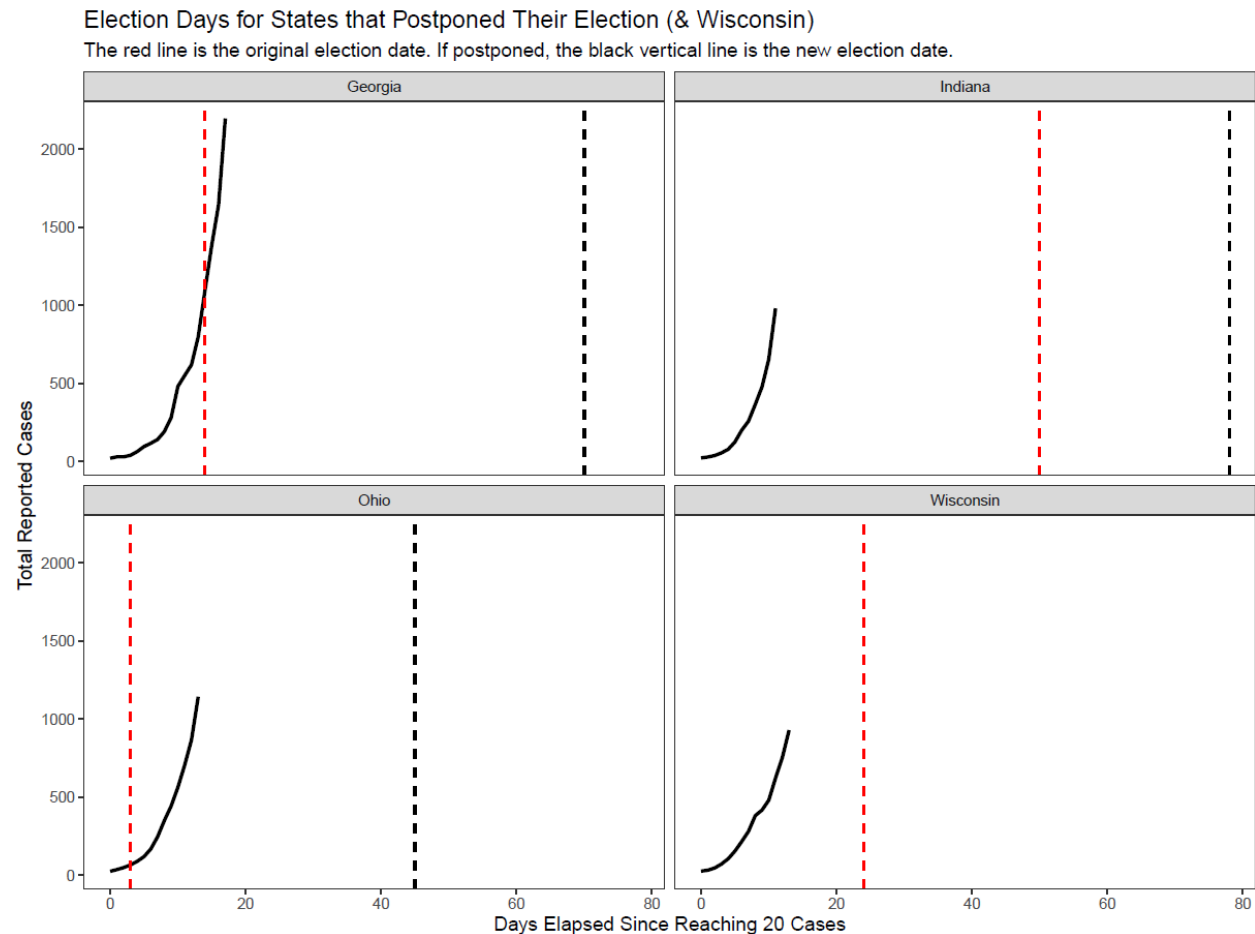


Figure 5: Election days for states that postponed their election^{3,4}

Georgia, Ohio, and Indiana are examples of states (out of a total of 14 states) that postponed their primary elections (Figure 5). Georgia's election was originally scheduled for March 24th, 14 days after they reached 20 cases, when their confirmed case count was 1,094. Ohio's election was originally scheduled for March 17th, three days after they reached 20 cases, when their confirmed case count was 67. Both states chose to postpone their elections, scheduled earlier than Wisconsin's, when they had fewer cases than Wisconsin currently does. Because these states had less information when making the decision, it is possible that they will further postpone. Indiana's election was originally scheduled for

³ Election dates sourced from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html>

⁴ State COVID-19 data sourced from <https://github.com/nytimes/covid-19-data>

May 5th, and they postponed it to June 2nd; Indiana had 982 cases as of March 27th. Indiana is an example of a state that postponed an election originally later than Wisconsin's, and other states that have done the same include Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and New York.

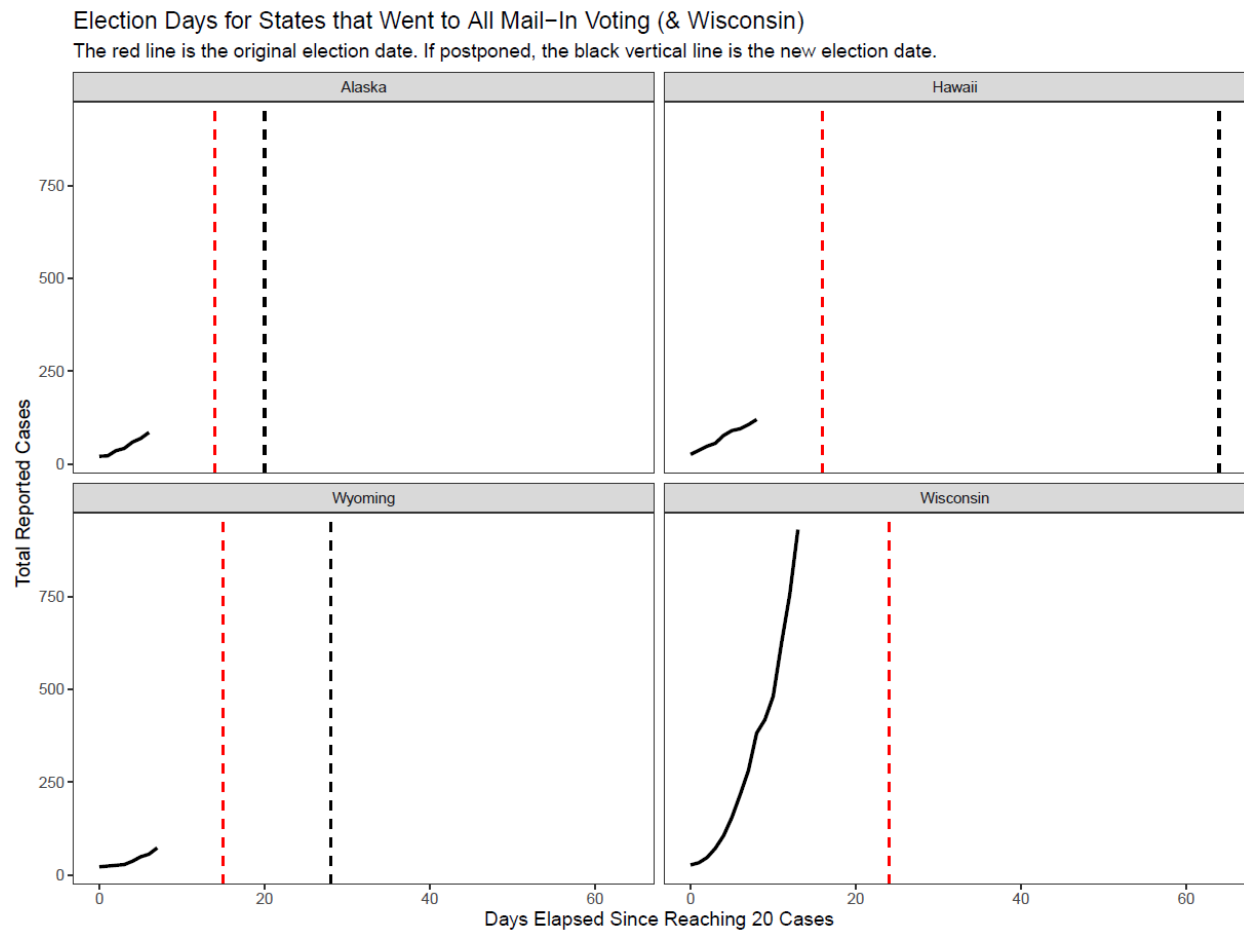


Figure 6: Election days for states that went to all mail-in voting^{5,6}

Alaska, Hawaii, and Wyoming went to all mail-in voting in their primary elections (Figure 6). Each of these states chose to do so early in their epidemics, when case counts were low. In each case, the states paired the choice to go to mail-in ballots with extending the deadline by which ballots needed to be received.

We strongly recommend that the April 7 election in Wisconsin be postponed, possibly to June 2nd and mail-in voting continues to be allowed until the date of the postponed election. To do otherwise

⁵ Election dates sourced from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html>

⁶ State COVID-19 data sourced from <https://github.com/nytimes/covid-19-data>

April 4, 2020

Page 8

would put all Wisconsin communities at greater risk of illness due to COVID-19, and puts our health care systems at risk of becoming overwhelmed and depleted of resources.

As the local health officers representing jurisdictions throughout the state, we take our responsibility seriously to engage in all measures necessary to prevent, suppress, and control communicable disease and, we are authorized under state law to do what is reasonable and necessary for the prevention and suppression of disease, including forbidding public gatherings when deemed necessary to control outbreaks of epidemics.

We understand that our authority to close polling places for in-person voting on April 7, 2020 has been preempted by the DHS Safer at home Order, Executive Order #12, as interpreted by the Governor, the Department of Health Services, and the Wisconsin Election Commission. Nonetheless, if we were not preempted, we would use our authority under Wis. State § 252.03(2) to close the polling places within our jurisdictions on April 7, 2020, notwithstanding our Election Commissioner's efforts to conduct this election pursuant to the State's orders.

Sincerely, the following Public Health Officers,



Janel Heinrich, MPH, MA
Director, Public Health Madison & Dane County



Jeanette Kowalik, PhD, MPH, MCHES
Commissioner of Health, City of Milwaukee Health Department



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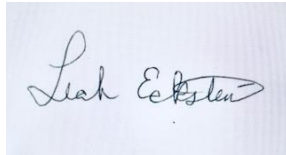


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Collaborating with partners to ensure a healthy, thriving Rock County...

Susan Sheppard

Susan Sheppard, RN, MSN
Health Officer/Health Director
Greendale Health Department

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Leah Eckstein".

Leah Eckstein RN, MSN

Health Officer

Adams County Health & Human Services Department

Lawther

Timothy Lawther, MPH, MA

Director and Health Officer

Sauk County Public Health

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "AZ Snyder".

AZ Snyder, MSc

Public Health Director & Health Officer

Pierce County Public Health Department

Courtney Day

Courtney Day, RN, BSN
Director of Health & Human Services/Health Officer City of Franklin Health Department



Sharon L. Nelson, RN, PHN

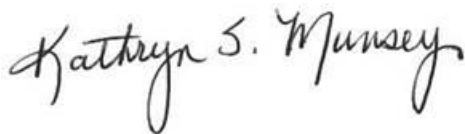
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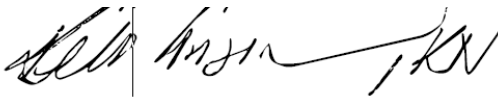
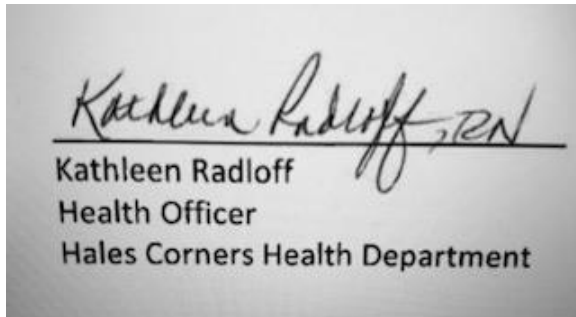
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Serving the communities of Bayside, Brown Deer, Fox Point,
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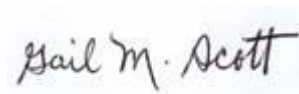
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