

Kentuckians prepare for possible spread of virus - Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - February 28, 2020 - page 1A

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Russ Finch helped sell the final few face masks available at a Lexington Home Depot on Tuesday to a woman hoping to ward off the coronavirus.

Finch, who has worked at the Richmond Road location for about two years, said he scoured the store Tuesday afternoon with the customer, looking for any remaining masks. When they finally found some, he said, "she loaded up her arms with basically as many as she could carry," which amounted to about 10 packs, or 30 masks.

She told him it was to protect against coronavirus, Finch said.

Now, "they're virtually gone from the store," even the more expensive respirator masks, typically used to avoid inhaling toxic fumes or particles. The demand has noticeably spiked this week, he said, and he doubts the store will be able to keep pace.

"With the way it's going right now, the demand's going to be so crazy nationwide that it's probably going to be hard to catch up with it," he said.

About a mile away, John Mutters, who works in purchasing at Grogan's Healthcare Supply, Inc., said the company's phones had been ringing "almost every minute" this week from national and international callers searching for masks and respirators, especially Food and Drug Administration-approved N95 respirators.

Grogan's supply, too, has been largely depleted. And Mutters said that isn't likely to change anytime soon.

"Manufacturers are never prepared for a pandemic," Mutters said Wednesday afternoon. "We had the same thing happen when SARS hit."

Supply rarely matches an unplanned uptick in demand, he said.

"The master distributors that we buy (masks) from have even put out a disclaimer," which was basically, "don't even waste your time trying to order unless you're a regular customer," he said.

Since the outbreak of the new respiratory illness, also known as COVID-19, in late December in the Wuhan Hubei Province of China, more than 81,000 cases have been identified and nearly 3,000 people have died. The vast majority of cases in China - more than 80 percent - caused only mild symptoms, according to a Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study.

The United States has confirmed 14 cases of the virus, the CDC reported, and about 450 cases,

total, have been tested.

So far in Kentucky, a little more than 100 people, after returning from trips to China, have been monitored for symptoms of the virus, Gov. Andy Beshear said at a news conference Thursday afternoon.

Only one out of that group exhibited symptoms. That person tested negative for coronavirus, and remains the only person in the commonwealth who has been tested, Beshear said.

Though Kentucky still has no suspected or confirmed cases of the virus, Mutters and Finch don't expect the face mask and respirator demand to wane. Health officials, though, say there's little evidence to suggest that masks, outside of a health care setting, actually protect against the virus.

"I don't think there's a benefit right now to be stockpiling masks," UK HealthCare Medical Director for Infection Prevention and Control Dr. Derek Forster said at a Thursday morning press conference.

"I don't think there's a benefit, really, in reducing transmission in non-health care settings when you're reusing masks on a regular basis. It's not going to be very protective," he said.

Lexington-Fayette County Public Health Commissioner Dr. Kraig Humbaugh came to a similar conclusion.

"We don't see, at this point, that there's evidence to suggest that it's helpful to be wearing masks," he said.

The unanimous advice from health officials at all levels is to wash one's hands regularly, avoid close contact with people who are sick, don't sneeze or cough on others, and if someone is sick, stay home.

Officials with the CDC said Tuesday a domestic spread of coronavirus disease at this point is likely inevitable. As some Kentuckians are doing their part to protect themselves and their families, state agencies and health care providers are poised to respond.

The Kentucky Department for Public Health said it continues to closely monitor the virus, and has an "active system" in place for epidemiologists and public health preparedness officials to "educate those who might have been exposed about what symptoms to look for, (and) to report daily to public health officials and immediately let us know if they experience any symptoms," department spokesperson Barbara Fox said Wednesday.

Beshear said he understands why people are concerned about the virus. Should transmission occur "everyone is prepared. I feel very strongly our work will have us prepared if and when we see a confirmed case."

UK HealthCare, the state's largest hospital system, and other medical providers are preparing for a potential influx of patients, Forster said, which includes making sure the hospital is stocked with extra supplies and close coordination with neighboring health care providers.

Public health officials on a statewide scale are also working with the Kentucky Hospital Association to "increase health care capacity to manage larger numbers of patients" in the event Kentucky does identify cases of coronavirus; advising health providers on how best to preserve personal protective equipment, like the N95 respirators, to keep workers safe.

The state also has obtained additional funding for medical services and supplies, provisions for people in quarantine and isolation, and transportation services for people in protected areas, Fox said.

For those at higher risk, such as anyone who has recently traveled to or from China, state health officials will continue to weigh in with guidance on best practices, which may include self-isolation.

Earlier this month, the state public health department and the CDC recommended that a group of Centre College students who recently returned from a trip to China quarantine themselves for two weeks. That order was lifted last week and students were allowed to resume normal activities.

After UK President Eli Capilouto temporarily halted all non-essential university-sponsored travel to China for students, faculty and staff in late January, a handful of students who had recently returned from China were also advised to self-quarantine for 14 days. That has also since been lifted, Forster said.

As an added precaution to protect against foreign transmission of coronavirus, the university said it would indefinitely suspend student travel to South Korea.

Forster reminded the public that, at this point, "although the immediate risk to Kentuckians is low, certainly the potential public threat is significant and that's where preparedness comes in."

"Nothing spreads faster than fear," he said. "It will always outpace the virus itself, (but) we have to stick with what we know, what the evidence supports."

State officials will provide coronavirus updates at <http://kycovid19.ky.gov>.

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