FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
WEDNESDAY, MAY 6

HealthWest nurses begin testing for COVID-19 in congregate living facilities

Muskegon County’s congregate living facilities have received a boost in their fight against COVID-19 thanks to a unique partnership between HealthWest, Public Health – Muskegon County, and Mercy Health.

HealthWest’s specially-trained nursing staff has begun testing for COVID-19 in the county’s congregate living facilities, including adult foster care homes, group homes, and room and boards.

Nurses began testing on April 22, and so far tested more than 30 individuals. More than half of these tests have been positive for COVID-19.

“Individuals living in these types of facilities are at an increased risk for contracting the disease and are much more likely to experience severe symptoms,” said HealthWest Integrated Health Clinical Services Manager Suzanne Beckeman. “Early intervention can limit the spread of the disease and save lives.”

So far, the testing program identified three people who were experiencing severe symptoms, which required hospitalization. All three of those individuals have survived.

Roughly a dozen HealthWest nurses volunteered to join the specialized COVID-19 testing team, and six were selected to participate after being trained on how to administer the tests properly. A lack of adequate-fitting personal protection equipment has limited the number of nurses eligible to join the team.

Mercy Health is providing training and testing materials.

“We know that it is very important to test our at-risk populations in order to reduce transmission,” said Gary Allore, president of Mercy Health Muskegon. “We are grateful to be able to support the Muskegon health community in this way as it embodies our mission to be a transforming, healing presence in the communities we serve.”

Testing individuals in these facilities provides many unique challenges. Still, HealthWest nurses can conduct testing inside the living facilities, and many have previously-established relationships with those being tested.

HealthWest nurses typically work in the agency’s Integrated Health Clinic or are embedded in teams serving individuals with behavioral health or substance use issues in the community.
“Many of those being tested by HealthWest nurses have physical or emotional limitations that prevent them from participating in more traditional drive-through testing programs,” said HealthWest Executive Director Julia Rupp. “Our nurses have traditionally worked every day with these individuals, and have an unmatched skillset when it comes to serving those with behavioral or substance use issues.”

However, the nurses aren’t the only HealthWest staff who were recruited to assist in the county’s COVID-19 response efforts.

HealthWest case managers have been assisting Public Health – Muskegon County with contact tracing for anyone in services at HealthWest who has tested positive for COVID-19.

“Contact tracing helps us identify possible sources of infection and is a critical tool in our COVID-19 response,” said Muskegon County Health Officer Kathy Moore. “HealthWest staff has been invaluable in helping us work with those they serve.”

“We are exceptionally proud – but not surprised – that our staff has stepped up to put themselves on the front lines to serve our community,” said Rupp. “HealthWest staff has always gone above and beyond to help those most in need, and I am honored to serve alongside these dedicated public servants every day.”

HealthWest has also continued to provide mental health, developmental disability and substance use services during the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, including the creation of a virtual groups program to assist community members who may be struggling during the pandemic. To learn more about HealthWest and its offerings, visit www.HealthWest.net/COVID-19