To: Medical Clinic Providers in Madison, Stanton, Cuming and Burt Counties
From: Gina Uhing, Health Director
Subject: COVID-19 (novel Corona Virus-19) Preparation Phase
Date: February 27, 2020

Over the past several weeks, we have been meeting with state and federal health officials to prepare for COVID-19. Currently, we are not aware of any COVID-19 virus cases in our district. However, the CDC tells us that it is not a question of “if” but rather “when” the COVID-19 virus will be spread through communities in the United States. As COVID-19 spreads worldwide, healthcare facilities locally must be prepared for the possibility of a coronavirus case presenting into your facility without notice.

We realize that the timing of this request is unfortunate for medical facilities and providers due to the current inundation of patients presenting with seasonal influenza and other respiratory illnesses. However, I would like to advise medical clinics, hospitals and healthcare providers to take time now to review emergency operations plans, as coronavirus cases in the area are likely to be identified in the coming days. It’s also likely that person-to-person spread will continue to occur, including in the United States, in Nebraska, and in local communities.

Community transmission of COVID-19 in the area could rapidly translate into large numbers of people needing medical care at the same time. Public health and healthcare systems may become overloaded, with elevated rates of hospitalizations and deaths. Other critical services, such as law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services, and emergency transportation companies may also be affected. These are overwhelming possibilities that we must be prepared for. As you know, there is no vaccine at this time to protect against COVID-19 and no medications approved to treat it.

I advise the following actions to prepare for COVID-19 in the ELVPHD district:

1. Prioritize time now to ensure your facility’s policies and practices are in effect to minimize exposure to respiratory pathogens. Review your emergency operations plans, and make sure that supervisors and staff are aware of steps to take should a patient with suspect or confirmed coronavirus present into your facility without warning.

2. Begin to factor how you will manage excess staff absenteeism due to illness.

3. Develop a strategy to begin triage callers now to ensure that patients with potential exposures do not unnecessarily expose uninvolved staff and/or patients.

4. Review recommendations for appropriate use and conservation of personal protective equipment (PPE). CDC recommends the use of PPE for healthcare personnel caring for patients with confirmed or possible COVID-19 infection. More information can be found here: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/healthcare-supply-ppe.html. However, due to shortages of PPE and to prevent supplies from becoming completely depleted, CDC has also published strategies for optimizing the supply of N95 Respirators. This guidance can be found here: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-supply-strategies.html.

5. Assign a point person to monitor the CDC Information for Healthcare Professionals webpage daily and pass information throughout the facility regarding any pertinent updates and recommendations regarding infection control, home care, specimen testing, guidance regarding exposures, etc. CDC is updating guidance documents frequently. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-supply-strategies.html

6. Notify ELVPHD at 402-529-2233 (or 402-841-8110 after hours) if you identify a person having traveled to or from an area in the past 14 days where there is an outbreak of COVID-19. We will advise you regarding laboratory testing recommendations in consultation with NE DHHS on a case-by-case basis.