

To all Hutterite Communities in Manitoba:

Manitoba has experienced a significant spike in COVID-19 cases in the past weeks. There are now over 130 COVID-related deaths including nine on Wednesday and another nine on Thursday. With case counts rising dramatically in the Winnipeg Metro and Southern Health Region, the whole province is moving to “Code Red” on the Pandemic Response System. This goes into effect on Thursday, November 12, and implements a series of new restrictions. This is an attempt to bring the number of active cases under control and to ensure that hospital capacity remains available.



These new measures directly impact all Hutterite communities in Manitoba. The HSC consulted with Manitoba Health officials about how Code Red will impact Hutterite communities; we explained our church and communal dining room situations and asked if certain Public Orders might be open to more flexible interpretations. Manitoba Public Health made it clear that all Manitobans, including Hutterites, need to follow all the Public Health Orders to stop the rapid spread of the virus and prevent our hospitals from being overwhelmed. Further, HSC has been informed by Public Health that Hutterite hospitalizations due to COVID have been increasing in recent weeks due to large weddings and other events and gatherings in communities and indicate that such gatherings must cease. **Remember: the key to getting rid of these restrictions is to actually follow the guidelines!**

The following summarizes the Public Health Orders as they relate to our communities:

Church Services

Based on information received from the Minister Schuler's office, and as specified in the Public Health Order dated November 11, 2020, church services are currently restricted and "all religious services are to return to virtual settings, and no in-person services may take place at this time." Stated bluntly: any community gathering in-person during this Code Red phase is in direct contravention of provincial law.

Dining Halls

Manitoba has ordered all restaurants to close with only “take-out” permitted. Hutterite kitchens and communal dining rooms fall into this "restaurant" category. This means that our dining halls must close. Food can be prepared in the kitchen and sent home. It is important that proper protocols be in place for cooks and assistants; this includes wearing masks, rigorous sanitization, and coughing/sneezing etiquette. Those picking up food for their families need to be physically distanced and wear a mask.

Weddings, Funerals, and other Church-Related Gatherings

Weddings, funerals and other events are to be limited to five (5) physically distanced people and one officiant, i.e. one minister and five family members. The HSC is available to support community leadership making sense of these events during this time. For weddings, the best course of action is to hold off for at least the next four weeks.

Gathering Size & Contact with Others

Contact with people outside of the immediate household is strongly discouraged. All persons are prohibited from assembling in a gathering of more than five persons at any indoor or outdoor location. This applies to ceremonies such as weddings and funerals as well as informal gatherings such as dinners and other events.

Travel

Travel should be restricted to essential travel only such as grocery shopping, essential medical appointments, deliveries of farm goods, etc. In a Hutterite context, this means all visiting trips should be put on hold.

Schools

Although all of the province is in Code Red, most schools remain in code orange. This means that while there are no COVID-19 cases, schools remain open with very strict protocols in place, including 2-meter distancing, mask wearing where this isn't possible, proper hand-washing and sanitizing protocols, and proper coughing and sneezing etiquette.

Enforcement

The government has increased the number of enforcement officers who are able to levy fines for non-compliance. Up to this point, the government has largely focused on education, but this grace period is over. Government officials have indicated enforcement efforts, i.e. steeper fines, will become reality. A reporting hotline has also been created so that any member of the public can report cases of noncompliance.

Duration of Code Red

Government officials expect these Public Health Orders and other guidelines to remain in place for a minimum of 14 days, but they are more likely to last 28 days after which the threat of COVID-19 will be reassessed.

Government Authority

These are difficult times; our regular patterns are disrupted and this can be frustrating. It is, however, also an opportunity to draw on our spiritual reserves to bring hope into a difficult situation. As Christians, we are called to stand in solidarity with the suffering and be respectful towards the government *in allen billigen Dingen*. Public Health Orders certainly fall into this category. In the same way we wear seatbelts and observe speed limits on the highway, we ought to observe COVID-19 safety regulations. The requested adjustments are minor and insignificant in comparison to the challenges facing frontline workers who are sacrificing so much more to keep all of us safe.

Please, help ensure that Hutterite communities are not the reason these measures have to be extended beyond 28 days!

Thank you and God bless,

Hutterian Safety Council's COVID-19 Taskforce