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| **Press Release****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** | Tim Jones | tim.jones@heartoftexashealthcare.org325-597-2901 |

**Limiting Holiday Gatherings is Key to Reduce COVID-19 Risk**

*Local health officials urge the community to take action against the dangerous virus.*

BRADY, Texas (Dec. 15, 2020) – The holiday season is normally a chance for families to gather for festive celebrations. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious health threat as the holiday season gets underway. Heart of Texas Healthcare System urges everyone in the community to reconsider their holiday gatherings and to take steps to slow the spread of the dangerous virus.

“Although we all want to gather with friends and loved ones during the holidays, the number of COVID-19 infections is at a record high,” said Tim Jones, CEO of Heart of Texas Healthcare System. “This virus is a serious risk to everyone’s health. We need to take steps to protect each other until a vaccine is widely available.”

According to recent statistics from Texas Health and Human Services, more than 1.3 million Texans have been infected by the virus, which has led to the deaths of more than 23,000 people across the state. Nationally, nearly 200,000 people have been diagnosed per day in recent weeks.

According to Jones, limiting the size of holiday gatherings is key to reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19. Health officials urge everyone to limit holiday gatherings to members of the same household.

“Many people can be contagious before being aware that they are infected with COVID-19,” Jones said. “That is one reason that the virus has spread so widely. Staying home and limiting gatherings is key to limiting the spread of the disease.”

Jones said that considering creative ways of connecting with friends and loved ones such as hosting virtual gatherings over online platforms can help make socially distanced holidays more enjoyable.

If you do choose to attend a group gathering, consider meeting outside and make sure everyone wears a mask. Washing your hands and keeping your distance from others are also crucial ways that you can reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

According to Jones, hospitals have seen a sharp increase in COVID-19 patients, meaning that a further

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increase in the number of patients could stress healthcare systems across the state, creating a dangerous situation for anyone who needs healthcare services. That is why taking steps to protect the community is so important.

**Reconsider your holiday travel plans**

Jones also warned that traveling this year could add to the COVID-19 risk. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, avoiding long-distance travel this year can help you and your loved ones stay safe. Many people will be traveling by car or flying to visit family in other parts of the country. Experts have warned that airports could be busy and airplanes could be full during the busy travel period.

Avoiding flying during this busy period is a good way to reduce your risk, but if you do need to fly, it is important to wear your mask at all times, practice social distancing as much as possible and wash your hands frequently.

If you are traveling, consider plans to keep everyone safe at your destination. If you are expecting loved ones to travel to your home, urge them to take precautions before and during travel.

**Stay focused on the things that matter most this holiday season**

Although we should all take steps to reduce the risk of COVID-19, that doesn’t mean we can’t take time to celebrate. Christmas and the holiday season is a time to remember the importance of family and to be thankful for life’s many blessings.

“We have much to be thankful for, and by focusing on family and taking steps to protect each other, we can ensure joy and cheer for many holidays to come,” Jones said.

Those who experience symptoms of COVID-19 are urged to call their healthcare provider before visiting the clinic or hospital. Your provider can provide guidance and recommend testing.

To learn more about local healthcare services and providers, please call Heart of Texas Healthcare System at 325-597-2901, or visit www.heartoftexashealthcare.com.

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