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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

TO: MUNICIPALITIES AND SENIOR CITIZENS ORGANIZATIONS
FROM: DR. IRINA GELMAN, COMMISSIONER OF HEALTH, ORANGE COUNTY
RE: OPENING OF SENIOR CITIZEN CENTERS AND AN UPDATE ON COVID-19 RATES IN ORANGE COUNTY
DATE: SEPTEMBER 18, 2020

Local officials, senior citizen groups, and others have contacted the Orange County Department of Health regarding whether senior centers should be open.

Since the risk of developing complications, severe illness, and death from COVID-19 increases with age due to underlying medical conditions and weakened immune systems, protecting our senior citizens from contracting COVID-19 has been a primary goal of the Orange County Department of Health. Preventative actions have included keeping senior centers, and other congregate settings closed to prevent the potential transmission of disease to our most medically fragile, susceptible, and vulnerable citizens.

The local impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic as of September 18, 2020 has resulted in 11, 778 confirmed cases as well as 498 deaths to date in Orange County.

Although seniors only make up 16.2% of cases in Orange County, adults aged 65 and older make up 78.5% of COVID fatalities.

Despite the seemingly low prevalence of cases among senior citizens in our community, we continue to see new COVID-19 positive resident cases in Orange County daily. The fatality rate among seniors is much higher than in the rest of the population. Additionally, this virus is completely new and although some symptoms are common among those suffering from the illness, the complete list of symptoms, as well as long term complications remain unknown.

The New York State Department of Health has not provided guidance for and has not mandated regular interval testing for COVID-19 prior to in-person activities at senior centers. This is especially concerning because masks may not be able to be worn by some seniors due to underlying medical conditions and/or inability to keep the masks on for a prolonged period.

As of the date of this letter, in consideration of all these factors, the continuation of virtual senior activities such as video calls, Zoom exercise or craft classes, virtual educational learning and other similar activities whenever possible would be ideal. These activities may potentially reduce some of the loneliness and anxiety seniors may suffer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OCDOH takes the health and safety of our senior citizens very seriously, even more so during the worst public health crisis in a century. While infection rates remain low, we need to proceed with caution, considering scientific fact and local statistical data prior to resuming in-person senior activities safely and responsibly in light of the potential of the resurgence of this pandemic. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Orange County Department of Health at 291-2330.