

OSU Extension Cancels In-Person Programming Through January 15, 2021

(as of December 4, 2020) As we are all well aware, the number of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are all increasing for Ohio and across the nation. We must continue to be vigilant and put the safety of our employees and that of our clientele first. It is the belief of the university, our college, and our organization that if we can help reduce the load by preventing or slowing down the spread of the virus, we should.

We must continue to make decisions based on the best science and advice to which we have access at this point, and as always, assure that these decisions are in alignment with our values and principles. We need to be following science and modeling best practices for reducing the spread of this virus.

As of recently released data (Dec 3 at 2pm), we have eight counties listed as PURPLE, three counties approaching PURPLE, and ALL counties identified as high case-incidence status. See <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/public-health-advisory-system>.

- **PURPLE:** Lake, Lorain, Medina, Montgomery, Portage, Richland, Stark, Summit
- **APPROACHING PURPLE:** Cuyahoga, Fairfield, Madison
- **RED:** 72 counties in RED, compared to only 9 a few months ago
- **ORANGE:** 8
- **YELLOW:** 0

There is a current urgent need to make adjustments to keep everyone safe and to help do our part to not contribute to the spread. As such, we will, once again, be reducing our in-person programming footprint, similar (but not exactly) to what was in place in the spring.

Please note: We are not making decisions in a vacuum; rather, we are paying attention to available data and changing situations (see the Governor's news release from yesterday at: <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/resources/news-releases-news-you-can-use/covid-19-update-12-03-20>),

Rationale and Assumptions:

- The number of cases, hospitalizations and death in Ohio are on the rise, and are NOT likely to reverse in the next three to four weeks.
- The increased gatherings over Thanksgiving and anticipated gatherings likely to occur between now and the new year will only contribute to this pattern of increase.
- Experts are indicating that hospital capacity in Ohio is already stressed by new COVID-19 cases and will soon have limited availability for non-COVID patients. This demand does not reflect the anticipated increases from recent Thanksgiving gatherings.
- We must do our part in helping flatten the curve and help keep hospitals and the health care workforce from being overwhelmed.
- We, as part of an academic institution, need to follow science and model what the CDC and other health experts stress is important in addressing this virus.



THE FOLLOWING GUIDANCE WILL BE IMPLEMENTED, EFFECTIVE DECEMBER 7, 2020 AND RUN THROUGH JANUARY 15, 2021:

ALL Counties

We are cutting back on the number of exemptions and will be approving only essential/critical in-person programming such as ServSafe and other trainings that, if withheld, would affect the person's livelihood or credentialing. Time-sensitive and critical research would still be permitted, and some court-mandated programs if courts are not willing to delay. The program assistant directors will be working with the educators to clarify which exemptions are still in place as essential/critical by program area.

Purple Counties and Counties Approaching Purple

(as identified by an asterisk on the Ohio Health Advisory map):

When a county turns **PURPLE** or is approaching **PURPLE**, OSU Extension offices are to be closed and employees will work virtually. Meetings and events need to be canceled, postponed, or held virtually until January 15. This includes 4-H club meetings and events and Master Gardener Volunteer meetings and events.

RED Counties:

When a county turns **RED**, OSU Extension offices are to be closed to the public but still staffed according to their Return to Office Plan (can still offer by appointment only). By “appointment only” means the office is staffed, but the door to the office is locked. Clientele are required to have a timed appointment to be admitted to the office. You should attempt to have a limited number of employees in the office at any one time. You can work this out locally and make adjustments to your Return to Office plans. As always, if your commissioners or landlords have closed your building, you should revise your Return to Office plans to move to full telework. Meetings and events need to be canceled, postponed, or held virtually until January 15. This includes 4-H club meetings and events and Master Gardener Volunteer meetings and events.

We recognize that this is different than even a few weeks ago; however, we are attempting to be in concert with the current and trending data, and it is clear that the numbers are trending upward quickly and significantly.

Orange Counties and Yellow Counties:

When a county is **Orange** or **Yellow**, the Extension office can remain open to the public according to its Return to Office Plan with existing safety protocols in place. You should still attempt to have a limited number of employees in the office at any one time. You can work this out locally and make adjustments to your Return to Office plans. Meetings and events need to be canceled, postponed, or held virtually until January 15. This includes 4-H club meetings and events and Master Gardener Volunteer meetings and events.



Local Health Advisories

In addition to the guidance from the governor's Ohio Health Advisory System requirements on <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/public-health-advisory-system>, various county health departments are releasing local health advisories limiting activities or encouraging additional caution regarding gathering and non-essential activities. If a county has issued a local health advisory, we expect the Extension professionals in that county to follow the most restrictive guidance (Ohio State or local). We recognize that there is a lot of room for interpretation of these advisories and that some of them appear to provide conflicting messages about gatherings and essential activities. If you are uncertain about what to do, contact your area leader, and he or she will work with our director of Operations (Jeff McCutcheon) to provide additional clarity.

Staying the Course

We came together as a team in March and made proactive, solid, and sometimes unpopular decisions to ensure that we did what was necessary. Our number one priority has been and will continue to be the health and safety of our Extension employees, as well as our clientele with whom we have regular contact. Some things are changing daily, and the health advisory system is only updated weekly. We will do our best to keep you informed as to any changes we, or the university, will need to make.

I understand the struggle of changing priorities and the strain of uncertainty. However, I know that all of us are concerned about the current and future health and well-being of our peers and colleagues, as well as our 4-H and FCS youth, volunteers, farmers, industry partners, businesses, and communities. There is light at the end of this struggle as vaccines begin to make their way into public health system. I am sure we will emerge from this with a renewed understanding of the value of what we all do and with some new tools for achieving our mission in OSU Extension.

We will keep the lines of communication open locally with our stakeholders, county commissioners, and OSU Extension administration. Remember, the community spread remains fluid and ever-changing. We may need to modify this guidance at any time. Be prepared to accomplish things via telework, and have signage and communications prepared as a proactive planning measure in all counties.

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