

## COVID Chronicles continue

Vermont's single-day count of new COVID-19 cases spiked on Thursday, Nov. 4 to 498. On Friday it dropped to 377. The previous high was Oct. 15 at 347. Caledonia County peaked on Nov. 3 with 59 cases, almost double the previous peak of 34 on Oct. 10. (Data at [healthvermont.gov](https://healthvermont.gov) and [vtdigger.org](https://vtdigger.org).)

Northeast Correctional is on lockdown with an outbreak; as of Thursday 15 inmates were infected.

We are in the midst of our biggest surge of the pandemic. The NEK and Bennington/Rutland are especially high.

The situation in the NEK is concerning enough that Agency of Human Services Secretary Mike Smith, Health Commissioner Mark Levine, and other officials held a briefing for NEK legislators on Friday morning. They ran through the latest disturbing statistics, and highlighted that 24 vaccination clinics remain open throughout the NEK (see <https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/vaccine/getting-covid-19-vaccine>).

Vaccinations are indeed key. Thursday's Caledonian-Record included a commentary by area healthcare providers offering a thoughtful, detailed discussion of COVID vaccinations.

Still, many people remain reluctant to get vaccinated. Frankly, I don't get it. The risk from COVID is so much greater than any risk from a vaccine — and the devastation from the pandemic is plain for all to see: premature loss of loved ones, school closures and restrictions, economic stress, social isolation.

I personally don't understand how some folks justify trusting their judgment and internet research over the expertise of nearly all medical specialists. (Let's not even address off-the-wall conspiracy theories.) Nevertheless, I understand these folks' beliefs to be true and valid in their view — and, most importantly, that neither I nor anyone else is likely to change their view.

But their view does not change the facts on the ground, namely that the surge in cases is significantly driven by the unvaccinated population, causing more deaths and prolonging restrictions on normal life.

The choice not to vaccinate oneself, at very least for the sake of others, imposes a responsibility to take other steps to protect our community, especially those who can't get vaccinated or are still at risk, such as young children and people with medical conditions. Wearing a mask in public indoor spaces and getting regular COVID tests are two steps the vax-reluctant must be willing to take.

Yet few people wear masks in stores — or, I suspect, in private gatherings. We all should now, vaccinated or not. Cool weather has finally arrived, driving us indoors, but we still want to get together for parties and events like Halloween, and now here comes Thanksgiving and Christmas. Are we setting ourselves up for an even higher surge?

I asked Secretary Smith and Dr. Levine what it would take for the Governor to take more forceful action, such as a mask mandate and testing requirement for those unwilling to get the vaccine.

The reply was that they look at a variety of data, most prominently whether caseloads threatens to overwhelm hospitals. In the Governor's judgment, that is not a danger yet. He stands by his assessment

that greater vaccine availability, both for children and boosters for previously vaccinated folks, as well as improved treatment if someone does get sick with COVID, all argue for not imposing mandates at this time. The officials also doubted the effectiveness of a mandate, because people are so tired of pandemic restrictions.

Agreed, everyone is tired of it. We need to be done with it. In my view the shortest route is a higher vaccination rate, and requiring masking and testing for those unwilling to be vaccinated.

However, so far the Governor and his Administration have a different view. It would be inconsistent of me not to recognize that they have access to more data and expertise than I do, so I at this point I must continue to trust their judgment. But I admit to serious concern.