



**Health and Labor & Industry Joint Hearing
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It has been clear since early in this pandemic that COVID-19 has much more dire consequences for seniors and others with pre-existing conditions. In Allegheny County, statistics have remained consistent: 24% of cases are found in persons age 60 and above, and 67% of all deaths are attributable to those residing in long-term care facilities, including skilled nursing and personal care/assisted living facilities. Even more frightening is the fact that 95% of all deaths in Allegheny County, and 93% statewide, are in persons aged 60 and older, whether they live in congregate settings or are living in their communities.

The desire to reduce the danger of spread of COVID-19 is the reason why many of us have been so focused on assuring the widespread availability of PPE, testing, and contact tracing, especially for those who are in or who come in contact with high risk groups.

While children, teens, and young adults are able to contract the virus even without symptoms or serious illness requiring hospitalizations, they are in a position to transmit the virus to others whose natural immune systems are less able to fight off the consequences. As of the September 27, there are over 600,000 children and young adults across the country who have tested positive for COVID-19. Further, over the summer and since schools and colleges have reopened, the average age of those who have tested positive has dropped significantly since the age group testing positive at the highest rate are 20 year olds. From June through August, the incidence of the virus was highest among adults ages 20 to 29, according to research published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Young adults accounted for more than 26% of all confirmed cases.

Seniors do not have to participate in the same activities as those in their 20's for the spread to take place. All they need is to be in contact with each other. It is for this reason that we need to be communicating with younger people about just how essential their role is in preventing harm to others – particularly the elderly and vulnerable among us. While we don't often consider co-mingling of the generations as a negative, in the time of a pandemic, we must consider protecting these groups from each other. Intergenerational homes – where seniors are now living with adult children and caring for grandchildren so parents can go to work – are a particular risk. But other places of risk include our grocery stores, hospitals, doctors' offices, neighborhoods, parks, and polling stations. It is important to assure that everyone is following the basic rules that are designed to keep each of us safe: handwashing, mask wearing at all times out of the home,

social distancing, self-quarantining when one is unwell, testing, flu shots, and contact tracing. These are not multiple choice tools in our public health tool box. Rather, each public health tool is critical and must be followed consistently to weather this upcoming season with minimal financial and medical hardship to all age groups.

Contact tracing has been essential in countries to minimize this financial and medical hardship. It is a long-standing public health tool to combat infectious diseases. Contact tracing, along with the other public health tools, keeps our region green, avoids going back to stay-at-home orders and closures, and prevents hospitals from being overwhelmed. The goal is to prevent new cases and clusters from becoming new outbreaks in our communities.

Case investigation and contact tracing also serve as the main mechanism to identify where the cases originate. Paired with testing, case investigation and contact tracing provide crucial information and insight to target public health actions. It has to be diligent and supported.

We applaud the efforts to coordinate contact tracing within communities and long-term care facilities to assure we can identify and isolate individuals who may unknowingly transmit the virus to vulnerable seniors and the greater community.