

# Mahnomen-White Earth Nation Joint Emergency Operations to Respond to COVID-19

By Kari Oldfield, Local Public Health Association of Minnesota Director

**M**ahnomen County is the only Minnesota county that sits entirely on a reservation – the White Earth Reservation – making it unique in the state.

Initially, Mahnomen County and the White Earth Tribal Nation each had its own Emergency Manager, but about four years ago, they filled the role jointly with Ed Snetsinger. Now, they are the only County and Tribal Nation in the state with a joint position responding to emergencies.

In the event of an emergency, Snetsinger will pull together a combined Tribal and County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to respond. During non-emergency times, the local emergency planning team meets quarterly to prepare and practice for an eventual emergency. The local emergency planning team works to build community relationships so it can quickly activate people when needed.

“It starts with that relationship prior to that incident,” said Snetsinger. “It is important to have those relationships first. Obviously, we cannot handle an incident by ourselves. It takes teamwork”.

In mid-March when the COVID-19 pandemic began heavily impacting the United States, the EOC was quickly activated. Eighteen people were brought together to fill multiple response roles, operating out of the Shooting Star Casino, each with specific duties, Snetsinger said. Some of the roles and services include:

- Public information: Shares critical information with the public.
- Planning section: Puts out reports and plans meetings.
- Operations: Uses local and tribal public health to oversee COVID-19 testing.
- Call center: Allows residents to get vital information about services offered.
- Employee line: Facilitates employee testing and monitoring individual symptoms.
- “Feeding Our Families”: An initiative to get non-perishable food to the public.

The EOC holds daily calls that include many individuals, such as members of the sheriff’s office, the police department, the local nursing home and hospital, Tribal Council Members, the Mahnomen County board chair, county administrator, city administrator, the Indian Health Services CEO, and the Emergency Manager of neighboring Becker County.

Tammy Carlsrud, a public health Nurse at Norman-Mahnomen Public Health, was brought into the group in mid-March. She serves as the Deputy of Operations for the joint EOC.

“On March 17, I was working at my desk at public health and Ed came to see me,” said Carlsrud. “He told me the EOC was in full activation now and would like me to join the EOC team; both to represent local public health, and because he recognized how well I could collaborate with our local agencies at the county level, specifically our hospital and nursing home as COVID-19 could have a huge impact on those facilities.” She noted that by 1 PM the same day, she relocated her desk to the EOC.

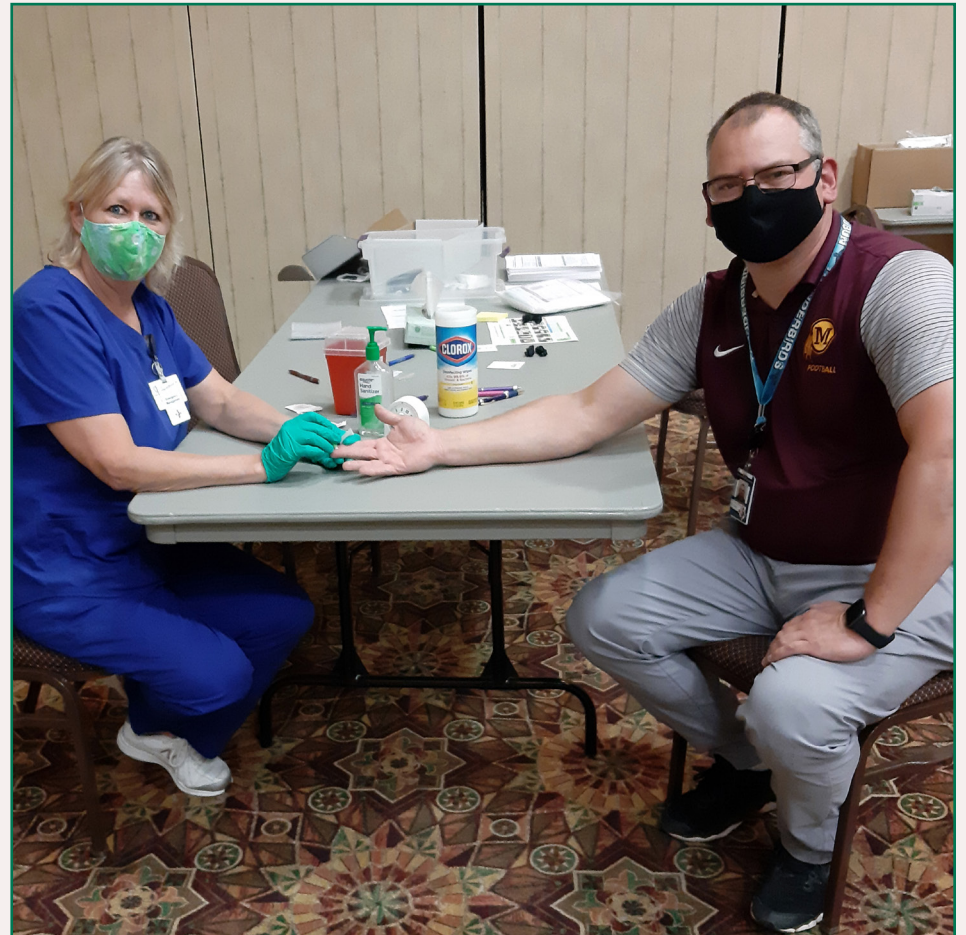
As part of the EOC, Norman-Mahnomen public health department has been working jointly with the White Earth Home Health Agency to do testing of community members. “We now have COVID-19 testing available using a Rapid Antibody test and/or an oropharyngeal Mayo swab,” said Carlsrud. “We offer drive through testing and the mobile unit hits the road and does testing in our local communities and villages. To date, the nurses working with the testing have done over 2000 COVID-19 tests.”

Carlsrud said public health and the White Earth Home Health Agency then follow up with individuals on their test results and trace contacts to identify contacts and prevent further spread. Members of the team are also working jointly to educate community members, day care providers, schools, long-term care and other community organizations on COVID-19. The response has involved all members of their team, including one staff person who stepped up to work at the local food shelf for several weeks.

Snetsinger said typically they stay in EOC mode a few days, followed by a much-longer recovery period. It’s been different with COVID-19, and the EOC has been operational since mid-March.

“This is very much unprecedented,” Snetsinger said. “I have been involved in some stressful incidents before but nowhere near this timeline here.”

“If there is anything good that can come from this COVID-19 pandemic, I would have to say it’s the partnership that has evolved between Mahnomen County, White Earth Nation and White Earth Home Health,” Carlsrud added. “I foresee this collaboration continuing and strengthening. I have gained so much knowledge by working side-by-side with these individuals and also made many new friends along the way.” ■



Tammy Carlsrud, Mahnomen County public health, performs a rapid antibody test on Ed Snetsinger, White Earth and Mahnomen County Emergency Manager.