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March 11, 2022

Dear Community,

Beginning Saturday, March 12, wearing masks will be optional in most indoor public spaces in Oregon. Last week, Gov. Kate Brown announced that the statewide indoor masking order will be lifted on March 12. The Benton County Board of Commissioners, acting as the Board of Health, has aligned with the state and removed its local indoor masking order #D2021-063.

### **Masking Changes**

As we find ourselves at the two-year mark of the pandemic, we remain grateful for the compassion, stamina, and resilience demonstrated across Benton County. The majority of our community has the protection afforded by COVID-19 vaccination, with 72.5% of the county population fully vaccinated. Of those currently eligible in Benton County, 66% have received a booster dose. Strong community support for vaccination, masking, and other precautions has had a significant impact throughout Benton County. Together, we have reduced the number who have fallen ill, kept people out of the hospital, and worked diligently to support the most at risk among us. It is because of everyone's hard work and willingness to compromise that we are in a position to safely lift the universal masking order, and instead make masking optional and based on individual risk.

Though masks will no longer be required, many people will continue to protect themselves and others by wearing masks and engaging in other public health measures. Benton County encourages everyone to continue to make decisions based on our individual risks and the risks of those with whom we engage. As we approach this change in mask requirements, we want to share ways that you can choose the best level of protection for yourselves, your loved ones, and our community.

### **How to Assess Risk**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently announced a new metric-based system to weigh COVID-19 risks. [COVID-19 Community Levels](#) are a tool including data and recommendations to help individuals and communities decide what precautions to take based on the latest local data and their unique individual, household, and professional circumstances.

Though we are moving out of the Omicron surge and currently have high levels of immunity from vaccination and recent infection, the virus remains a threat, particularly to our community members at higher risk. It is important to know that we are not powerless against COVID-19 in an environment without required universal masking, and our collective risk decreases with lower community transmission. We have protective vaccines, COVID-19 treatments, testing, and a supply of high-quality masks that offer protection to those who need or want them. We should also continue to improve ventilation, practice good hand hygiene, and stay home when sick.

## **What's Next?**

Benton County will continue to support protection measures for community members that are most at risk by making available high-quality masks that are effective in situations without universal masking. We will continue to provide outreach, while ensuring availability and access to vaccination, testing, and COVID-19 treatments. Universal masking will continue in healthcare settings, and it is still recommended that those who are unvaccinated, immunocompromised, have underlying health conditions, or are age 65 and older continue wearing masks in indoor public places. Benton County and the Oregon Health Authority will also continue monitoring the situation around COVID-19, reviewing the impact new developments have on our communities and assess if any future public health measures need to be considered.

As we move forward, we ask that you extend good will and patience supporting choices made by others. Thank you to our general community and community partners for continuing to do your part to help us control the spread of COVID-19. Visit <https://www.co.benton.or.us/covid19> for more information on COVID-19 testing, masking, and vaccines.

Sincerely,

**April Holland, MPH**

Benton County Public Health Director/Administrator

**Carolina Amador, MD**

Benton County Public Health Officer