

Governor Walz Announces 2.1 Million Free KN95 Masks Distributed to Minnesotans Through Schools, Community Groups

State will work with schools, local public health, and clinics to distribute high-quality masks

Today, Governor Tim Walz announced the state will provide 2.1 million KN95 masks to community groups, local public health agencies, schools, and other entities to ensure Minnesotans have access to high-quality masks during the current COVID-19 wave.

Around 650,000 KN95 masks will go to local public health agencies for residents, and schools will receive 550,000 masks to distribute to staff and students. Other recipients include MDH's Covid-19 Community Coordinators, child care centers, clinics serving Medicaid enrollees, and tribal nations.

The State of Minnesota has started to distribute masks this week, with further shipments in the days ahead. Organizations receiving masks will provide them directly to Minnesotans, and they will inform their communities how to get their masks. The State of Minnesota is working to prioritize getting these masks to people in higher risk settings, higher risk populations and our state's schools.

"Throughout the pandemic we have built a strong partnership with schools, local public health agencies, community groups, and others to make sure Minnesotans can access the tools they need to safely navigate COVID-19. That includes KN95 masks, which are especially important as we confront the highly contagious Omicron variant," said Governor Walz. **"Studies constantly show that high-quality masks like KN95s better protect wearers from COVID-19 and help slow the spread of the virus. As we navigate the difficult weeks ahead, make sure you mask up in public to protect yourself, your family, and your community."**

"High-quality masks help keep you and others safe – period. The Omicron variant means it is more important than ever that you wear a mask in public to slow the spread of COVID-19," said Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan. **"I'm grateful to our community partners who continue to serve Minnesotans by providing vital resources to stay safe, including testing, vaccines, and masks."**

"Well fitting respirators like N95/KN95 masks offer the highest level of protection in stopping the spread of COVID-19 but not everyone can afford or have access to this resource," said Hue Pham, Executive Director of Vietnamese Social Services. **"As part of the ongoing work against this virus, VSS is very pleased with the opportunity to partner with MDH in distribute free N95/KN95 masks to our vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities."**

"WellShare International, in partnership with MDH and other CCCs, provide masks, rapid COVID-19 test kits, and other PPE supplies to community members who cannot afford to buy these supplies, or even unable to get it from other sources," said Sakhaudiin A. Mohamud, Director of COVID Response Programs at WellShare International. **"Our community health workers deliver these PPE supplies to elders and other family members with comorbidities at their homes. KN95 masks will provide better protection to community members during faith congregations and other settings when social distancing is loosely maintained."**

“KN95 masks are a powerful part of mitigating COVID-19 transmission in our schools during the Omicron wave. These high-quality masks, in conjunction with vaccination opportunities and a robust testing program, give us the tools to prioritize uninterrupted in-person learning,” added Matt Hillman, Ed.D., Superintendent, Northfield Public Schools .

“We know that Minnesotans on our Medicaid and MinnesotaCare programs experience historical and ongoing structural disadvantage that increases their risk for complications from COVID-19. High quality masks have been shown to help decrease transmission in communities, but access and affordability of this important tool hasn’t been consistent,” said Dr. Nathan Chomilo, Medical Director for Medicaid and MinnesotaCare in the Minnesota Department of Human Services and Senior Equity Advisor at MDH . **“We are grateful to our managed care partners who stepped forward during this current surge to help distribute N95 masks to over 150 clinics around the state in zip codes that have a high degree of structural disadvantage and which serve a significant number of our fellow Minnesotans on Medicaid.”**

“Scott County Public Health has worked hard throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to protect community members through testing and vaccination. We are pleased to add to these efforts with the distribution of free high-quality KN95 masks ,” said Lisa Brodsky, Public Health Director for Scott County Public Health . **“Each layer of protection we can offer helps to curb the spread of COVID-19. Partnership with MDH has helped increase capacity and resources for local public health to serve our communities, an endeavor we are committed to during and beyond the pandemic. We will be distributing these KN95s through the strong partnerships we have in the county including our faith-based and community-based organizations.”**

Minnesota’s mask distribution strategy comes as the Biden Administration begins sending millions of masks to pharmacies and community health centers for Americans to pick up for free. Minnesotans are encouraged to visit their local pharmacy for more information.

To help protect yourself and others from the more contagious Omicron variant of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) recommend Minnesotans wear high-quality masks like N95 or KN95 masks, which are effective at blocking airborne droplets that spread COVID-19.

In addition to wearing a mask, testing and vaccinations are critical tools Minnesotans should use to protect themselves and others.