

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 30, 2020

TO: Michael May, City of Madison Attorney; Satya Rhodes-Conway, City of Madison Mayor

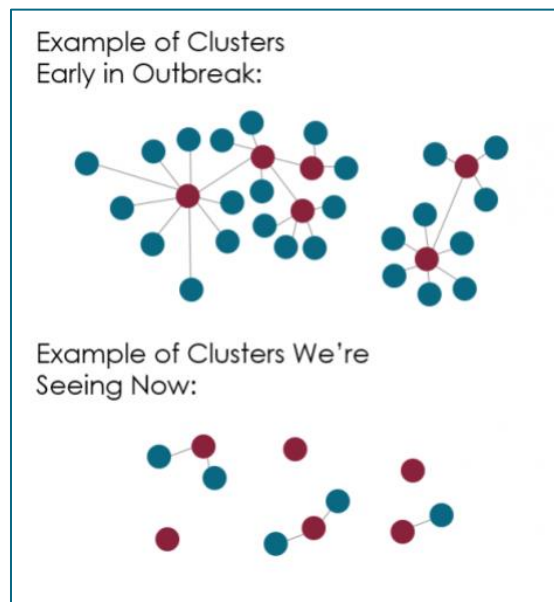
FROM: Janel Heinrich, Director, Public Health Madison & Dane County

SUBJECT: **April 7th election and COVID-19: Urgent need to postpone and move to mail-in ballots only**

The in-person elections scheduled for April 7th present a serious challenge to controlling the spread of COVID-19. In absence of a vaccine or cure, our public health tools to combat this epidemic are few: **preventing exposure** to the virus is the best way to prevent illness, and **flattening the curve** of cases that are occurring is the best way to prevent exceeding the capacity of our health care system. Hosting an in-person election that would promote gathering of people throughout the state is in direct conflict with critical steps the state has taken, through closures and iterations of Safer at Home orders, to require social distancing to protect its population.

Every day, Public Health Nurses at Public Health Madison & Dane County interview people who test positive—we do this primarily to understand with whom they have been in contact so that we can intervene with contacts to prevent further spread. As social distancing orders were strengthened, the size of our contact investigations has decreased. This means that the number of contacts someone has looks very differently compared to even a few weeks ago.

Rather than entire workplaces or restaurants needing follow-up, it is more common now for someone newly diagnosed to name only household contacts. At this point in the progression of illness of COVID-19 in WI, an in-person election has the potential to reverse this progress by expanding the network of contacts surrounding a person who is asymptomatic but contagious. Our case counts have been increasing steadily—but not exponentially—since mid-March. Holding elections is a walk back to the fragile, but effective, system of social distancing we have established in Wisconsin and a risk we should not willingly take.



In addition to the public health risk of holding in-person elections, the strain on polling logistics is significant. Currently, Madison is down from the needed 1,500 poll workers to 600. The number of polling locations have gone from 92 to 68. Communities of all sizes across the state are in similar situations. The engine of polling infrastructure is powered by older adults. People aged 65 and older are at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19. Poll workers are often adults over 60, and many are understandably cancelling the shifts they have signed up for. In the City's recruitment of poll workers to adequately cover the polls on April 7, the focus would be on younger, healthy adults. However, adults ages 20-44 currently account for 52% of all positive COVID-19 cases in Dane County. The percentage is even higher for the City at 61%. Younger people are more likely to have mild symptoms and may not even be aware they are infected with COVID-19, so having poll workers from this age group still poses a significant risk of transmission to voters, particularly if adequate safety materials are unable to be obtained due to national and global shortages.

The City of Madison is scrambling to find and even fabricate plastic face shields and plexiglass barriers to protect both poll workers and voters from interfacing directly with each other. We're making sure each polling location can accommodate curbside voting to the extent possible, and supplying each polling station team with hand sanitizer, disinfectant spray, and gloves. We're stressing the importance of maintaining at least 6 feet between poll workers and between voters in line to obtain ballots. As a City, we're doing all we can to promote absentee voting and to keep up with the absentee requests, including dedicating staff from several agencies to support the Clerk's Office during this time. Clerk's staff working around the clock and foregoing sleep to support election preparation, which can be detrimental to their own immune systems. The Clerk's Office is receiving hundreds of calls from frustrated voters—mostly older adults without the technological capacity to request absentee ballots on-line—who feel disenfranchised, as if they have to make a choice between obeying public health advice to stay safe at home and going to the polls on April 7 to vote. **Instead, mailing ballots to every Wisconsin resident and extending the election deadline is the urgent step to take now.** This is both an act of public health best practice as well as a preservation of civic engagement.

Wisconsin has been a leader at enacting statewide public health interventions throughout this epidemic. While it took other states critical time to restrict gatherings to 50 people, Wisconsin implemented this restriction early—merely days after reaching 20 cases (*Figure 1*).

ACTIONS: Restrict gatherings to 50

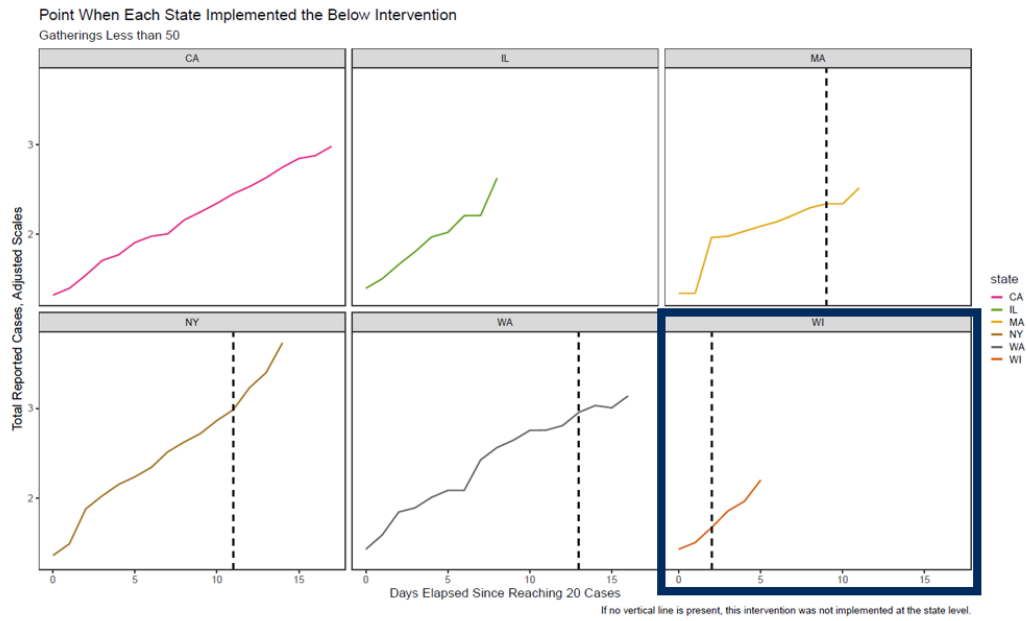


Figure 1: Timeline of state orders restricting gatherings to 50 people or less (Wisconsin in blue box)

Compared to other states, Wisconsin was also a leader in school (Figure 2) and restaurant (Figure 3) closures.

ACTIONS: School closure

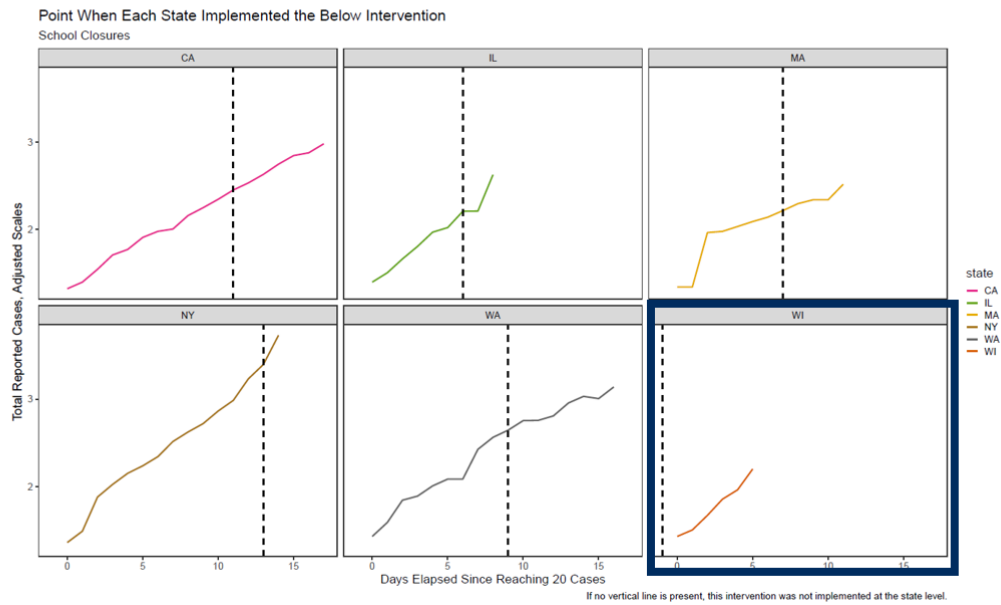


Figure 2: Timeline of state orders closing school (Wisconsin in blue box)

ACTIONS: Restaurant closure

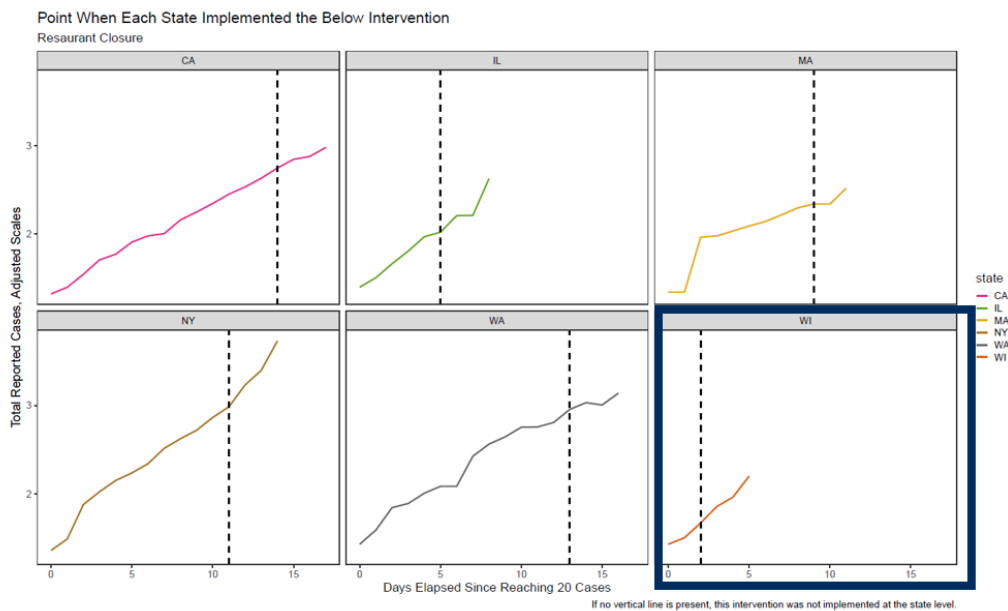


Figure 3 Timeline of state orders closing restaurants (Wisconsin in blue box)

When it comes to elections, Wisconsin would be a significant outlier if it hosted an in-person election on the scheduled date of April 7th.

Election Days for States that Did Not Postpone Their Election

The red line is the original election date. If postponed, the black vertical line is the new election date.

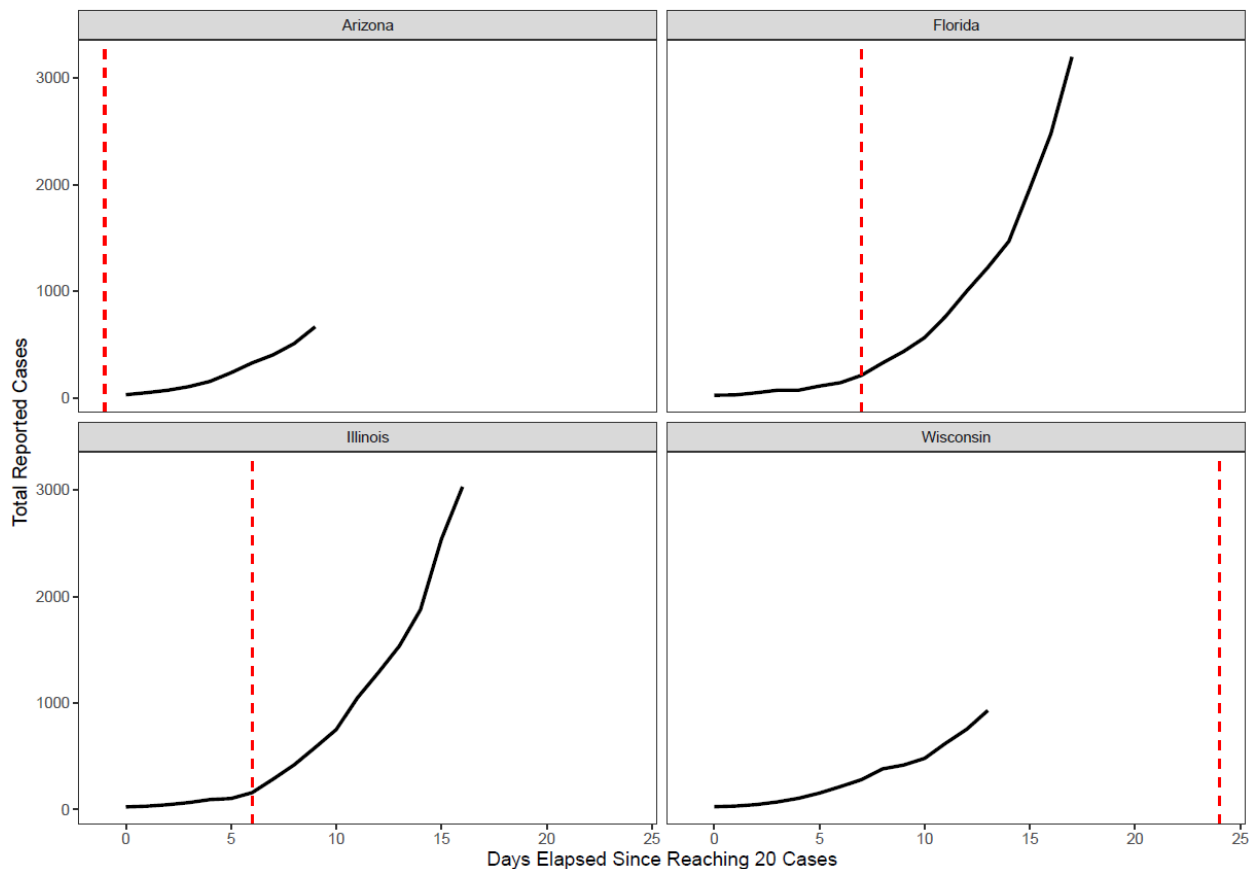


Figure 4: Election dates for states that did not postpone their election^{1,2}

Three other states with primaries after the start of the epidemic (March 17th) did not postpone their elections. Illinois, Florida, and Arizona went forward with their primary elections, but did so far earlier in the epidemic (6 days past 20 cases, 7 days past 20 cases, and 0 days past 20 cases respectively) and had far fewer cases and less community spread (Figure 4). On March 17 when they voted, Illinois had 159 confirmed cases of COVID-19, Florida had 210 confirmed cases, and Arizona had 20 confirmed cases. Wisconsin had 1,112 cases as of March 29th, which will only increase before the scheduled election on April 7th. **Wisconsin’s election is planned to take place 24 days after we reached 20 confirmed cases—putting Wisconsin out of alignment with election practices actively being implemented across the country.**

¹ Election dates sourced from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html>

² State COVID-19 data sourced from <https://github.com/nytimes/covid-19-data>

Election Days for States that Postponed Their Election (& Wisconsin)

The red line is the original election date. If postponed, the black vertical line is the new election date.

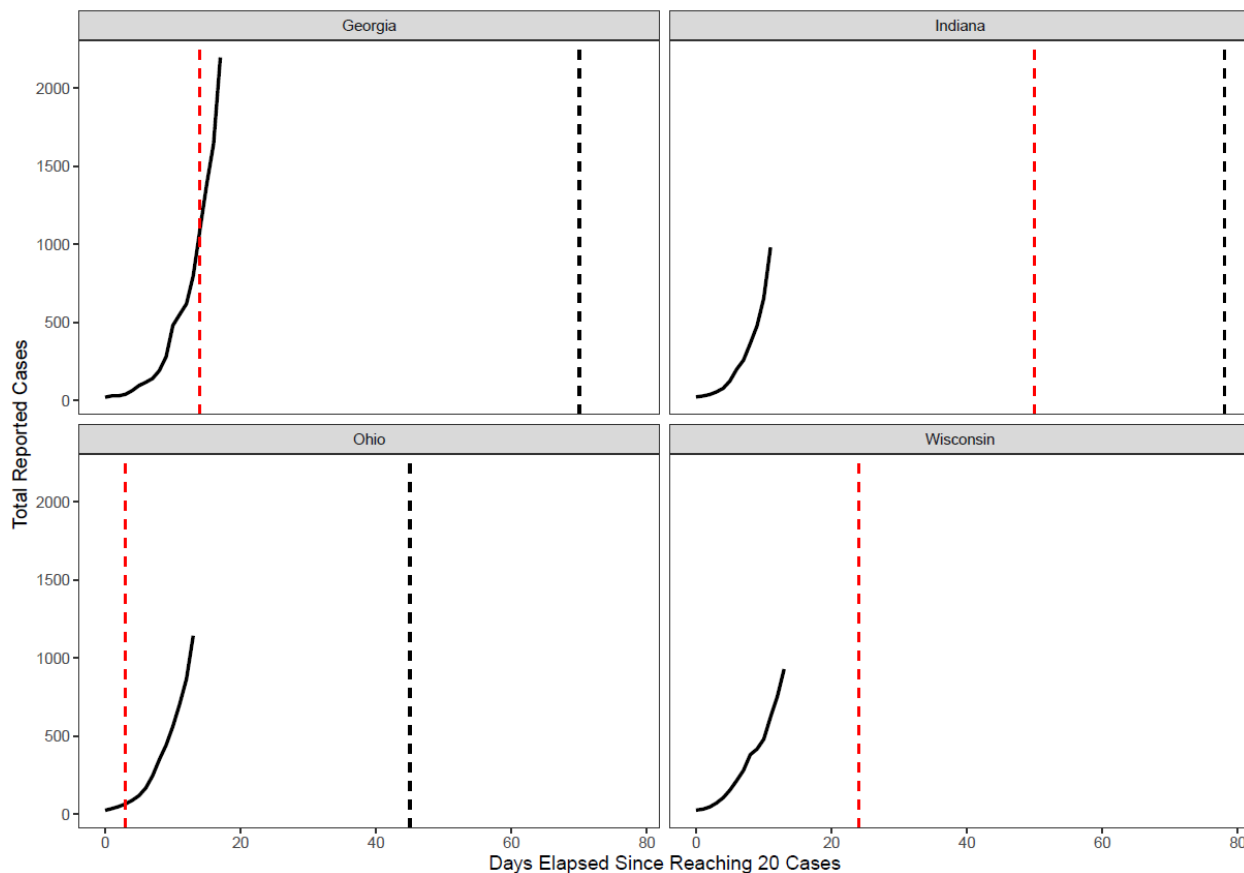


Figure 5: Election days for states that postponed their election^{3,4}

Georgia, Ohio, and Indiana are examples of states (out of a total of 14 states) that postponed their primary elections (Figure 5). Georgia’s election was originally scheduled for March 24th, 14 days after they reached 20 cases, when their confirmed case count was 1,094. Ohio’s election was originally scheduled for March 17th, three days after they reached 20 cases, when their confirmed case count was 67. Both states chose to postpone their elections, scheduled earlier than Wisconsin’s, when they had fewer cases than Wisconsin currently does. Because these states had less information when making the decision, it is possible that they will further postpone. Indiana’s election was originally scheduled for

³ Election dates sourced from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html>

⁴ State COVID-19 data sourced from <https://github.com/nytimes/covid-19-data>

May 5th, and they postponed it to June 2nd; Indiana had 982 cases as of March 27th. Indiana is an example of a state that postponed an election originally later than Wisconsin’s, and other states that have done the same include Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and New York.

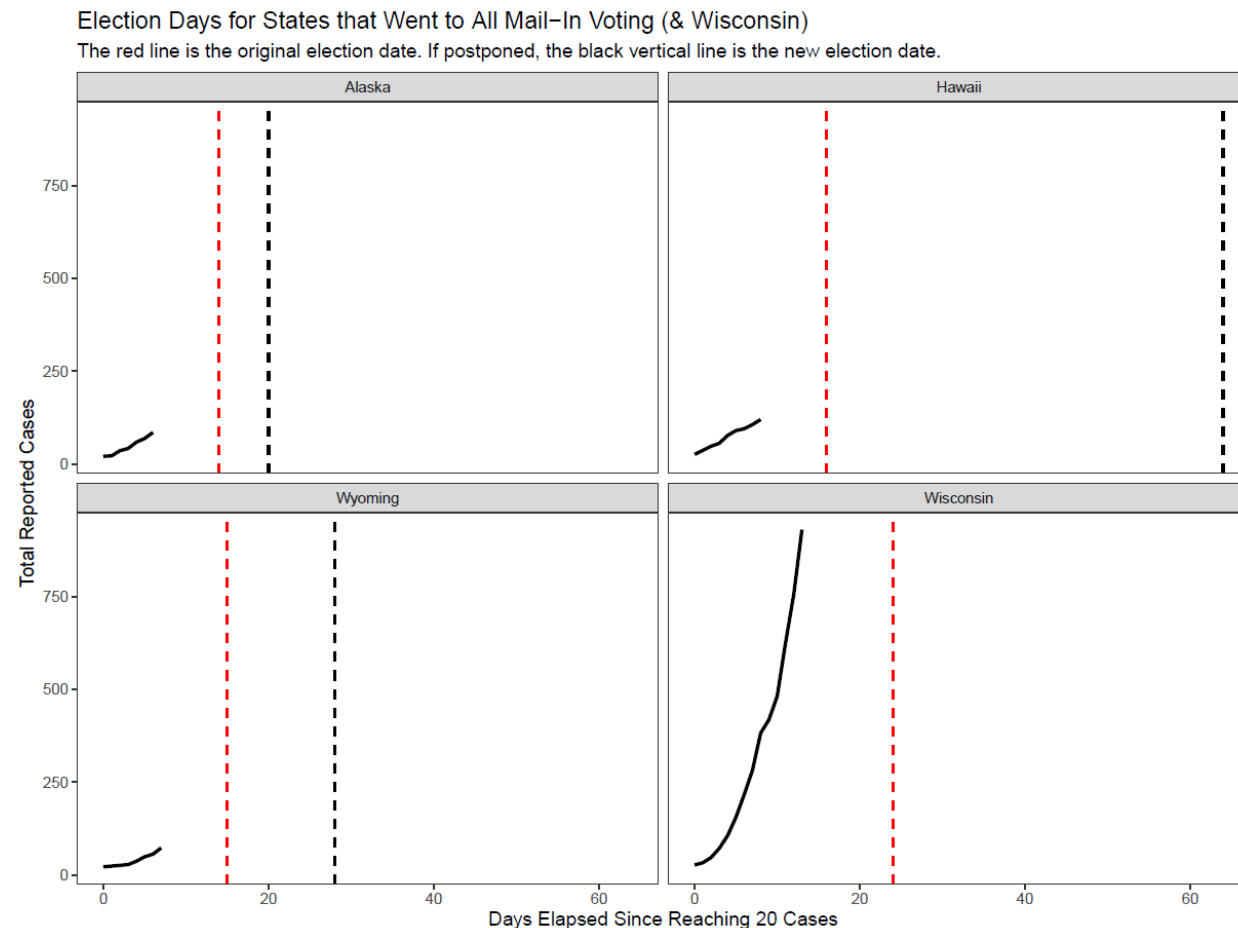


Figure 6: Election days for states that went to all mail-in voting^{5,6}

Alaska, Hawaii, and Wyoming went to all mail-in voting in their primary elections (Figure 6). Each of these states chose to do so early in their epidemics, when case counts were low. In each case, the states paired the choice to go to mail-in ballots with extending the deadline by which ballots needed to be received.

We strongly recommend that the April 7 election in Wisconsin be postponed and changed to all mail-in voting. To do otherwise would put all Wisconsin communities at greater risk of illness due to COVID-19, and puts our health care systems at risk of becoming overwhelmed and depleted of resources.

⁵ Election dates sourced from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/2020-campaign-primary-calendar-coronavirus.html>

⁶ State COVID-19 data sourced from <https://github.com/nytimes/covid-19-data>

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janel Heinrich". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "H".

Janel Heinrich, MPH, MA
Director, Public Health Madison & Dane County