

“Yes, Rhode Island needs another mask mandate”

McGowan, Dan. Boston Globe (Online); Boston. 07 Dec 2021.

The big rivalry basketball game between Providence College and the University of Rhode Island last Saturday had several things in common with the performances of “Hamilton” at the Providence Performing Arts Center. The secondary players were more impressive than the big stars on stage and on the court. And both shows contributed to an increase in traffic in downtown that was somehow refreshing, as everyone raced to their favorite secret parking spots (Eddy Street next to City Hall never fails, by the way). But there was one glaring difference between 13,000 or so fans that packed The Dunk and the 3,000 theatergoers at PPAC: There is no mask or COVID-19 vaccine mandate to watch college basketball, but you can't even walk into PPAC without a mask and proof of vaccination or a recent negative test. It's time for Governor Dan McKee to change that policy.

With Rhode Island posting back-to-back days of more than 1,000 positive COVID-19 tests last week and cases surging across the region, McKee should immediately consider an indoor mask mandate for at least the rest of the year (and likely through the winter) in an effort to curb community spread and prevent our hospitals from once again becoming overcrowded. And yet, McKee is taking a wait-and-see-how-many-of-my-political-rivals-will-push-me approach that has become too common within his administration.

Hours after state Treasurer Seth Magaziner (who is running against McKee for governor next year) called for an indoor mask mandate, McKee spokeswoman Lexi Kriss said the governor “continues to evaluate the data and is exploring issuing a recommendation for indoor masking for large indoor gatherings.”

“The governor and the Department of Health are closely monitoring the rise in COVID-19 cases and the transmission level here in Rhode Island,” Kriss said. “Rhode Island is fortunate to have the most robust testing structures in the United States, which allows us to capture and address many cases. The state also leads the nation in adult vaccinations, which is crucial to the pandemic response.” All of those points are right, and yet they still aren't enough.

Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency room doctor, public health professor at Brown University, a voice of reason for Rhode Islanders and all Americans throughout the pandemic, told me that there are factors that can't be ignored. She said the hospital system is stressed to max, not because it's being inundated with new COVID-19 patients (the state has averaged about 22 new hospital admissions a day over the last week), but “we don't have the capacity to take care of a non-COVID emergency.”

The numbers back up Ranney's concerns.

On Monday, six hospitals were at 100 percent occupancy (based on staff levels) for ICU beds, according to data from the health department. For example, at Kent Hospital, there were 10 staffed ICU beds, and 10 patients in them. The occupancy rates for staffed inpatient beds are lower, but they've consistently been above 85 percent occupancy.

Ranney also said Rhode Island should be proud of its high vaccination rate, but she said the vast majority of people who are hospitalized are unvaccinated (a spokeswoman for Lifespan confirmed Ranney's comment).

When I asked Ranney specifically about a new mask mandate, she stopped short of publicly calling on McKee to take action. Instead, she explained that she would encourage Rhode Islanders to use over-the-counter COVID tests before and after large gatherings, and continue to get vaccinated and boosted. “The same measures that have worked throughout the pandemic continue to work with the Delta variant,” Ranney said.

McKee is right to tout that Rhode Island is among the most vaccinated states in the country, and he deserves a lot of credit to helping to streamline the vaccination process early in his tenure as governor after the initial rocky rollout. He also followed through on his promise of music in Newport over the summer, and as a basketball fan, I'm sure he loves that Rhode Island has at least two college teams that have legitimate chances to make the NCAA Tournament in March.

A mask mandate takes nothing away from those accomplishments. It's a practical approach to addressing a spike that appears to be getting out of control. The threat of the Delta variant had many health professionals alarmed when the state first started seeing 300 new cases a day in early November. That number has tripled in a month. Implementing a mask mandate would not be the kind of loss of face for McKee that the Rams or King George III took on Saturday. Instead, masking up could be a big win for all Rhode Islanders. After all, COVID doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints.