

As coronavirus reaches Martha's Vineyard, concern over an outbreak on the islands grows

Hospital chiefs ask summer homeowners to stay away

By [Dugan Arnett](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 21, 2020, 5:01 p.m.



The Steamship Authority said it will reduce service to and from Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard as demand has dropped sharply. With many workplaces closed on both islands and across mainland Massachusetts, the need to commute daily by ferry has plunged. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Hospital officials on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket have a stark message for people with summer homes on the islands: just stay away.

The plea came as Martha's Vineyard announced its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on Friday and as several residents awaited test results on neighboring Nantucket. It reflected growing unease on the summer havens that part-time residents could bring problems ashore with them.

In a joint statement, Martha's Vineyard Hospital and Nantucket Cottage Hospital said that those not already on the islands should avoid coming, while adding that anyone there should remain at home except for "absolute necessities," such as food or prescriptions.

"[We're] urging residents and visitors of the islands to consider the limitations of our critical access hospitals during this unprecedented time of pandemic," said the statement, which was signed by Denise Schepici, the president and CEO of Martha's Vineyard Hospital, and Gary Shaw, president and CEO of Nantucket Cottage Hospital.

"For your safety and to save lives, we strongly advise you to **STAY AT HOME.**"

Since part-time island residents began flocking to the island in recent days — many in an effort to isolate in summer homes — there have been growing concerns among local officials and year-round residents that the islands would be incapable of handling the influx in the event of an outbreak.

In a private Facebook post Friday night, Nantucket Police Chief William Pittman offered a stark rebuke to Governor Charlie Baker's repeated stance that he is not considering a shelter-in-place order for the state.

“Everyone on the island needs to contact the governor’s office tomorrow, Sunday and Monday and every day that Gov. Baker fails to listen to the pleas of our island’s healthcare professionals to shut down the influx of refugees from virus-infected areas of the country,” Pittman wrote in a post.

“His refusal to even acknowledge the request from Nantucket Cottage Hospital and Partners HealthCare is beyond belief.”

A spokeswoman for Baker’s office said the state’s new coronavirus response command center has been in direct talks with officials at Partners, which owns both island hospitals, about their concerns.

On Friday, the Martha’s Vineyard Town of Tisbury announced the first positive case of COVID-19 on the islands.

“The patient is under quarantine at their Tisbury home and appears to be recovering,” the town said in a statement. “The patient’s family and close contacts have been identified and are in self quarantine and taking all recommended precautions.”

The statement said no further identifying information would be provided about the resident to protect their privacy.

Longtime West Tisbury resident and community organizer Laura Silber worried the influx of seasonal residents will overload the island’s small hospital.

“This is not a locals versus seasonal residents situation, this is strictly a public health situation,” said Silber. “The best way that seasonal residents can support this community, which they are a part of, is to stay in their mainland homes and reduce the terrible burden facing our hospital and first responders.”

As of Friday, meanwhile, 29 people had undergone testing for the virus at Nantucket Cottage Hospital, which has only 14 licensed beds. Of the nine results that had come back, all were negative, according to a hospital spokesman.

The Nantucket hospital has also restricted access to one entrance, cancelled elective procedures and has said no one should go to the hospital unless they need emergency care.

A spokeswoman for the Martha's Vineyard Hospital — which has 25 beds — did not immediately respond to an e-mail seeking the number of tests the facility had performed.

Tisbury's emergency management director, Micah Agnoli, was also in self-quarantine off-island as of Wednesday, according to a statement on the town's website.

However the statement said “there is no indication that he has contracted COVID-19 or that he was otherwise exposed to it while on-island. Employers are mandating that employees self-quarantine if they experience flu-like symptoms, regardless of whether they came into contact with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or associated with a third party who has contracted COVID-19.”

“Mr. Agnoli remains actively engaged in the town's emergency management planning to combat the COVID-19 pandemic from his location off-island,” the statement added. “He is in routine contact with other island departments to assist and aid in the on-island response and is in direct contact with my office and the Board of Selectmen.”

The Steamship Authority also posted the hospitals' plea atop the homepage of its website as a “travel advisory.”

The authority said that **starting Sunday** it will reduce service to and from the islands as demand has dropped sharply.

With many workplaces closed on both islands and across mainland Massachusetts, the need to commute daily by ferry has plunged, including among construction workers, as Nantucket has issued a moratorium on construction.

The agency said it also plans to delay by at least three weeks bringing back its high-speed ferry, which had been scheduled to return to service April 3.

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