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PRESS RELEASE

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As restrictions ease, Alaskans may choose to slightly expand their social circle to strengthen support networks while still preventing the spread of COVID-19

May 15, 2020 ANCHORAGE — As Alaska slowly reopens its economy and eases restrictions, some Alaskans are wondering how much socializing is reasonable if we hope to continue to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

In Phase 2 of the [Reopen Alaska Responsibly Plan](#), gatherings of fewer than 50 people are allowed as long as non-household members remain 6 feet apart. But what about having dinner with one other household at your home, watching your friend's children or allowing your children to play with their cousins or the children of your closest friend? What level of social interaction is currently considered safe?

Alaska's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Anne Zink says the answer to those questions may vary from household to household and will depend on the risk factors of everyone living in them.

Generally, and according to the state's mandates, Alaskans are expected to keep at least 6 feet from all non-household members. However, in some cases, if a stronger support network is needed, Alaskans may begin to expand their social circle to include just a few others.

As we begin to socialize more, Zink said it may be helpful for Alaskans to consider a concept called an expanded social bubble, already in use in New Zealand and some Canadian provinces. The idea behind this concept is that a household may choose to expand slightly to link with one other individual, couple or household if it is deemed mutually beneficial and agreeable to everyone involved.

"This is something that other countries and communities are trying out, as a way of providing added social support while continuing to limit most social interactions," Zink said.

Once linked, the individuals within an expanded social bubble can visit each other's homes, share meals, care for one another, help with home projects or go on recreational outings together. Children within that enlarged bubble may play with each other in close proximity, indoors or outdoors.

Outside that trusted bubble, all household members still must keep at least six feet apart from non-household members. Another important point is that once a household has expanded its bubble to include others, the members within that bubble need to remain consistent. You should not choose to

include two new members one week, and then substitute one of those members for someone else the following week.

“Consistency is key,” Zink said. “Expanding your bubble, even to include just one or two others, is not something to be done lightly. Alaskans have done a tremendous job since late March preventing the spread of COVID-19 by limiting their social interactions. That needs to continue, but we recognize that if people have more social support, limiting other social interactions will be easier to maintain as COVID-19 continues to be of concern in our communities.”

Joining with another household or just one or two individuals allows parents and caregivers to take turns caring for children, provides children with more opportunities to play and socialize with other children, and will help ease loneliness and provide improved social support for those who have felt isolated.

Mike Abbott, chief executive officer with the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, said he expects this model could prove beneficial to the mental health of Alaskans. “Alaskans are showing considerable resilience under extremely difficult circumstances, but this adjustment, done correctly, could represent a great way to relieve stress and anxiety for Alaskans who have been feeling alone or isolated,” Abbott said. “It provides Alaskans with options to help build a stronger network of support.”

If Alaskans choose to expand their social bubble, they will need to first consider their risk for serious illness from COVID-19. Those most at risk, such as those 65 or older or people with an ongoing health condition will need to be the most restrictive, keeping their bubbles as tight as possible to prevent spreading infection into the group.

The larger the group, the more socialization can occur, but with that comes added risk. If one person in the group becomes sick, that person will need to be isolated from the remainder of the household and everyone else who is not ill will need to remain quarantined, assuming close contacts occurred with the sick individual.

Dr. Zink is also urging Alaskans to voluntarily keep track of their social interactions. An explanation of the bubble concept and a sample tracking worksheet are attached to this press release and are also [available online](#). For a more detailed explanation of this concept, please read today’s [Play Every Day Blog](#) that features a Q and A with Dr. Zink.

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