

County, city urged to mandate masks

**(KNZA)--The Brown County Commission was urged Monday to reconsider a mask mandate to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.**

**In addition, Hiawatha Community Hospital CEO John Broberg asked the Hiawatha City Commission Monday evening to consider requiring face coverings in public when social distancing isn't possible.**

**Since July 1, Broberg said the number of COVID-19 cases in Brown County has more than double. During the same time, he said the hospital's emergency room has seen a 179 percent increase in patients presenting virus-related symptoms.**

**Due to current staffing issues, the hospital is transferring positive patients requiring hospitalization to St. Joseph or Topeka.**

**Broberg said the pandemic has put additional stress on the hospital staff, providers and resources.**

**He said they are hiring additional staff to work at the screening table, to triage patients, and field questions through the hospital's COVID line.**

**During the Hiawatha City Commission meeting, Broberg read a letter submitted by Maple Heights Nursing and Rehabilitation Center Administrator Denise Wolney supporting a mask mandate, and submitted several other letters of support from local businesses.**

**Hiawatha Mayor Bill Collins, along with Commissioners Becky Shamburg and Dave Middendorf, said they support the wearing of masks. However, Collins said the City can't mandate it.**

**Police Chief John Defore said a mask mandate would be a civil, rather than criminal matter.**

**Broberg noted several other cities have successfully implemented such a mandate.**

**The Brown County Commission last month approved a resolution strongly urging residents to wear a mask in public, but not requiring it. They did not discuss Broberg's request Monday for reconsideration.**

**On Thursday, the Brown County Health Department reported 44 positive COVID-19 cases to date. 31 have recovered, while two remain hospitalized.**

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