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Virginia Department of Health on Alert for Omicron Variant, Working With CDC and Federal Partners in Monitoring for New Variant

(RICHMOND, Va.) — As part of its ongoing disease surveillance, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is closely monitoring the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.529, also known as the Omicron variant. No cases of this variant have been identified in the United States to date. Emerging variants such as Omicron are expected and may be soon detected in the United States and Virginia. In partnership with the Department of General Services' Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services (DCLS), VDH will continue to actively monitor SARS-CoV-2 viral samples from throughout the Commonwealth to identify circulating and new variants. We also will continue to work with our partners at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to remain informed on all variants.

"Once again, we see how unpredictable viruses can be. Viruses change and mutate all the time, and as we learn more about this new variant, we need to continue taking precautions to reduce infections," said **State Health Commissioner M. Norman Oliver, M.D., M.A.** "We all want this pandemic to end. Please, if you haven't been vaccinated already and are eligible, get vaccinated. And if you are eligible for a booster, please get your booster as soon as you can. Please continue to do those things that we know can help reduce virus transmission, such as wearing a face mask, social distancing, frequent hand washing, staying home if you are sick, and getting tested if you have COVID-19 symptoms or if you have had a known exposure to someone with COVID-19."

Virginians can find a testing location near them on the VDH COVID-19 Testing web page.

"In Virginia, we are fortunate to have a robust genetic sequencing program to determine quickly whether variants of concern are circulating in our communities," said **Dr. Denise Toney, Ph.D. (HCLD), director of DCLS**, the state's public health laboratory. "Our network of laboratories throughout the Commonwealth is committed to sequencing as many positive samples as possible."

The level of community transmission in Virginia remains high. The emergence of Omicron is a good reminder to Virginians to continue taking the important and simple steps that we know reduce the spread of COVID-19: **Vaccination remains the most important tool in fighting the pandemic.** Virginians who are eligible should get vaccinated if not already. Everyone in Virginia who is age 5 or older is eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine now. VDH also recommends

that eligible individuals who are age 18 and older should receive booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. To find a location to get your vaccine, please visit vaccinate.virginia.gov.

Other important mitigation efforts include: **wearing a mask** in indoor public places in areas of substantial or high community transmission, **getting tested** if you suspect exposure or have symptoms, and **staying home** when you are sick.

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