FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, April 22, 2020

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HealthPartners, UMN researchers launch app to Fight COVID-19 at the neighborhood level

By crowdsourcing user's anonymous data, SafeDistance app could offer hyper-local view of neighborhood health and help people avoid novel coronavirus

BLOOMINGTON, Minn. — HealthPartners Institute and researchers at the University of Minnesota have teamed up with developers to create a mobile app that provides users with data about the health of their neighborhood, helping them avoid potential COVID-19 hotspots.

"People want clear information about their health and their neighborhoods. Those of us in health care and public health are limited in our ability to test, isolate and trace the contacts of possible COVID-19 cases," said Bjorn Westgard, MD, an emergency physician and population health researcher at the HealthPartners Institute. "This tool could help with both of those issues."

Called SafeDistance, the app crowdsources data down to the level of people's census block groups. These census block groups usually contain around 1,500 people and most accurately reflect neighborhoods.

"We chose this neighborhood approach because it respects users' privacy, but still provides detailed data that can be genuinely useful to the public and to health professionals," said Brian Krohn, PhD, developer at Modern Logic and technical lead on the project. "We're trying to create very actionable information on an individual level and a population health level."

Most current COVID-19 tracking maps only break-down COVID-19 data to the county level, which is not detailed enough to help public health officials contain outbreaks or target resources. Additionally, most tracking maps currently available only report cases confirmed by testing, representing a fraction of the infections spreading across the country. But, SafeDistance displays data showing potential and confirmed cases, creating a more holistic picture of regional health.

Unlike similar apps, no account is required to use SafeDistance, data will not be used for-profit, and users will not be asked for identifiable information.

How to "SafeDistance"
Users first download SafeDistance and enter anonymous demographic and health data. They can then share things like whether they have had potential infectious contacts, are displaying COVID-19 symptoms, or have been clinically diagnosed, tested, or confirmed with COVID-19.

The app provides practical tips about users' own health risks, how best to maintain social distancing, what to do for symptoms that might arise, and when to seek further care. As more users adopt the tool,

they will also receive notifications when they move through high-risk areas and whether they should self-isolate and monitor for the development of COVID-19 symptoms.

The crowdsourced health and geographic data from all users are displayed in a color-coded heat map by neighborhood to indicate areas where COVID-19 is likely circulating and if those hotspots are based on adequate amounts of data. App users can then know the likely degree of COVID-19 in their community and increase their social distancing or self-isolation in response.

For Public Health Experts, A Chance At Prediction

For health care and public health experts, it could be a window into the lifecycle of the outbreak. In the absence of widespread testing, using anonymous data and real-time broad geographic tracking, public health experts and care systems could coordinate their operations and tailor resources and preventive health to specific communities.

"We are all seeing maps of confirmed cases and deaths, but we know that the data underrepresent the true impact of COVID-19 due to limited testing," said Nico Pronk, PhD, HealthPartners Institute president and HealthPartners chief science officer. "We hope this app will provide a better picture of illness and risk in our community at a level that the average user can make informed decisions."

The project uses multiple public data sources but is added to by user data – the more people who use the app, the more accurate it will be. The app will launch first across Minnesota. Clinicians at HealthPartners are encouraging patients and the public to use the app. If the tool is widely used in the Twin Cities, where COVID-19 is most prevalent, it could help telegraph the spread to new areas of Greater Minnesota or show persistent hotspots of infection.

While this tool and research are relatively new, researchers are hopeful this type of user-generated data could be helpful in fighting outbreaks in the future, too.

To download SafeDistance, visit www.SafeDistance.org.

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About HealthPartners Institute

HealthPartners Institute is part of HealthPartners, the largest consumer-governed, non-profit health care organization in the nation with a mission to improve health and well-being in partnership with members, patients and the community. HealthPartners Institute supports this mission through research, education and practice. The Institute annually conducts 400+ research studies and trains 700+ medical residents and fellows and 1,200+ medical and advanced practice students. Its integration with HealthPartners' hospitals, clinics and health plan strengthens the Institute's ability to discover and develop evidence-based solutions and translate them into practice. Based in Minneapolis, the Institute's work impacts care, health and well-being across the region and nation as well as internationally. Visit healthpartnersinstitute.org for more information.