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Officials investigated COVID-19 outbreak that led to 31 cases among East Windsor tobacco farm workers

By **ALEX PUTTERMAN**
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In this file photo workers hang shade tobacco in the tobacco shed at Mulnite Tobacco Farms in East Windsor. The farm has been running for four generations. (Shana Sureck / The Hartford Courant)

State officials are investigating a COVID-19 outbreak in East Windsor, where 31 workers at a tobacco farm have tested positive for the disease, First Selectman Jason Bowsza said Wednesday.

Max Reiss, a spokesperson for Gov. Ned Lamont, said state officials believe the outbreak is contained to workers at Mulnite Tobacco Farms, but that the state Department of Public Health was currently investigating the scope of the spread.

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“From what we understand this is from a congregate, living setting with a number of farm workers living in a similar place,” Reiss said.

East Windsor has reported no new COVID-19 cases so far this week, which Bowsza said was an encouraging sign.

Reiss said the cluster was discovered through the state’s initiative to test individuals in congregate settings.

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Bowsza said he was first made aware on Friday of 31 new cases in East Windsor but that the state Department of Public Health did not confirm the location of those cases until Tuesday. Lamont mentioned an outbreak at an East Windsor farm during a press briefing Monday but did not elaborate.

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On Wednesday, Lamont noted the importance of testing in congregate settings.

“We know looking around at the rest of the country that dense housing in some of the migrant workers — I understand they’re in Massachusetts as well as Connecticut — can be dicey,” Lamont said. “And we’ve got to do a better job there in terms of testing, the importance of testing and then track and trace, all our traditional metrics”

“It’s like a wildfire, you want to get it early,” Lamont said. “So if we gotta get there faster, we’ll get there faster.”



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Bowsza said the town was conducting its own investigation, in addition to a state investigation, and would prepare a report to share with state officials.

North Central District Director of Health Patrice Sulik referred questions about the outbreak to a spokesperson for the state DPH, who did not respond to a request for comment.

Mulnite Farms, which has grown tobacco in East Windsor for more than 70 years, could not be reached for comment.

Connecticut has maintained low rates of COVID-19 over recent weeks and months, despite small outbreaks, such as one involving teenagers in Greenwich and another at a nursing home in Norwich. Most notably, Danbury this week closed parks and shifted schools to remote learning in response to more than 200 cases over the course of two weeks.

As for the East Windsor outbreak, “This isn’t the first surge, and it’s likely not to be the last,” Reiss said.

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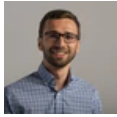
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Alex Putterman reports on the coronavirus pandemic, among other subjects. Since joining The Courant in 2018, he has covered UConn football and the Huskies athletic department, plus sports betting, stadium economics, local mascot debates and more. Previously, he contributed to publications including The Atlantic, VICE, MLB.com and Awful Announcing.

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