

Journey through COVID-19: How exec Jeff Kluever beat the virus and is getting back to business



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Jeff Kluever

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[Jeff Kluever](#) and his southeast Wisconsin friends enjoyed incredible skiing and chalet dinners during their 16th annual trip to the Austrian Alps.

But they didn't know their Shangri-La on the slopes was near another Austrian ski hotspot that would later and belatedly be identified as high-risk for contracting coronavirus. By the time Kluever, executive director of the influential Business Health Care Group, returned to Milwaukee on March 8, he was certain he contracted COVID-19.

A test at Aurora Medical Center Summit in western Waukesha County confirmed his suspicion.

"I'm Waukesha County patient number one," Kluever disclosed matter-of-factly while he was self-quarantining at home.

Kluever not only was the first confirmed case in Waukesha County, according to what the county public health division told him, but also the first identified in metro Milwaukee. A March 11 announcement from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services said a Waukesha County patient was exposed while traveling in the United States and internationally.

Thus began what Kluever, 64, describes as his journey through COVID-19.

Along the way, he experienced how bad symptoms can get for patients like him who are able to recover at home without medical intervention. His takeaway is that Wisconsin employers and local officials need to advance actions to thwart the spread of the pandemic.

“This is incredibly serious — it’s very, very dangerous,” Kluever said. “It is nothing to take lightly.”

By virtue of his profession, Kluever is in a position to spread the message.

He is arranging webinars for members of the Business Health Care Group, which has over 200,000 lives covered by health benefits, and other employers.

Members include some of the area’s most high-profile employers such as Kohl’s Corp., Northwestern Mutual, Robert W. Baird & Co., Charter Manufacturing, Rockwell Automation, Children’s Wisconsin, Direct Supply Inc., Sendik’s Food Markets and Molson Coors Beverage Co.

The webinars will feature advice from attorneys and medical professionals as well as a town hall session with members who already instituted protocols to cope with coronavirus, Kluever said.

“We’re mobilizing those Business Health Care Group members that are farther down their journey and can share learnings they have to benefit our member-employers,” he said.

Kluever’s literally ill-fated Alps ski trip was in the St. Anton area of Austria near Innsbruck.

He and his friends didn’t know it at the time, but there was an undisclosed COVID-19 outbreak underway a short distance away at another popular Austrian ski area in Ischgl and the St. Anton area was evacuated after his group departed.

Kluever said he started feeling sick on March 3 but he didn’t “seem that bad.”

“I didn’t know I had this; I was able to enjoy days of skiing,” he said.

By the time he was on his eight-hour flight to Milwaukee, he had experienced a fever and a cough and later noticed mucus in his chest.

Once Kluever was home, he contacted his primary care doctor who sent him to the emergency department at Aurora Medical Center Summit, where he was tested for influenza and COVID-19.

The hospital medical staff sent him home and he later received a call informing him that the COVID-19 test was positive.

He immediately self-quarantined and was able to treat his symptoms with over-the-counter medicine. At one point, his cough became so severe that he couldn’t talk without slipping into uncontrollable hacking.

Kluever said his 14-day quarantine officially ended March 21 and he is feeling much better. He returned to his organization’s Waukesha office briefly but returned home, as all employees are working from home.

The five friends who accompanied Kluever on the trip live in Milwaukee County and Racine County. They all were diagnosed with COVID-19 and they also self-quarantined, he said.

“We’re absolutely confident there has been no community spread,” he said. “We understand the seriousness and absolutely will not put anyone in a position where they could develop COVID-19.”

An Aurora Health Care spokeswoman said the health care system’s clinical staff gives guidance to people experiencing non-severe COVID-19 symptoms on how to self-quarantine at home.

“People presenting to our hospitals with severe COVID-19 symptoms will be evaluated and, if deemed appropriate, tested and treated,” the spokeswoman said.

One of the major causes of the coronavirus outbreak is that people can be asymptomatic for up to a week and spread the virus to others.

“Obviously the patient normally doesn’t know if he has the virus,” said Dr. Hector Lopez, medical director at Independent Physicians Network in Milwaukee. “If you don’t know you have the virus, you can be around people and spread the virus.”

U.S. Centers for Disease Control guidelines suggest people who self-quarantine can end the 14-day stint if they have gone without a fever for at least three days, other symptoms have improved and at least seven days passed since symptoms first appeared.

The Business Health Care Group will open its webinars at no charge to nonmembers, Kluever said. They are scheduled for April 1 and April 8. For more information go to BHCGWI.org.

Kluever said he offered to the Waukesha County public health division to speak with anyone who has questions about coronavirus or COVID-19.

“I’m truly one of the luckiest people not only in southeast Wisconsin but all over the world,” he said. “There are many others who won’t have the same result, which is tragic.”

TIMELINE

Here is how one of the area’s public health departments responds when it receives notification that a patient in its geographic area has been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Benjamin Jones, Waukesha County health officer and public health division manager at the county’s Department of Health & Human Services, said only people who have symptoms should be tested. If they test positive, they are considered contagious and the department staff takes the following actions.

- **Calls and interviews** the patient to learn about the potential contact they had with others and to attempt to identify the source;
- **Identifies** individuals who have had contact with the patient, again in an effort to identify the source of the virus;
- **Quarantines** those contacts and develops a plan in the event they become symptomatic; and
- **Ensures** the diagnosed patient remains isolated for the appropriate time period.