FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE   **December 9, 2021**
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First Confirmed Case of Omicron (B.1.1.529) COVID-19 Variant Identified in Virginia

(RICHMOND, VA) - Today, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) announced that the first confirmed case of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant (B.1.1.529) has been identified in a sample from an adult resident of the Northwest Region of Virginia who had no history of international travel, but did have a history of domestic travel, during the exposure period. The Omicron variant was first identified in Botswana and South Africa in November 2021, and may spread more easily than other variants, including Delta. The U.S. government SARS-CoV-2 Interagency Group classified Omicron as a Variant of Concern for the U.S. on December 1, 2021. At this time, there is no evidence that infection with this variant causes more severe disease, but there is evidence that persons who have previously had COVID-19 might be at greater risk for reinfection with Omicron. To date, the Omicron variant has been identified in 21 other U.S. states or jurisdictions.

"We knew it was only a matter of time before we would record our first Omicron infection in the Commonwealth," said **State Health Commissioner M. Norman Oliver, M.D., M.A.** "This drives home the challenge the COVID-19 virus presents to the world as the virus changes and mutates over time. Scientists are hard at work studying the newly identified variant to understand how easily it spreads and how sick it makes people. Right now, the highly transmissible Delta variant is causing almost all cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. We have very effective vaccines that can interrupt the chain of transmission and reduce the odds that unpredictable mutations like the Delta and Omicron variants will emerge. Do your part. Get vaccinated if you are eligible. Get your booster shot if you're eligible. Vaccination is how Virginia, the U.S. and the world will put this pandemic behind us."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been working with state public health, academic, and commercial laboratories to increase domestic strain surveillance capacity to sequence thousands of specimens every week. This effort has greatly expanded our ability to detect and characterize emerging viral variants in the United States. Regarding this reported case, a commercial laboratory participating in these efforts identified the Omicron variant in a sample from a Virginia resident and promptly notified VDH. With the combined state and national surveillance efforts, it is likely that additional cases with SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern will be identified. For additional information about variants that have been identified in Virginia, visit our VDH Variants dashboard, which is updated weekly on Fridays.

Viruses change all the time, and VDH expects to see new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus emerge as disease spreads. As our public health officials closely monitor the emergence of these SARS-CoV-2 variants in our Commonwealth, it is critical that all Virginians comply with mitigation measures. Public health recommendations for stopping the spread of COVID-19 will work for all COVID-19 variants. This means getting vaccinated for COVID-19 if you are aged 5 years or older and getting a booster dose when you are eligible. **Getting vaccinated now as part of the primary series or with a booster dose as soon as you are eligible is strongly encouraged to get your antibody levels as high as possible.** Wearing masks correctly, staying at least six feet from others, avoiding crowds or indoor areas with poor airflow, washing hands often, and staying home if you are infected with COVID-19 or if you have had close contact with someone with COVID-19 also continue to be important prevention strategies with Omicron.

As of December 9, 2021, approximately 2.4 million Virginians have joined the fight against COVID-19 using their mobile devices. This includes 1,225,482 downloads of COVIDWISE - the nation's first app using the Google/Apple framework. More than 1.1 million additional iPhone users have also turned on COVIDWISE Express, which is a secondary exposure notifications option specifically for iPhone users.

For more information about COVID-19 variants, visit the VDH Variants of the Virus that Causes COVID-19 website and the CDC Variants of the Virus website.

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