GUIDANCE FOR EMPLOYERS –
PLAN FOR AND RESPOND TO COVID-19

SPOKANE REGIONAL
HEALTH
D I S T R I C T

The following guidance provides planning considerations if there are widespread community outbreaks of 2019 novel Coronavirus (COVID-19).

All employers should plan to respond in a flexible way to varying levels of severity of an outbreak of COVID-19 and be able to refine their business response plans as needed. While the immediate health risk from COVID-19 is considered low, all employers need to consider how best to decrease the spread of acute respiratory illness and lower the impact of COVID-19 in their workplace in the event of an outbreak in the U.S.

Prevent stigma and discrimination in the workplace by not making determinations of risk based on race or country of origin and be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed coronavirus infection. There is much more to learn about the transmissibility, severity, and other features of COVID-19 and investigations are ongoing. Updates are available on the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) web page at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV.

Planning for a Possible COVID-19 Outbreak

In considering how best to decrease the spread of acute respiratory illness and lower the impact of COVID-19 in their workplace in the event of an outbreak, employers should identify and communicate their objectives, which may include:

1. Reducing transmission among staff
2. Protecting people who are at higher risk for adverse health complications
3. Maintaining business operations
4. Minimizing adverse effects on other entities in their supply chains

Key Considerations When Making Decisions on Appropriate Responses:

-   Disease severity in the community (i.e., number of people who are sick, hospitalization and death rates).
-   Impact of disease on employees that are vulnerable and may be at higher risk for COVID-19 adverse health complications. **Inform employees that some people may be at higher risk for severe illness**, such as older adults and those with chronic medical conditions.
-   **Prepare for possible increased numbers of employee absences** due to illness in employees and their family members, dismissals of early childhood programs and K-12 schools due to high levels of absenteeism or illness:
    o   Employers should plan to monitor and respond to absenteeism at the workplace.
-   **Implement plans to continue your essential business functions in case you experience higher than usual absenteeism**.
    o   Cross-train personnel to perform essential functions so that the workplace can operate even if key staff members are absent.

- Assess your essential functions and the reliance that others and the community have on your services or products. **Be prepared to change your business practices if needed to maintain critical operations** (e.g., identify alternative suppliers, prioritize customers, or temporarily suspend some of your operations if needed).
- Employers with more than one business location are encouraged to **provide local managers with the authority to take appropriate actions** outlined in their business infectious disease outbreak response plan based on the condition in each locality.
- **Coordination with [local public health officials](#) is strongly encouraged** for all businesses so that timely and accurate information specific to our local community can guide appropriate responses.

Important Considerations for Creating an Infectious Disease Outbreak Response Plan

All employers should be ready to implement strategies to protect their workforce from COVID-19 while ensuring continuity of operations. During a COVID-19 outbreak, **all sick employees should stay home and away from the workplace. Respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene should be encouraged, and routine cleaning of commonly touched surfaces should be performed regularly**.

Recommendations for an Infectious Disease Outbreak Response Plan:

- **Identify possible work-related exposure and health risks to your employees**. OSHA has [information on how to protect workers from potential exposures to COVID-19](#).
- **Review human resources policies** to make sure that policies and practices are consistent with public health recommendations and are consistent with existing state and federal workplace laws.
- Explore whether you can establish policies and practices, such as **flexible worksites** (such as telecommuting) and **flexible work hours** (e.g., staggered shifts), **to increase the physical distance** among employees and between employees if public health recommends the use of social distancing strategies.
  - Supervisors should encourage those employees who are able to **telework** to work from home instead of coming into the workplace until symptoms are completely resolved.
  - Ensure that you have the **information technology and infrastructure** needed to support multiple employees who may be able to work from home.
- Identify essential business functions, essential jobs or roles, and critical elements within your supply chains (e.g., raw materials, suppliers, subcontractor services/products, and logistics) required to maintain business operations. **Plan for how your business will operate if there is increasing absenteeism or supply chains are interrupted**.
- **Set up authorities, triggers, and procedures for activating and concluding the company's infectious disease outbreak response plan**, altering business operations (e.g., possibly changing or closing operations in affected areas), and transferring business knowledge to key employees. Work closely with your local health officials to identify these triggers.
- Plan to minimize exposure between employees and also between employees and the public, if public health officials call for **social distancing**.

- **Establish a process to communicate information** to employees and business partners on your infectious disease outbreak response plans and latest COVID-19 information. Anticipate employee fear, anxiety, rumors, and misinformation, and plan communications accordingly.
- In some communities, early childhood programs and K-12 schools may be dismissed, particularly if COVID-19 worsens. **Determine how you will operate if absenteeism spikes** from increases in sick employees, those who stay home to care for sick family members, and those who must stay home to watch their children if dismissed from school. Businesses and other employers should prepare to **institute flexible workplace and leave policies** for these employees.
- **Local conditions will influence the decisions that public health officials make regarding community-level strategies**; employers should take the time now to learn about plans in place in each community where they have a business.
- **If there is evidence of a COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S., consider canceling non-essential business travel to additional countries per travel guidance on the CDC website**.
  - Travel restrictions may be enacted by other countries which may limit the ability of employees to return home if they become sick while on travel status.
  - Consider cancelling large work-related meetings or events.

Resources and More Information

- Spokane Regional Health District COVID-19 Website
- Washington Department of Health COVID-19 Website
- CDC COVID-19 Website
- What You Need to Know About COVID-19 Fact Sheet
- What to Do If You Are Sick With COVID-19 Fact Sheet
- Interim US Guidance for Risk Assessment and Public Health Management of Persons with Potential Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Exposure in Travel-associated or Community Settings
- CDC Health Alert Network
- CDC Travelers' Health Website
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Small Business International Travel Resource Travel Planner
- OSHA COVID-19 Guidance

Spokane Regional Health District
Disease Prevention and Response
(509) 324.1442 | *TDD* (509) 324.1464

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