FAQs for Homeless Shelters and Residential Treatment Centers on Coronavirus (COVID-19)

This guidance document will continue to be updated as the COVID-19 situation evolves. Visit www.coronavirusnetwork.org for the latest information, updates and resources.

What are the first things my shelter / center can do to prepare for coronavirus?
Start by asking your leadership team what planning is being done for the coronavirus threat. Unhoused populations are at higher risk due to their mobility, underlying conditions and lack of hygiene practices. You can send your leadership these FAQs and offer to aid in preparations.

A few practical steps for your shelter / center to consider:
● Establish a regular all staff meeting about preparing for potential coronavirus cases. Allow for all staff concerns to be heard.
  ○ Short daily or weekly check-ins between larger meetings can be helpful as the situation is emerging.
● Create a plan for staff and resident safety as well as new stronger cleaning measures
● Write-up a procedure for what your staff will do with a potential coronavirus case
● Check on supply of masks, gloves, soap, hand sanitizer and other cleaning supplies.
● Pay special attention to individuals who could be at high risk to serve cases of coronavirus (elderly and people with lung disease or other underlying conditions)
● Circulate general population FAQs and coronavirus myths among staff and volunteers

How can I better prevent potential coronavirus from spreading within my shelter / center?
Many shelters and centers are organized to maximize space to house as many people as they can on a nightly basis. You may want to consider reconfiguring sleeping space to maximize the distance between people and/or ensure sleeping arrangements are organized in a head-to-foot configuration.

If possible set-up a separate area for individuals that show mild coronavirus symptoms (dry cough, fever and body aches) so they are not mixed with other individuals. If you have masks, put them on these individuals. Use temporary barriers such as sheets or shower curtains to try and limit exposure between these individuals. If possible, designate a separate bathroom for sick individuals. Staff entering these areas should wear protective equipment.

How can I reduce the risk of residents from getting coronavirus?
Homeless populations tend to be highly mobile and one individual may visit several agencies in a day. During the coronavirus this high mobility may promote the rapid spread of the virus. To reduce individuals opportunities to be exposed, try to find ways to:
● Limit the movement of residents, such as transfers between shelters
● Limit the number of clients or visitors at drop-ins or other day programs
● Cancel or postpone group activities, if possible
- Provide incentives to reduce mobility; for example, re-organizing services so that three meals are offered at one facility, instead of one meal each at three different agencies
- Promote hand washing and use of hand sanitizer among your residents

**What can I expect if there are confirmed cases in my community?**
Plan for higher shelter usage if this happens. Right now you can consult with community leaders, local public health departments, and faith-based organizations about places to refer people if shelter space is full. Consider the need for extra supplies (food, toiletries, etc.) personal protective equipment (masks and gloves).

**What should I do if I think a resident might have coronavirus?**
If you identify any resident with the following severe symptoms, notify your public health department and arrange for the person to go for immediate hospitalization.
- Extremely difficult breathing (not being able to speak without gasping for air)
- Bluish lips or face
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- Severe persistent dizziness or lightheadedness
- New confusion, or inability to arouse
- New seizure or seizures that won’t stop

For potential mild cases, isolate them from the rest of the residents as best as possible. While the availability of tests for coronavirus is improving, at the moment getting someone tested is not easy and you must meet a certain criteria. Trying to send someone for testing might put them and others at risk. Monitor mild cases, especially those that are at high risk.

Call your local Department of Public Health in advance of seeing individuals with coronavirus. Determine the appropriate phone number and department to call if you suspect an individual has coronavirus. Establish a pathway by which your staff can work with DPH to send qualifying individuals for testing and keep others in isolation for recovery. Communicate this chain of contact with all staff members.

**What should I do if I think a staff member might have coronavirus?**
Advise your staff that anyone is not feeling well they should notify the clinic leadership immediately. If staff withholds the fact they are not feeling well they put themselves as well as others at risk. Come up with a policy for how you will handle individuals who need sick leave or become quarantined. It may be a case-by-case basis if they will quarantine on site or at home based on their role and what symptoms they are exhibiting. Ensuring that your shelter staff are taking proper steps to stay in good health (proper sleep, drinking fluid, eating healthy, etc) as a proactive step.

**What supplies should our shelter / center be stocking up on?**
Access to medication can be interrupted during a pandemic. Knowing that many people who are homeless live with chronic disease or mental illness where they rely upon medication, consider
what is going to happen and how you can still effectively serve people who may lose access to their medications.

Consider stockpiling the following critical supplies.

- Soap, paper towels, hand sanitizer, hand wipes, and tissues.
- Cleaning supplies, large and small garbage bags, and other waste disposal supplies.
- Personal protective equipment, including gloves, surgical masks, and goggles.
- Thermometers & thermometer covers.
- Medications used to bring fevers down, such as acetaminophen.
- Disinfectant (e.g., bleach to make weak solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water; Lysol; or other household disinfectant)
- Extra linen, towels, blankets, bedclothes, hospital gowns, robes.
- Sheets, curtains, twine and nails to rig up barriers for isolation of sick. (Plastic shower curtains could also be used for this purpose.)
- Extra fluids & foods: juices, Gatorade, Pedialyte,
- Instant soups, jello and teas

What can I do to help unhoused individuals who are not in a shelter?
You can speak with outreach workers, parks staff and law enforcement to ensure you have a current understanding of where people are dwelling in unsheltered locations and discuss an emergency plan to serve this population if there is an outbreak in the area. It is possible that unsheltered homelessness will rise in the event of a coronavirus as some homeless individuals and families may leave shelters and go outside if they perceive it to be safer or if homelessness service providers in the area need to close down.

How can I stay calm?
Three sources of information on coronavirus — mainstream media, politicians, and social media are giving mixed messages about coronavirus. There are some people that seem hysterical and others that are dismissing coronavirus as nothing at all. To manage your anxiety the most important thing to remember is that most healthy people that get coronavirus experience only mild symptoms that are comparable to a cold or flu.

If you feel anxious, there are things you can do to keep yourself healthy and prepared:

- Avoid travel and large crowds when possible
- Frequently wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds.
- Use appropriate hand sanitizers as a substitute for washing your hands when that is not available
- Frequently disinfect surfaces, like your desk, phone, tablet, smartphone, and countertops.
- Have contingency plans for school closures
- Be able to prepare meals at home without having to shop for several days.

What can I say to people who are worried and anxious?
It is important to use empathy. People are right to be worried, so do not dismiss their anxiety, even if they seem emotional. Ask them what they are most concerned about. Remind them that most people only experience mild symptoms. Provide them with the above suggestions as well as the general FAQs and myths document. If they fall into a high-risk category, supply them with the special high risk FAQs. Project calm to the individual and remind them that with the proper precaution and preparation, they will be able to navigate through the coronavirus situation.

**Information for this FAQ came from:**
US Center for Disease Control (CDC):
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Seattle & King County and the Vulnerable Populations Action Team
Seattle & King County Public Health’s Communicable Disease Control, Epidemiology & Immunization Section
Iain De Jong, President and CEO https://www.orgcode.com/who_we_are
Cloudburst Group, Landover, MD
Toronto Public Health Control of Infectious Diseases and Infection Control

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www.coronavirusnetwork.org.