

Columbus and Franklin County Public Health's Interim Guidance on COVID-19 for Homeless Service Providers

UPDATED 3/16/2020

This document provides interim guidance specific for homeless service providers (such as overnight emergency shelters, transitional housing, day shelters, drop-in centers, and meal service providers) during the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This interim guidance may be updated frequently. Please go to www.csb.org for additional information and most up-to-date guidance.

This interim guidance assumes that homeless service providers, particularly emergency shelters and transitional housing facilities, will encounter and provide shelter for people who may be experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.

Guidance also assumes that persons who are severely symptomatic (whether or not confirmed) and at high risk of adverse health consequences will be assisted in accessing appropriate emergency and other medical assistance immediately, including non-shelter-based isolation and quarantine options *as they are available*.

Efforts are currently underway to identify appropriate responses, including temporary emergency shelter options, for people who are literally homeless and have tested positive for COVID-19.

Guidance below is meant to supplement and support facilities that may have to tend to the needs of sick individuals who may be mildly symptomatic and have no other safe, appropriate housing option for isolation and physical distancing until recovered. Guidance specifically focuses on protective actions that can be taken to reduce community transmission and properly assist individuals who are mildly to severely symptomatic.

Background

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is respiratory disease caused by a newly identified coronavirus that was first detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China but has now been detected throughout the world. Community spread of COVID-19 has been identified in Ohio and Franklin County and we anticipate growing numbers of people who are symptomatic, under-investigation for COVID-19, and positive for COVID-19.

Symptoms of COVID-19 can include a fever, cough, and shortness of breath. In addition, illness may be accompanied by other symptoms including headache, tiredness, chills, body aches, and diarrhea. Like seasonal flu, COVID-19 infection in humans can vary in severity from mild to severe. The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person, usually between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet). This transmission occurs through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Current information about COVID-19 symptoms and spread may be found at the [CDC's COVID-19 website](https://www.cdc.gov/covid-19/).

Transmission of COVID-19 in the community could affect people experiencing homelessness in several ways. The outbreak could cause illness among people experiencing homelessness, could contribute to an increase in emergency shelter usage, or may lead to illness and absenteeism

among homeless service provider staff. Furthermore, people who are experiencing homelessness are have underlying medical conditions that put them a higher risk for severe outcomes.

Protecting your staff, volunteers, and clients requires a coordinated effort between homeless service providers, healthcare facilities, and Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health departments.

General Communication Guidance

Stay informed about the local COVID-19 situation. Get up-to-date information about local COVID-19 activity from public health officials and Community Shelter Board (CSB). Homeless assistance providers may request to be added to CSB's COVID-19 information email distribution list by contacting Erin Maus, emaus@csb.org.

Homeless service providers should collaborate, share information, and review plans internally and, as needed, with CSB and local health officials to help protect their staff, clients, guests and volunteers.

- Additional information about local conditions and Columbus Public Health responses may be found [here](#).
- To be added to the Franklin County Public Health distribution list for public health advisories and information, please email Niki Lemin, nikilemin@franklincountyohio.gov.
- Additional information about CSB-led responses and homeless crisis response system guidance may be found [here](#) or contact Erin Maus, CSB System Manager at emaus@csb.org.

Emergency Shelter Screening

The following screening protocol will be used by the Homeless Hotline, effective 3/17/20 until further notice. Shelter options for individuals and families who are infected with and confirmed to have COVID-19 will be communicated when known. CSB continues to work closely with Columbus and Franklin County Public Health Departments to identify appropriate responses and facilities.

Single adults and families

- **Starting at 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday, March 17, 2020:** Homeless Hotline will begin screening persons who are eligible and being referred to shelter for self-reported symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) including whether the person or anyone in their household is experiencing fever, cough, sore throat, or shortness of breath. Callers will also be asked about travel to high exposure areas and, finally, if they or a member of their household was exposed to or has tested positive for COVID-19.
- **Persons reporting mild symptoms who are unconfirmed for COVID-19 and not currently undergoing testing** will continue to be admitted to shelter. Homeless Hotline staff will record information about reported symptoms in CSP within the notes section.
- **Persons reporting mild symptoms who are confirmed for COVID-19** will be immediately reported to CSB for further problem-solving.
- **Persons reporting severe symptoms (see below for severe symptoms), whether or not confirmed for COVID-19** will be immediately encouraged to call 911.

General Hygiene Guidance

The following are general guidelines for facilities serving people experiencing homelessness or who are otherwise vulnerable. These and other practices recommended by the CDC and local public health officials should be observed to reduce risk of transmission and ensure universal precautions.

- Encourage everyone in the facility or otherwise assisting persons experiencing homelessness to cover their cough or sneeze with a tissue and have trash cans available to dispose of tissues immediately.
- Encourage everyone to wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing their nose, coughing, or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Post signs and informational posters for staff, volunteer, and client awareness about [COVID-19](#), [cough etiquette](#), and appropriate [handwashing](#).
- Overnight shelter and transitional housing facilities:
 - **Limit visitors to the facility.**
 - **Beds/mats should ideally be spaced at least 3 feet apart (ideally 6 feet apart) in a head to toe arrangement.** Increasing the space between clients can help reduce the spread of illness.
 - **Ensure readiness to support the isolation of ill individuals** when it is not possible to isolate these individuals elsewhere. Recommendations for isolation management follow below.
 - If a client is confirmed as positive for COVID-19, immediately isolate the client in a place identified by Franklin County or Columbus Public Health or the Franklin County Emergency Management Agency, outside a homeless service facility as they are available. Information will be shared about such options as soon as possible. **See below for isolation considerations within homeless service facilities that may be necessary for confirmed or otherwise symptomatic individuals who have no other safe, appropriate shelter or housing and do not require hospitalization.**
 - **Provide access to fluids, tissues, plastic bags** for the proper disposal of used tissues.
 - **Ensure bathrooms and other sinks are consistently stocked with soap and drying materials for handwashing.** Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizers that contain at least 60% alcohol (if that is an option at your shelter) at key points within the facility, including registration desks, entrances/exits, and eating areas.
 - **At check-in, provide any client with respiratory symptoms (cough, fever, shortness of breath) with a surgical mask.**
 - **Monitor clients who could be at high risk for complications** from COVID-19 (those who are older above the age of 60 or have underlying health conditions) and reach out to them regularly.
 - **Confine clients with mild respiratory symptoms consistent with COVID-19 infection to individual rooms, if possible, and have them avoid common areas.** See further guidance below.

- Non-medical homeless service providers are not expected to provide complex care, such as checking vital signs or providing medications to ill individuals.
- Follow CDC [recommendations](#) for how to prevent further spread in your facility.
- Actively monitor reports of respiratory illness, or reports of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the facility. **Confirmed cases of COVID-19 should be immediately reported to Columbus Public Health at 614-645-1519 and Franklin County Public Health at 614-525-8888. Confirmed cases must also be immediately reported to CSB via a Major/Unusual Incident report faxed to Erin Maus at 614-221-9199.**
- Facility clients, staff and volunteers should immediately inform management if they have fever or respiratory symptoms consistent with COVID-19. More details on management follow below.
- **If you are in Columbus/Franklin County and have symptoms of COVID-19, are a homeless service provider with questions about COVID-19 or concern about a client, or if you're a healthcare provider with questions about COVID-19, contact 614-645-1519. The Call Center is open 7 days per week from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm.**

Staff Considerations

The following are general staffing considerations and guidelines that may be used to inform or supplement current agency and program practices.

- **Plan for staff and volunteer absences.** Staff (and volunteers) may need to stay home when they are sick, caring for a sick household member, or caring for their children in the event of school dismissals.
- **Encourage ill staff and volunteers to stay home** (or be sent home if they develop symptoms while at the facility), to prevent transmitting the infection to others.
- **Plan your staffing to minimize the number of staff members who have face-to-face interactions with clients with respiratory symptoms.**
- **Use physical barriers** to protect staff who will have interactions with clients with unknown infection status. For example, using a sneeze guard or placing a big table to increase distance between staff and clients.
- **Ensure access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**, such as mask, eye protection, gown, gloves and hand washing supplies.
- **All staff should have ready access to hand sanitizer and receive up-to-date guidance and training on universal precautions and [personal protection per CDC guidance](#),** including when engaging clients within facilities, in unsheltered locations, other public locations or when transporting clients (if necessary).

Client Considerations

- If you have a client with **severe symptoms** of COVID-19 infection, call 911. **Severe symptoms include:**

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
 - Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
 - Sudden dizziness
 - Confusion
 - Severe or persistent vomiting
 - Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- **Many people with COVID-19 will have mild illness and do not need to be hospitalized.** Consider the following for symptomatic clients who have not been confirmed positive for COVID-19 by laboratory testing and are experiencing mild symptoms.
 - Mild symptoms do not typically require medical attention. However, clients with these symptoms will need to be isolated from other clients and staff/volunteers.
 - If a symptomatic client is over age 60 or has underlying medical problems like diabetes, heart disease or lung disease, weakened/suppressed immune symptoms or is pregnant, they may be more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its complications.
 - Clients with respiratory symptoms should wear surgical masks to protect those around them and be reminded and strongly encouraged to follow personal hygiene and sanitation measures.
 - If at all possible, isolate clients who are symptomatic, per guidance below.

Isolation in Homeless Shelters and Congregate Transitional Housing Facilities

While isolating clients who are suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 outside homeless shelter facilities is ideal, such options are not presently available. When designated sites are available, they might be overwhelmed or not immediately accessible.

Although achieving “isolation” in a shelter setting for individuals who are symptomatic will be challenging, infection control procedures can decrease the risk for everyone. The following guidelines should be followed to the greatest extent possible.

- If possible, sick clients should be confined to individual rooms with separate bathroom and eating facilities and should avoid common areas.
- In the bedroom/bathroom dedicated for an ill person: consider reducing cleaning frequency to as-needed (e.g., soiled items and surfaces) to avoid unnecessary contact with the ill person.
- As much as possible, an ill person should stay in a specific room and away from other people in their home, following [home care guidance](#).
- Identify 1 or 2 staff (properly trained on universal precautions) who will bring food, hydration, and check in on clients who have symptoms in order to limit exposure and ensure consistent care and response.
 - Staff and volunteers at high risk of severe COVID-19 (those who are older or have underlying health conditions) should not be designated as caregivers for symptomatic or confirmed COVID-19 clients who are staying in the shelter.
- Staff should wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) when bringing supplies

(tissue, hand sanitizer), providing support (food, drink), or handling client belongings or laundry used by clients, especially ill individuals.

- Ideally the staff will wear a surgical mask, gown, gloves, and eye protection if they have direct face-to-face interaction within 6 feet of the ill person. Make sure to train any staff using gloves to [ensure proper use](#).
- Staff can provide personal cleaning supplies for an ill person's room and bathroom, unless the room is occupied by a child or another person for whom such supplies would not be appropriate and may present a danger. These supplies include tissues, paper towels, cleaners and [EPA-registered disinfectants](#).
- If individual rooms for sick clients are not available, consider using a large, well-ventilated room specifically for sick persons, especially for people with respiratory disease symptoms.
- In isolation areas, help reduce spread by:
 - Arranging beds at least 3 feet apart.
 - Creating temporary physical barriers between beds using sheets or curtains.
 - Arranging beds so that individuals lie head to toe relative to each other.
- If a separate bathroom is not available, the bathroom should be cleaned and disinfected after each use by an ill person. If this is not possible staff should wait as long as practical after use by an ill person to clean and disinfect the high-touch surfaces. See the CDC recommendations on cleaning [here](#).
- Provide clients who are ill or have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 with information on what to do while they are [sick and if they get worse](#). Explain the need to keep them separate from the rest of the population to help limit the spread of disease.
- Give sick clients access to fluids, tissues, plastic bags for the proper disposal of used tissues, and a means to wash their hands or alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- The ill person should eat/be fed in their room if possible. Non-disposable food service items used should be handled with gloves and washed with hot water or in a dishwasher. [Clean hands](#) after handling used food service items.
- Give particular consideration to those clients who could be at high risk for complications from COVID-19 (those who are older, have underlying health conditions, or weakened immune systems). Check in on people at least once a day to determine if their health status is getting worse. If an ill person develops severe symptoms, call 911.
- Signs of withdrawal from alcohol or other substances also need to be addressed. Sudden withdrawal from alcohol or opioids can cause medical emergencies.
- Individuals who have symptoms of COVID-19 should not be assigned to meal preparation or cleaning tasks within the facility.
- Ill individuals with active substance use, mental health symptoms or who may be aggressive or non-cooperative will need a higher level of care. Ensure proper staffing and support via program services or partners are in place to support individual needs and the safety of client, staff and volunteers.

- Individuals in isolation may need to refill prescriptions or need access to daily medications such as methadone. Consider what assistance clients and guardians may need to obtain and take prescription or over-the-counter medications.

Cleaning and Disinfecting Considerations

For full guidance on appropriate cleaning and disinfecting, see CDC's [Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection Recommendations](#) for facilities and CDC's [Interim Recommendations for US Households with Suspected/Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019](#).

Surfaces

- Wear disposable gloves when cleaning and disinfecting surfaces. Gloves should be discarded after each cleaning. If reusable gloves are used, those gloves should be dedicated for cleaning and disinfection of surfaces for COVID-19 and should not be used for other purposes. Consult the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning and disinfection products used. [Clean hands](#) immediately after gloves are removed.
- If surfaces are dirty, they should be cleaned using a detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection.
- For disinfection, diluted household bleach solutions, alcohol solutions with at least 70% alcohol, and most common EPA-registered household disinfectants should be effective.
 - Diluted household bleach solutions can be used if appropriate for the surface. Follow manufacturer's instructions for application and proper ventilation. Check to ensure the product is not past its expiration date. Never mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser. Unexpired household bleach will be effective against coronaviruses when properly diluted.
 - Prepare a bleach solution by mixing:
 - 5 tablespoons (1/3rd cup) bleach per gallon of water or
 - 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of water
 - [Products with EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims](#) are expected to be effective against COVID-19 based on data for harder to kill viruses. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products (e.g., concentration, application method and contact time, etc.).
 - For soft (porous) surfaces such as carpeted floor, rugs, and drapes, remove visible contamination if present and clean with appropriate cleaners indicated for use on these surfaces. After cleaning:
 - Launder items as appropriate in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. If possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely, or
 - Use products with the EPA-approved emerging viral pathogens claims (examples at [this linkpdf iconexternal icon](#)) that are suitable for porous surfaces.

Clothing, towels, linens and other items that go in the laundry

- Wear disposable gloves when handling dirty laundry from an ill person and then discard after each use. If using reusable gloves, those gloves should be dedicated for cleaning and disinfection of surfaces for COVID-19 and should not be used for other household purposes. [Clean hands](#) immediately after gloves are removed.
 - If no gloves are used when handling dirty laundry, be sure to wash hands afterwards.

- If possible, do not shake dirty laundry. This will minimize the possibility of dispersing virus through the air.
- Launder items as appropriate in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. If possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely. Dirty laundry from an ill person can be washed with other people's items.
- Clean and disinfect clothes hampers according to guidance above for surfaces. If possible, consider placing a bag liner that is either disposable (can be thrown away) or can be laundered.

Healthcare Clinic Considerations

If your homeless service facility includes healthcare provision, make sure your clinic staff are prepared for the potential for a COVID-19 outbreak using [CDC guidance](#).