



Commonwealth of Virginia
Office of Governor Ralph S. Northam

March 6, 2020

MEMORANDUM

TO: Agency Heads
CC: Cabinet Members
From: Chief of Staff
Subject: COVID-19 and Agency Preparations

As a follow up to the email dated March 2, 2020, sent to all state employees, I am providing additional information in response to questions received about the state workforce. As the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an evolving situation, guidance must be fluid and may change over time. Information below should assist you in planning and preparing in the immediate term.

Review your agency Continuity of Operations Plan. It is critical that you clearly identify positions essential to your agency operations and communicate expectations to employees performing essential functions. You should also review your plans to have staff back up where needed. As you evaluate your plans, please focus on the potential that some staff may be unavailable for prolonged periods of time.

Ensure employee contact information such as phone numbers and email addresses are up to date. Reviewing emergency contact information on a regular basis should be a part of your overall continuity plan.

Review your agency practices related to teleworking and alternate work schedules. Should COVID-19 continue to spread, teleworking and alternate work schedules will be strongly encouraged as a means to help reduce potential exposure. Teleworking is also a valid option to ensure continuity of operations when an employee is caring for another individual such as a family member, child, or spouse. Please ensure your leadership teams understand and your agency culture reflects the importance of teleworking and know how to manage effectively employees who telework. We must trust supervisors and employees to balance successfully work and personal needs by allowing teleworking when it is possible.

Monitor travel and be prepared to respond to employee questions about travel.

- Agencies should not send employees to countries that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have designated as a Level 3 Risk. There are no current restrictions on domestic travel within the United States.
- The Virginia Department of Health has interim guidance on recommendations for travelers posted to the external VDH COVID-19 [site](#).
- Currently, the CDC guidelines call for public health officials to monitor any U.S. nationals returning from China who were there within the last 14 days. Entry of foreign nationals from China and Iran coming into the United States has been suspended at this time.
- For those travelers coming into the United States who have been in countries with CDC Level 3 Travel Health Notice within the last 14 days, VDH recommends that they monitor for coronavirus-like signs and symptoms and self-quarantine at home for 14 days.
- For those travelers coming into the United States who have been in countries with CDC Level 2 Travel Health Notice within the last 14 days, VDH is recommending that they monitor for coronavirus-like signs and symptoms and, to the extent possible, practice social distancing and stay home for 14 days.
- Countries with Level 2 or 3 travel advisories (other than China and Iran) currently are South Korea, Italy, and Japan. This list is subject to change as the disease spread will change over time.
- Should an employee with relevant travel history develop any symptoms of fever, cough, or shortness of breath, they should contact their local health department or medical professional.
- Managers will need to work with employees to identify situations involving international travel and determine how best to handle the required period of self-monitoring.
- While teleworking is the preferred solution, agencies are authorized to use Public Health Emergency Leave, as needed. Details on the use of Public Health Emergency Leave are described below.

Promote Healthy Hygiene Habits. Every employee can take “non-pharmaceutical” precautions, as the Governor noted in the March 2 email. Please continuously communicate and encourage the following actions.

- Staying home if feeling sick.
- Washing of hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use of an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) if soap and water are not available.
- Covering ones mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and promptly disposing of the tissues in a wastebasket. If tissues are not available, cough, or sneeze into the upper sleeve – not into hand.
- The CDC created flyers that can be posted in breakrooms, bathrooms and on intranet sites within your agencies. English and Spanish versions of “What you need to know” and “What to do if you are sick” can be found [here](#). VDH also has a flyer that can be found at this [link](#).

- As leaders, you must ensure that employees feel supported in taking sick leave. If your workplace culture is one that emphasizes “presence at work,” please address this with your leadership team.
- A “Germ Warfare” workshop is available to agencies through the state’s CommonHealth Program. It teaches simple ways to prevent the spread of germs in the office, and makes it less likely that you will get sick. Agency CommonHealth Coordinators can reach out to their regional CommonHealth Coordinator to discuss options for hosting the workshop at your worksite in the future.

Personal Protective Equipment. Some employees may ask if they can wear masks and/or gloves while working. Prior to addressing this with employees, I encourage you to review information on the CDC website.

- The CDC does not recommend that people who are well wear a facemask. Facemasks should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19 to help prevent the spread of disease to others. This is to protect others from the risk of getting infected. The use of facemasks are crucial for health care workers and others who are taking care of someone infected.

Visitors to State Facilities. Visitors to state facilities are not being limited at this time. This could change and will be communicated as needed.

- No employee or public health screenings are necessary at this time and state customers should not be turned away from receiving state-provided services.
- Should a visitor disclose or comment that they may have COVID-19, encourage the visitor to contact their local health department where the risk of having the disease can be evaluated.

Agency-Sponsored, Large-Scale Events. There has not been an identified need to cancel or delay any large scale events such as conferences, graduations, committee or community meetings or other like gatherings of people. This could change and will be communicated as needed. The CDC has guidance regarding Large Events and Mass Gatherings that can be viewed [here](#). If you have additional questions about upcoming events, please contact the Virginia Department of Health.

Environmental Cleaning. Employees may begin to ask questions about efforts to sanitize work sites. If it is determined that additional measures are needed, guidance will be distributed accordingly. None have been identified at this time.

Emergency Office Closures. There has been no identified need to close state facilities. The Virginia Department of Health will continue to monitor the COVID-19 situation and will make recommendations to the Governor, if needed. Decisions of this nature will be communicated as needed and will be made by the Office of the Governor.

Public Health Emergency Leave. If an employee is unable to telework this leave can be used to self-monitor health when returning from Level 2 and 3 countries, such as China, Iran, South Korea, Italy, or Japan. This leave may also be used to care for an immediate family member residing in an affected area, as defined in policy. At this time, leave should not be needed for this purpose, as the Commonwealth has no known cases.

- Up to 80 hours of leave may be authorized as needed.
- Leave may be provided to all state employees, including employees of agencies exempt from coverage of the Virginia Personnel Act and wage employees. Hours authorized for wage employees shall be in accordance with the employee's normal work week schedule. This is typically up to 29 hours per week.
- Employees who are symptomatic, diagnosed, and being treated will be able to use their traditional sick leave or disability benefits provided under the provisions of the Virginia Sickness and Disability Program.
- Employees who may have been exposed to someone returning from the countries noted above will need to work with agency leadership to determine how best to handle the specific situation.
- Agencies are to work with DHRM staff to identify and to respond to employee situations where 80 hours of public health emergency leave may be insufficient.

The DHRM will host a teleconference with Agency HR Directors in the coming weeks to review the Public Health Emergency Leave Policy. Additional guidance will be communicated directly to Agency HR Directors as needed.

Employee Assistance Programs. It is normal for employees to be worried and stressed during a disease-related outbreak. Employees have access to professional assistance through the state's health care plan. That information can be found on [DHRM's website](#) and should be shared continuously through your normal channels of communication. In addition, the World Health Organization has created a [flyer](#) that can be posted on bulletin boards or shared by electronic means.

Stigma Reduction and Non-Discrimination. Misinformation about COVID-19 can create fear and hostility that hurts people and makes it harder to keep everyone healthy. Follow and enforce the [guidelines](#) established by the CDC. You should share this information with employees who work directly with the public and state customers. You may also want to reinforce the Commonwealth's Civility in the Workplace policy. We are stronger as a community when we stand together.

Media Inquiries. Any media inquiries should be directed to Maria Reppas, the Director of Communications at the Virginia Department of Health. She can be reached at maria.reppas@vdh.virginia.gov or 804-864-7008.

State Contractors. Agencies are encouraged to work with state contractors to ensure that state contractors are also following CDC guidance and have developed a COVID-19 response protocol.

The information in this memo is intended to provide guidance to Executive Branch Agencies. The Virginia Department of Health will continue to provide more detailed and specific direction as needed. That information may include more restrictive measures than outlined in this memo. Please keep in mind that this is an evolving situation and information may continue to change.