

March 4, 2020

Dear DHS Providers,

The Department of Homeless Services is dedicated to supporting New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, and the staff serving them, in being healthy and safe. As you know, a novel (or new) coronavirus (COVID-19) is causing illnesses worldwide. Local transmission is now occurring in several other countries, and travel-associated cases have been reported from many other countries. In the U.S., both travel-associated and locally-acquired cases have been reported. **The risk remains low in the U.S.** However, the situation is fluid and may change, therefore preparation is key.

As a reminder, **influenza (the flu) infects millions and kills thousands of people in the U.S. every year.** To protect your staff and clients against respiratory illness, **encourage staff and clients to get a flu shot: it is not too late. For more information on the flu, go to: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/flu-seasonal.page>**

#### **How does coronavirus spread?**

The virus that causes COVID-19 is spread mainly from person-to-person, mainly via droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza and other respiratory illnesses spread. It is possible, but less common, for people to get COVID-19 by touching something that was contaminated with the virus and then touching their face.

#### **What are the symptoms?**

Fever, cough, shortness of breath. Symptoms may appear in as few as 2 days or as long as 14 days after exposure. Most persons have a mild illness, however severe illness and sometimes death can occur in the elderly and persons with underlying chronic medical conditions.

#### **How to prevent infection?**

The following are protective measures against all respiratory illnesses:

- Wash hands often with soap and water and for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Have sufficient sanitizer at the shelter.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Do not touch your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Clean frequently touched objects and surfaces using usual (not antibacterial) household cleaning products.
- Healthy people do not need to wear a mask.
- Place these posters at the shelter:
  - Cover your cough: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/cd/cyc-poster-clinics.pdf>
  - Travel triage poster: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/em/travel-triage-poster.pdf>

#### **For those who are sick, how to protect others?**

- Persons who are sick with respiratory illness should cover their mouth when coughing or sneezing with flexed elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash. Provide them with a surgical mask. Keep a stock of surgical masks onsite for clients who are ill.
- Persons who are sick should be seen by a medical provider and isolated from others.
- Clean frequently touched objects and surfaces with usual cleaning products.

**For information on coronavirus, go to: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/coronavirus.page>**

See DOHMH Fact Sheet here: <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/novel-coronavirus-wuhan-factsheet.pdf>

Information from CDC can be found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

**What should DHS providers do if a client presents with symptoms of respiratory illness?**

Give them a surgical mask to wear and ask the questions below. If you have a client who recently (within the past 14 days) arrived from China, Iran, Italy, Japan or South Korea or has been in contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19 infection, alert your Program Administrator immediately. The Program Administrator will alert their Assistant Commissioner and the Medical Office right away.

**Questionnaire for existing DHS clients with respiratory illness and for all clients presenting at Intake**

Questions and Answers
<p><b>1. In the past 14 days, have you traveled to or had contact with a person known to have traveled from a COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) -affected area*, such as China, South Korea, Japan, Italy or Iran?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• Refuse to respond</li> </ul> <p><b>2. Do you have (check all that apply)?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fever</li> <li>• Cough</li> <li>• Shortness of breath (or difficulty breathing)</li> </ul>
Action steps
<p><b>If YES to questions 1 and 2:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the response is “yes” to 1 or “refuse to respond”, shelter staff will immediately inform their DHS Program Administrator, who will immediately inform the Program Leadership and Medical Office.</li> <li>• The Medical Office will inform DOHMH.</li> <li>• If client responds “yes” to Q1 any of the three listed symptoms in Q2:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At Intake, provide a surgical mask to the client, ask them to put it on and send them to the onsite clinic if during open hours. The medical provider will evaluate the client and call 911 as needed.</li> <li>• If at a shelter with clinic, similarly, provide a surgical mask to the client, ask them to put it on and send to onsite clinic if open. The medical provider will evaluate the client and call 911 as needed.</li> <li>• If the onsite clinic is closed or at a shelter without clinic, provide a surgical mask to the client, ask them to put it on, place them in a closed office and call 911. Tell the 911 responder that you have a client who recently arrived from a COVID-19-affected country and has respiratory symptoms. Keep the client in the closed office until EMS arrives. Leave the office unoccupied for 2 hours afterwards.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>If NO to question 1 and YES to question 2:</b> Provide client with a surgical mask and send to on-site clinic, urgent care, community clinic, or hospital for routine respiratory illness evaluation.</p>
<p><b>If YES to Q1 and NO to Q2:</b> Travelers returning from China should be monitored for fever, cough and shortness of breath for 14 days.</p>

\*For up-to-date list of affected areas with ongoing transmission, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/hcp/clinical-criteria.html>

Further guidance related for managing a client diagnosed with COVID-19 while residing at a DHS facility as well as management of contacts is being developed.

**Mental Health Support**

For 24/7 access to emotional support and crisis counseling for anyone experiencing distress or other mental health concerns related to the COVID-19 outbreak, staff and clients can call 888-NYC WELL (888-692-9355), or text “WELL” to 65173 for a confidential help line.

Sincerely,

Joslyn Carter  
DHS Administrator

Fabienne Laraque, MD/MPH  
DHS Medical Director