Interim Guidance: Homeless Shelters Considerations, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

VDH VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

March 16, 2020

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed [guidance for homeless shelters](#) in the United States. As the COVID-19 outbreak evolves, the Virginia Department of Health strongly encourages those who oversee homeless shelters to prepare for the possibility of outbreaks in their communities. Creating an emergency plan for your organization can help protect the health of you and your community.

In consultation with local health officials, **leaders within shelters should consider the following intervention strategies based on COVID-19 severity status in Virginia**. Broadly, VDH will assess and categorize COVID-19 severity using measures including the number of cases reported, case- hospitalization ratio and the number of localities affected. CBFO leadership should take into consideration their ability to implement modifications to their normal operations for moderate and high severity level situations depending on their organizational needs.

The guidance below is structured in three sections: **prior** to COVID-19 detection in your community, **once** COVID-19 is detected in your community, and **after** COVID-19 event in your community.

≪ PRIOR to COVID-19 Detection in your community

- **Update your existing emergency operations plan**
    - Find out if your local government has a private-public emergency planning group.
    - **Meet with your planning team** to update your emergency operations plan.
    - Identify key contacts in local and state health departments.
    - Consider the needs of older adults, persons with disabilities, and other [at-risk persons](#).
    - Identify services that might be limited or temporarily discontinued during an outbreak.
    - **Identify healthcare facilities** where clients with respiratory illness can seek care.
- Address **prevention strategies.**
    - Promote everyday preventive actions such as **hand hygiene** and **environmental cleaning**, and **provide appropriate supplies** in accessible locations to staff and visitors of your organization.
    - **Plan for staff absences** and develop flexible attendance and sick leave policies. Develop teleworking opportunities for staff when possible, especially staff at [risk for more severe COVID-19 complications](#).
    - **Identify a separate space** for people who become sick. Most individuals with COVID-19 infections will have mild symptoms and will not require hospital care. If possible, **designate separate rooms and a bathroom for clients with an illness,** and a plan for daily cleaning of those rooms.
    - Be prepared to report cases of respiratory illness that might be COVID-19 to your local health department.
    - Prepare [healthcare clinic staff](#) for patients with COVID-19.
    - **Plan for high shelter usage during the outbreak.** Identify alternate spaces where clients can be referred, and consider the need for extra supplies.
- **Communicate about COVID-19** and prevention actions.

- o   Identify potential language, cultural, and disability barriers associated with communicating COVID-19 information to workers and those you serve.
- o   Establish ongoing communication with your local health department to facilitate access to current information.
- o   **Share plans** with staff, volunteers, and community partners.

▶ ONCE COVID-19 IS DETECTED in the community

Once COVID-19 is detected in a community, health department recommendations addressing any change in normal operations will depend on a number of factors such as the number of cases detected, the severity of illness associated with those cases and how widespread infection is or is predicted to be based on case histories. Assessing these and other factors will help the health department determine the severity of the situation, which will help inform recommendations. In consultation with local officials, leaders of homeless shelters should consider implementing the following when COVID-19 is detected in their or neighboring communities.

Actions to take DURING the identification of NONE to MINIMAL travel-associated cases with NO EVIDENCE of COVID-19 COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION

- ● Provide information that explains why and when on-site operations and services may be scaled back, or may be closed to non-essential visitors
- ● **Distribute health messages** to staff, volunteers, and the community
- ● Download posters and fact sheets that can be distributed and posted in and at the entrance to your facility.
- ● **Provide COVID-prevention supplies** to staff, volunteers, and those you serve
  - o   This includes hand soap and paper towels,
  - o   Provide cleaning agents for frequently touched surfaces, and assign staff to regularly clean surfaces.
- ● **Educate staff and volunteers** about how to keep themselves healthy
  - o   **Consider placing posters** about hand hygiene and encouraging people to stay home when sick
- ● Identify any **clients with severe symptoms**, notify your public health department and arrange for your client to receive immediate care. Severe symptoms include:
  - o   Extreme difficulty breathing (not being able to speak without gasping for air)
  - o   Bluish lips or face
  - o   Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
  - o   Severe persistent dizziness or lightheadedness
  - o   New confusion, or inability to arouse
  - o   New seizure or seizures that won't stop

Actions to take DURING the identification of MINIMAL TO MODERATE TRANSMISSION of COVID-19

- ● **Ensure staff safety precautions for preventing disease spread.**
  - o   Minimize the number of staff who have face-to-face interactions with clients with respiratory symptoms.
  - o   Staff and volunteers at high risk of severe COVID-19 should not be designated as caregivers for sick clients.
  - o   If staff handle client belongings, use disposable gloves and hand hygiene.
  - o   Use a physical barrier or increased distance from staff to clients at check-in points.
- ● Ensure **client precautions** for preventing disease spread.
  - o   In general sleeping areas, **ensure mats/beds are at least 6 feet apart, arranged head to toe.** Wash bedding and other shared resources after use, and wash hands after handling bedding.

- Ensure **bathrooms are stocked with soap and paper towels**, and provide places for disposal. Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizers at entrances and eating areas.
- **Screen clients for respiratory symptoms and fever,** separate sick clients and provide them with a surgical mask. If separate rooms are not available, a large, well-ventilated room could be used.
- **Clients with severe symptoms** should receive immediate care. Notify your local health department.

Actions to take DURING the identification of SUBSTANTIAL community transmission

- In consultation with local public health officials, consider scaling back operations.

AFTER a COVID-19 event in your community

Once concern about COVID-19 has subsided, organizers of large events and mass gatherings are encouraged to work with local officials to help scale back prevention efforts specific to COVID-19. Recommendations to consider in this phase of response include:

- Meet with the emergency operations coordinator or planning team for your venues to discuss and note lessons learned.
- Maintain and expand your planning team.
- Participate in community-wide emergency preparedness activities.