

Planning for a COVID-19 Outbreak in Your Community

Overview: *Communication specific to coronavirus, caregiving, and older adults is a dynamic situation. The points below provide a framework for organizations developing messaging for media consumption and/or responding to press queries about diagnosed cases of COVID-19 in their organization. Tailor the content below, as needed, to your setting.*

Guiding principles: The spread of coronavirus is a public health emergency. Transparency and open communication are crucial to establishing your organization's credibility and ensuring that each of your audiences (i.e., the older adults living in your community and their families, your staff and your larger community, local public health officials and the general public), know the facts and view your organization as a trusted source of information. It is crucial to tell the truth, tell it first, tell it fully, and tell it fast.

Prepare. Anticipate what you will need should reporters call. Answer the following:

- Who will be your spokesperson? (Pick only one.)
- What is your message?
- What audiences need to be addressed, and in what order? (i.e., patients, patient families, board members, staff, public, media, etc.)
- What will the process be to create and approve messaging, and then distributed?
- Who will have approval to create and distribute messaging; who in your organization must approve the message prior to it being made public?
- What channels will be used to distribute (email, social media, website)?
- If you intend to push your message out to the media, what outlets and reporters can be tapped? (if you have time and the desire to proactively reach out to media with whom you have established relationships)
- Plan to inform staff that any queries about the case must be directed to your organization's designated media spokesperson when word of a diagnosed case is shared with residents/clients, families, staff and others in your community. You want to maintain control of the message.
- Anticipate follow up questions that may be asked after the diagnosed case is announced, and develop a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document. NOTE:
 - While you do not have to disclose ALL details of the situation (i.e., where/how the person became infected, the person's state of health, etc.) in your public statement, you should be prepared to respond to any question, and those responses should have the same approvals as the statement.

- If you do not know the answer to an anticipated question, it is appropriate to say, “At this time, we do not have the answer to your question. We will provide updates as we learn more,” and then be sure to provide updates when you have them.

Execute:

- **Message:** Keep the language simple and straightforward. Provide facts without violating privacy. Explain the steps your organization is taking to care for the sick person and to contain the virus’ spread amongst each of your audiences (i.e, other residents/clients; families and visitors; your staff; vendors; etc.). Emphasize your organization’s collaboration with public health organizations.
 - SAMPLE: “A [resident/client we serve/staff member] of [insert organization name] has been diagnosed with COVID-19. The [resident/client we serve/staff member] is in [what: quarantined at home/in the hospital]. We have notified public health officials as required and are following procedures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.”
- **Timing:** News spreads fast. You can anticipate a call moments after learning about the diagnosis yourself. Prepare a short statement for use in the event of a diagnosed case; have approvals in place so that you can take action if necessary. When a case is diagnosed, proactive media outreach is not necessary, however you should be prepared to make a statement and be transparent. Make it easy to find information about the situation on your website with the name of your spokesperson.

Follow-up: Prepare to update your statement as the situation changes. (E.g., new cases, no more cases, etc.). You can also reasonably expect that a reporter will follow-up with you regularly. If you have promised to provide updates to reporters, do so.

Re-group: After the situation has passed, plan a time to regroup with your team to assess how the plan was executed including how to improve your processes for a future crisis event.

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