

# Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) FAQs for State of Alaska Employees

## 1. Background

The State of Alaska is closely monitoring an outbreak of respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus (COVID-19). While there is no evidence that COVID-19 is spreading in Alaska at this time, cases have been identified in over a dozen states, including evidence of community transmission in some areas.

Alaskans can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by washing hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds. If you don't have soap and water, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol. The Department of Health and Social Services will publish [current information about COVID-19 on-line](#).

Please be respectful and treat others with courtesy. The risk of COVID-19 is not at all connected with race, ethnicity or nationality. Stigma will not help fight the illness. Do not make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin and be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed COVID-19 infection.

## 2. What is a coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that usually cause mild respiratory illnesses such as the common cold. The virus is related to the SARS-associated coronavirus that caused the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002-2003; however, it is not the same virus.

## 3. What are the common symptoms of COVID-19 illness?

Mild to severe respiratory illness with fever, cough, shortness of breath, and fatigue.

## 4. How does the virus spread?

Per the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person through coughs and sneezes. Respiratory droplets can land in the mouths, noses, and eyes of people who are nearby and lead to infection. Therefore, it is best to stay at least 6 feet away from people who are sick with a respiratory infection.

It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. We do not know how long this novel coronavirus can live on surfaces, so it is important to clean frequently touched surfaces (e.g., desktops, door handles, cell phones, countertops) with standard household disinfectants such as Lysol, Clorox wipes, or hydrogen peroxide.

## **5. Who should seek medical evaluation for COVID-19?**

If you develop a fever and symptoms of respiratory illness, such as a cough or difficulty breathing, and if:

- 1) you have been in close contact (within 6 feet) with a person known to have COVID-19,  
or
- 2) you live in or have recently travelled or worked in an area with ongoing spread.

Please call your health care provider BEFORE you go to the clinic and let them know about your symptoms and recent travel or contact. Your healthcare professional will work with Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to determine if you need to be tested for COVID-19.

## **6. What should I do if I suspect an employee is at risk for COVID-19?**

If an employee meets the above criteria, please notify your supervisor or human resources official. It is important that an employee who meets the criteria for COVID-19 be placed in a private room away from others. The employee should also be asked to wear a face mask, bandana, or otherwise cover their nose and mouth, if possible.

CALL the person's health care provider and explain the situation and get instructions for testing. The provider will notify DHSS if testing is warranted.

Also request the employee exit the workplace as soon as possible. The employee can then contact their supervisor and HR manager to discuss work needs, telecommuting options, and leave options.

If an employee cannot leave the workplace immediately due to transportation or another justifiable reason, take action to limit his or her contact with other staff. Symptomatic employees cannot be within 6 feet of other people. Please note that employees should not remain in the workplace simply to complete a routine work assignment.

## **7. Will employees be required to take leave if exhibiting symptoms consistent with COVID-19?**

As long as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) continues to declare the response to COVID-19 as a public health emergency for the United States, employees with COVID-19 symptoms will be deemed unfit for duty in the workplace and required to leave the workplace. Supervisors need to document observations of the employee's symptoms, why the supervisor determined the employee was unfit for duty, efforts made to minimize the symptomatic employee's risk to others, and the circumstances surrounding the supervisor's request for the employee to leave the workplace.

Per policy, if the employee is too ill to work, the employee will be required to take leave. However, if the employee is well enough to work, situational telecommuting is allowable on a

voluntary basis with supervisor approval, in accordance with the [Telecommuting Policy](#).<sup>1</sup> Managers are responsible for providing employees clear direction on assignment and project expectations while telecommuting. Although a written telecommuting agreement is recommended, this requirement is waived during a situational telecommuting scenario. Your Human Resource staff is available to provide guidance on establishing telecommuting arrangements in excess of 14 days or if the employee is telecommuting from a location other than their duty station city.

Continue to treat colleagues in the workplace with respect and dignity. We have a shared responsibility to the general public in minimizing transmission of COVID-19. This includes doing your part to fight fear, stigma and misinformation which can only make the situation worse.

## **8. When is it appropriate to use Leave Without Pay or FMLA leave?**

The use of Leave Without Pay (LWOP) will depend on the terms of your collective bargaining agreement or agency policy. In many cases, LWOP cannot be used until personal leave is exhausted. Please consult with your HR Manager or union representative for specific questions as to your collective bargaining agreement. Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) leave may be an option depending on your specific situation. Please consult your HR Manager and medical provider to discuss.

Unions also may have shared medical leave banks or a catastrophic leave bank employees could use. Please contact your union for further information.

## **9. Can employees take leave or telework to care for a sick family member?**

Yes. Per policy, if the employee is too engaged in full-time caretaking, the employee will be required to take leave. However, if the employee is able to work while caring for a sick family member, situational telecommuting is allowable on a voluntary basis with supervisor approval, in accordance with the [Telecommuting Policy](#). Managers are responsible for providing employees clear direction on assignment and project expectations while telecommuting. Although a written telecommuting agreement is recommended, this requirement is waived during a situational telecommuting scenario. Your Human Resource staff is available to provide guidance on establishing telecommuting arrangements in excess of 14 days or if the employee is telecommuting from a location other than their duty station city.

## **10. When is it acceptable for the employee to return to work?**

In accordance with guidance provided by the CDC, an employee should remain at home, away from the workforce and public, until the risk of secondary transmission to others is thought to be low. The decision to return to the workplace should be made on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with healthcare providers and state and local health departments. A person who

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<sup>1</sup> The Telecommuting Policy references a pandemic health crisis. COVID-19 can only be declared a pandemic health crisis by DHSS.

been exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19 may be asked to stay away from other people for 14 days, even if they do not have symptoms. This decision will be made by the epidemiological staff in the Division of Public Health. A person who has tested positive for the virus that causes COVID-19 will be asked to isolate until they are cleared by the Department of Health and Social Services. A person who does not have the virus that causes COVID-19 but is ill is asked to stay at home and away from others until they have not had a fever for more than 24 hours.

### **11. Will employees be required to provide documentation from a health care provider support their absence for COVID-19?**

To avoid overburdening medical providers and limiting exposure, the CDC suggests that medical attention is necessary only when emergency warning signs are present or if an individual has chronic health conditions. Therefore, unless an employee is suspected of leave abuse, or an employee qualifies for leave protections under FMLA/AFLA, certification from a health care provider should not be requested. We recommend contacting your Human Resource staff prior to requesting documentation.

State of Alaska employees also have access to [Teladoc](#), 24/7 access to a doctor through phone and video consultation. Employees who want to seek medical advice for themselves, family members, or as a caregiver can consult with [Teladoc](#) doctors without overburdening medical providers in Alaskan facilities.

### **12. Is my job protected if I am out of the office for more than 14 days without using FMLA?**

If you use personal leave, leave without pay, or telecommute with permission from your supervisor, your job is protected. However, if there is suspicion you are abusing leave, you would have all rights under your collective bargaining agreement. Please contact your HR staff for more information.

### **13. If I feel unsafe in the workplace because of COVID-19, can I telecommute?**

Alaska's Chief Medical Officer has designated public places, such as workplaces, as safe locations at this time and will update the HSS website if the status changes. Therefore, an employee's feeling of being unsafe at the workplace because of a general fear of COVID-19 does not, standing alone, justify a situational telecommute request like having COVID-19 symptoms or a COVID-19 symptomatic family member would. However, the State's [Telecommuting Policy](#) allows supervisors broad discretion in establishing telecommuting arrangements, including providing clear expectations, monitoring employee compliance, and providing assignments to be completed. So, a supervisor can consider the request, but must also ensure adequate office coverage, staffing of essential operations, and impact on mission.

Management retains the right to approve or deny telecommuting requests based on established criteria in the Telecommuting Policy.

#### **14. What can I do to prepare for COVID-19 impacts to my workplace?**

All agencies need to consider how to lower the impact in their workplace. Prepare for possible increase in numbers of absences due to illness in employees and/or their family members. Implement contingency plans to continue your essential business functions in case you experience higher than usual absenteeism.

- Keep medical conditions confidential. Remember that communications and records on medical issues, or suspected medical issues, must be kept confidential.
- Cross-train personnel to perform essential functions so that the workplace is able to operate even if key staff members are absent.
- Assess your essential functions and the reliance that other agencies and the community have on your services. Be prepared to change your practices or services if needed to maintain critical operations.
- Supervisors should work with their department's directory administrators to prepare a list of pre-approved employees for remote accounts, Virtual Private Networking (VPN) to work files and systems can be activated on short notice.
- To use the state network remotely, employees need:
  - A State of Alaska laptop
  - VPN approval, requested through supervisor
  - Home internet access (at least 5Mbps)
  - Remote connection instructions posted [here](#)

#### **15. What can I do to prevent COVID-19 illnesses in my workplace?**

Encourage sick employees to stay home.

- Employees who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness are recommended to stay home and not come to work until they are free of fever (100.4 degrees F [37.8 degrees C] or greater using an oral thermometer), signs of a fever, and any other symptoms for at least 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom altering medicines (e.g. cough suppressant). Employees should notify their supervisor and stay home if they are sick.
- Emphasize good hygiene practices.
  - Wash your hands frequently, ideally with soap and warm water.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PmVJQUCm4E>
  - Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
  - Avoid close contact with sick people.

-Provide disinfectant wipes for employees to clean their personal workspace and common areas. Provide hand sanitizer for the use of employees and members of the public that may visit your office.

-Provide tissues for an employee who is exhibiting symptoms of the flu to cover coughs and sneezes while exiting the workplace.

## **16. What can I do to manage my medical care?**

The State of Alaska has implemented several changes in medical care for Alaska Care employees, including:

- Employees can refill prescriptions early (except opioids)
- Coinsurance fees for COVID-19, influenza, and RSV testing are waived
- For most employee plans, access to primary care physicians is available for co-payment only, without having to first meet your deductible

## **17. Involve your Human Resources staff under the following circumstances:**

- If an employee returns to the workplace or declines to leave the workplace while exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19.
- If you suspect an employee of abusing their leave.
- If you have questions regarding invoking LWOP or FMLA leave.

## **18. Where can I find more information?**

A non-emergent, non-HR COVID-19 support line has been set up in the Division of Public Health to assist you. You can reach them at: 907-269-3046

[DHSS COVID-19 Website](#)

[CDC COVID-19 Situation Summary website](#)

[CDC COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions and Answers](#)

[FAQs about Travel: HSS](#)

*These FAQs will be updated as new information develops.*