



COVID-19

COVID-19 communication for behavioral health staff and providers

Behavioral health providers: COVID-19 outbreak information

During widespread infectious disease outbreaks – like the coronavirus pandemic the world is seeing now – many people experience feelings of distress. The Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) recognizes the important role that behavioral health providers play in helping Alaskans through this global public health emergency. That’s why we’re contacting you today to provide information about the outbreak, so you have the information you need to meet the mental health needs of your communities.

About COVID-19

DHSS is closely monitoring the rapidly emerging outbreak of COVID-19, a respiratory illness first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in late December 2019. Cases have been identified in a growing number of locations around the world, including the United States.

The virus spreads from person to person and has the potential to cause mild to severe illness and death. There are still many unknowns about this new virus, but at this time, spread of the virus is understood to happen:

- When an infected person coughs or sneezes next to others
- Through close contact (e.g., hugging, kissing, shaking hands)
- Possibly by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching the mouth, nose, or possibly eyes

Symptoms are likely to appear 2-14 days after exposure, and include fever, cough and shortness of breath.

More information about the disease can be found at www.cdc.gov/COVID19.

Updates on the evolving situation in Alaska can be found at <http://coronavirus.alaska.gov>.

Behavioral health needs in our communities

As you know, it’s normal that people may feel anxious, sad or angry as a result of the news and events unfolding. Any disaster causes anxiety, but unlike many disasters, the evolving and long-term nature of this situation has the potential to put everyone under a great deal of stress for an extended period of time. The heightened emotions that arise due to news about the outbreak can lead to unhealthy behaviors and responses from the increased stress.

Proactively share resources with your patients and communities that can help them identify and address stressful responses, such as these:

- [Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
- [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips for social distancing, quarantine and isolation during an infectious disease outbreak](#)
- [Talking with Children: Tips for caregivers, parents and teachers during infectious disease outbreaks](#)

Connect people with helplines that offer crisis counseling and support:

- [Disaster Distress helpline](#): 800-985-5990
SAMHSA's Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters, including infectious disease outbreaks.
- [Alaska Careline](#): 877-266-4357 (HELP)
Careline is a free, confidential and 24/7 suicide prevention and someone-to-talk-to line for Alaskans by Alaskans.

Prevention & Preparedness

While there are **currently no known cases of COVID-19 in Alaska** (as of March 12), as transmission occurs in more places around the world and in the United States, it is increasingly likely that cases will occur in Alaska. Understanding what actions Alaskans can take to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses and how to prepare can help them feel more in control during these uncertain times and help to alleviate some of their distress.

Steps everyone can take to prevent contracting respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19:

- **Wash hands** often with soap and water; if not available, use hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol
- **Avoid touching** your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands
- **Avoid contact** with people who are sick
- If you're sick, **stay home and avoid close contact** with others, and cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or sleeve when coughing or sneezing

Prepare yourself, your family and your community by having an emergency kit and plan. Use and share the resources below:

- [Prepare your health website](#) (CDC)
- [Preparing for a pandemic](#) (DHS)
- [Get Your Household Ready for Pandemic Flu guide](#) (CDC)
- [Get Your Community Ready for Pandemic Influenza guide](#) (CDC)
- [Planning Guidance and Checklists](#) (CDC)

Thank you for all you do to support the behavioral health needs throughout our communities in Alaska every day and during this outbreak. We encourage you to stay informed by following updates from DHSS, CDC and other trusted public health officials, and to do your part to fight any fear, stigma and misinformation that may arise. Responding with calm, thoughtful planning and intentional action will help us all get through this outbreak.