



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING &
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Charles D. Baker, Governor ♦ Karyn E. Polito, Lt. Governor ♦ Jennifer D. Maddox, Undersecretary

PHN 2019-07

To: Local Housing Authority Executive Directors
From: Ben Stone, Associate Director, Division of Public Housing
Re: COVID-19 (“Coronavirus”) Public Health Information
Date: March 10, 2020

We understand that Local Housing Authorities (LHAs) management, staff, and residents have serious concerns around the COVID-19 novel Coronavirus. DHCD is issuing this public housing notice to ensure that all LHAs have access to the most-up-to-date guidance from our partners at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) and Federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We are advising that LHAs become familiar with DPH guidance, implement common-sense hygiene, social distancing, and resident education measures, and begin contingency planning for the potential spread of the virus within Massachusetts communities. DHCD is working closely with DPH and the Baker-Polito Administration to be sure we are sharing the latest guidance with you and will issue further recommendations as events evolve.

Please note that Governor Baker and state public health officials are holding a press conference on COVID-19 today, March 10 at 3:30 pm; there may be additional guidance following that but we wanted to get LHAs some initial information ahead of that.

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1. Information Resources

DHCD strongly recommends LHAs familiarize themselves with the available guidance from public health agencies

- **Mass DPH** <https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

Mass DPH’s website has information and best practices on coronavirus in Massachusetts, including current cases, current quarantine numbers, and prevention recommendations. This information is updated **daily at the** above link. Guidance at this time essentially asks residents to take special care of hygiene, as one would do to control the spread of influenza.

- **Wash your hands often** with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds.
- **Avoid touching** your eyes, nose and mouth.
- **Clean things that are frequently touched** (like doorknobs and countertops) with household cleaning spray or wipes.
- **Cover your mouth** when you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue or your inner elbow, not your hands.
- **Stay home if you are sick** and avoid close contact with others.

The linked graphic should be posted in public areas of LHA developments to remind residents about proper hygiene measures. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/stop-the-spread-of-germs-respiratory-diseases-like-flu-and-covid-19/download>

This is also available in Spanish <https://www.mass.gov/doc/detenga-la-propagacion-de-germenes/download>

- **Center on Disease Control** <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

CDC has similar guidance as MA DPH, with a more national context.

- **Specific Guidance for Long Term Care Facilities** <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-guidance-and-recommendations#for-long-term-care-facilities-https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/prevent-spread-in-long-term-care-facilities.html>

Coronavirus appears to be most dangerous for elderly populations, especially those with pre-existing health issues. DPH and CDC have developed specific recommendations for Long Term Care Facilities – while these are not equivalent to elderly public housing, some of the recommendations should be considered for protecting vulnerable residents of Chapter 667 developments. These include:

- Keep Residents and Staff informed of LHA plans and Public Health Guidance.
- Ask residents with undiagnosed respiratory symptoms to avoid common areas.
- Support hand and respiratory hygiene.
- Enhance cleaning of Common Areas and common touch points such as door handles.
- Ask residents and visitors to limit interaction with elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions.

The CDC list of measures for home, workplace, and businesses will also be helpful to Housing Authorities, and can be posted in common and staff areas.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/workplace-school-and-home-guidance.pdf>

2. LHA Action Items

LHAs can take a series of common sense steps, based on DPH guidance, to protect residents and employees in the event of wider spread of Coronavirus.

- **Communicate With Residents**
 - Post DPH reminder about hygiene practices <https://www.mass.gov/doc/stop-the-spread-of-germs-respiratory-diseases-like-flu-and-covid-19/download>

- Share public DPH website information.
- Remind residents to let management know if they are under self-isolation or quarantine orders, and in certain cases if they are experiencing flu-like symptoms, so that LHA staff can adjust maintenance practices for those units.
- LHAs should consider communicating through email and phone calls as well as posting in common areas, and ensure that materials are appropriately translated.
- Ensure residents are aware that coronavirus-related and treatment will **NOT** be subject to deductibles or copays for insurance carriers in Massachusetts – no-one should avoid medical care for suspected coronavirus symptoms because of cost concerns¹.
- **Communicate with Community Partners**
 - LHAs should establish a primary contact on Coronavirus issue for residents, community partners, and DHCD.
 - LHAs should make sure they have active contacts on Local Boards of Health and at Local Hospitals to seek guidance in event of suspected infections.
 - LHAs should make sure they have active contacts with their municipalities and local first responders to ensure they are included in any broader community planning.
- **Common Sense Hygiene Measures**
 - LHAs should ensure that all staff have access to cleaning supplies. Cleaning supplies may not be immediately available in stores now, but LHAs should order supplies such as hand sanitizer, bleach, and gloves now so they may be available in future.
 - Common Bathrooms and other community spaces should be cleaned frequently, and best efforts should be made to keep hand sanitizer and any other necessary cleaning materials adequately stocked.
 - LHAs should consider increasing cleaning frequencies for other common touch points such as elevators, common doors, and LHA offices.
 - LHAs should consider limiting community events such as social events in community rooms, outdoor barbecues, and LTO meetings.
- **Contingency Planning**
 - At this time, MA DPH has not indicated need for wholesale “social-distancing” measures such as canceling community events, wide-spread self-isolation, or school closures. We encourage, however, LHAs to start internal planning **now** for how the following measures could be implemented, **if needed and indicated by DPH**, in the event of wider spread of Coronavirus.
 - Canceling of community events and closing of community rooms.
 - Resident self-isolation or quarantine in event of suspected infections, including how the LHA can facilitate safe provision of medical services, food supplies, and emergency repairs to those residents.
 - Changes to LHA management and maintenance practices to limit contacts with and among residents.
 - Staffing contingencies in case of large proportions of staff being out-sick or in self-isolation/quarantine.

¹ <https://www.mass.gov/doc/bulletin-2020-02-addressing-covid-19-coronavirus-testing-and-treatment-issued-362020/download>

In general, LHAs should follow the guidance of public health authorities.

3. DHCD Actions and Next Steps

DHCD will continue to work with our state agency partners and LHAs on response to the Coronavirus. At this time, DPH and DHCD do not see a need for extraordinary measures or funding, though that could change based on events.

- **Funding:** DHCD's position is that the above recommended measures, including increased frequency of common area cleanings and purchases of larger stocks of cleaning supplies, can be accomplished within current LHA resources. In the event of wider outbreaks or suspected infections at an Authority, DHCD will ensure that funding is available for that LHA to respond appropriately.
- **Insurance Claims:** Biohazard and viral contamination are **not eligible** for coverage under our insurance policy. If you have any concerns about related insurance claims, please contact DHCD's risk management specialist Sarah O'Leary at sarah.oleary@mass.gov.
- **Technical Assistance:** DHCD will continue to communicate with LHAs to ensure that they have access to the most up-to-date information and guidance. Additionally, DPH has offered to host a conference call to update LHAs on the Commonwealth's response to Coronavirus and take questions from LHAs. This has not been scheduled, but we will be sure to extend the invitation to all LHAs as soon as we have a date and time.
- **Contact:** Please contact your Housing Management Specialist and Ben Stone ben.stone@mass.gov with any questions related to Coronavirus response that cannot be answered by the DPH/CDC guidance. We will not have all the answers, but we want to understand LHAs' concerns.

Thank you for your efforts to protect and inform residents and staff of your LHAs. We look forward to continuing to work with you as the Commonwealth meets the challenge of this virus. Please note that this is an evolving situation and DHCD may send out additional guidance in the near future.