



For immediate release

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County Employers Urged to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19

Helena – Lewis and Clark Public Health officials advise employers in the county to work with Public Health by immediately instituting and enforcing prevention protocols. Employers should create plans now, outlining how to respond to a COVID-19 positive worker and what steps to take to ensure the safety of all employees and their customers.

The call to action comes as Lewis and Clark County continues to see a significant rise in COVID-19 since shattering its one-day record for positive cases on October 22.

Many recent cases of COVID-19 are tied to employees knowingly going to work, despite having symptoms or while waiting on test results. In some cases, employers asked workers to return, knowing they were listed as close contacts to a positive case.

The recent rise in COVID-19 cases in the county stems almost exclusively from community spread, meaning the source of an individual's infection cannot be determined by the health department. Rampant community spread of a virus like COVID-19 is especially dangerous to individuals who work directly with the public, such as wait staff, bartenders, healthcare, teachers and those in retail establishments. In addition to these front-line workers, employees in congregate settings, such as nursing homes, daycares and detention facilities should not report to work if they have any symptoms of illness, no matter how mild. Several outbreaks in congregate settings can be tied directly to an employee going to work even when they showed symptoms of COVID-19.

For employers, preventing the transmission of COVID-19 hinges on steps designed to ensure an infected employee does not transmit the virus to other workers. These steps include temperature checks, screenings for all employees, urging an infected employee to work with LCPH tracers to identify close contacts, and adherence to any physical distancing, masking and other orders and mandates set in place by the state government and the local health department.

LCPH has created a guidance document for responding to a COVID-19 positive employee, which is attached to this press release.

"As the infection rate continues to rise in our community, so does the need for businesses to prepare for impacts associated with staffing shortages tied to a positive case or contacts to a positive case in the workplace," said Eric Merchant, Lewis and Clark Public Health's Disease Control and Prevention Division administrator. "We urge all businesses to have a plan, and to plan in advance, rather than reacting to such a situation."

In some certain cases, employers may have employees who qualify for a work quarantine solution. These situations would include employees deemed 'essential critical infrastructure workers' in fields such as law enforcement and other first responders, healthcare, energy, and public works. More specific insight regarding occupations deemed essential critical infrastructure is available through the Department of Homeland Security in their August 18, 2020, publication, *Advisory Memorandum on Ensuring Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers Ability to Work during the COVID-19 Response*.

Due to the high number of cases in the county, it could take some time for LCHP contact tracers to reach out to individuals who might be a close contact to a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently updated their description of a close contact to include individuals who were closer than six feet, for 15 minutes (cumulatively, or all at once over a period of 24 hours), within two days of the onset of their symptoms or a positive test result.

COVID-19 symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus and include fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Also, be aware of emergency warning signs of severe COVID-19 disease. Individuals showing any of the following signs or symptoms should seek emergency medical care immediately: trouble breathing, persistent pressure or pain in the chest, new confusion, inability to wake or stay awake, or bluish lips or face coloring.

For the most current available data on local COVID-19 cases, view the Local COVID-19 Decision Making Dashboard at www.lccountymt.gov/health/covid-19/local-covid-19-decision-making-dashboard.html.

Preventing and controlling local COVID-19 is dependent on personal responsibility and individual choices that residents of our county can make to protect our community. Lewis and Clark Public Health continues to urge people to do the right thing to protect our community, practice what has been learned over the last few months, such as physical distancing, wearing a face covering, avoiding large gatherings, washing hands, and sanitizing surfaces to protect ourselves and others.

If you have questions, please call Lewis and Clark Public Health at 457-8900.

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