

Shared Employee Housing Health and Safety Considerations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Numerous Cook County employers run seasonal operations that employ college students and other summer workers who come from all over, usually arriving in May or June, leaving at the end of summer and residing in shared housing during their stay.

There are two types of shared living situations that will involve different risk-mitigation strategies. One is “dorm-style” living in which employees socially distance from one another in common areas but having their own room/bathroom. The other is a “household” scenario in which employees share a cabin/yurt/etc. as well as bathrooms and other common areas.

“Self-quarantine” involves separating oneself (either as an individual or as part of “quarantine group” from the public for a period of time and monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19 (including taking one’s temperature twice a day)

Housing employees together poses some unavoidable level of risk for COVID-19 transmission. The following strategies can help to mitigate that risk.

1. Arrival of seasonal staff into the community at the beginning of the season:

- The best practice would be to have employees quarantine apart from one another for 14 days upon arrival to the work site

If this is not logistically feasible, here are other options that can mitigate the risk that newly arrived staff could potentially spread the COVID-19 virus to other staff members or to customers

- Ask staff to quarantine for 14 days prior to arrival to the work site. The quarantine days can include days spent traveling to Cook County if the staff member drives to the site.
- Ask staff to quarantine for 6 days if 14 is not feasible (the incubation period for COVID-19 ranges from 2-14 days with an average of 5 days. A 6-day quarantine won’t eliminate as much risk as a 14-day quarantine, but it is far better than no quarantine at all)
- Request that staff avoid use of mass transit (buses, planes, trains) and to travel by car. If they do not own a private vehicle, recommend they rent one and drive to Duluth, where the employer can pick them up.

- Require that they observe proper health and safety procedures during their travel, including use of cloth face coverings in public spaces, frequent hand washing (or use of 60% alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap and water are not available), and social distancing in public spaces.
- Arrange for staggered arrivals if possible, with staff to arrive several days apart in order to have separate “quarantine groups” that will live together for the summer (share a common sleeping space, common bathroom space). This can lessen the logistics of quarantine for multiple individuals on different time frames.
- If a staff member is in quarantine, they should only prepare food for themselves or, in a communal living situation, others who are also in the same “quarantine group”
- Consider what to do if a staff member leaves Cook County during the season. Depending on the situation, you may ask that the employee quarantine upon re-arrival to the worksite.

2. How to manage shared living quarters:

- Spread staff out to the greatest extent possible so there is a lower density of people in a shared living space.
- Stay at least 6 feet apart from others with whom you do not live.
- Wear cloth face coverings in any shared spaces (if living in a dorm), not including your room. If you live in a shared cabin/bunkhouse/other facility in which you and others are in close enough contact to be considered a “household,” then this does not apply.
- Employer should provide COVID-19 prevention supplies in common areas, such as soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizers that are at least 60 percent alcohol, tissues, trash baskets and cloth face coverings that are washed regularly
- Make shared areas off-limits to all who do not live there/are not considered part of your “household”.
- Ensure schedules are developed that assign someone to clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces at least daily (depending on use): door knobs, countertops, phones, light switches, faucets, most bathroom surfaces.
- In shared kitchens, dining rooms, laundry rooms, bathrooms, limit the number of people who can be in the space at one time so that proper distancing may be practiced (this applies to dorm-style living rather than “household” style shared housing).
- In dorm-style living situations, people who are sick, their roommates and those who have higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 should eat in their room rather than in common areas.

- In dorm-style living situations, do not share dishes, glasses, cups or eating utensils. Non-disposable food service items should be handled with gloves and washed with dish soap and hot water, or in a dishwasher.
- Guidelines for doing laundry and handling dirty laundry should be posted.
- Sinks can be a source of infections. Do not lay toothbrushes directly on a sink counter. Use a tote for personal items so they do not touch bathroom counters.
- Each employee should be instructed on how information related to COVID-19 will be transmitted: by email, by text message, by flyer, etc. Employees should be instructed on how to contact local medical facilities if that need arises.

3. What to do when a worker in shared living develops COVID-19

- Anyone showing common symptoms of COVID-19 should be isolated in a room or facility with its own bathroom, apart from others in the household. This individual should be tested for COVID-19 as soon as possible. Until the test results are known, those who reside with the ill person also will be isolated, but away from the person with symptoms.
- If someone tests positive for COVID-19, their isolation will continue in consultation with local medical providers. In a “household” shared living situation, all other members of the household will need to quarantine for 14 days
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect all surfaces in the shared living area.
- Take precautions such as wearing gloves and making sure you have good ventilation while cleaning.

References

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/shared-housing/>
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/disinfecting-your-home.html>
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/living-in-close-quarters.html>
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