

Planning for a COVID-19 Outbreak in Your Community

Overview: *Communication specific to coronavirus, caregiving, and older adults is a dynamic situation. The points below provide a framework for you to develop messaging for media consumption and/or respond to press queries about diagnosed cases of COVID-19 in your organisation. Tailor the content below, as needed, to your setting.*

Guiding principles

The spread of coronavirus is a public health emergency. Transparency and open communication are crucial to establishing your organisation's credibility and ensuring that each of your audiences (i.e., the older adults living in your community and their families, your staff and your larger community, local public health officials and the general public), know the facts and view your organisation as a trusted source of information. **It is crucial to be in control and to tell the truth, tell it first, tell it fully, and tell it fast – especially in these days of social media communication.**

1. Prepare

Anticipate what you will need, should reporters call. Have answers to the following:

- Who will be your spokesperson? (Pick only one)
- What is your message?
- Which audiences need to be addressed, and in what order? (i.e., residents, resident families, board members, staff, public, media, etc.)
- What will the process be to create and approve messaging, and then distribute?
- Who will have approval to create and distribute messaging; who in your organisation must approve the message prior to it being made public?
- What channels will be used to distribute - email, social media, website?
- If you intend to push your message out to the media, what outlets and reporters can be tapped? (particularly if you have the time and desire to proactively reach out to media with whom you have established relationships)
- Plan to inform staff that any queries about the case must be directed to your organisation's designated media spokesperson when word of a diagnosed case is shared with residents/clients, families, staff and others in your community. You want to maintain control of the message.
- Anticipate follow up questions that may be asked after the diagnosed case is announced, and develop a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document.

NOTE:

- While you do not have to disclose ALL details of the situation (i.e., where/how the person became infected, the person's state of health, etc.) in your public statement, you should be prepared to respond to any question, and those responses should have the same approvals as the statement.
- If you do not know the answer to an anticipated question, it is appropriate to say, "At this time, we do not have the answer to your question. We will provide updates as we learn more," and then be sure to provide updates when you have them.

2. Execute

- **Message:** Keep the language simple and straightforward. Provide facts without violating privacy. Emphasise your organisation's collaboration with public health authorities. Explain the steps your organisation is taking to care for the sick person and to contain the virus spread among each of your audiences (i.e, other residents/clients; families and visitors; your staff; vendors; etc.).
 - SAMPLE: "A [resident/client we serve/staff member] of [insert organisation name] has been diagnosed with COVID-19. The [resident/client we serve/staff member] is in [what: isolation at home/in the hospital]. We immediately notified health authorities and are following procedures recommended by the Department of Health and the Communicable Diseases Network of Australia." (see template media release)
- **Timing:** News spreads fast. You can anticipate a call moments after learning about the diagnosis yourself. Prepare a short statement for use in the event of a diagnosed case; have approvals in place so that you can take action if necessary. When a case is diagnosed, proactive media outreach is not necessary, however you should be prepared to make a statement and be transparent. Make it easy to find information about the situation on your website with the name of your spokesperson.

3. Follow-up

Prepare to update your statement as the situation changes. (for example: new cases, no more cases, etc.). You can also reasonably expect that a reporter will follow-up with you regularly. If you have promised to provide updates to reporters, do so.

4. Re-group

After the situation has passed, plan a time to regroup with your team to assess how the plan was executed including how to improve your processes for a future crisis event.