BACKGROUND

The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new virus that causes respiratory illness in people and can spread from person-to-person. Law enforcement officials may come in contact with individuals who have tested positive or are suspected of having COVID-19. COVID-19 can be transmitted from people who are infected with the virus even if their symptoms are mild, such as a cough. Additionally, exposure is possible by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching one’s mouth, nose, or eyes. Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus and can include cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, and fever. Other symptoms can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s website.

PLEASE REMEMBER it is extremely important to stay at home if you feel sick; practice good hand hygiene by washing your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, and avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands. In addition, when on duty cover eyes, nose, and mouth with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) when working with subject who is ill.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF FROM BEING EXPOSED?

- If you encounter someone who is visibly ill, place a (surgical) mask, if available, on the individual. If the person is combative, a spit sock may be used according to use of force policies.
- Eye protection is recommended when dealing with a symptomatic person. Goggles that create a seal around your eyes are optimal; however, when you do not have goggles, good wraparound eyewear similar to range safety glasses will work better than no protection. Wash your eyewear with soap and water and completely dry after contact with the symptomatic person.
- Use nitrile gloves when handling individuals due to other hazards beyond COVID-19 that may be present.
- After having contact with a symptomatic person, do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- If you are dealing with a subject who is asymptomatic, you do not need to use personal protective equipment (PPE) unless required by your employer’s policies, but you should still maintain a safe distance (6 feet) where possible. Remember, ordering PPE in large quantities may be difficult, so please use PPE only when necessary.
- Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, you may use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Hand sanitizer that is at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol as the active ingredients are shown to be effective against COVID-19.
- If possible, have a trained EMS/EMT assess and transport anyone who has symptoms consistent with COVID-19 (cough, difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, fever) and needs immediate medical care to a healthcare facility.
- If you are transporting a symptomatic individual in the patrol car, lowering passenger windows to increase air flow may help decrease chances of transmission.
- Learn your employer’s plan for exposure control and participate in training (if available) on how to use PPE for respiratory protection.

If you must come in contact with individuals confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19, follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s CDC’s interim Guidance for EMS. The minimum PPE recommendations include:

- A single pair of disposable gloves;
- Disposable isolation gown or single use/disposable coveralls;
- Eye protections, like goggles or disposable face shields that fully cover the front and sides of the face; and
- An approved respirator, such as N-95 or higher-level respirator. (Facemasks are an acceptable alternative until the supply chain is restored. Respirators should be prioritized for actions that are likely to generate respiratory aerosols, which would pose the highest exposure risk.)

HOW CAN WE LIMIT THE SPREAD COVID-19?

- Employees with COVID-19 symptoms (cough, difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, fever) should stay home.
- Minimize contact between officers by suspending roll call and using videoconferencing, email, and other technologies to provide briefings and advisories.
- Increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting of all patrol cars, precincts, barracks, cafeterias, on-site gyms, and station houses.
- Implement symptom screening for employees before they enter the workplace.
- Implement social distancing measures like reducing group on-site activities, staggering lunch times, and limiting the number of people at the gym.
- Before going home, employees should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water and consider washing their face as well.
- If possible, employees should have clean civilian clothes at the work location to change into before going home. If they must wear their uniform and gear home, they should change before having close personal contact with family members.
- Encourage others to protect themselves by using social distancing and handwashing, even when not at work.

CLOSE CONTACT PROTOCOLS

If close contact has occurred while responding to any incident, you should clean and disinfect your duty belt and gear before reusing it. Information from the CDC about cleaning and disinfection is found here: Cleaning and Disinfecting. Follow standard operating procedures for containing and disposing of used PPE and for cleaning clothes worn on duty. Uniforms should be laundered as usual. Avoid shaking the clothes.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, visit https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx. The latest information on the coronavirus in the U.S. and worldwide can be found on the CDC website. Additional information from the CDC on what to do if you are sick can be found here. What law enforcement personnel need to know about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – CDC fact sheet

Help is available, contact the Crisis Text Line by texting PA to 741-741 to communicate with a mental health crisis counselor.