Message from Safety Director Wayne Niles on Coronavirus

All DOC Employees—

Health officials are working hard to contain the spread of the COVID-19 (commonly known as “coronavirus”), but we should expect to see more cases in the United States. While we do not have a confirmed case in Minnesota as of this message, we can expect that it will happen at some point soon. We are fortunate to have a strong disease surveillance system here in our state that relies on partnerships between the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), local health departments, and our world-class hospital and clinic systems.

Below we wanted to share some background on the illness, information about the state’s response, and some tips on personal planning and preparation.

Background

“Coronavirus” is actually a large family of many viruses. Coronaviruses are estimated to cause about a third of all cases of the common cold. The illness that is currently in the news has been named “COVID-19” — it is a viral respiratory illness that is caused by one coronavirus that has not previously been found in people.

COVID-19 is not caused by the same coronavirus that caused Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in 2012. However, it is in the same family of viruses.

Because this is a new-to-humans virus, there are still things we do not know, such as how severe the illness can be, how well it is transmitted between people, and other features of the virus.

But, based on the latest incidents, COVID-19 presents a range of possible illness. While many cases seem to be mild to moderate with symptoms similar to colds and flu, some cases may be more severe. Those who appear to be at gravest risk are those who are older in age and those with other underlying health conditions. As health officials and care providers learn more about the range of illness, we will share this information.

State of Minnesota Response

Governor Walz has directed the State of Minnesota, as an enterprise, to take the outbreak very seriously. Led by the Department of Health, every state agency is coordinating the state’s response in close contact with both federal and local officials.

If, at any point, lab testing were to confirm a case of COVID-19 in a Minnesota resident—including someone incarcerated in our facilities— MDH and its partners would isolate the ill person to prevent additional exposures, and would monitor those in contact with the sick person for illness.
A security plan is in place in our facilities to ensure isolation of potentially impacted individuals.

**Personal Planning and Preparation**

So, what can you do in the meantime?

With available information evolving rapidly, the best way to stay up to date is by visiting the websites of the [Minnesota Department of Health](https://www.health.state.mn.us) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov) (CDC). The best guidance for avoiding COVID-19 is to take the same precautions you take for avoiding colds and flu:

1. **Wash your hands** thoroughly and frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds at a time.
2. **Cover your coughs and sneezes with your sleeve or a tissue, not your hand. Throw the tissue away when you are done.**
3. **Stay home when sick.**
4. **Stay informed.** Visit the MDH and CDC websites often.

At this point, the CDC does not recommend the use of facemasks as a preventive measure for the general public, and we will not be using facemasks in our facilities. Facemasks are typically used by individuals showing symptoms of illness to prevent spread of diseases to others.

People who think they may have been exposed to COVID-19 should contact their healthcare provider before going into the clinic. Share with them your symptoms as well as any travel history or other information about potential COVID-19 exposure.

It is natural for people to feel concern during outbreaks, but Minnesota is fortunate to have a strong public health sector and world-class health care providers working hard to keep us healthy. We will continue to share updates as more information is available.

Here are a few other resources and tips:

- Think about backup plans for child care when a school is temporarily closed or when parents, children, or a child care provider are sick.

- Think about necessary items to have at home, including prescription medicines (check your refill dates), and non-prescription medications, such as fever-reducing medications.

- While it is less likely in a mild to moderate outbreak that we would see shortages of food in stores, health officials suggest that people gradually build up at-home supplies of non-perishable foods over the course of the next few weeks. This may help make it easier to stay home if you or a family member becomes sick, or
if you want to avoid sick people during more intense waves of transmission at various times in a given community.

- More guidance on preparing yourself and your family is available on the MDH website.
- **Behavioral Health and Emergency Preparedness:** Look for the Managing Stress and the Threat of COVID-19 on this page to understand stress reactions and increase your ability to cope during a public health emergency.