



Residential and Congregate Care Programs
2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance
Effective October 3, 2022

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The Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) continues to work with state, federal, and local partners on the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and we continue to appreciate the essential role residential and congregate care programs have in responding to this evolving situation. On May 29, 2021, the Commonwealth lifted COVID-19 restrictions while maintaining necessary COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures in certain settings, including residential and congregate care programs. This guidance replaces and supersedes all previously issued Congregate Care guidance issued by EOHHS.

Please note this guidance is intended to supplement, not supplant, provisions from regulatory agencies that oversee programs and facilities included in this guidance. **Guidance may be subject to change as required by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.**

COVID-19 Public Health and Safety Standards

This guidance applies to organizations that operate residential congregate care programs, which includes but is not limited to: group homes, and residential treatment programs funded, operated, licensed, and / or regulated by the Department of Early Education and Care (DEEC), Department of Children and Families (DCF), Department of Youth Services (DYS), Department of Mental Health (DMH), Department of Public Health (DPH), the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB), and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC).

Congregate care providers must continue to comply with federal and state COVID-19 guidance. This includes, but is not limited to, guidance on a) [considerations for health care personnel after vaccination](#), b) COVID-19 Isolation and Exposure Guidance for the general public, and c) [if staff are health care personnel personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#). In addition to these requirements, it is recommended that programs check the CDC website frequently to ensure they are implementing the most current CDC guidance and [Massachusetts guidance](#). These standards are informed by public health data related to COVID-19 and may be amended in response to such data. Providers must also adhere to program-specific guidance that may be issued by EOHHS agencies.

Protective Measures / Mitigating the Risk of Spreading COVID-19

Masks

- Masks wearing is optional for all staff and residents, regardless of vaccination status.
- Consistent with [DPH Guidance](#), it is strongly recommended that individuals with weakened immune systems or an underlying medical condition wear a mask or face covering when indoors.
- Masks, such as surgical masks, should be offered and provided to all residents, visitors and staff who want them.

If any staff at the congregate care setting are health care personnel then they should follow the [DPH guidance for personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#).

Visitation

- Congregate care programs must allow for in-person visitation without arbitrary limits on duration or frequency, which can occur in designated indoor or outdoor visitation space or the resident's room, with the appropriate safety, care, and infection control measures and policies in place.
- A resident may be visited if: the resident has recovered from COVID-19, is not suspected or confirmed to be infected with COVID-19, or the resident is not quarantined and has never tested positive for COVID-19.
- Visitation may be restricted if there is a COVID-19 outbreak at the setting. Programs should follow the guidance issued by their funding and licensing agencies regarding visitation and restrictions of all non-essential personnel [found in the EOHHS Visitation Guidance website](#).
- Programs should communicate visitation guidelines to families and/or guardians and should continue to augment in-person visitation by supporting families and guardians to visit remotely using technology, including phone and video calls.
- While visitor vaccination can help prevent the spread of COVID-19, visitors **should not be required to be tested or vaccinated (or show proof of such)** as a condition of visitation.
- When visitation guidance is revised by the funding and licensing agencies, the congregate care program should develop and issue communications to all potential visitors, family members, and licensing/and or funding agencies regarding any changes.

Congregate Activities

- Residents, **regardless of vaccination status**, may participate in congregate activities in the setting so long as they are not exhibiting symptoms consistent with COVID-19, currently isolated or quarantining due to infection or exposure,

- When there is a confirmed COVID-19 positive resident, the setting should discuss the necessary response with the Local Board of Health (LBOH), and contact DPH Epidemiology at 617-983-6800 if any additional support is needed.

Screening entrants

- Settings should direct everyone arriving to the program to self-screen for COVID-19 symptoms or being exposed (within six feet for 15 minutes or more with a 24 hour time period) to someone who has had COVID-19 within the past 14 days, or a positive COVID-19 test within the past 10 days. This includes posting signage at all entrances for individuals to check for symptoms of COVID-19.
 - Any visitors with [symptoms](#) of COVID-19 infection, or those who have been exposed with someone with COVID-19 infection in the prior 5 days (regardless of the visitor's vaccination status) will not be permitted to enter. If the visitor had a diagnosis of or exposure to SARS-CoV-2 in the prior 10 days, then they will only be permitted to enter a setting if they do not have any COVID-19 symptoms and are able to wear a facemask at all times.
- To determine when an employee may safely return to the setting following symptoms of COVID-19 infection or exposure, follow the [COVID-19 Isolation and Exposure Guidance for the General Public](#).

Screening current residents

- Remind residents to self-assess and to report any new respiratory symptoms.

Admitting new residents

- Effective June 10, 2022, there are no general quarantine requirements for new admissions.
- New admissions should have testing (i.e. iHealth, BinaxNOW or Ellume test) performed at admission.
- New admissions should be assessed at least once per day for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 infection, including fever.
- New admissions should not be placed in a room with an individual who is immunocompromised.

Additional Considerations

- Where there are individuals who are not up-to-date with COVID-19 vaccines, congregate care providers should continue to encourage social distancing through administrative and environmental controls, such as the use of floor markings and signage to promote social distancing and proper hand hygiene.

- Congregate care providers should demonstrate adherence to [relevant guidelines from DPH and CDC](#) regarding infection control and prevention to maintain a safe environment for residents and staff.
- If signs or [symptoms](#) of COVID-19 infection develop while an individual is on-site, the individual should put on a mask, if they are not wearing one already, and move to an isolated area of the program. Notify the program director immediately.
- Programs should contact any entities that have staff regularly visiting their programs (e.g., contracted/per diem staffing agencies, attorneys, pharmacy delivery organizations, itinerant provider staff, cleaning agencies, etc.) to review and approve their protocols for identifying and preventing the spread of respiratory diseases, including COVID-19.
- If staff experience signs or [symptoms](#) of COVID-19 infection while they are working, they should notify the program supervisor and put on a mask.

Precautionary Steps to Keep Residents and Staff Healthy

Reminders for Residents and Staff

- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol often. If alcohol-based hand rub is not available, then wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Wash hands before eating, after going to the bathroom (or changing diapers), coughing, or sneezing.
- Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Cover coughs or sneezes using a tissue or the inside of your elbow (not your hands). Immediately throw the tissue in the trash.
- Stay away from people who are sick and stay home when you feel sick.

Facility Protective Measures

- Masks, such as surgical masks, should be used by people who show [symptoms](#) of illness to help prevent the spread of the virus.
- Masks, such as surgical masks, should be offered and provided to all staff, residents, and visitors who request them. Congregate care providers should maintain sufficient PPE volume on-hand to align with use as directed in the DPH comprehensive PPE guidance. Staff should not use cloth face coverings, which are not considered PPE. Further information on PPE is included [here](#).
- Decisions about when to scale back or cancel activities should be made in consultation with your local public health official(s), the licensing agency and/or funding agency, and informed by a review of the COVID-19 situation in your community. Monitor [exposed personnel](#) for fever or signs and [symptoms of COVID-19 infection](#).
- Adhere to reporting protocols to public health authorities.
- Train and educate program personnel about preventing the transmission of respiratory pathogens such as COVID-19.

Cases of COVID-19 in Employees or Residents

Suspected Cases of COVID-19

Any congregate care program serving a resident with suspected COVID-19 should immediately contact a healthcare provider associated with the facility and the local board of health to review the risk assessment and discuss testing and control measures.

These control measures include the following:

- Provide a mask, such as a surgical mask, for the resident exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, if they are not already wearing one.
- Isolate the resident in a private room with the door closed, when possible.
 - In the event of concerns relative to self-harm, programs will refer to agency suicide prevention measures and internal safety protocols.
 - Make considerations for effective communication access.
 - Serve meals to the individual in their room – do not allow residents to dine together.
 - If the setting has two or more bathrooms, designate one bathroom for use by the individual with suspected case and the other bathroom for others to use.
- If you are in the same room as the individual, follow the guidelines in the [most current comprehensive PPE guidance](#), and keep as much distance as possible.
- Ask the individual about [symptoms of COVID-19](#).
- If possible, program medical staff should immediately assess the individual using appropriate PPE, if available, or arrange a phone or video call with the individual's health care provider.

If the individual requires immediate medical care, call 911 for an ambulance and inform EMS of the individual's symptoms and concern for COVID-19.

Individuals with confirmed COVID-19 need to be isolated from others for 5 days and continue to wear a mask around others for 5 additional days. Prior to releasing the individual from isolation, it is strongly recommended that a COVID-19 viral test (i.e. BinaxNOW test) be performed and has resulted as negative. If the test is positive, then the individual should remain on isolation precautions until after day 10.

Surveillance Testing

EOHHS issued surveillance testing guidance for organizations that operate residential congregate care programs, veteran's shelters, and residential schools – EOHHS Congregate Care Surveillance Testing Guidance.

Confirmed Cases of COVID-19

Any congregate care program serving a resident with a confirmed case of COVID-19 must follow the [COVID-19 Isolation and Exposure Guidance](#) for the General Public and should immediately contact:

- A healthcare provider associated with the facility
- The individual's guardian, as applicable
- The local board of health, or the DPH Epidemiology Line at 617-983-6800 – to review the risk assessment and discuss outbreak testing and infection control measures
- The program's EOHHS licensing and/or funding agency (see [Reporting COVID-19 cases](#))

COVID-19 Exposures

An employee or resident who has had an exposure (within 6 feet of someone for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period) with an individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 must follow the COVID-19 Isolation and Exposure Guidance for the General Public.

Asymptomatic Health Care Personnel (HCP), including those congregate care direct care workers who have been designated as HCP, may continue working while masked after they have been exposed to a person with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in accordance with the COVID-19 Isolation and Exposure Guidance for the General Public.

- Residents are not required to [quarantine](#) following a COVID-19 exposure but should wear a mask around others for 10 days¹.
- To reduce the risk of transmission and severe disease, individuals should be encouraged to remain up to date with COVID-19 vaccines and are considered up to date with COVID-19 vaccines when they have received all doses in the primary series and the most recent booster recommended for them, when eligible².
- The facility does not need to be closed.
- The facility does not need to be deep cleaned at this time.
- If the exposed employee or resident subsequently develops symptoms and tests positive for COVID-19, follow the guidelines under [confirmed cases](#).

Confirmed Employee Case Outside the Congregate Care Program

If an employee tests positive for COVID-19 but was not in the facility while they were symptomatic or in the 48 hours prior illness onset, no additional cleaning and disinfection may be required. To determine when an employee may safely return to the setting, follow the [DPH COVID-19 Isolation and Quarantine Guidance](#) for the General Public.

¹ Individuals for whom wearing a mask is not practical or possible, should physically distance to the extent possible for 10 days following a COVID-19 exposure and any other individuals at the congregate care program should wear a mask when within six feet of the exposed individual.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/stay-up-to-date.html>

Reporting COVID-19 Cases

Effective October 3, 2022, all congregate care settings will fully transition to exclusively over the counter (OTC) rapid antigen tests for surveillance, outbreak, and symptomatic/exposure testing. OTC rapid antigen test results are not required to be reported to the Department of Public Health, except for positive tests administered by a staff member on another person.

Reporting Deaths

Providers should inform their licensing and/or funding agency of the death of any individual or staff with a positive case of COVID-19.

Providing Care to Residents

Residential and congregate care programs face [unique considerations](#) when a resident is confirmed to have COVID-19 or has had a COVID-19 exposure.

Those with presumed or confirmed COVID-19 need to be isolated from others for 5 days and continue to wear a mask around others for 5 additional days. Residents who have had a COVID-19 need to wear a mask around others for 10 days.³ Consult the DPH Epidemiology Line at 617-983-6800 or local board of health to review the risk assessment and assess whether the residential setting is appropriate for care.

- This includes whether the resident is stable enough to receive care at the setting, appropriate caregivers are available, and there is a separate bedroom where the resident can recover in without sharing immediate space with others.
- Those caring for a resident with COVID-19 must have access to appropriate, recommended personal protective equipment, and must be capable of adhering to precautions such as hand hygiene.
- If other residents are at increased risk of complications from COVID-19 infection (such as people who are immunocompromised), home care may not be appropriate.

If the resident will be cared for within the facility:

- Other residents should stay in another room or be separated from the resident as much as possible.
- Other residents should use a separate bedroom and bathroom, if available.
- Prohibit any visitors who do not have an essential need to be in the setting.
- Other residents and staff should wear a mask, unless wearing a mask causes risk to the individual, such as trouble breathing.

³ Individuals for whom wearing a mask is not practical or possible, should physically distance to the extent possible for 10 days following a COVID-19 exposure and any other individuals at the congregate care program should wear a mask when within six feet of the exposed individual.

- Clean all “high-touch” surfaces within the facility every day.

Resident Care

- Make sure any assigned caregivers understand and can help the resident follow their healthcare provider’s instructions for medications and care.
- Help the resident with basic needs and provide support, as needed, for getting groceries, prescriptions, and other personal needs.
- The resident should wear a mask around other people unless the resident is not able to wear a mask (for example, because it causes trouble breathing).
- Avoid sharing personal items with the resident. After the resident uses items, wash them thoroughly.
- Follow the guidelines in the cleaning section of this guidance regarding cleaning procedures of a resident’s space.
- Additional information on infection control and risk mitigation can be found in the CDC’s [Implementing Home Care Guidelines](#).

Cleaning

Congregate care providers should have an established plan for thorough cleaning and disinfection of all areas as consistent with [CDC guidance](#).

The precautions that congregate care programs have in place to prevent the spread of germs can help protect against COVID-19. Congregate care programs should increase the frequency of their regular cleaning and disinfection program, including having an established plan for thorough cleaning and disinfection of all areas as consistent with [CDC guidance](#).

- When a program resident is discharged or leaves the program permanently, their room should be cleaned and disinfected in preparation for the next resident.
- If a resident leaves the setting or facility to go to the hospital, their room, bathroom, and any other space they use, as well as items such as communication devices, should be cleaned and disinfected prior to their return.

Cleaning After Someone Has Been Sick

A [cleaning and disinfection of a facility](#) may be required if an employee or resident is confirmed to have COVID-19 and was present in the facility while they were infectious.

Monitoring staff emotional health

Emotional reactions to stressful situations such as new viruses are expected. Remind staff that feeling sad, anxious, overwhelmed, having trouble sleeping, or other symptoms of distress are normal.

If symptoms become worse, last longer than a month, or if they struggle to participate in their usual daily activities, encourage them to reach out for support and help.

Emotional health resources

The national Disaster Distress Helpline is available with 24/7 emotional support and crisis counseling for anyone experiencing distress or other mental health concerns. Calls (1-800-985-5990) and texts (text TalkWithUs to 66746) are answered by trained counselors who will listen to your concerns, explore coping and other available supports, and offer referrals to community resources for follow-up care and support.

Additional resources can be found [here](#).