The new coronavirus (2019-nCoV) is the latest in a string of highly infectious diseases that have emerged in the last 18 years. Hospitals and other healthcare providers are required to develop plans and protocols to prevent the spread of disease among patients and staff.

One of the most important ways you, as a local leader, can prepare for potential coronavirus or other new, highly infectious diseases in the workplace is to request a bargaining session with your employer to discuss readiness. Health and safety issues are mandatory bargaining subjects, so employers have a legal obligation to disclose information and bargain on this issue.

IS YOUR WORKPLACE READY FOR CORONAVIRUS?
GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL LEADERS ON INFORMATION REQUESTS AND REQUESTS TO BARGAIN

The following list, adapted from a Health Professionals and Allied Employees sample demand letter, is a helpful resource in setting the agenda for a meeting with employers; it contains basic questions local union leaders are entitled to have answered:

1. Are there written policies and procedures in place for infection control and occupational health that specifically address readiness to care for a coronavirus patient? If so, please provide a copy of all such policies and procedures. If not, are there specific plans to develop such policies and procedures, and when will they be provided to the union?

2. Please provide details of the systems, policies or procedures that are in place to apply standard and expanded precautions when providing care to all patients, regardless of the signs and symptoms they present.

3. Are there systems, policies or procedures in place for early identification and isolation of suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases? If so, please provide details about all such systems, policies and procedures. If not, are there specific plans to develop such policies and procedures, and when will notification of those be provided to the union?

4. Please provide copies of all procedures in place for triage, reception areas and the emergency department.

5. What signs and equipment—such as tissues, respirators, masks and hand sanitizers—are available where patients present to quickly identify and isolate suspected cases?

Whether your labor-management relationship is cooperative or not, assessing preparedness for highly infectious disease cases in your facility is an important first step. It is imperative that local leaders know:

- the status of infection-control protocol;
- occupational health and preparedness plans;
- quantity, sufficiency and location of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE); and
- training on protocol and proper use of PPE in the workplace.

American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten  Lorretta Johnson  Evelyn DeJesus
PRESIDENT  SECRETARY-TREASURER  EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

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Where is signage located?

6. Does the facility have the ability to quickly isolate suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases in isolation rooms? Please provide details of the procedure.
   a. Is restricted access to and dedicated equipment for these areas ensured? If so, what standards and/or protocols are being followed to ensure restricted access and dedicated equipment?
   b. Do these rooms have negative air pressure?

7. Are there procedures in place to ensure that, prior to entering the patient isolation rooms/areas, all visitors and healthcare workers properly use personal protective equipment and rigorously perform hand hygiene? Please provide details of the procedures.

8. Is there an adequate supply of PPE, including gloves, gowns, respirators and eye protection for splashes? By what standards or protocols has the hospital determined that such supplies are adequate?

9. Does the facility have an adequate supply of N95s, N99s, half-mask and full facepiece elastomeric respirators, and powered air-purifying respirators? By what standards or protocols has the hospital determined that such supplies are adequate?

10. What is the process in place for medical screening, fit testing and training for respiratory protective equipment? Are screening, fit testing and training up to date?

11. Where is respiratory equipment located, and what measures is the employer taking to encourage its use?

12. What system is in place to ensure safety of injections, phlebotomy procedures and management of sharps? Please provide details of the system.

13. What is the procedure to ensure regular and rigorous environmental cleaning, decontamination of surfaces and equipment, and management of soiled linen and waste?

14. Will new chemical disinfectants be introduced into the workplace? If so, on what date will a new disinfectant be introduced? What is it, and will staff receive thorough training on its use?

15. What measures have been established for safe processing of laboratory samples from suspected or confirmed patients with coronavirus? Please provide the details of these measures.

16. Has the facility established a process to ensure that the infection prevention-and-control measures are followed while handling dead bodies or human remains of suspected or confirmed patients with coronavirus for post-mortem examination and burial preparation? If so, please provide the details of the process. If not, will such process be established, and when?

17. Is there a system in place to promptly evaluate, care for and, if necessary, isolate healthcare workers or any person exposed to blood or body fluids from suspected or confirmed patients with coronavirus? If so, please provide the details of such a system. If not, will such a system be established, and when? Will potentially exposed workers placed on precautionary removal (isolation) be compensated?

For a variety of reasons, many employers shy away from discussions about health and safety issues in the healthcare workplace. With the likelihood of more coronavirus cases surfacing in healthcare settings, it is more important than ever for local leaders to insist on knowing the level of preparedness in the workplace and ensure that adequate protections are in place.

Our members have the right to a workplace where adequate infection-control practices and PPE keep them safe from exposure to hazards like coronavirus, and our labor laws obligate employers to discuss these matters. As a union, we can engage in a solution-driven dialogue with employers that will ensure patients and health professionals are protected from coronavirus exposure in the workplace.

Be sure to check out our coronavirus toolkit for more information about the virus and how to protect your workplaces and members. For additional information, contact AFT Nurses and Health Professionals at 202-879-4400.