



A Union of Professionals

# Is Your Workplace Ready for COVID-19?

## Guidance for **Local Higher Education Leaders** on Information Requests and Requests to Bargain

MARCH 19, 2020

COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic impacting every aspect of society, especially on higher education campuses. Is your institution prepared? Do you have a voice in how any plan is implemented?

**This document will outline some basic questions to pose to the employer and steps to take to have the union's voice heard in the process.**

It is vital that colleges and universities be prepared for any emergency, but especially now during this pandemic. Employer plans and protocols need to address all aspects of an outbreak, including early identification of suspect cases and reduction of potential exposure to the virus within campus communities; the individuals who are considered to be essential personnel; which essential services will need to continue; and the parameters for online instruction.

Whether your labor-management relationship is cooperative or not, assessing preparedness for highly infectious disease cases in your workplace is an important first step.

As a local leader, you should be a part of any planning for an outbreak and should 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.

The following checklist, adapted from the Department of Health and Human Services' Colleges and Universities Pandemic Influenza Planning Checklist, is a helpful resource in setting the agenda for a meeting with employers; it contains basic questions and actions local union leaders should pursue with the employer. **You are entitled to know everything about the college or university plans.**

Ask who has the specific authority for declaring a public health emergency at the state and local levels and for officially activating the college or university pandemic emergency response plan.

**For additional information, contact Amy Bahruth with AFT Health Issues at 202-879-4731, [abahruth@aft.org](mailto:abahruth@aft.org).**

Find these resources and more at [www.aft.org/coronavirus](http://www.aft.org/coronavirus)

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The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.7 million 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.

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## Policies and Procedures

- Are there written policies and procedures in place, such as a crisis management plan, for infection control and occupational health that specifically address readiness for a potential pandemic outbreak? 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?
- Are there any essential personnel identified in the plan? Who are they, and what are their roles during an outbreak?
- Have you established a pandemic coordinator and response team (including campus health services and mental health staff, student housing personnel, security, communications staff, physical plant staff, food services director, academic staff and student representatives) with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness, response and recovery planning?
  - a. This team is accountable for articulating strategic priorities and overseeing the development of the operational pandemic plan. The union should be considered a key stakeholder in the development of these policies and procedures. We formally request that the union have designated representatives on the planning team. This would be specific union-appointed representatives separate from staff who may be on the team in their work capacity (e.g., healthcare professionals, faculty members, custodial staff, etc.).
  - b. Has the college or university included local and/or state health departments and other community partners in establishing organizational structures, such as the Incident Command System, to manage the execution of the college or university's pandemic influenza plan? If not, why not? And when will these relationships be established?
- Does the plan incorporate scenarios that address college or university functioning based upon having various levels of illness among students and employees and different types of community containment interventions?
  - a. This includes planning for different outbreak scenarios, such as variations in severity of illness, mode of transmission, and rates of infection in the community.
  - b. Issues to consider include: cancellation of classes, sporting events and/or other public events; closure of campus, student housing, and/or public transportation; assessment of the suitability of student housing for quarantine of exposed and/or ill students; contingency plans for students who depend on student housing and food services (e.g., international students or students who live too far away to travel home); contingency plans for maintaining research laboratories, particularly those using animals; and stockpiling nonperishable food and equipment that may be needed in the case of a pandemic.
- Are there systems, policies or procedures in place for early identification and isolation of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases on campus? 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 these be provided to the union?

## Elements of Good Plans and Policies

Once you have access to your college or university plan, look for the following elements:

- What is the procedure to ensure regular and rigorous environmental cleaning and decontamination of surfaces and equipment? What protections will be put in place for those providing this service?
  - What chemical disinfectants are likely to be used for decontamination? Will safety data sheets be available for any disinfectant applied in buildings? Will staff receive hazard communication training for new disinfectants and thorough training on appropriate use?
  - Has the college or university worked with the local or state health department to discuss an operational plan for surge capacity for healthcare and other mental health and social services to meet the needs of the college/ university and community during and after a pandemic?
  - Has the college or university implemented an exercise/drill to test the pandemic plan and to discover gaps in its implementation so the plan can be regularly improved?
  - Has the college or university developed a continuity-of-operations plan for maintaining the essential operations of the institution, including payroll; ongoing communication with employees, students and families; security; maintenance; and housekeeping and food service for student housing?
  - Has the college or university developed alternative procedures to ensure continuity of instruction (e.g., web-based distance instruction, telephone trees, mailed lessons and assignments, instruction via local radio or television stations) in the event of college/ university closures?
  - Does the college or university have a plan to disseminate information about the institution's pandemic preparedness and response plan?
- This should include the potential impact of a pandemic on student housing closure, and the contingency plans for students who depend on student housing and campus food service, including how student safety will be maintained for those who remain in student housing.
- Has the college or university worked with the local or state health department to implement infection-prevention policies and procedures that help limit the spread of infectious disease on campus (e.g., promotion of hand hygiene, cough/sneeze etiquette, etc.)?
  - Has the college or university established a pandemic plan for campus-based healthcare facilities that addresses issues unique to healthcare settings? Does the plan ensure health services and clinics have identified the critical supplies needed to support a surge in demand, and take steps to have those supplies on hand?
  - Has the college or university secured sufficient and accessible infection-prevention supplies, such as soap, alcohol-based/waterless hand hygiene products containing at least 60 percent alcohol, tissues and receptacles for their disposal?
  - What are the college's or university's policies and procedures for staff and student sick leave unique to a pandemic (e.g., non-punitive, liberal leave, etc.)?
  - Has the college or university established an emergency communication plan that is revised regularly? This plan should identify key contacts with local and state public health officials as well as the state's higher education officials (including backups) and the chain of communications, including alternate mechanisms.
  - What is the communication plan for disseminating information to faculty, staff, students and families? Does the plan ensure language, culture and reading-level appropriateness?
  - Is there a plan in place to test platforms (e.g., hotlines, telephone trees, dedicated websites

and local radio or TV stations, etc.) for communicating pandemic status and actions to faculty, staff, students and families?

- Is there an educational session planned for explaining the pandemic plan to faculty and staff and for outlining the roles of those responsible for implementing the plan?
- Has the college or university developed a recovery plan to deal with consequences of the pandemic (e.g., loss of students, loss of staff, financial and operational disruption, etc.)?
- Has the college or university adopted the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's travel recommendations during the pandemic, and will it be able to support voluntary and mandatory movement restrictions? Recommendations may include restricting travel to and from affected domestic and international areas, recalling nonessential employees working in or near an affected area when an outbreak begins, and distributing health information to people who are returning from affected areas.

For a variety of reasons, many employers shy away from discussions about workplace health and safety issues. With the potential of COVID-19 cases surfacing in education 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 personal protective equipment keep them safe from exposure to hazards like COVID-19, 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 staff and students are protected from COVID-19 exposure in the workplace.