March 25, 2020

**VDH Interim Workplace Guidance and Recommendations for Increased Absenteeism/Sick Leave Policies:**

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in modern times.  There is no vaccine and there are no treatments for COVID-19. The volume of cases will soon outstrip the capacity of public health to conduct case investigations and contact tracing.  The most important defense against disease spread is social distancing and keeping sick individuals away from others.  The virus that causes COVID-19 is spread from person to person, and infection prevention by social distancing is the only way to stop widespread illness.

On March 23, Governor Ralph Northam issued Executive Order 53 including a directive that "All businesses shall, to the extent possible, adhere to social distancing recommendations, enhanced sanitizing practices on common surfaces, and other appropriate workplace guidance from state and federal authorities while in operation."

 We have received reports from employees that they are being required to produce doctors' notes or lab reports prior to taking sick leave.  Many employees do not have paid sick leave.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is highly contagious, and keeping a sick employee at the workplace will put other employees and customers at risk of developing illness. Some employees may need to stay home because they have been in contact with a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19.

**VDH Recommendations:**

**Develop or adopt flexible leave policies to ensure that sick employees do not report to work.  Employees who are sick should not be penalized for missing work for illness.**

- Symptoms of COVID-19 include: dry cough, fever, difficulty breathing.  A person may exhibit relatively mild symptoms, but still be able to infect those around them—some of whom may be at higher risk for severe illness.

- CDC recommends that people who are sick should stay at home to recover unless they are in urgent need of medical care.  Many COVID-19 cases are mild and do not require medical care for recovery.

- Some employees may also need to miss work if they are a close contact or household contact to a COVID-19 case and are following public health recommendations to self-quarantine.

- Maintain policies that allow employees to stay home to care for a sick family member. Employers should be aware that more workers may need to stay at home to care for sick children or other sick family members than is normal.

- Talk with companies who provide contract or temporary employees about the importance of sick employees staying home. Encourage them to develop leave policies that do not punish employees.

**Where possible, consider options and flexible leave policies for other employees impacted by COVID-19:**

- Some employees may share a household with individuals who are at increased risk for severe illness, and may be afraid to come to work because of fear of exposure.

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- Some employees may need to miss work to care for children, due to day care centers or schools being closed.

**Do not require doctors' notes or laboratory test results to confirm illness**. **It may not be possible for your employee to provide a doctor's note or positive test results to confirm their illness.**

- Testing capacity for COVID-19 is currently limited; VDH has advised clinicians to reserve testing for those who meet certain [testing criteria](#). A test for COVID-19 may not be available or necessary for every patient with symptoms.
- Even for those who do get tested, wait times for results can last several days or even more than a week.
- Sometimes, testing people with mild illness can waste precious limited supplies for healthcare.
- CDC recommends that those exhibiting symptoms isolate themselves immediately, and contact a healthcare provider via phone, particularly if their symptoms are worsening. This helps ensure that we are not putting medical professionals or others at risk for infection by visiting a doctor's office unnecessarily.
- As the COVID-19 situation evolves, it may be increasingly difficult to get routine medical appointments.
- We understand that this may cause logistical issues for your business. VDH encourages the "better safe than sorry" approach to employee absenteeism at this time, for the sake of slowing the spread of COVID-19.

If an employee becomes ill at work, place them in a private room away from others until they can leave the worksite, and contact a health care provider. Contact your local health department if you suspect a workplace exposure.

**References**:

CDC Interim Guidance for Business and Employers:  [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html)

OSHA Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19.  OSHA 3990-03 2020. Page 11 [https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf](https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf)