

# AFSCME Facts

## Coronavirus Disease 2019

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory infection caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus that began in Wuhan, China in December 2019.

### Number of Cases

COVID-19 has spread throughout China and to 31 other countries and territories, including the United States. As of Feb. 26, 2020, there were 78,191 reported cases in China and 2,918 cases in locations outside China. There have been 2,762 reported associated deaths worldwide; no deaths have been reported in the United States to date. As of Feb. 26, 15 cases had been diagnosed in the following six states: Arizona (one case), California (nine), Illinois (two), Massachusetts (one), Washington (one), and Wisconsin (one). Twelve of these 15 cases were related to travel to China, two cases occurred through person-to-person transmission to close household contacts of a person with confirmed COVID-19 and one patient's exposure is currently unknown but could be an instance of community spread COVID-19, according to the CDC. An additional 45 cases were reported among repatriated U.S. citizens, residents, and their families returning from Hubei province, China (three), and from the Diamond Princess cruise ship that was docked in Yokohama, Japan (42). Thus, there have been 60 cases within the United States.

### Risk

The potential public health threat posed by COVID-19 is high, both globally and to the United States. The disease is of concern because it is a novel virus – a new strain of virus infecting people – and it has caused illness, including illness resulting in death, and exhibits sustained person-to-person spread, which are two of the three criteria of a pandemic. As the virus exhibits more cases of community spread, or cases for which the source of infection is unknown, COVID-19 will meet all three characteristics.

Although the general public health risk from COVID-19 is high, individual risk currently varies, depending on exposure. For the general American public, who are unlikely to be exposed to this virus at this time, the immediate health risk is considered low. However, certain people will have an increased risk of infection, for example health care workers caring for patients with the disease and other close contacts of them. And if the virus causes a pandemic, as health experts expect is likely, that will change the risk assessment for individuals.

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## Symptoms

COVID-19 symptoms have occurred between two and 14 days of infection and include fever, cough and shortness of breath. The severity of symptoms ranges widely, from mild – milder than the flu – to severe illness, and even death. Older adults and those with underlying health conditions or compromised immune systems might be at greater risk for severe illness from this virus. Some infected individuals exhibit no symptoms.

## Spread

COVID-19 is believed to spread between people who are in close (within 6 feet) contact with one another, mainly by respiratory transmission – via droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It is possible that spread can occur from surfaces infected with the virus, but this is not believed to be the main way the virus spreads. People are thought to be most contagious when they show the greatest symptoms, although some spread might be possible before people show symptoms.

## Prevention

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to the virus, by taking everyday preventive actions as with the flu and other respiratory illnesses:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- Get a flu vaccine.

CDC does not recommend that people who are well wear a facemask to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. Facemasks should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19 to help prevent the spread of the disease to others.

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## Treatment

People who think they may have been exposed to COVID-19 should contact their healthcare provider immediately. There is no specific antiviral treatment recommended for COVID-19. People with the disease should receive supportive care to help relieve their symptoms. For severe cases, treatment should include care to support vital organ functions.

## Workplace Policies to Limit Spread

CDC recommends employers actively encourage sick employees to stay home and not come to work until they are free of fever or other symptoms for at least 24 hours without the use of medicines. Employees who come to work sick or become sick at work should be sent home immediately. Employers should extend greater flexibility in sick leave policies, such as not requiring a doctor's note for acute respiratory illness, because health care provider offices may be extremely busy and not able to provide such documentation in a timely way.

Employers should promote cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene among employees and provide adequate supplies in multiple locations and in conference rooms. Employers should perform routine cleaning of frequently touched surfaces, such as workstations, countertops and doorknobs. No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended at this time.

Employees who are well but who have a sick family member at home with COVID-19 should notify their supervisor and refer to CDC guidance for how to conduct a risk assessment of their potential exposure. If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19 infection, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace but maintain confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Employees exposed to a co-worker with confirmed COVID-19 should refer to CDC guidance for how to conduct a risk assessment of their potential exposure.

## Workers' Rights and Employers' Responsibilities

**Leave Policies** - Employees with COVID-19 or who are caring for a family member with the disease are entitled to job-protected leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act. The law is less clear regarding employees who are not ill themselves but are quarantined. No employment protection exists for individuals subject to mandatory quarantine. However, arguments have been made that quarantines may be considered a serious health condition requiring inpatient medical care, thus qualifying for FMLA. Employees covered by collective bargaining agreements are likely protected by "just cause" dismissal provisions in contracts, as courts and arbitrators would be unlikely to consider missing work due to mandatory quarantine to be a reasonable cause for dismissal.

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**OSHA Standards** - There is no specific Occupational Safety and Health Act standard covering COVID-19, and OSHA only covers public sector workers in 29 states and territories (Alaska, Ariz., Calif., Conn., Hawaii, Ill., Ind., Iowa, Ky., Maine, Mass., Md., Mich., Minn., N.J., N.Y., Nev., N.M., N.C., Ore., P.R., S.C., Tenn., Utah, Vt., Va., Wash., Wyo. and V.I.). All private sector workers are covered, either by federal OSHA or through an OSHA state plan.

For workers who are covered by OSHA, other standards and directives may apply to COVID-19 risks. The Personal Protective Equipment standards require using gloves, eye and face protection and respiratory protection and require employers to implement a comprehensive program that meets the standard. The General Duty Clause requires employers to furnish a place of employment “free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm.” OSHA further prohibits employers from retaliating against workers for raising concerns about safety and health conditions.

## Updates

U.S. public health authorities are monitoring the situation closely, and the Centers for Disease Control is coordinating efforts with the World Health Organization and other global partners. Information about the disease is rapidly changing so it is critical to monitor changes frequently. You can monitor new content by going to the CDC’s [What’s New](#) link and you can also keep up with CDC updates on Coronavirus Disease 2019 by [signing up for email updates](#), [syndicating available content](#), and subscribing to [Coronavirus Disease 2019 RSS Feed](#).

## Resources

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus Disease 2019 situation summary](#)
- [CDC Guidance for Risk Assessment](#) for potential exposures to COVID-19
- [CDC What to do if you are sick with COVID-19](#) includes guidance to reduce spreading your illness to others
- [CDC Handwashing website](#)
- [CDC Hand Hygiene in Healthcare Settings](#)
- [World Health Organization Emerging respiratory viruses, including COVID-19: methods for detection, prevention, response and control](#) free online course (approx. 3 hours)
- [WHO Emergencies/Diseases webpage](#) provides up-to-date information on outbreaks
- [WHO Health Topics/Coronavirus webpage](#)
- [WHO Risk Communication Package for Health Care Facilities](#) (PDF): aimed at healthcare workers and healthcare facility management and includes flyers

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