

Brian P. Kemp
Governor



J. Alexander Atwood
Commissioner

Date: March 2, 2020

To: Agency Heads
Directors of Human Resources

From: Alex Atwood, Department of Administrative Services
Commissioner

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Atwood".

Kathleen E. Toomey, M.D., M.P.H., Department of Public Health
Commissioner

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Toomey".

The health of Georgia's workforce and workplace safety are top priorities for all of us. In light of the current news about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), we want to provide joint guidance to assist you in managing employee concerns. We cannot stress enough the need to calm fears with facts from reliable sources such as the Georgia Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The COVID-19 situation is evolving daily and the information below is based on the best scientific information we have at this time from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We will continue to provide updates to you as necessary.

Q: What is COVID-19?

A: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The virus that causes COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus that was first identified during an investigation into an outbreak in Wuhan, China.

Q: How does COVID-19 spread?

A: COVID-19 spreads the same way the flu and other respiratory diseases spread, through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Q: Are Georgians at risk for COVID-19?

A: Risk is based on exposure. For the general public in Georgia, the immediate health risk of COVID-19 is considered low, at this time.

Q: What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

A: Symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, cough and shortness of breath, and appear in as few as two days or as long as 14 days after exposure. It is thought that **80% of patients with confirmed COVID-19 have mild symptoms**. In very severe cases, patients with COVID-19 have developed pneumonia in both lungs.

Q: How can I protect myself from COVID-19?

A: The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19. The same measures that are urged to prevent the spread of any respiratory virus are increasingly important for all Georgians:

- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Stay home if you're sick.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Get a flu shot!
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.

Q: Does CDC recommend the use of face masks in the community to prevent COVID-19?

A: CDC does not recommend that people who are well wear a face mask to protect themselves from respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19. You should only wear a mask if a health care professional recommends it.

Q: Is there a vaccine for COVID-19?

A: There is currently no vaccine to protect against COVID-19. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19.

Q: Who can be infected with COVID-19?

A: Diseases can make anyone sick regardless of their race or ethnicity. People of Asian descent, including Chinese Americans, are not more likely to get COVID-19 than any other American. Help stop fear by letting people know that being of Asian descent does not increase the chance of getting or spreading COVID-19.

Q: Where can employees get information about COVID-19?

A: Depend on reliable sources for information about COVID-19 to reduce fear and misinformation. The Georgia Department of Public Health will continue to update Georgians through their website dph.georgia.gov/novelcoronavirus, Facebook and Twitter. The CDC has comprehensive information and situation updates about COVID-19 on their website: cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019ncov/index.html.

Q: What should I do if an employee thinks he or she has been exposed to COVID-19?

A: First, ask the employee whether he or she has visited any places where there are ongoing outbreaks of COVID-19 in the last 14 days, or whether he or she had contact with a person infected with COVID-19. If the answers are "no" to both questions, then it is unlikely that the employee has been exposed to COVID-19. (**Note:** this is subject to change if there is community-spread of COVID-19 in Georgia.)

In the event an employee might have been exposed to COVID-19, the employee should not come to the workplace until the 14-day incubation period has expired without any signs of illness. A request to use sick leave in this situation should be approved. State Personnel Board Rule 16(7)(c)(2).

Q: Can I prohibit an employee from entering the workplace?

A: Agency heads may prohibit an employee from entering the workplace if it is reasonable to believe that the employee may pose a health risk. Agencies should confer with their legal counsel before prohibiting an employee from entering the workplace due to suspicion of exposure.

Agencies may provide the employee the choice to use his or her existing leave balance (e.g., sick, annual, personal) and/or compensatory time or designate the absence as "authorized leave without pay."

Q: What if an employee has exhausted his or her leave balance?

A: Your HR professional should follow normal procedures for addressing the employee's absence if sick leave is exhausted. The employee may use other accumulated leave or compensatory time, if available, for sick leave purposes. The employee may also request in writing to have previously forfeited leave to be restored as sick leave (see SPB Rule 16(6)(d)(2) and (7)(g)(2)). Otherwise the absence should be designated "authorized leave without pay." Please note that neither state law nor State Personnel Board Rules authorize what some refer to as "administrative leave," or paid time off without use of accumulated leave under these circumstances.

HR professionals may contact the HRA Help Desk at 404-656-2705 or 1-877-318-2772 or the DOAS HRA Policy and Compliance team at hrapolicy@doas.ga.gov with any questions.