



COVID-19 Churches Guidance

This interim guidance is to help community- and faith-based organizations (CFBOs), whose members may include [vulnerable populations](#), plan for community transmission of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) encourages CFBOs to prepare for the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak in their local communities.

COVID-19 is caused by a new virus. There is [much to learn about its transmissibility, severity, and other features of the disease](#). The Before, During, and After sections of this guidance offer suggested strategies to help CFBOs plan, prepare, and respond to this emerging public health threat.

Before a COVID-19 outbreak occurs in your community: Plan

A COVID-19 outbreak could last for weeks or even months in your community. Depending on the severity of the outbreak, public health officials may recommend community actions to reduce spread of COVID-19. Local public health officials may make recommendations appropriate to your local situation, such as [flexible sick-leave and telework policies](#) and [temporary school dismissals](#).

Establish ongoing communication with your local public health department to facilitate access to relevant information before and during an outbreak.

Having a good contingency plan in place and developing flexible policies and procedures to accommodate public health recommendations can help reduce infection. During your planning process, remember to engage key partners across both public and private sectors, such as local businesses, schools, other community- and faith-based organizations, and community leaders. Also, the specific details of your plan should be based on the extent of the outbreak and the size of your organization and workforce, complexity of your day-to-day operations, and type of on-site and off-site services your organization provides to vulnerable populations.

Connect to community-wide planning.

Find out if your local government has a private-public emergency planning group that meets regularly. Building strong alliances before an outbreak may provide your organization with the support and resources needed to respond effectively. Also, in recognition of the [“whole community” approach](#) to emergency planning and management, your input as community leaders and stakeholders helps ensure the completeness and representativeness of your local government’s emergency operations plan.

In This Guidance:

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- [During a COVID-19 outbreak: Act](#)
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Update your existing emergency operations plan.

Meet with your emergency operations coordinator or planning team to update your emergency operations plan. If your organization does not have a person or team in place, determine who will be responsible for coordinating your organization's emergency operations plan. Review all aspects of your organization, such as personnel, systems, services, and other resources. Prepare for key prevention strategies outlined in this guidance. Update your plan based on various scenarios your organization may face during a COVID-19 outbreak in your community.

Consider the needs of older adults, persons with disabilities, and other individuals with access and functional needs in your response plan. Helpful resources are available online, such as the [Capacity-Building Toolkit for Including Aging and Disability Networks in Emergency Planning](#).

Establish relationships with key community partners and stakeholders. When forming key relationships, include the local public health department, other community and faith leaders, local businesses, and educational institutions. Collaborate and coordinate with them on broader planning efforts. Clearly identify each partner's role, responsibilities, and decision-making authority. Review the COVID-19 plan for your community and participate in community-wide emergency preparedness activities. Identify services which might be limited or temporarily discontinued during an outbreak. Find alternative solutions that will ensure continuity for your community, especially for vulnerable populations served by your organization.

Address key prevention strategies in your emergency operations plan.

Promote the practice of everyday preventive actions. Use health messages and materials developed by credible public health sources, such as your local and state public health departments or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Read more about [everyday preventive actions](#).

Provide COVID-19 prevention supplies at your organization. Have supplies on hand for staff, volunteers, and those you serve, such as soap, hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, tissues, trash baskets, and disposable facemasks. Plan to have extra supplies on hand during a COVID-19 outbreak.

Note: Disposable facemasks should be kept on-site and used only when someone becomes sick at your organization. Those who become sick should be immediately isolated from those who are not sick and given a clean disposable facemask to wear until they can leave.

Plan for staff absences. Develop flexible attendance and sick-leave policies. Staff (and volunteers) may need to stay home when they are sick, caring for a sick household member, or caring for their children in the event of school dismissals. Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff members.

Note: Use a process similar to when you cover for and staff workers during the holidays.

Develop a method for monitoring and tracking COVID-19-related staff absences. Understand the usual absenteeism patterns at your organization. Determine what level of absenteeism will disrupt day-to-day operations. If staff absenteeism increases to disruptive levels, some organizations may need to consider temporarily reducing on-site operations and services.



Identify space that can be used to separate sick people (if possible). Designate a space for people who may become sick while at work and cannot leave immediately. If possible, designate a nearby separate bathroom just for sick people. Develop a plan for cleaning the room daily. Plan ways to limit face-to-face contact between people at your organization. Several ways to do this include offering workers the option to telework, replacing in-person meetings in the workplace with video or telephone conferences, and postponing non-essential meetings and travel.

Review your process for planning events, programs, and services. Identify actions to take if you need to temporarily postpone or cancel events, programs, and services. Consider limiting access to your organization by non-essential visitors.

Plan ways to continue essential services if on-site operations are scaled back temporarily. Provide web- and mobile-based communications and services, if possible. Increase the use of email, conference calls, video conferencing, and web-based seminars.

Communicate about COVID-19 and everyday preventive actions.

Update your emergency communication plan for distributing timely and accurate information. Identify everyone in your chain of communication (for example, staff, volunteers, and key community partners and stakeholders) and establish systems for sharing information with them. Maintain up-to-date contact information for everyone in the chain of communication. Identify platforms, such as a hotline, automated text messaging, and a website to help disseminate information to those inside and outside your organization.

Identify and address potential language, cultural, and disability barriers associated with communicating COVID-19 information to workers and those you serve. Learn more about [reaching people of diverse languages and cultures](#). **You also can learn more about communicating to workers in a crisis.** Help counter [stigma and discrimination](#) in your community. Engage with stigmatized groups and speak out against negative behaviors.

Get input and support for your emergency operations and communication plans.

Share your plans with staff, volunteers, and key community partners and stakeholders. Develop training and educational materials about the plans for staff and volunteers.

During a COVID-19 outbreak in your community: Act

Establish a “buddy” system to ensure vulnerable and hard-to-reach community members stay connected to COVID-19-related news and services.

It is important that your emergency operations planning team meets regularly (even if by video or telephone conferencing, rather than in-person) during an outbreak to accurately assess, manage, and communicate possible risks. Special consideration should be given to communicating risk to vulnerable populations in your community, including older adults and others with [access and functional needs](#). Encourage those you serve to seek out a “buddy” who will check on and help care for them if they get sick. Early action to slow the spread of COVID-19 will help keep staff and volunteers healthy and help your organization maintain normal operations.



Put your emergency operations and communication plans into action.

Stay informed about the local COVID-19 situation. Get up-to-date information about local COVID-19 activity from [public health officials](#). Be aware of [temporary school dismissals](#) in your area because these may affect your staff and volunteers.

Note: Early in the outbreak, local public health officials may recommend schools be dismissed temporarily to allow time to gather information about how fast and severe COVID-19 is spreading in your community. Temporarily dismissing schools also can help slow the spread of COVID-19.

- Communicate frequently with those in your communication chain. Update key community partners and stakeholders regularly. Share information about how your organization is responding to the outbreak.
- Provide information that explains why and when on-site operations and services may be temporarily scaled back or your organization may be closed to non-essential visitors. Some CFBO administrators and leaders may choose to alter normal operations due to high staff absenteeism. Meet with your emergency operations coordinator or planning team to discuss plans for modifying, scaling back, postponing, or canceling large group activities and events (e.g., religious services and community outreach programs), especially for high-risk groups like the elderly. Discuss how these actions will impact your organization and those you serve.
- Distribute health messages and materials to staff, volunteers, and the community. Continue to promote everyday preventive actions (e.g., stay home when sick, cover coughs and sneezes, and wash hands often). Offer resources that provide [reliable COVID-19 information](#). Address the potential fear and anxiety that may result from rumors or misinformation.

Note: Messages, materials, and resources should be culturally appropriate.

- Provide COVID-prevention supplies to staff, volunteers, and those you serve. Ensure that your organization has supplies, such as hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, tissues, trash baskets, and disposable facemasks for staff, volunteers, and those you serve. Clean frequently touched surfaces and objects daily (e.g., tables, countertops, light switches, doorknobs, and cabinet handles) using a regular detergent and water.
- If surfaces are dirty, they should be cleaned using a detergent and water prior to disinfection. For disinfection, a list of products with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-approved emerging viral pathogens claims, maintained by the American Chemistry Council Center for Biocide Chemistries (CBC), is available at [Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Fighting Product](#). Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for all cleaning and disinfection products.
- Educate staff and volunteers about how to keep themselves healthy when accompanying someone to a destination away from your facility. For example, teach staff and volunteers how to keep themselves healthy while traveling with a client to a medical appointment, worship service, or government office by having tissues and alcohol-based hand sanitizer on hand.
- Track staff absenteeism related to COVID-19 symptoms. Work with local public health officials to determine when to begin tracking and reporting COVID-19-related absenteeism. They may ask you to notify them if absenteeism is higher than normal for your organization. Learn more about [COVID-19 symptoms](#).
- Address the concerns of staff and volunteers who are at high risk for COVID-19 complications. Encourage staff and volunteers to consult with their healthcare provider about how to protect their health if they are at high risk for COVID-19 complications. Be prepared to address the health concerns and needs of those who are at high risk, such as older adults and those with underlying health conditions (for example, by allowing them to telework, if possible).



- Implement flexible attendance and sick-leave policies (if possible) due to COVID-19. Ask staff (and volunteers) to stay home if they are sick to lower their chances of spreading illness to others, or if caring for a sick household member. Provide instructions about how and when to safely return to work.
- Separate those who become sick at your organization from those who are well. Send sick staff members and volunteers home immediately. If someone you serve becomes sick at your organization, separate them from others (particularly from those who are at high risk for COVID-19 complications) as soon as possible. Provide them with clean disposable facemasks to wear until they can leave. Work with the local public health department and nearby hospitals to care for those who become sick. If needed, arrange transportation for staff and others who need emergency care. Read more about [caring for those sick with COVID-19](#).

Note: Providing those who are sick with disposable facemasks does not replace the need to ask them to go home and stay home when they are sick. Facemasks may be in short supply during a COVID-19 outbreak.

After a COVID-19 outbreak has ended in your community: Follow Up

Establish criteria and procedures for when and how response actions will be phased out.

Remember, a COVID-19 outbreak can last for a long time. When public health officials determine that the outbreak has ended, work with them to identify criteria for phasing out and ending your organization's COVID-19 actions. The criteria should be based on reduced severity or a slowing of the outbreak in your local area.

Evaluate the effectiveness of your emergency operations and communication plans.

- Discuss and note lessons learned. Gather feedback from staff, volunteers, those you serve, and key community partners and stakeholders to improve your plans. Identify any gaps in your plans and any needs you may have for additional resources.

Maintain and expand your emergency planning team. Look for ways to expand community partnerships. Identify agencies or partners needed to help you prepare for other emergencies in the future and make an effort to add them to your planning team.

An infectious disease outbreak can occur at any time and having a plan in place is essential. Your contingency or emergency operations plan for COVID-19 will help protect the health and safety of your staff, volunteers, and those you serve, while preserving normal operations. Continue to coordinate your planning activities with local public health officials and key community partners and stakeholders to help maintain essential services.

