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July 9, 2020

To: Cowley County Industry Management  
Human Resources Directors

RE: Health Department COVID-19 Response  
Release from Quarantine – return to work

Greetings:

As we navigate through the ongoing SARS-CoV2 pandemic, it is important that I share with you the following information relative to virus testing and follow-up retesting and return to work status for our local workforce.

I appreciate your willingness to protect your operational status and workers by implementing health safety precautions at your respective facilities. Your establishment of protocols requiring that employees that report to work ill or call in sick be tested prior to their return to duty has been a major reason why you have been able to only suffer minor workforce disruptions to this point. The process appears to work well even though testing results do take time to receive and are based upon laboratory lag times which fluctuate based upon broad based population health. I understand your desire to know immediately the results of testing but that is not attainable at the current time nor does it appear that it will be possible soon. Currently we are receiving lab results back with a 3 day (72 hour) expected report. Some labs are backlogged with testing and are taking up to 7 days (or more) to report results. The Health Department cannot control these processing times as we are in the same situation.

Recently our Health Department was provided a laboratory device that allows us to test in a rapid fashion (less than 1 hour). As expected, upon people learning about this everyone wanted us to process their tests using this device. The result was a depletion of supplies and the notification to us that we must now wait for additional supplies rendering our device idle and our testing dependent on an outside laboratory.

The process for testing for COVID-19 is straight forward; individuals that are ill should be sent home to be isolated and instructed to call the Health Department.

Employers that provide a list of ill employees with contact information make the task of verifying employment and contacting the individuals easier. There are often problems with language and employees not reporting for testing as scheduled.

The Health Department schedules public COVID-19 testing each day (Mon-Fri) during the morning hours (9AM – 11AM) we can process 25-30 tests each morning. Employees are provided a time to report to our drive-up lane for sample collection. Any person that shows up for testing without an appointment is denied service until properly scheduled. (Please understand there is an incredible amount of documentation required for health testing and it does not simply

happen). Employees are instructed to return home and are placed under quarantine until the results of testing are returned. Once collected, samples are processed and then shipped to the lab in the early afternoon. Our samples are processed in the order received and the results returned to us as quickly as possible. When results are returned, Health Department staff reaches out to the individuals to inform them of the results and answer any questions they may have.

If an employee tests negative for COVID-19 they are instructed to contact their employer. If they are ill with another illness they are instructed to stay out of the workplace until they are symptom free for 48 hours in order to not infect others.

When an individual test's positive for COVID-19 in Cowley County, they are notified and placed into a 14-day quarantine. Health Department staff begins the contact tracing process to determine source of the infection, any close contacts that may have been exposed to them and the extent of exposure they may have spread. If needed the close contacts are scheduled for testing and also quarantined. (This could include co-workers).

For employers that have signed releases for disclosure of personal health information from their employees' test results are shared with their HR departments. Several employers assist in performing contact tracing within the organizations. This process however can prove costly to the employer as sending numerous employees out for testing will eliminate them from the workforce until their results are returned.

It is strongly encouraged that HR staff consult with the Health Department on a case by case basis if needed when illness occurs in the workforce or follow a contact tracing algorithm approved by the Public Health Officer to determine who should be sent home and referred for testing. The testing of employees showing no symptoms is **NOT ADVISED**. Testing prematurely results in false results that may expose the workforce more broadly than using simple isolation for a period of time.

When an employee has tested positive and has been placed under quarantine, they are monitored by the Health Department. When they have completed their mandatory 14-day quarantine they are evaluated for health-related factors to determine their recovery. Generally, people that are in good physical condition have recovered within that time frame and allowed to return to normal activities following a follow-up 2<sup>nd</sup> test.

We have learned in the last 120 days that most people continue to test positive due to physical viral load despite recovering from symptoms and moving out of the state of illness where they are considered contagious.

Employers that are requiring a negative test result for employees in order to return to work will find that it may take as long as 8 weeks or more for some people to return to that level of minimal viral load in the body. This is part of human viral and antibody response.

The Health Department cannot repeatedly re-test individuals. We will allow for one re-test and either recommend continued quarantine based upon recovery status or release them from

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quarantine to return to work with a mandate to wear a mask when in public for a specific time period

The time it takes for individuals to fully recover from illness will vary based on age, physical condition, and preexisting comorbidities. Severity of the illness may also vary based upon the same criteria.

Spread of COVID-19 is most prevalent in close person to person contact. This is mainly occurring in social settings away from workplaces as several employers have instituted mandatory use of personal protective equipment (PPE – masks, gloves, eye protection etc.) in the workplace. The PPE protocol coupled with daily health screenings is an effective methodology to keep the workplace and workforce protected.

In summation, I am pleased that the employers of Cowley County have responded in a positive fashion to keep our local business functional and workers employed. The management of human resources will continue to be challenging during the duration of the pandemic response. As employees experience illness it will continue to require actions to procure testing for the ill and then flexibility in having them return to the workforce. We are continuing to learn more and more about the severity of the virus through our experiences and there is not a one size fits all response plan that can be used.

We hope that this document can assist you as you modify your internal protocols for your specific industry workforces. As always if you have questions specific to your operations, I will be happy to discuss your issues and work to find solutions that benefit both the business and the employees.

Thank you all for fighting this fight with us. Your help has allowed us to keep our community as safe as possible in exceptionally trying circumstances.

Stay Well,



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