



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING &
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Charles D. Baker, Governor ♦ Karyn E. Polito, Lt. Governor ♦ Jennifer D. Maddox, Undersecretary

PHN 2022-01

To: Local Housing Authority (LHA) Executive Directors
From: Ben Stone, Director, Division of Public Housing
Re: COVID-19 Omicron Variant and State-Aided Public Housing
Date: January 18, 2022

Background:

The Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus has led to an unprecedented surge in case counts within the Commonwealth over the past 3 weeks. While there have been significant number of breakthrough infections, COVID-19 vaccines and boosters continue to provide effective [protection against severe illness, hospitalization, and death](#). The Omicron variant's extreme contagiousness, however, still poses a substantial challenge to the health of public housing residents, particularly the elderly and unvaccinated, as well as challenges for local housing authority (LHA) staffing and continuity of operations.

DHCD is issuing this memo in light of the recent increase in COVID-19 cases to remind LHAs of their ability and authority to make operational changes at their properties to mitigate the rapid spread of COVID-19 and to re-share some helpful information on the state's COVID response and resources available to LHAs.

Operations

DHCD reiterates its guidance from [PHN 2021-18: Updated COVID-19 Guidance for Delta Variant](#) that LHAs are empowered to make operational changes at their own discretion to protect residents and staff.

“While most public health restrictions have been lifted, individual businesses, non-profits, and government entities such as Housing Authorities can set their own rules for employees and visitors as long as they are consistent with existing contracts and laws. Housing authorities should work with their local board of health and their attorney for guidance.”

Though there are no blanket DHCD mandates or recommendations at this time, LHAs may – but are not required to – institute policies including (but not limited to):

- Requiring that staff wear masks when in offices, common areas, and residents' units;
- Posting signage requesting that residents wear masks while in common areas;
- Adjusting staffing levels in office, allowing remote work where possible;
- *Temporarily* cancelling resident activities and closing community rooms during height of current surge. If doing so, DHCD recommends consulting and informing Local Tenant Organization (LTO) if applicable;
- *Temporarily* deferring unit inspections; however, DHCD will not be waiving inspections in the fiscal year 2022 Performance Management Review (PMR) so any deferred inspections should be completed within the LHAs fiscal year - note that DHCD PMRs will continue on schedule;
- *Temporarily* deferring servicing routine in-unit work orders, though LHAs must continue to promptly service emergency work orders; and

- Requiring that visitors to office wear masks, and *temporarily* adjusting office hours and or/requiring appointments to meet with LHA staff; however, LHAs should continue allowing residents to visit site offices. LHAs that require masks to enter the office should have a supply of masks to offer visitors without one. Commonwealth offices remain open to the public and will require masking by visitors through February 28, 2022.

LHAs may consider, with Board approval, instituting vaccine and boosters and/or testing mandates for staff. We strongly recommend that LHAs considering this course consult with an employment attorney.

Isolation, Leave, and Testing Protocols

We understand that COVID-19 cases among staff are impacting LHA operations. On January 11, 2022 the Massachusetts Department of Public Health issued a [Public Health Advisory regarding COVID-19 Testing](#) based on updated CDC guidance. DPH advises that rapid antigen tests are an acceptable alternative to a PCR test in most situations, including in the following scenarios:

- To exit isolation or quarantine, in line with DPH guidance
- To receive therapeutics like monoclonal antibodies or antiviral medications if the patient is at high risk for severe outcomes

DPH advises that a positive COVID-19 rapid antigen does not need to be confirmed with a PCR test.

DPH recommends individuals that have COVID symptoms and test negative with a rapid antigen test should isolate and either repeat an antigen test or get a PCR test in 24-48 hours if they continue to exhibit symptoms.

DPH advises that employers, or schools and childcare providers should not require a test as a condition of returning to work, school, or childcare.

[Covid-19 Isolation and Quarantine Guidance for the General Public](#) recommends that individuals with COVID-19 symptoms and/or a positive test for COVID-19 isolate for 5 days, and if symptom-free may return to work after five days but should mask with high-quality mask for another 5. *Vaccinated* individuals do not have to quarantine (but should mask) if they have an exposure without a positive test or symptoms, but *unvaccinated individuals* should quarantine for 5 days until they can get a negative test, per the CDC guidance.

Note the isolation and testing guidance are frequently updated by MA DPH and CDC, so please check these resources pages for updates going forward.

The legislature in September extended the Massachusetts [COVID-19 Emergency Paid Sick Leave Program](#) that reimburses employers for up to 40 hours of sick leave for COVID-19 related reasons, including need to self-isolate after COVID-19 diagnosis, to recover from COVID-19, or to recover from immunization. The maximum benefit under this program is \$850 per week. This program can support your employees who have exhausted or do not want to draw down their sick leave, and the program is available until April 1, 2022 or when the federal funds backing the program are exhausted, whichever comes first.

Testing – Sites & Rapid Test Purchase

Massachusetts has several resources for testing that you can use to keep staff operational and pass on to residents to help them keep safe.

- **PCR testing** should be free, with or without insurance, for those with a COVID-19 exposure or experiencing symptoms. You can find PCR COVID-19 testing locations at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/find-a-covid-19-test>, as well as info on at-home PCR tests. Note that during the current surge wait times for PCR tests and results have lengthened.

- **Rapid tests** are well suited for diagnostic testing in people who are symptomatic or who have been exposed to COVID-19. The state has set up several opportunities through statewide contracts to order rapid tests from distributors or direct from manufacturer. Note that the direct-from-manufacturer options have minimum order requirements that could challenge smaller LHAs, who may want to explore partnerships with other LHAs or municipalities to meet minimum orders. Find more details at this link: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-statewide-contract-resources-for-antigen-test-kits>

Additionally, the Biden-Harris Administration is requiring insurance companies and group health plans to cover the cost of over-the-counter, at-home COVID-19 tests, so people with private health coverage can get them for free starting January 15th. See details at this press release:

<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2022/01/10/biden-harris-administration-requires-insurance-companies-group-health-plans-to-cover-cost-at-home-covid-19-tests-increasing-access-free-tests.html>

You can also work with your Local Board of Health or Municipality on testing resources.

Vaccines & Boosters

Vaccinations, including 3rd shots (boosters), remain the most effective way to protect oneself and the community from the worst effects of COVID-19. We recommend that LHAs continue to encourage vaccination and boosters among residents and staff. Vaccination sites, some with online sign up or walk-in availability, can be found at this link: [COVID-19 Vaccine Availability | Mass.gov](#).

If you believe you have a critical mass of residents and/or staff who would take advantage of an onsite clinic, you can reach out to a pharmacy, health clinic, or other vaccine provider OR contact the states mobile vaccination clinic service using this form: [Mobile Vaccination Clinic Request Form](#)

More information on these mobile clinics at this link: [COVID-19 Mobile Vaccination Program | Mass.gov](#)

Some residents may have difficulty leaving their homes to get their COVID-19 vaccinations; the state has a home-vaccination program, more details at [COVID-19 In-Home Vaccination Program | Mass.gov](#).

PPE supplies

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has collaborated with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to make available large quantities of personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies, for LHA and shelter use.

All supplies are being provided at no cost to LHAs.

All supplies must be picked up at the MEMA logistical warehouse located at 20 Forge Parkway in Franklin, MA.

No supplies can be picked up without an order confirmation and designated pick-up time. MEMA has limited staff and must control the volume of traffic on-site.

While the original deadline to order these supplies has passed, supplies are still available. Please contact the DHCD Facilities Management Unit at: DHCDFMSsupport@mass.gov if you missed the original December 27, 2021 deadline but would still like to source PPE from the Franklin warehouse. LHAs and shelters have already ordered approximately one million surgical and KN95/N95 masks for pickup.

Funding & FEMA reimbursement

Unfortunately, DHCD does not at this time have additional resources to offer LHAs to cover COVID-19-related costs.

FEMA, however, continues to reimburse up to 100% of eligible costs for COVID-19 response through April 1, 2022. See details here: [COVID-19 Federal Disaster Declaration | Mass.gov](#)

Please contact your Housing Management Specialist with any questions about this notice.