

# Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-2019)

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## Workforce Considerations for the South Australian Public Sector

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# Background

The possibility of an outbreak arising from the *coronavirus disease 2019* (COVID-19) (formerly called novel coronavirus 2019 (2019 nCoV)) is real.

COVID-19 is usually an acute respiratory infection or febrile illness. However, for up to date information on the clinical presentation see [www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov](http://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov).

The infectious period is not yet known. However, there is some early evidence of pre-symptomatic transmission. It is assumed that people can potentially spread the virus which causes COVID-19 whilst symptomatic. The duration of infectiousness after symptoms cease is currently unknown. See the Australian Government Department of Health website for more information.

South Australia has not had to deal with a significant large-scale threat to the health and well being of its citizens for many years, therefore a possible pandemic is likely to create a significant level of concern within the community.

In the event of an outbreak all business organisations (including the SA public sector) will rely almost entirely on their employees to maintain business operations. It is however possible that a significant number of employees could be absent at the peak of an outbreak. Given the circumstances, many employees will experience either personal illness or a level of concern for their health and safety, or that of members of their family or be required to undertake self isolation and/or social distancing. This may result in an inability to mix with groups of other people, for example attending their place of work, using public transport, attending schools etc.

## State Control Agency

Under State arrangements SA Health is the Control Agency for Human epidemic as directed in the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP).

SA Health will provide regular and updated advice to government through normal communication arrangements, including distribution of National Situation Reports, inter departmental meetings and Communication and Media liaison with other agency counterparts. This will continue until SA Health, as the Control Agency, formally activate State Emergency Management arrangements.

At a point of activation of state arrangements and/or a declaration, the Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO) will lead the State response to COVID-19 for South Australia under the powers and guidance of the Public Health Act 2011. A declaration could also be made under the Emergency Management Act 2004 Act, in conjunction with SA Police. The CPHO as the dedicated State Controller may call upon other agencies to assist SA Health.

This decision will be made to protect the health of South Australians by minimising and preventing the spread of the virus. Measures may include, but are not limited to, directing the public to undertake social distancing measures and self-isolation for those who are sick. Should the situation escalate, other measures may be considered such as the postponement or cancellation of higher risk public events or the closure of sites or services such as schools.

# Focus

The focus of this document is to provide general workforce guidance that will assist agencies in developing and/or updating their **workforce contingency plans**, which form part of broader business continuity planning. While this paper will not address every circumstance it will assist in the identification of **possible workforce issues** in relation to:

- The health, safety and welfare of employees and other persons (volunteers, contractors and students)
- Maintaining critical Government services.
- Maintaining 'business as usual' for as long as circumstances permit,
- Planning a 'phased' approach to implementing alternative operating arrangements in the event of an increasing number of employees being absent, and
- Ensuring that existing business continuity plans address the additional issues that may conceivably arise in the event of a local COVID-19 outbreak.

Chief Executives can further support these outcomes by:

- Implementing a positive two-way approach to **communicating and consulting** with employees, based on honesty and openness, and which is timely, regular and culturally and linguistically appropriate;
- Providing **briefing sessions** for employees and other persons as appropriate to update them with relevant information regarding the outbreak, empowering them to make rational and informed decisions (thereby minimising the impact of rumours and 'fear of the unknown');
- Providing **training sessions** to those employees who will be involved in the provision of critical services, possibly under changed circumstances;

- Implementing measures that provide additional **support and encouragement** to employees and volunteers who may be making their best effort to continue to operate under more demanding circumstances; and
- If the need arises, facilitating an environment in which employees can nominate themselves for alternative duties rather than possibly having to be directed to do so.

Further information on planning for an outbreak can be found in Attachments A and B.

This paper will continue to be reviewed and updated in accordance with advice from relevant authorities.

## Degree of Lead Time

The current rapid growth in confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide means that SA public sector agencies should be finalising updates to their business continuity plans. Moving to an implementation phase should be seamless and effective, and will need to occur when further information is available.

## Duration of Impact

Existing agency business continuity plans are likely to be based on the short-term disruption of a significant event (e.g. a major fire or explosion). However the impact of an outbreak may be for a considerably longer period (up to six months is considered possible), as an increasing number of employees are absent due to possible exposure to the virus, confirmed illness, or needing to care for a family member who is ill or in isolation.

It is important that agencies recognise the likely extended duration of an outbreak as a possibility when developing workforce contingency plans.

## State of Emergency Declared

Under all but the most extreme circumstances it is envisaged that the operation of the SA public sector will continue under business as usual arrangements, or at reduced levels as necessary. If, however, a state of emergency is declared it is envisaged that the SA public sector will continue to function within the normal legislative framework, although some staff in agencies may undertake alternative duties, and a range of functions may be allocated a lesser priority.

## Fundamental Principles

### Prevention

A key issue to business continuity will be prevention or minimisation of the spread of the virus which causes COVID-19. For SA public sector agencies this will include ensuring all workers are familiar with symptoms, and act in accordance with any direction from the Australian Government Department of Health and SA Health regarding self-isolation.

Information should be sourced directly from the [Australian Government Department of Health website](#). As the situation is constantly evolving, agencies should regularly check the website for updates, and communicate these to staff.

## Duty of Care

The SA Government owes a duty of care to all its employees while they are at work to provide a safe work environment. This duty continues to apply, and is owed by both the home agency and the host agency to any employees transferred between agencies. Systems need to be in place that enable the 'home agency' (who is transferring employees to another workplace) to ensure that the 'host agency' has adequately addressed their duty of care to the employee, with particular attention to the fact that some employees may be asked to undertake different duties and in different locations. Chief Executives are reminded that they must ensure the same duty of care is discharged in respect of volunteers and to people engaged by the agency as contractors, consultants or through a labour hire firm.

The legislative responsibilities of managers and employees (at all levels) will continue to apply under the provisions of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012* (WHS Act 2012) and Regulations, relevant Codes of Practice, and supporting policies and practices.

If COVID-19 has been identified as a risk to your agency, a risk based approach is required to ensure suitable controls exist, or are implemented, to reduce the likelihood of infection to workers so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) to those who may be at higher risk of exposure through the course of their duties.

It can be anticipated that the circumstances under which agencies and employees normally operate may change in the event of a significant outbreak, and Chief Executives, managers and employees at all levels should give serious consideration to 'what is reasonably practicable'. The factors effecting what is reasonably practicable will include:

- The circumstances (i.e. the phase of the outbreak) prevailing at the time;

- The nature of the agency's operations;
- The particular individual(s) and the level of training, skill, knowledge and experience they bring that is relevant to the situation; and
- The degree of risk associated with the situation if the duties were not undertaken.

It is emphasised that in the event of a state of emergency or pandemic being declared some aspects of normal WHS management systems may be reassessed as a lesser priority, e.g. some administrative processes associated with quarterly hazard inspections, or the conduct of training in relation to routine matters may be deferred, pending the resumption of normal operations.

## Attendance

To reduce the impact of COVID-19 in Australia, a range of measures may be implemented by both the Commonwealth and SA Governments. In regard to SA public sector employees, **the following approaches may need to be considered if the situation escalates:**

1. It may be necessary to direct employees who report or exhibit symptoms or signs of possible infection to seek medical review, including consideration of testing for the virus which causes COVID-19;
2. It may be necessary to direct employees who are well but required to be isolated to **work from home**, (where this is reasonable and practicable), or to utilise **flexible working hours** (under a far more flexible arrangement than usual);
3. Chief Executives may encourage employees who are well but vulnerable (for example, those who are pregnant, or have a diagnosed chronic medical condition) to **work from home**, or to utilise **flexible working hours** (under a far more flexible

arrangement than usual), in order to minimise contact with other people (both in the workplace and in public places when travelling to and from work;

4. In consultation with employees, Chief Executives should:
  - Determine which employees are required to ensure the maintenance of the agency's critical services (or perform critical services in other agencies);
  - Determine which employees are providing non-essential but desirable services;
  - encourage (and in some cases direct where this is reasonable) the remaining employees to **access leave entitlements** (as provided under the PS Act and other relevant legislative and industrial instruments); and
  - where necessary and appropriate, direct employees to remain absent from the workplace with remuneration.

## Leave and Alternative Arrangements for caring purposes

Agencies are encouraged to consider a 'phased' approach to the management of employee leave entitlements, ensuring that each circumstance is assessed on a case-by-case basis.

1. Where the employee is providing care for a child or member of their household, the relevant form of **Carer's Leave** may be used for the caring period.
2. Where the employee is no longer performing a caring role, but is required to be isolated following exposure to the virus which causes COVID-19 consider what **working from home** or **extended flexible working arrangements** can be put in place for the isolation period.

3. Where working from home is not practical or there is no facility to work remotely, agencies should consider **access to any leave entitlements** available to the employee.
4. If the employee is subsequently diagnosed with COVID-19, access to **Personal or Sick Leave** should be provided.

## Leave or alternative arrangements for staff who have been exposed

On 2 February 2020, the Australian Government issued specific isolation requirements for those who may have been exposed to the virus which causes COVID-19. For specific information see:

[www.health.gov.au/news/coronavirus-update-at-a-glance](http://www.health.gov.au/news/coronavirus-update-at-a-glance)

All employees **must** act in accordance with the information from the Australian Government Department of Health, and/or SA Health, including directions from the Chief Public Health Officer. Employees who have self-isolated due to one of the above situations should alert their employer as soon as possible to discuss alternative arrangements such as working from home.

A common-sense approach should be adopted regarding evidence requirements for absences relating to possible exposure, with priority given to minimising any possible additional exposure to the wider workforce or vulnerable populations that we serve. The specific arrangements for an employee who is required to be isolated should be considered on a case-by-case basis, depending on the role in question, and the individual circumstances.

1. Where the employee is otherwise well and capable of undertaking duties, consider **working from home arrangements**, or **extended flexible working options where reasonable and practicable**.
2. If working from home or extended flexible working options are not appropriate because of the nature of the work, the agency should consider **access to any leave entitlements** available to the employee.
3. If an employee has insufficient leave accrued, the agency may approve the taking of **sick or recreation leave in advance of accrual**. This is relevant for employees covered by the *Commissioner's Determination 3.1: Employment Conditions – Hours of Work, Overtime and Leave*.
4. Chief Executives have discretion to approve the use of special leave with pay provisions for employees covered by the *Commissioner's Determination 3.1: Employment Conditions – Hours of Work, Overtime and Leave*, if they feel it necessary in the circumstances. For example, an employee in isolation in China who is currently unable to return to Australia.

In the event a Chief Executive is considering issuing a direction to an employee, or group of employees where the employee or group of employees have presented for work, that Chief Executive may choose to seek specific advice as to the entitlements for payment to impacted employees e.g. it may be necessary to direct employees to remain absent from the workplace with remuneration. Further advice may need to be sought depending on the workforce situation.



## Transfer of employees to deliver services

As a matter of priority, Chief Executives should identify critical business functions within the agency and ensure that contingency plans give particular focus to options for maintaining delivery of those functions. This may include directing employees to undertake alternative duties, including transferring employees from or to another business unit or agency to support delivery of services which are critical to the wider community. In the event of a transfer pursuant to Section 9(3) of the PS Act, Chief Executives must ensure that **appropriate records are maintained**, and that the employee(s) concerned is/are afforded procedural fairness to the extent possible and practicable before a transfer is made.

Under the circumstances of an outbreak, and in accordance with business continuity planning, Chief Executives and managers at all levels must give due consideration to what would be a 'reasonable direction' to give to an employee in the existing circumstances.

## Employee and Volunteer Contact Details

Although basic employee contact details, including 'next-of-kin' details are obtained from employees and volunteers at the time of their initial engagement, it is recognised that in some cases these records are no longer current. In order to implement any workforce contingency plan, or indeed existing business continuity plans, it will be essential for agencies to have current employee and volunteer contact details that can be easily accessed by authorised employees (eg the agency's Human Resources area or coordinator). This may involve issuing a whole of government instruction for employees to update their contact details (for example in HR21) as part of the contingency planning.

As a minimum, employee contact details should include:

- Home phone
- Mobile phone number
- Home e-mail address
- Residential address
- Next of kin contact details

Chief Executives are responsible for ensuring that;

- Records are available both in electronic and hard-copy format,
- The storage of this information is secure, and
- All employees can be confident that the information is stored securely, and will only be accessed by authorised personnel (a 'cascading' arrangement of 'authorised personnel' may be necessary to provide for these people also becoming ill) for communication purposes.

**Employers of other persons (volunteers, contractors and students) should be reminded of their responsibility to keep current contact details.**

## Health Records

Given the potential risks associated with the spread of an outbreak, it will be essential that agencies maintain an accurate record of:

- Employees and volunteers who contract COVID-19 (according to medical opinion), and
- Employees and volunteers who have had contact with people who are known to have COVID-19 (according to medical opinion).

These records should be maintained in accordance Cabinet Circular PC012 that sets out the Information Privacy Principles for the whole of Government.



**Employers of other persons (volunteers, contractors and students) should be reminded of their responsibility to maintain similar health records as described above.**

## Screening

In order to contain any outbreak, it may be necessary to undertake a health screening procedure of all employees, contractors, clients and visitors; indeed this measure may be imposed by a Government direction as an element of any future containment plan.

If this is required, further information will be provided by SA Health in regards to the most appropriate means of implementation.

## Staff Training

Agencies have sufficient numbers of trained staff to manage 'business as usual', however, in the event of an outbreak 'normal arrangements' may fail to cope with a high percentage of employees on sick leave.

Having identified the critical services within the agency, Chief Executives are strongly encouraged to develop and implement a training program to ensure a much higher number of employees can effectively undertake the identified critical functions. The additional training, in which one or more employee(s) 'shadows' another, will also assist in ensuring that the agency has trained and confident employees able to continue providing essential services.

## Employee Assistance Programs

Agencies should discuss contingency plans with their Employee Assistance Provider to ensure provision of support to affected staff in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak.

Agencies generally have existing external 'Employee Assistance Providers' (EAP). In the

event of an outbreak these programs will be even more essential, as employees and their family members may experience increased psychological pressure due to general concerns relating to the outbreak, illness that impacts on the family (e.g. employee, family member, child's carer or teacher), or death of a family member or friend. In the latter case, the ability of the employee or family member to access grief counselling, may be highly desirable, not only for that person, but for the resultant effect on the employee's ability to continue at, or return to work. The specialist service providers may also be operating under the limitation of diminished resources, and may therefore be unable to provide the service as promptly as normal.

## Industrial Associations

The circumstances associated with the emergence of an outbreak, and the planning for and management of the public sector workforce in the event of an outbreak, will conceivably result in many short-term changes within the working environment. In addition to ensuring genuine consultation with employees, it will be necessary for Chief Executives to ensure appropriate and timely consultation with relevant unions, the management of which will rightly have concern for the health and safety of their members. Agencies can alleviate these concerns by involving union officials and worksite delegates in meaningful consultation, and by being able to demonstrate that, within the agency;

- Contingency plans are in place to manage a range of scenarios that may impact on the workforce, and
- The health, safety and welfare of the employees is the key issue, and that it is being managed in genuine consultation with the employees concerned, and in accordance with established risk management processes.

# FURTHER INFORMATION

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-COVID-19](http://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-COVID-19)

[www.smartraveller.gov.au/news-and-updates/novel-coronavirus-covid-19](http://www.smartraveller.gov.au/news-and-updates/novel-coronavirus-covid-19)

[www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/)

# ATTACHMENT A

## A. Suggested planning for the impact of a COVID-19 outbreak on an organisation

- Identify an **Outbreak Coordinator** and/or team with defined roles and responsibilities for preparedness and response planning. The planning process should include input from employees and employee representatives.
- Develop an **Outbreak Action Plan**, and guidelines for its timely implementation and termination. **Communicate** the plan to all employees, and provide **training** for those employees who will need to perform key roles.
- Identify **essential employees** and other critical inputs (e.g. suppliers, sub-contractor services/products, and logistics) required to maintain business operations by location and function during an outbreak.
- Train and prepare an **ancillary workforce** (e.g. contractors, employees in other roles, volunteers (e.g. retirees)).
- Develop and plan for scenarios likely to result in an **increase or decrease in demand** for your business services during an outbreak.
- Determine the potential impact of an outbreak on business-related domestic and international **travel** (e.g. isolation periods).
- Find up-to-date, reliable outbreak **information** from the Australian Government Department of Health, SA Health, emergency services, and other expert sources.
- Establish an emergency **communications plan** and revise periodically. This plan includes identification of key contacts (with back-ups) and chain of communications (including suppliers and customers).
- Develop, implement and evaluate an exercise to **test the plan**, and revise the plan periodically, and in the light of new information.

# ATTACHMENT B

## B. Suggested planning for the impact of a COVID-19 outbreak on employees

- Forecast and allow for **employee absences** during an outbreak due to factors such as personal illness, family member illness, personal or community containment measures and isolation periods, closure of schools and/or other service providers, and closure or reduction of public transport systems and services.
- Implement clear and open **communication and consultation** with staff to ensure that all employees have a clear understanding of:
  - The organisation's business continuity plan, particularly the elements relating to all aspects of their health, safety and welfare, including containment and prevention measures, payment of salaries, leave provisions, etc.,
  - The essential services that will need to be maintained, and the employees who will be required to perform those duties, and
  - The arrangements intended to provide training to employees who may be required to perform alternative duties (if needed).
- Ensure staff are educated about appropriate hygiene i.e. cough etiquette, hand hygiene, and home isolation (i.e. staying home if unwell).
- Provide sufficient and accessible **infection control** supplies (eg. hand-hygiene products, tissues and receptacles for their disposal) in all worksites.
- If directed by SA Health, implement guidelines regarding social distancing i.e. to modify the frequency and type of **face-to-face** contact (e.g. hand-shaking, seating in meetings, office layout, shared workstations) among employees, and between employees and customers.
- Evaluate employee access to and availability of **healthcare services** during an outbreak, and provide support as needed.
- Evaluate employee access to and availability of **mental health and social services** during an outbreak, including corporate, community, and faith-based resources, and provide support as needed.
- Identify employees and key customers who have **special needs**, and, if applicable, consider those needs when developing contingency plans.
- Enhance **communications and information technology** infrastructures as needed to support employees working from home, and remote customer access.