

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Protecting and Promoting Residents' Health

Cities and states across the country are seeing record caseloads of COVID-19, portending wider spread in the months ahead. The pandemic is dangerously out of control in all regions of the country: rural, urban and suburban, coastal and inland. As a result, municipalities are struggling with renewed restrictions on opening, and healthcare capacity is seriously strained. Local officials have critical roles to play in keeping residents safe by monitoring COVID-19 spread, communicating safe practices, and partnering to ensure people have the healthcare they need. The following are key steps cities can take to protect and promote residents' health.

1 Promote safe practices to prevent spread and foster mutual accountability.

Everyday health and hygiene practices continue to be the most effective measures each person can take to prevent and contain infections. Universally practiced, the "3 Ws" offer the gateway for every city and region to get back to business in a staged, safe manner: Wear a face mask in public where physical distancing is hard to maintain; Watch your distance and stay at least six feet from people who are not in your household; and Wash your hands often.

Local leaders can foster a sense of community and mutual responsibility with consistent communications to build trust, help people deal with uncertainty, and tap into their motivations for acting to stop the spread:

- Get the message across that we are all in this together: every one of us has a responsibility to protect ourselves, our families and our communities.
- Provide information on how residents can [protect themselves and others](#).
- Model wearing face masks and safe health practices.
- Pass a face mask ordinance in your city or town council, mandatory if feasible based on local politics and culture.
- Manage expectations and be prepared to enact stronger measures to mitigate illness and deaths based on local patterns of spread.

Face masks are one of the most powerful weapons against the spread of COVID-19 in communities of all sizes, yet a [Pew Research Center survey](#) shows significant differences in face mask use across political affiliations and racial and ethnic groups. [Real-world studies](#) have shown that mask mandates in 15 states and the District of Columbia led to definitive slowdowns in COVID-19 growth rates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s [updated guidance](#) confirms that face masks protect the wearer as well as others, with individuals and communities benefiting when increasing numbers of people use masks consistently and correctly.

Cities of all sizes have enacted face mask ordinances and offered helpful recommendations on the best types of masks, how to get them, and ideas for businesses. Some have even provided printable signs/flyers. Here's a sampling of requirements and other city materials with links: [Burlleson, TX](#); [Columbia, MO](#); [Charleston, SC](#); [Hays, KS](#); [Kent, OH](#); [Minnetonka, MN](#) and [San Francisco, CA](#). See [Oklahoma City's](#) music video: [Mask Up OKC!](#)

A new resource from the **Societal Experts Action Network** provides [strategies](#) with 10 communications tips that local decision makers can employ to make it more likely that protective behaviors will become habitual:

- Making a behavior easy to start and rewarding to repeat.
 - Tying behaviors to existing habits.
 - Providing alternatives to unwanted behaviors and specific descriptions of desired behaviors.
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2 Apply data, testing, and contact tracing to stage opening and mitigate spread.

Local officials can partner with health departments and healthcare providers to:

- Build out the local COVID-19 data infrastructure and advocate for data disaggregated by race, ethnicity and income to ascertain impact on various groups;
- Increase capacity for widespread testing to track spread, especially in communities that have experienced historic and continuing inequities;
- Support robust contact tracing to identify and safely isolate people who are exposed to COVID-19;
- Track surge capacity in hospitals and ICU beds to treat people sick from COVID-19; and
- When a safe vaccine is available, build confidence/trust among residents and ensure equity in distribution.

A combination of metrics is essential to ascertain local community spread and guide phases of reopening: total COVID-19 cases in the population, new daily case trend (7-day average), test positivity rate (<2% is optimal), public health capacity on contact

tracing (aim to reach >80% of contacts), and hospital and critical care surge capacity to treat people who get sick (<80% of beds filled + sufficient healthcare workers, equipment and supplies).

Cities can lead the way in developing or supporting development of dashboards with measures of COVID-19 spread to guide phases of reopening. Examples include: COVID-19 [New Orleans, LA](#) Dashboard, [District of Columbia](#) Reopening Metrics, and [Washington State's map](#) of risk assessment by counties.

Municipalities with colleges may want to check out the New York Times resource, [Tracking COVID at U.S. Colleges and Universities](#) (scroll down to see list of institutions by states). Another resource is the Brown University School of Public Health's [online risk assessment map](#) on state and county risk levels across the U.S. The map provides guidance on actions for green, yellow, orange or red risk levels.

CVS Health/Aetna has been on the front lines of COVID-19 Testing through their presence in nearly 10,000 communities across the country. They have engaged city, county and state partners as well as other businesses in providing diagnostic testing with schools and employer-based “return to work” programs, and for the entire community.

3 Support mental health services to ensure well-being and safety of people and communities.

Communities continue to face increases in mental health challenges as a result of illnesses and deaths associated with COVID-19, as well as mitigation activities that increase the risk of social isolation. A [report](#) from the CDC found that younger adults, people of color, essential workers, and unpaid adult caregivers were experiencing disproportionately worse mental health outcomes, increased substance use, and elevated suicidal ideation during the pandemic. Also at risk: people experiencing homelessness, struggling with substance use disorders, and/or living with trauma and violence. Racial and ethnic disparities pervade access to mental health services.

In response to these challenges, city leaders can build partnerships to:

- Shift from punitive to public health approaches to homelessness, as in [Huntington, WV](#), [Indianapolis, IN](#), and [San Antonio, TX](#).
- Work in partnership with hospitals, community health centers, community-based organizations and faith-based organizations, among others, to provide support and resources to those struggling with mental health challenges.

- Advance trauma-informed approaches to train city staff, first responders, and essential personnel in how to best manage trauma among COVID-19 patients, families, bystanders and impacted communities.
- Integrate wraparound services such as food support, healthcare services and job training in [holistic approaches](#) that improve community health and well-being for residents.

It's important to remember that local officials must attend to their [own self-care](#) as well as that of the [city's workforce](#) and the broader [community](#). **The City of Fishers, IN** has resources for the public that convey care and support for its community, and the [Trauma Intervention Program](#) in Maine assists first responders by providing support to people in crisis.

4 Expand healthcare access to treat COVID-19 and pre-existing health conditions.

COVID-19 not only increases stress and fear, it also overburdens the healthcare system and disrupts quality of care. All residents, especially people of color with multiple conditions, continue to have health needs that are more difficult to address during the pandemic. Reliable access to affordable, ongoing and preventive health services is always critical and even moreso at a time when it prevents further strain on overburdened hospitals. But many communities lack these services, especially in rural and low-income areas. Adding to the challenge is the fact that school closures impede student access to school-based health providers who are often a vital resource for the most disadvantaged populations.

Municipal leaders can support reliable access to healthcare for all local residents in these ways:

- Collaborate with state and regional lawmakers to expand healthcare access points—for example, by creating temporary field hospitals.
- Work with partners on temporary efforts to grow the healthcare workforce—for example, by providing short-term flexibility for [out-of-state licensed providers to provide telehealth](#) and/or for licensed providers to practice outside the scope of their license.
- Advocate for telehealth options and expanded use of telehealth.
- Issue statewide calls for providers to combat the crisis (e.g., in [New Jersey](#) and [Oregon](#)).
- Communicate through trusted partners, city government portals and texts, community-based organizations, and other channels with timely, safe and accessible information on where to find quality, affordable care (with intentional efforts to reach communities that have experienced inequities).

- Join in and support efforts to provide supplies and resources (e.g., masks, gloves, gowns, tests, etc.) for patients, healthcare workers, caregivers and first responders to limit COVID spread.
- Ensure financial resources from federal, state, and local entities are getting where they are most needed to enable reliable access to healthcare treatment and services.

5 Connect children and families to nature and outdoors for physical and mental health.

At a time of physical distancing, municipal leaders can encourage residents to go outdoors to exercise and enjoy nature. Getting outside can combat social isolation, maintain physical and mental health, enrich connections with parks and public spaces, and set a pattern for a healthier life. Yet not all residents have yards or safe and easy access to parks and/or streets with trees and greenery. [Parks that serve a majority of people of color](#) on average are smaller and serve far more people per acre than parks that serve a majority white population.

Local leaders have a key role to play in bridging the nature access gap and promoting compliance with state and federal guidelines regarding safety and distancing while outdoors. Among the steps your city can take:

Clarify via public announcement and the city's website that parks, greenways, and trails are open with physical distancing rules in effect (and whether or not playgrounds, benches, and recreation centers are off limits).

- Encourage residents to get outdoors at least once a day in nature.
- Collaborate with parks, schools and [libraries](#) to offer and promote neighborhood-based and virtual options to connect with nature.
- See [Finding Nature](#) for more resources on government actions to support spending time outdoors.

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- [Atlanta, GA Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms](#), and [Boston, MA Mayor Marty Walsh](#) used Twitter to encourage safe outdoor activity.
 - The Virtual Rec Center in [Lake Forest, IL](#) includes park information, walking program schedules, an outdoor scavenger hunt and educational resources.
 - [Willamalane, OR](#) features a [Families at Home](#) website with nature-based activities and park and trail directory.
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