

For immediate release

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Contact: Gayle Shirley, Communications Manager, 406-457-8908, 457-8900

Organizing a Big Event? Keep COVID-19 in Mind

If you've ever organized a big event – like a fundraiser, rodeo, wedding, or high school reunion – you know how much work and worry goes into making sure that every detail is perfect. Imagine adding the specter of COVID-19 to your list of planning concerns!

COVID-19 is the highly contagious respiratory disease that's been making national and international headlines for the past two months. So far, no cases have been reported in Montana, but public health officials fear it's only a matter of time.

“If we do have a serious outbreak, one of the strategies we have the legal authority to use is to ask people to modify, postpone, or cancel large events,” said Eric Merchant, administrator of the Disease Control and Prevention Division at Lewis and Clark Public Health (LCPH). “Right now we're not advising that, but as the COVID-19 outbreak evolves, we strongly encourage event organizers to prepare for this possibility.”

To begin with, stay informed about the local COVID-19 situation. One of the best ways to do so is to visit the Lewis and Clark Public Health web page at www.lccountymt.gov/covid-19. You can also call LCPH at 457-8900 or email publichealth@lccountymt.gov.

Events Already Scheduled

For those who have events scheduled in the near future, LCPH recommends that organizers:

- Let people know, in advance if possible, that they'll be turned away if they show any symptoms of being sick.
- Have hand sanitizer, tissues, and trash cans at all entrances and strongly encourage their use.
- Post preventive measures at entrances (see “Use Good Hygiene” below).
- Attempt to keep people as far apart as the venue and program allows.
- Clean and disinfect all objects and surfaces that people might touch during the event. If the event will last longer than an hour, disinfect once an hour.
- Consider whether you can use teleconferencing, television, radio, or other alternatives to hold your event. If it's a fundraiser, consider adding an option to donate online.
- Consider postponing your event until the COVID-19 outbreak is over.
- Be prepared to cancel or postpone your event if the pandemic reaches Lewis and Clark County.

“Unfortunately, there’s no way to predict when this disease will run its course,” Merchant said. “It could last for a long time.”

Planning Future Events

One way to be ready to roll with the coronavirus punches is to develop a contingency plan based on the size and duration of your event, as well as how many people you expect to attend.

Here are some other things to consider:

Your Venue

Talk to the manager of your venue in advance about its cancellation policy and whether you can get a full or partial refund if you are required to cancel.

“We hope venue operators will be a little more flexible about refunds under these circumstances,” Merchant said. “And we hope event organizers will be flexible, too, about refunding ticket prices or entry fees to participants. I don’t think anyone wants to be responsible for helping to spread this potentially fatal disease.”

As you’re selecting your venue, look for a space where you can separate anyone who becomes sick during your event and can’t leave immediately. If possible, have disposable face masks available for them to use until they leave.

During your event, provide COVID-19 prevention supplies, like sinks with soap, hand sanitizers, tissues, trash baskets, and disposable face masks (for those who start having symptoms). Make sure surfaces and objects that people will touch are disinfected before the event. Consider disinfecting common hand-contact areas (like doorknobs and pens) at least once each hour during the event.

Your Staff

If you’ve hired staff or designated people to fill certain roles during your event, keep in mind that they might have to stay home if they’re sick or caring for a sick child or other family member. Public health officials may recommend closing schools temporarily, and that could prompt staff absences, too.

If you’re working with a caterer or other event provider, make sure they have information about COVID-19 and require their staff to stay home if sick. Make sure food servers wear gloves and follow required food-safety standards. Make sure food is protected from contamination by providing serving utensils and dish covers.

Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training for those roles, including your own. Consider avoiding the use of event staff who are at high risk for complications from COVID-19, like those over 65 and those who have chronic medical conditions.

Your Attendees

Encourage participants to stay away from your event if they're sick and to leave if they start having symptoms of COVID-19. These include fever, cough, and shortness of breath.

Share information about COVID-19 with staff, participants, suppliers, vendors, and others. Keep them up to date on your local situation, and designate a way for them to communicate with you if they have concerns. You can find timely and accurate information about COVID-19 on the web page listed above.

Keep in mind that those over age 65 and those with chronic medical conditions are most likely to be severely impacted by COVID-19.

Use Good Hygiene

Merchant also urged all county residents to take seriously the everyday precautions that can help prevent the spread of flu and other germs, including coronavirus.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing;
- If soap and water aren't available, use a hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol;
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick;
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth;
- Stay home when you're sick;
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue, and then throw the tissue in the trash; and
- Clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that may be contaminated.