

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Q&A for Employees of Maine State Government* March 20, 2020

The State of Maine is in an unprecedented moment in time. Governor Mills has declared a Civil State of Emergency and health care professionals and Maine CDC experts are working around the clock to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

State government and its employees provide critical services to the people of Maine every day, and we are working to ensure that State government can deliver these services while also safeguarding the health and wellbeing of State employees. This responsibility to continue the operations of the government, during this emergency when some services are needed the most, remains paramount, and you—our valued and dedicated employees—are essential to carrying out the mission.

All agencies are working to implement methods to support social distancing and limit potential exposure through reassignment of work areas, telework where able, and more flexible leave options where appropriate, understanding these options are limited, especially for our 24/7 operations and public safety programs.

From Dr. Shah today: “What we mean by social distancing is physical distancing. Let’s keep those social connections strong and intact.” This is our opportunity to spread kindness and caring through phone calls, email, social media and other electronic outreach.

Things are changing almost hourly, and it’s true that guidance today may change tomorrow. Stay connected to updated information. maine.gov/dafs/covid-19

Here are answers to questions you’ve asked.

What are the results of testing for COVID-19 in Maine?

March 20, 2020 COVID-19 total test data for Maine: 2,264 negative results and 56 positive results.

This changes on a day-to-day basis. The Maine CDC is providing daily updates on their website, which you can find [HERE](#).

Will I be told if someone I’m working with tests positive for COVID-19?

Yes. Your health and safety are of the utmost importance to us. Please rest assured, if and when the State is made aware of a case of COVID-19 for a state employee, coworkers in the employee’s work area will be informed.

As you may be aware from the Maine CDC’s public reporting of COVID-19 confirmed cases (which includes the age, range, gender, and county location of the individual – as most other states do), law prohibits us from identifying an employee by name when sharing positive test information. Therefore, any notification to coworkers must and will be made without mention of the employee’s name.

What does Maine CDC recommend if an employee tests positive for COVID-19?

- ~~Maine CDC recommends closing a specific office area (not necessarily a whole office or building), if an individual in that office area tests positive for COVID-19.~~
- ~~Employees who work in the same office area as the affected individual should self-quarantine at home and observe for symptoms for 14 days.~~
- ~~Those who develop symptoms during that 14-day period should contact their health care provider for medical advice.~~
- ~~During the 14-day office area closure, the area should be thoroughly cleaned.~~
- ~~After the 14-day closure period, employees may return to work if they are not diagnosed with COVID-19, are not in their 14-day window for self-quarantine, do not have any symptoms and did not have symptoms during their period of self-quarantine.~~
- ~~If multiple people in an office are affected with COVID-19, the period of closure should be based on the date of the last diagnosed individual's interaction with employees.~~

~~NOTE: other offices/programs/divisions within the same office building need not close.~~

Updated March 30, 2020:

- Maine CDC may recommend closing a specific office area (not necessarily a whole office or building) for cleaning, if an individual in that office area tests positive for COVID-19.
 - During the closure, the area should be thoroughly cleaned according to US CDC guidance.
- Employees who work in the same office area and are identified as close contacts of the affected individual should self-quarantine at home and observe for symptoms for 14 days.
 - Close contacts are identified through an epidemiologic investigation and will be notified that they need to go into quarantine.
 - Those who develop symptoms during that 14-day period may contact their health care provider for medical advice.
- After the closure, employees may return to work if they have no symptoms
NOTE: other offices/programs/divisions within the same office building need not close.

What action is the State taking now to limit my exposure to COVID-19?

We are working to keep employees informed and educated. Find communications [here](#). In addition, consistent with the guidance sent to all employees on March 16, state agencies are encouraging social distancing to limit potential exposure through lessening the number of employees in work areas, temporarily increasing telework, and providing more flexible leave options as appropriate (understanding these options are limited or unavailable for our 24/7 operations and public safety programs).

Below are answers to some of the questions we have received specific to working from home and leave time options:

1. Am I automatically approved to stay home to work if I am already equipped to telework (have a laptop and remote security access)?

Decisions regarding approval for telework are made at the department/agency level. It may be that some employees already set up for telework will be immediately approved to work from home. However, it may not meet operational needs to have all those with remote capabilities to be away from the office each day. Agencies may have operational needs requiring an employee with a laptop and remote access to be in the office or rotate days in the office. Additionally, appropriate social distancing may occur by having some employees out of the office and others remaining in the office. Please work with your supervisor and manager to determine how to best meet operational needs.

2. I have never been able to work from home before – can I work from home now? In some cases, it may be possible due to the extraordinary circumstances related to this emergency for people who would not typically work from home to be able to perform work remotely. Departments and agencies are trying to be flexible to aid in social distancing; however, it may be that social distancing occurs in the office once others are home working. If you are approved to telework, please be aware these arrangements are not designed to be long-term and are only approved due to current circumstances related to COVID-19. Some employees may be approved to work from home for some days but be required to be in the office on other days.

3. Do I need to sign an agreement for telework?

You must have management approval to work from home. Some departments and agencies have formal agreements in place or are designing them for this temporary COVID-19 situation. It is up to the agency whether or not they require a formal telework agreement before you work at home for these temporary arrangements. Even if you did not initially sign a telework agreement, your agency may ask for a signed agreement to formalize expectations at a later date.

4. Are there guidelines or tips for working from home?

If approved to work from home, some tips to keep in mind:

- **Seek approval before taking home any materials that contain confidential information.** Remember to exercise caution, and to maintain confidentiality even with family members.
- **Seek approval before bringing any additional office equipment beyond a laptop home with you.**
- **Trust is critical.** Be available when you say you will be, ask for help when needed, and consistently deliver quality work.
- **Stay connected with your team.** Communicate with your co-workers and supervisor as much as you normally would, as best you can. Develop a schedule and stick to it. Your availability while teleworking should be equal to in-office availability. In addition to helping you with your work, this will keep you from feeling isolated.
- **Remain flexible** and willing to make changes to meet operational and public needs.
- **More guidance on working from home can be found at [maine.gov/dafs/covid-19](https://www.maine.gov/dafs/covid-19)**

5. My children's school is closed, and I have no childcare options. Can I work from home or take leave time to care for them?

The answer to this question will depend on the nature of your work, whether or not your job can be done remotely, and if there are sufficient employees available to work to ensure operations of the State can continue. Supervisors are being encouraged to look at each employee's situation to determine if telework or leave time are options (if leave time is an option; see #6 below). It is also important to remember that any time an employee spends caring for dependents while teleworking is not counted as time worked.

There are some employees providing essential services in 24/7 facilities and public safety roles who will be required to work if well.

A new federal law not yet enacted may provide additional options. Stay tuned for more information over the next few weeks.

6. What do I use for Leave Time?

In response to COVID-19, the use of sick leave has been expanded beyond the contractual language for absences related to COVID-19. At this time and until further guidance, you may use **SICK LEAVE** for absences, as follows:

a. You are Sick

In accordance with language and standard practice, if you are sick, stay home, and use your sick time.

b. You are Taking Care of Sick Dependent(s)

Also in accordance with contract language and standard practice, if you are required to attend to sick dependents (as defined in bargaining unit agreements), do so and use sick time.

c. You are Taking Care of Children Due to COVID-19 School or Daycare Closure. FOR THIS COVID-19 EMERGENCY ONLY and only for a limited time (being reviewed regularly), if you are not required to work to provide essential operations, and you are not able to work from home, and you must be home to care for young children due to the COVID-19 closure of schools or your daycare, you may record leave time as SICK LEAVE.

d. You/Someone with whom You Live Must Stay Home per CDC Guidance on COVID-19

To provide more flexibility for those who need to be away from work for reasons related to COVID-19, sick time may be used if you or your family member must stay home per CDC guidance, even though you/they may not be sick.

e. You are in a Higher Risk COVID-19 Group

If you are considered at higher risk under CDC guidelines (elderly or with a medical condition that causes higher risk per CDC guidelines), you may be eligible to use sick time. This may not be an option for those necessary to provide essential operations.

At this time, if you are approved to be out of work due to COVID-19, **you may also be eligible to use your available vacation, comp, or personal leave.**

A new federal law not yet enacted may provide additional options. Stay tuned for more information over the next few weeks.

Also note: there are employees providing essential services in 24/7 facilities and public safety roles who will be required to work if well.

7. What if I run out of paid sick, vacation, comp time and personal leave?

If you are out of work due to COVID-19 reasons and run out of paid sick, vacation, comp and personal leave options, talk with your supervisor and Human Resources office. We will work to find options to keep you in pay status. This may mean revisiting work from home and other leave options.

A new federal law not yet enacted may provide additional options. Stay tuned for more information over the next few weeks.

8. I have a compromised immune system or underlying condition. Can I work from home or take sick leave?

Ensuring the health and safety of our at-risk employees is the primary concern, and supervisors and their human resources office will work with employees who come forward with health concerns to identify if there are other work areas that provide greater social distancing, any potential telework options, or the use of leave time, whichever is appropriate. See the leave options above in items 6 and 7 if leave time is the approved option. Note that some employees providing essential services in 24/7 facilities and public safety roles may be required to work if they are well.

A new federal law not yet enacted may provide additional options. Stay tuned for more information over the next few weeks.

9. Can I be required to report to work?

Possibly. The services provided by the State of Maine are critical during this unprecedented time when the needs are great, and State government remains open. The work of all Departments is important, and there are some operations which will require employees to report to work without options for telework or leave time. Please discuss your options with your supervisor and manager and raise any concerns to Human Resources. Understand not all requests for telework or leave will be granted, as the operational needs of the State must be met.

10. Will I lose my health insurance if I go on unpaid status?

If you are out of work due to COVID-19 and go on an unpaid leave, the State will continue to pay its share of your benefits (the 'employer' or 'State' share). You are still responsible for paying your share of benefits for yourself and any dependents you may have on your insurance plans (the 'employee' share). You will be billed for the employee share of health, dental, life, and any other insurance. Please reach out to your Human Resources office if you have concerns with keeping your insurance.