Governor Abbott Lifts Mask Mandate, Opens Texas 100 Percent

March 2, 2021 | Austin, Texas | Press Release

Governor Greg Abbott today issued an Executive Order (GA-34) lifting the mask mandate in Texas and increasing capacity of all businesses and facilities in the state to 100 percent. The Governor made the announcement at Montelongo's Mexican Restaurant in Lubbock in an address to the Lubbock Chamber of Commerce.

"With the medical advancements of vaccines and antibody therapeutic drugs, Texas now has the tools to protect Texans from the virus," said Governor Abbott. "We must now do more to restore livelihoods and normalcy for Texans by opening Texas 100 percent. Make no mistake, COVID-19 has not disappeared, but it is clear from the recoveries, vaccinations, reduced hospitalizations, and safe practices that Texans are using that state mandates are no longer needed. Today’s announcement does not abandon safe practices that Texans have mastered over the past year. Instead, it is a reminder that each person has a role to play in their own personal safety and the safety of others. With this executive order, we are ensuring that all businesses and families in Texas have the freedom to determine their own destiny."

During his remarks, the Governor discussed the incredible advancements that Texas has made that allow the state to open fully and lift the mask mandate—noting the rapid increase of vaccines. Nearly 5.7 million vaccine shots have been
administered to Texans, and the state is now administering almost one million shots each week. By next Wednesday, about 7 million shots will have been administered in Texas and over half of seniors in Texas will have received a vaccine shot. By the end of March, every senior who wants a vaccine should be able to get one. The vaccine supply continues to increase so rapidly that more and more Texans will soon be eligible to receive a vaccine.

The Governor noted that Texas has a surplus of personal protective equipment and can perform over 100,000 COVID-19 tests a day. The state has invested in a variety of anti-body therapeutic drugs that have kept thousands of Texans out of hospitals. Texans have also adopted daily habits that reduce the risk of COVID-19 exposure and infection. More than 2.5 million Texans who were lab confirmed for COVID-19 have recovered since the beginning of the pandemic, and experts note the total number of Texans who have recovered from COVID-19 is likely 4-5 times that amount. The number of active COVID-19 cases is the lowest since November—meaning more Texans are recovering from COVID-19 than contracting it.

This executive order rescinds most of the Governor’s earlier executive orders related to COVID-19. Effective next Wednesday, all businesses of any type may open to 100% capacity. Additionally, this order ends the statewide mask mandate in Texas. Businesses may still limit capacity or implement additional safety protocols at their own discretion.

If COVID-19 hospitalizations in any of the 22 hospital regions in Texas get above 15% of the hospital bed capacity in that region for seven straight days, a County Judge in that region may use COVID-19 mitigation strategies. However, County Judges may not impose jail time for not following COVID-19 orders nor may any penalties be imposed for failing to wear a face mask. If restrictions are imposed at a County level, those restrictions may not include reducing capacity to less than 50% for any type of entity.

View the Governor’s Executive Order.
March 2, 2021

The Honorable Ruth R. Hughes
Secretary of State
State Capitol Room 1E.8
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Secretary Hughes:

Pursuant to his powers as Governor of the State of Texas, Greg Abbott has issued the following:

Executive Order No. GA-34 relating to the opening of Texas in response to the COVID-19 disaster.

The original executive order is attached to this letter of transmittal.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregory S. Davidson
Executive Clerk to the Governor
GSD/gsd

Attachment
WHEREAS, I, Greg Abbott, Governor of Texas, issued a disaster proclamation on March 13, 2020, certifying under Section 418.014 of the Texas Government Code that the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) poses an imminent threat of disaster for all counties in the State of Texas; and

WHEREAS, in each subsequent month effective through today, I have renewed the disaster declaration for all Texas counties; and

WHEREAS, I have issued executive orders and suspensions of Texas laws in response to COVID-19, aimed at protecting the health and safety of Texans and ensuring an effective response to this disaster; and

WHEREAS, I issued Executive Order GA-08 on March 19, 2020, mandating social-distancing restrictions in accordance with guidelines promulgated by President Donald J. Trump and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); and

WHEREAS, I subsequently issued a series of superseding executive orders aiming to achieve the least restrictive means of combatting the evolving threat to public health by adjusting social-distancing restrictions while implementing a safe, strategic plan to reopen Texas; and

WHEREAS, under Executive Order GA-32, in effect since October 14, 2020, most establishments have been able to operate up to at least 75 percent of total occupancy, except in some areas with high hospitalizations as defined in that order, where most establishments have been able to operate up to at least 50 percent of total occupancy; and

WHEREAS, I also issued Executive Order GA-29, regarding the use of face coverings to control the spread of COVID-19, and a series of executive orders, most recently GA-31, limiting certain medical surgeries and procedures; and

WHEREAS, COVID-19 hospitalizations and the rate of new COVID-19 cases have steadily declined due to the millions of Texans who have voluntarily been vaccinated, many more who are otherwise immune, improved medical treatments for COVID-19 patients, abundant supplies of testing and personal protective equipment, and Texans' adherence to safe practices like social distancing, hand sanitizing, and use of face coverings; and

WHEREAS, in the Texas Disaster Act of 1975, the legislature charged the governor with the responsibility "for meeting ... the dangers to the state and people presented by
disasters” under Section 418.011 of the Texas Government Code, and expressly granted the governor broad authority to fulfill that responsibility; and

WHEREAS, under Section 418.012, the “governor may issue executive orders … hav[ing] the force and effect of law;”

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Greg Abbott, Governor of Texas, by virtue of the power and authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the State of Texas, and in accordance with guidance from medical advisors, do hereby order the following on a statewide basis effective at 12:01 a.m. on March 10, 2021:

1. In all counties not in an area with high hospitalizations as defined below:
   a. there are no COVID-19-related operating limits for any business or other establishment; and
   b. individuals are strongly encouraged to wear face coverings over the nose and mouth wherever it is not feasible to maintain six feet of social distancing from another person not in the same household, but no person may be required by any jurisdiction to wear or to mandate the wearing of a face covering.

   “Area with high hospitalizations” means any Trauma Service Area that has had seven consecutive days in which the number of COVID-19 hospitalized patients as a percentage of total hospital capacity exceeds 15 percent, until such time as the Trauma Service Area has seven consecutive days in which the number of COVID-19 hospitalized patients as a percentage of total hospital capacity is 15 percent or less. A current list of areas with high hospitalizations will be maintained at www.dshs.texas.gov/ga3031.

2. In any county located in an area with high hospitalizations as defined above:
   a. there are no state-imposed COVID-19-related operating limits for any business or other establishment;
   b. there is no state-imposed requirement to wear a face covering; and
   c. the county judge may use COVID-19-related mitigation strategies; provided, however, that:
      i. business and other establishments may not be required to operate at less than 50 percent of total occupancy, with no operating limits allowed to be imposed for religious services (including those conducted in churches, congregations, and houses of worship), public and private schools and institutions of higher education, and child-care services;
      ii. no jurisdiction may impose confinement in jail as a penalty for violating any order issued in response to COVID-19; and
      iii. no jurisdiction may impose a penalty of any kind for failure to wear a face covering or failure to mandate that customers or employees wear face coverings, except that a legally authorized official may act to enforce trespassing laws and remove violators at the request of a business establishment or other property owner.

3. In providing or obtaining services, every person (including individuals, businesses, and other legal entities) is strongly encouraged to use good-faith efforts and available resources to follow the Texas Department of State Health Services (DShS) health recommendations, found at www.dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus.

4. Nothing in this executive order precludes businesses or other establishments from requiring employees or customers to follow additional hygiene measures, including the wearing of a face covering.

5. Nursing homes, state supported living centers, assisted living facilities, and long-
term care facilities should follow guidance from the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) regarding visitations, and should follow infection control policies and practices set forth by HHSC, including minimizing the movement of staff between facilities whenever possible.

6. Public schools may operate as provided by, and under the minimum standard health protocols found in, guidance issued by the Texas Education Agency. Private schools and institutions of higher education are encouraged to establish similar standards.

7. County and municipal jails should follow guidance from the Texas Commission on Jail Standards regarding visitations.

8. Executive Orders GA-17, GA-25, GA-29, and GA-31 are rescinded in their entirety.

9. This executive order shall supersede any conflicting order issued by local officials in response to the COVID-19 disaster, but only to the extent that such a local order restricts services allowed by this executive order or allows gatherings restricted by this executive order. Pursuant to Section 418.016(a) of the Texas Government Code, I hereby suspend Sections 418.1015(b) and 418.108 of the Texas Government Code, Chapter 81, Subchapter E of the Texas Health and Safety Code, and any other relevant statutes, to the extent necessary to ensure that local officials do not impose restrictions in response to the COVID-19 disaster that are inconsistent with this executive order, provided that local officials may enforce this executive order as well as local restrictions that are consistent with this executive order.

10. All existing state executive orders relating to COVID-19 are amended to eliminate confinement in jail as an available penalty for violating the executive orders. To the extent any order issued by local officials in response to the COVID-19 disaster would allow confinement in jail as an available penalty for violating a COVID-19-related order, that order allowing confinement in jail is superseded, and I hereby suspend all relevant laws to the extent necessary to ensure that local officials do not confine people in jail for violating any executive order or local order issued in response to the COVID-19 disaster.

This executive order supersedes Executive Orders GA-17, GA-25, GA-29, GA-31, and GA-32, but does not supersede Executive Orders GA-10 or GA-13. This executive order shall remain in effect and in full force unless it is modified, amended, rescinded, or superseded by the governor. This executive order may also be amended by proclamation of the governor.

Given under my hand this the 2nd day of March, 2021.

GREG ABBOTT
Governor
This guidance document is being provided based on the public health situation as we understand it today and takes effect immediately, regardless of whether a school system starts at the date currently planned or the local school board votes to change the school system’s calendar to delay the start of the school year. Changes to the public health situation in the coming months may necessitate changes to this guidance.

The guidance in this document is authorized by Executive Order GA-34, which has the effect of state law under Section 418.012 of the Texas Government Code. Executive Order GA-34 provides TEA with the legal authority to publish requirements for the operation of public school systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. TEA recommends that public school systems consult with their local public health authorities and local legal counsel before making final decisions regarding the implementation of this guidance.

This guidance addresses:
- On campus and virtual instruction
- Administrative activities by teachers, staff, or students that occur on school campuses or virtually
- Non-UIL extracurricular sports and activities
- Any other activities that teachers, staff, or students must complete that cannot be accomplished virtually
- Visits by parents and the general public

It is recommended that after-school providers and other programs that operate in conjunction with campuses follow this guidance in coordination with the campus(es) they serve.

**Public Health Considerations**

The virus that causes COVID-19 can infect people of all ages, and school system leaders should do everything feasible to keep students, teachers, staff, and our communities safe. That said, research from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), among others, has found that while children do get infected by COVID-19 and some severe outcomes have been reported in children, relatively few children with COVID-19 are hospitalized or have severe symptoms. Furthermore, the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that COVID-19 risks must be balanced with the need for children to attend school in person, given that lack of physical access to school leads to a number of negative consequences, placing “children and adolescents at considerable risk of morbidity, and in some case, mortality.”

While it is not possible to eliminate all risk of furthering the spread of COVID-19, the current science suggests there are many steps schools can take to reduce the risks to students, teachers, staff, and
their families significantly. This guidance document contains information on four sets of practices that minimize the likelihood of viral spread, including some that are requirements for all schools and others that are recommendations:

1. PROVIDE NOTICE: Requirements for parental and public notices
2. PREVENT: Required practices to prevent the virus from entering the school
3. RESPOND: Required practices to respond to a test-confirmed case in the school
4. MITIGATE: Recommended and required practices to reduce likely spread inside the school

The prevention and mitigation practices outlined in this document are designed to significantly reduce the likelihood that a coronavirus outbreak occurs on campus. Consistently implementing recommendations to the extent feasible is the best way to reduce the potential negative impact of infection on students’ educational experiences. Additionally, systems should consider stringently applying recommended practices to adults on campuses, even when it might not be feasible to do so for students, to more fully protect adult teachers and staff who are generally at greater risk from COVID-19 than students.

There will almost certainly be situations that necessitate temporary school closure due to positive COVID-19 cases in schools. Parents, educators, and school administrators should be prepared for this in the event that it occurs, while actively working to prevent it through prevention and mitigation practices.

**PROVIDE NOTICE: Parental and Public Notices**

**Developing a Plan for On-Campus Activities and Instruction**

School systems must post for parents and the general public, one week prior to the start of on-campus activities and instruction, a summary of the plan they will follow to mitigate COVID-19 spread in their schools based on the requirements and recommendations outlined here. This summary document can follow any format the school system deems appropriate to communicate the information, should broadly address the major points in this guidance, and must be posted on the school system homepage or another easily found area on the system website. The document should be developed in consultation with teachers, staff, and parents to ensure the plan provides for the safety of teachers, staff, and students. Neither this summary document nor any local school systems’ reopening plans are subject to approval by any government entity.

It is recommended that, within this summary, school systems designate a staff person or group that is responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns and clearly communicate for all school staff and families who this person or group is and how to contact them.

**Attendance and Enrollment**

- Per Texas Education Code (TEC), §25.092, students must attend 90% of the days a course is offered (with some exceptions) in order to be awarded credit for the course and/or to be promoted to the next grade. This requirement remains in force during the 2020-21 school year.
o Given the public health situation, student attendance may be earned through the delivery of virtual instruction.

o Any parent may request that their student be offered virtual instruction from any school system that offers such instruction. If a parent who chooses virtual instruction wants their child to switch to an on-campus instructional setting, they can do so, but school systems are permitted to limit these transitions to occur only at the end of a grading period, if it will be beneficial to the student’s instructional quality. If a parent requests virtual instruction and the school does not offer it, the parent may enroll in another school that does offer it for transfer students.

o School systems must provide on-campus attendance as an option for students otherwise entitled to attend school who follow this document’s required public health procedures and whose parents wish them to attend on campus, subject to school closure and the exceptions listed in this document. In high school, school systems may offer a less than daily on campus instructional experience if there is a need to reduce the total count of people on campus at any one time to maintain social distancing.

o In order to facilitate a safe, effective back-to-school transition process, during a period up to the first four weeks of school, which can be extended by an additional four weeks by vote of the school board, school systems may temporarily limit access to on-campus instruction. As a result, some parents opting for their student(s) to attend on campus may be required to start with remote instruction temporarily, although any family who does not have Internet access and/or devices for distance learning at home is still entitled to have their student receive on-campus instruction each day during this transition period, as they are during the rest of the year. School systems must clearly describe this transition process in their posted summary of their plans to operate campuses safely, as required above.

o School systems are required to provide parents a notice of their public education enrollment and attendance rights and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic using a document published by TEA. This information should be supplied at time of enrollment, or at the earliest practical time after enrollment. This notice is posted at https://tea.texas.gov/coronavirus and can be found in English & Spanish.

PREVENT: Practices to Prevent the Virus from Entering the School

Stay-at-Home Period for Close Contacts of Individuals Who Tested Positive
For individuals who are close contacts to individuals who tested positive, a 14-day stay-at-home period was previously advised by the CDC based on the incubation period of the virus.

As of December 2, 2020, the CDC amended their guidance to allow two shorter options for the stay-at-home period. Based on current CDC guidance, the stay-at-home period can end for individuals experiencing no symptoms:

- On Day 10 after close contact exposure without testing,
- On Day 7 after close contact exposure and after receiving a negative test result.

If individuals return to school from these shorter stay-at-home windows, they should regularly monitor themselves for symptoms to ensure they remain symptom-free and take appropriate precautions (e.g., more consistent mask usage) for the duration of the 14-day incubation period.
Finally, the CDC has also advised that critical infrastructure services—which includes schools—may permit close contact staff members who are asymptomatic to continue to work in select instances when it is necessary to preserve school operations. Per the CDC, this option should be used only in limited circumstances. When using this option, school systems may consider adding additional protocols to increase monitoring for these individuals, which might include the use of COVID-19 tests (e.g., on Day 3 and/or Day 7 after the close contact exposure).

Taking into account all of the above, school systems may apply any of the following stay-at-home periods to those individuals who are identified as close contacts, in the absence of specific control orders issued by their local health authority regarding the identified individuals. Specifically, the stay-at-home period can be:

- 10 days after the last close contact, so long as they continue to monitor themselves daily for symptoms and take appropriate precautions through day 14
- 7 days after the last close contact, after receiving a negative test result (administered at least 5 days after the last close contact), so long as they continue to monitor themselves daily for symptoms and take appropriate precautions through day 14
- For staff who are necessary to preserve school operations, school systems can choose not to require any stay-at-home period, so long as the affected staff continue to monitor themselves daily for symptoms and take appropriate precautions through day 14, and schools can consider the use of rapid tests for these individuals
- 14 days after the last close contact

**Screening Questions for COVID-19 Before Campus Access**

1. School systems must require teachers and staff to self-screen for COVID-19 symptoms before coming onto campus each day. Symptoms are listed at the end of this document. The self-screening should include teachers and staff taking their own temperature. Teachers and staff must report to the school system if they themselves have COVID-19 symptoms or are test-confirmed with COVID-19, and, if so, they must remain off campus until they meet the criteria for re-entry as noted below. Additionally, they must report to the school system if they have had close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed with COVID-19, as defined at the end of this document, and, if so, must follow school system policy for the stay-at-home period, aligned to guidance in this document.

2. Parents must ensure they do not send a child to school on campus if the child has COVID-19 symptoms (as listed in this document) or is test-confirmed with COVID-19, and instead should opt to receive remote instruction until the below conditions for re-entry are met. Parents may also opt to have their students receive remote instruction if their child has had close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed with COVID-19 until the end of the school system’s stay-at-home period, if no symptoms have been reported. School systems may consider screening students for COVID-19 as well. Screening is accomplished by asking questions by phone or other electronic methods and/or in person. The screening questions should also be asked of a student’s parent if that parent will be dropping off or picking up their child from inside the school. Regularly performing a forehead temperature check of otherwise asymptomatic students in school is not recommended, but the practice is also not prohibited by this guidance.
3. Excluding parental drop-off and pick-up as discussed above, before visitors are allowed onto campuses, school systems must screen all visitors to determine if the visitors have COVID-19 symptoms (as listed in this document) or are test-confirmed with COVID-19. When practical, screening questions could be supplemented with temperature checks of adults. If a visitor has symptoms of COVID-19, or is test-confirmed positive with COVID-19, they must remain off campus until they meet the criteria for re-entry as noted below. Additionally, school systems must screen to determine if visitors have had close contact with an individual who is test-confirmed with COVID-19, and, if so, the visitor must follow school system policy regarding the stay-at-home period, aligned to guidance in this document.

**Individuals Confirmed or Suspected with COVID-19**

1. Any individuals who themselves either: (a) are test-confirmed to have COVID-19; or (b) experience the symptoms of COVID-19 (listed below) must stay at home throughout the infection period, and cannot return to campus until the school system screens the individual to determine any of the below conditions for campus re-entry have been met:
   - In the case of an individual who is symptomatic and is diagnosed with COVID-19, the individual may return to school when all three of the following criteria are met:
     - at least one day (24 hours) has passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications);
     - the individual has improvement in symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); and
     - at least ten days have passed since symptoms first appeared.
   - In the case of an individual that is asymptomatic but has received a positive COVID-19 test result, the individual may not return to the campus until ten days have passed since a positive test.
   - In the case of an individual who has symptoms that could be COVID-19 and who is not evaluated by a medical professional or tested for COVID-19, such individual is assumed to have COVID-19, and the individual may not return to the campus until the individual has completed the same three-step set of criteria listed above.
   - If the individual has symptoms that could be COVID-19 and wants to return to school before completing the above stay at home period, the individual must either (a) obtain a medical professional’s note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis, though for health privacy reasons the note does not need to indicate what the alternative diagnosis is, or (b) obtain an acute infection test (at a physician’s office, approved testing location, or other site) that comes back negative for COVID-19.
   - If the individual has tested positive for COVID-19 and believes the test was a false positive, and wants to return to school before completing the above stay at home period, the individual must either (a) obtain a medical professional’s note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis, though for health privacy reasons the note does not need to indicate what the alternative diagnosis is, or (b) obtain two PCR acute infection tests (at a physician’s office, approved testing location, or other site) at least 24 hours apart that come back negative for COVID-19.
**Identifying Possible COVID-19 Cases on Campus**

- Schools must immediately separate any student who shows COVID-19 symptoms while at school until the student can be picked up by a parent or guardian.
- Schools should clean the areas used by the individual who shows COVID-19 symptoms while at school (student, teacher, or staff) as soon as is feasible.
- Students who report feeling feverish should be given an immediate temperature check to determine if they may be symptomatic for COVID-19.

**RESPOND: Practices to Respond to a Test-Confirmed Case in the School**

**Required Actions if Individuals with Test-confirmed Cases Have Been in a School**

1. If an individual who has been in a school is test-confirmed to have COVID-19, the school must notify its [local health department](https://example.com), in accordance with applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations, including confidentiality requirements of the [Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)](https://www.ada.gov) and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

2. Consistent with school notification requirements for other communicable diseases, and consistent with legal confidentiality requirements, schools must notify all teachers, staff, and families of all students in a school if a test-confirmed COVID-19 case is identified among students, teachers or staff who participate on any on campus activities.

3. Upon receipt of information that any teacher, staff member, student, or visitor at a school is test-confirmed to have COVID-19, the school must submit a report to the Texas Department of State Health Services via an [online form](https://example.com). The report must be submitted each Monday for the prior seven days (Monday-Sunday).

**MITIGATE: Practices to Mitigate the Likelihood of COVID-19 Spread Inside the School**

**Operational Considerations:**

**Health and Hygiene Practices: General**

1. Schools should attempt to have hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water at each entrance. They should also attempt to provide hand sanitizer and/or hand washing stations with soap and water in every classroom.

2. Students, teachers, staff, and campus visitors should be encouraged to sanitize and/or wash hands frequently.
   - School systems are encouraged to have students engage in supervised handwashing for at least 20 seconds at least two times each day, in addition to being encouraged to wash hands after using the restroom and before eating.
   - School systems are encouraged to teach students good handwashing techniques.
   - Students, teachers, staff, and campus visitors should be encouraged to cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, and if not available, covered in their elbows. Used tissues should be thrown in the trash, hands should be washed immediately with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or hand sanitizer should be used.

3. Increasingly, evidence suggests that COVID-19 does not easily spread on surfaces and that increased cleaning practices may not be beneficial in reducing spread. Given this, campuses
may institute more frequent cleaning practices, including additional cleaning by janitorial staff, if they choose to do so.
  o The CDC has provided guidance on cleaning community buildings to prevent COVID-19 spread.
  o Schools should ensure these products are stored safely, including storing harmful products where children cannot access them, and ensuring that harmful cleaning products are not used near children.

4. Increasingly, evidence suggests that improved air circulation is beneficial in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Whenever possible, schools should open windows or otherwise work to improve air flow by allowing outside air to circulate in the building.
  o The CDC has provided guidance on increasing ventilation to prevent COVID-19 spread.
  o Additional information on the benefits of improved ventilation is available in this overview.

5. If a building has remained dormant for an extended period, we recommend you review CDC guidance on maintaining water system safety when buildings are unused for extended periods of time, and apply this guidance as appropriate.

6. The CDC provides a range of printed resources such as posters that promote protective measures and can serve as helpful reminders of best practices. Schools may use these or may create their own reminders.

7. On the first day a student attends school on campus, school systems must provide instruction to students on appropriate hygiene practices and other mitigation practices adopted in the local school system.

Health and Hygiene Practices: Masks

1. For the purposes of this document, masks include non-medical and medical grade disposable face masks and cloth face coverings (over the nose and mouth). Full-face shields may be used in place of a mask to protect eyes, nose, and mouth whenever a mask is not feasible or whenever the education context may benefit from the ability to see an individual’s full face.

2. Schools must comply with the following requirements:
   o Every student, teacher, or staff member shall wear a mask over the nose and mouth when inside a school building, school facility, facility used for school activities, or when in an outdoor space on school property or used for school activities, wherever it is not feasible to maintain six feet of social distancing from another person not in the same household; provided, however, that this mask requirement does not apply to the following:
     ▪ Any person younger than 10 years of age, except where a school system determines it is developmentally appropriate;
     ▪ Any person with a medical condition or disability that prevents wearing a mask;
     ▪ Any person while the person is consuming food or drink, or is seated in a dining area to eat or drink;
     ▪ Any person while the person is: (a) exercising outdoors or engaging in physical activity outdoors; and (b) maintaining a safe distance from other people not in the same household; or
Any person while the person is giving a speech for a broadcast or to an audience.

- The above mask-wearing requirements do not apply to any school system that was exempted from the face covering requirements of Executive Order GA-29 during its effect due to a county judge attestation filed with the Texas Division of Emergency Management.
- The governing board of a school system may modify or eliminate by formal action the above mask-related requirements.

3. In addition to the mask-wearing requirements listed above, school systems may require the use of masks or face shields for adults or students for whom it is developmentally appropriate.

4. It may be impractical for students to wear masks or face shields while participating in some non-UIL athletic or other extracurricular activities. In situations where masks are required by this guidance and when it is impractical for students to wear masks or face shields during those activities, schools must require students, teachers, staff, and visitors to wear masks or face shields when entering and exiting facilities and practice areas and when not actively engaging in those activities. Schools may, for example, allow students who are actively exercising to remove masks or face shields, as long as they maintain at least six feet of distance from other students, teachers, and staff who are not wearing masks or face shields. However, schools must require students, teachers, and staff to wear masks or face shields as they arrange themselves in positions that will allow them to maintain safe distancing.

**Student-Teacher Groupings**

Where feasible without disrupting the educational experience, encourage students to practice social distancing.

1. In classroom spaces that allow it, consider placing student desks a minimum of six feet apart when possible.

2. In classrooms where students are regularly within six feet of one another, schools should plan for more frequent hand washing and/or hand sanitizing and should consider whether increased airflow from the outdoors is possible.

**Use of Non-Classroom Spaces**

1. When feasible and appropriate (for example, in physical education classes as weather permits), it is preferable for students to gather outside, rather than inside, because of likely reduced risk of virus spread outdoors.

2. Schools may continue to offer extracurricular activities, at their discretion and consistent with the guidance in this document, for non-UIL extracurricular activities and with the guidance found on the UIL website for all UIL activities.

3. As is the case in typical years, school systems with policies that allow it may open facilities to the public. Operation of the facilities should be done consistent with the governor’s executive orders for similar activities.

4. Campuses must plan for entry, exit, and transition procedures that reduce large group gatherings (of students and/or adults) in close proximity. Consider staggering school start and end times, assigning students to entries to ensure even distribution of students entering/exiting at each door, providing guidance to students to enter one at a time and wait
six feet apart outside the entrance, and, where appropriate, encouraging parents to remain outside during drop-off and pick-up.

5. Depending upon local conditions, school systems should consider eliminating assemblies and other activities that bring large groupings of students and/or teachers and staff together.

6. Consider adding dividers between bathroom sinks, especially when students cannot be at least six feet apart while using the sinks.

7. School systems should consider practices that reduce the likelihood that students meet the close contact definition (defined below) at lunch. This could include having students eat lunch at their desks or outside. It could include the use of seats that are spaced at least 6 feet apart. It could include the use of dividers on cafeteria tables if they can serve the purpose of shielding the students from respiratory droplets with which they might otherwise come into contact. For meal service itself, consider individually plated meals with disposable food service items for students who do not bring their own lunch.

Transportation Recommendations

1. School systems should consider requiring students and staff to use hand sanitizer upon boarding the bus.

2. When possible, schools should open windows to allow outside air to circulate in the bus.

3. School systems should encourage families to drop students off, or walk with their student to school to reduce possible virus exposure on buses.

4. Increasingly, evidence suggests that COVID-19 does not easily spread on surfaces and that increased cleaning practices may not be beneficial in reducing spread. Given this, school systems may at their discretion apply additional cleaning practices in sanitizing buses, such as thoroughly cleaning after each bus trip, focusing on high-touch surfaces such as bus seats, steering wheels, knobs, and door handles. During cleaning, it is recommended that windows be opened to allow for additional ventilation and air flow.

Visits to Schools

- Parents and other adults can visit schools, as permitted by local school system policies. During these visits, parents and other visitors must follow virus prevention and mitigation requirements of the school.

- Schools systems should restrict visits in schools to only those essential to school operations.

Staffing

1. Employees of school systems, like employees of any organization, must continue to meet the work expectations set by their employers, subject to any applicable employment contract terms or legal requirements. However, school systems should work with teachers and other staff to ensure the safety of students, teachers, and staff. This could include allowing those staff, including teachers, who may fulfill their work duties remotely to do so. It could include modification of schedules to ensure, where feasible, that staff members, including teachers, interact with smaller and/or more consistent cohorts of individuals to further mitigate risk. In addition, teachers and staff who are in high risk categories may be entitled to paid leave under the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) in addition to leave already accrued.
2. School teachers and staff should be trained specifically on the protocols outlined in this document and the practices adopted by their school system. Additionally, while not developed with this exact guidance in mind, Texas Agri-Life Extension offers a free online course on Special Considerations for Infection Control During COVID-19 (2hrs). This course is intended for frontline childcare workers, but the principles of the course apply equally to those working in school settings.

3. School systems should attempt to reduce in-person staff meetings or other opportunities for adults to congregate in close settings. When those meetings are necessary and cannot be done via electronic means, everyone must follow the mask protocols, as required by this guidance, remain at least 6 feet apart where feasible, consider the use of dividers, and consider whether increased airflow from the outdoors is possible in those settings.

**COVID-19 Symptoms**

In evaluating whether an individual has symptoms consistent with COVID-19, consider the following question:

Have they recently begun experiencing any of the following in a way that is not normal for them?

- Feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit
- Loss of taste or smell
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Chills
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Shaking or exaggerated shivering
- Significant muscle pain or ache
- Diarrhea
- Nausea or vomiting

**Close Contact**

This document refers to “close contact” with an individual who is test-confirmed to have COVID-19. The definition of close contact is evolving with our understanding of COVID-19, and individual scenarios should be determined by an appropriate public health agency. In general, close contact is defined as:

a. being directly exposed to infectious secretions (e.g., being coughed on); or

b. being within 6 feet for a total of approximately 15 minutes throughout the course of a day; however, additional factors like case/contact masking (i.e., both the infectious individual and the potential close contact have been consistently and properly masked), ventilation, presence of dividers, and case symptomology may affect this determination.
Either (a) or (b) defines close contact if it occurred during the infectious period of the case, defined as two days prior to symptom onset to 10 days after symptom onset. In the case of asymptomatic individuals who are test-confirmed with COVID-19, the infectious period is defined as two days prior to the confirming test and continuing for 10 days following the confirming test.

**Screening Questionnaire Information**

4. When asking individuals if they have symptoms for COVID-19, school systems must only require the individual to provide a “Yes” or “No” to the overall statement that they are symptomatic for COVID-19, as opposed to asking the individual for specific symptom confirmation. School systems are not entitled to collect information during screening on the specific health information of an individual beyond that they are symptomatic.

5. Once it is determined that individuals who responded “Yes” to either of these questions have met the criteria for re-entry, school systems must destroy those individuals’ responses.

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Within sections that primarily contain requirements, there are some recommended practices (indicated with “should”). Likewise, within sections that primarily contain recommendations, there are some required practices (indicated with “must”).
Campus Operations During COVID-19

The information on this page is intended to provide general guidance for Texas institutions of higher education (IHEs) from the THECB, as it pertains to various campus operations during this health emergency. THECB staff will update this guidance as we receive additional inquiries and information. Questions related to the reopening of various campus operations can be directed to Ray Martinez, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Workforce Education, at ray.martinez@thecb.thecb.texas.gov.

Impact of Executive Order GA-34 on Institutions of Higher Education

Considering Governor Abbott’s March 2 executive order relating to the opening of Texas in response to the COVID-19 disaster, can institutions of higher education continue to implement COVID-related health and safety protocols for their campuses, including a requirement for the wearing of a face covering? (Added 3/7/2021)

On March 2, 2021, Gov. Abbott announced Executive Order GA-34, effective March 10, 2021. Executive Order GA-34 removes COVID-19-related operating limits for any business or other establishment and prohibits any jurisdiction from mandating the wearing of a face covering. Importantly, Executive Order GA-34 contains the following language:

"Public schools may operate as provided by, and under the minimum standard health protocols found in, guidance issued by the Texas Education Agency. Private schools and institutions of higher education are encouraged to establish similar standards."

On March 4, 2021, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) published Public Health Planning Guidance for public school systems. TEA guidance recommends that public school systems consult with their local public health authorities and legal counsel before making final decisions regarding COVID-19-related health and safety protocols. Furthermore, TEA guidance advises public school districts to require the wearing of face coverings for "...every student, teacher, or staff member when inside a school building, school facility, facility used for school activities, wherever it is not feasible to maintain six feet of social distancing from another person not in the same household..." Notably, TEA guidance also states that the governing board of a school system may modify or eliminate by formal action the mask-related requirements.

Executive Order GA-34 encourages institutions of higher education to establish similar health protocol standards as TEA has done for public schools.

Accordingly, THECB recommends that institutions of higher education take the following action:

1. Institutions of higher education may continue to require current health and safety protocols on campus, including relating to the wearing of a face covering for all students, faculty, staff, and campus visitors. However, the governing board of the institution or system may modify or eliminate by formal action the mask-wearing requirement.

2. Given the constant changes to the COVID-19 public health situation, institutions of higher education should continue to consult closely and regularly with their local public health authority in making decisions regarding appropriate COVID-19 health and safety measures for each respective campus.

THECB staff will continue to monitor this situation closely and we are consulting regularly with staff at the Department of State Health Services (DSHS). As further guidance becomes available, we will update our agency’s COVID-19 FAQ page. In the meantime, any questions should be directed to Ray Martinez, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Workforce Education, at ray.martinez@thecb.thecb.texas.gov or (512) 653-3331.

Recommended Health Protocols for Institutions of Higher Education

The following health protocols are recommended for IHEs for various campus operations. The practices specified are recommended to maintain safety for campus communities. The virus that causes COVID-19 is still circulating in our communities. We need to continue to observe practices that protect everyone, including those who are most vulnerable. IHE leaders may consider adopting additional protocols for their specific needs and circumstances to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and campus visitors.

- White House Coronavirus Task Force Recommendations for College Students [PDF] (Added 9/4/2020)
- CDC Guidance for Colleges, Universities, and Higher Education [Added 11/16/2020]
- Promote Flu Vaccinations to your Campus Community [Added 11/16/2020]
- Register to be a COVID-19 Vaccinator [Added 11/16/2020]

Now that campuses operations are fairly stable during COVID-19, the checklists for reopening posted for Fall 2020, Summer 2020, and Career and Technical Education have been archived. We have also archived the hyperlinks for Fall 2020 re-opening plans for Public Community, State, and Technical Colleges, Public Universities and Health-Related Institutions, and for Independent Colleges and Universities. These hyperlinks may still provide COVID-19 information for these campuses.
HOWARD COLLEGE – COVID-19 RESPONSE

OPEN HOWARD COLLEGE

Beginning in early 2020, the college began monitoring and sharing information concerning COVID-19 with the college community. During Spring Break, the college activated its COVID-19 Response Team as concerns heightened about the spread of the virus across the country. Decisions were made to protect the health and safety of all as we delayed the break for another week and quickly transitioned to an online instructional format with a few exceptions. As the situation evolved and emergency status was enacted at the national, state and local levels, Howard College has been following Presidential, Governor and local authority Orders and guidance which have allowed for the college to operate during this time of emergency in an altered operations status. Multiple decisions have been made as we worked through the spring semester and planned for the summer and fall semesters. To guide our journey, Howard College developed the Open Howard College Strategic Plan https://howardcollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/PDF/Consumer/COVID/Open%20Howard%20College%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf and will continue to use and update its resources as we move forward. We have advanced through three phases of reopening as we planned for Phase IV which began on August 9. Our plan is devised so that we can adapt as the situation changes. This document is the condensed version. Please read it carefully. All individuals in the college community must do their part to make this work effectively. We will continue making decisions based on the guidance of authorities to do what is best for the health and safety of all. Thus, definitions and protocols will change accordingly. Significant penetration of COVID-19 in the area will be monitored and can result in tighter restrictions with the reverse action in areas of low penetration as allowed by state guidelines.

We are ready for Making Dreams Real! ARE YOU READY? TIME TO FLY!!

DEFINITIONS

1. Definitions
   - Campus – all land and buildings owned, provided for or leased by Howard College as lessee.
   - Work center – a building or portion of a building
   - Single-person offices – offices where an individual can work alone
   - Employee – any person employed by or volunteering for Howard College, be it full time, part-time, or adjunct
   - Student – any current or prospective student with or without appointments for advising, testing, tutoring, etc.

Last Updated: March 10, 2021/6:00 pm
**Contract labor** – non-Howard College employees who may be working on various projects on campus

**Lessee** – any organization renting space from the college

**Public** – members of the public who are members of select organizations approved to be on campus, members of the Harold Davis Fitness Center, children and families associated with Howard Cottage, bookstore and dining services customers, attendees of events scheduled in campus buildings

**Visitors** – pre-arranged visits for recruiting or business purposes

**Individual** – employee, current/prospective student, contractor, lessee, public member or visitor

**Central check-in point** – screening stations in each campus building that will include a stationary thermal/sanitation location


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**INDIVIDUAL HEALTH**

2. **Individual Health Protocols/Foundation of Open Howard College**
   a. **Self-screen before coming to campus or leaving on-campus residence** for any of the following new or worsening signs or symptoms of possible COVID-19 in a way that is not normal for you/symptoms of COVID-19 may appear 2-14 days after exposure to the virus:
      i. Cough
      ii. Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
      iii. Chills
      iv. Repeated shaking with chills
      v. Muscle/body aches or pain
      vi. Fatigue
      vii. Headache
      viii. Sore throat
      ix. Loss of taste or smell
      x. Diarrhea
      xi. Nausea or vomiting
      xii. Congestion or runny nose
      xiii. Feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit based on thermometer reading taken prior to coming to campus or leaving on-campus residence

   b. **If employees, students, contractors, lessees, public members, or visitors have any of the above symptoms, do NOT come to campus.** In each campus community there are numbers to call to speak with professionals about concerns you might have relative to COVID-19 symptoms.
      - Scenic Mountain Medical Group COVID-19 Hotline (432-267-5531/432-582-8030 after hours)
      - Midland Memorial Call “68NURSE” (855-686-8773)
**DO NOT go to an Urgent Care Center or the hospital ER for treatment or testing (this statement is on the website)**

- **844-6-SHANNON (844-674-2666)**
  This number is available from 9 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday. Individuals with questions regarding screening or testing for COVID-19 can call and get connected to a clinical provider who can answer questions and direct them to next steps. This line can also answer questions about other services at Shannon during this time.

c. Consistent with applicable law and privacy policies, **students and employees must report if they have symptoms of COVID-19, a positive test for COVID-19, or were exposed to someone with COVID-19/lab confirmed within the last 14 days**, in accordance with health information sharing regulations for COVID-19 and other applicable federal and state privacy and confidentiality laws, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/special-topics/hipaa-covid19/index.html

Please contact by phone or email your supervisor, student services lead (Big Spring, Dean of Student Services/Christi Mikeska; Lamesa, Campus Director/Monica Castro; San Angelo, Student Services Director/Mike Hemmeter; or SWCD, Campus Director of Student Services/Shannon Creswell) or specific campus contact if a contractor, lessee, public member or visitor. The supervisor, student services lead or campus contact will then inform Rhonda Kernick, HR Director (c-432.264.8846) and/or Fabian Serrano, Director Safety and Security (c-432.213.3787) by phone or email. These individuals will confer with the campus leaders and then the president for final actions.

d. **Individuals with new or worsening signs or symptoms listed above are assumed to have COVID-19 and may NOT return to campus until**:
   i. At least 24 hours have passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications);
   ii. The individual has improvement in symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); and
   iii. At least 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared. For patients with severe illness, duration of isolation for up to 20 days after symptom onset may be warranted.

   
   or
   - the individual must obtain a medical professional’s note clearing the individual for return based on an alternative diagnosis;
   or
   - the individual receives two separate confirmations at least 24 hours apart that they are free of COVID-19 via acute infection tests at an approved COVID-19 testing location found at https://tdem.texas.gov/covid-19/.

e. **Do NOT come to campus or leave campus housing if you have known close contact with a person with COVID-19/lab confirmed within the last 14 days.** Recent CDC guidelines have changed relative to quarantining under certain conditions and will be followed accordingly. Based on current local health authority guidance, the quarantine period can be adjusted. At this time, individuals with known close contact to a person who is lab-confirmed to have COVID-19 will not be allowed to return to campus until the end of the 14 day self-quarantine period from the last date of exposure (with an exception that can be granted for healthcare workers and critical infrastructure
workers as well as those with cases of COVID-19 within the last three months and fully vaccinated people in certain situations). Individuals must obtain a medical professional’s note clearing the individual for return or the health department notice. Individuals in the San Angelo/Tom Green County area can access health department release information at the following link.  

If you live in another county and do not have a release from a medical professional or health department notice, please contact your campus contact listed in c. above for further instructions. 

f. Do NOT come to campus or leave campus housing if you have tested positive for COVID-An individual diagnosed with COVID-19 with symptoms may return to campus after isolation when the three-step criteria are met in section d. above. For persons who never develop symptoms, isolation and other precautions can be discontinued after 10-days after the date of the first positive RT-PCR test for SARS-CoV-2 RNA. The individual must obtain a medical professional’s note clearing the individual for return or the health department notice. Individuals in the San Angelo area can access health department release information at the following link. 

If you live in another county, you should receive a release from your medical professional or the health department.

3. Campus Health Protocols

   a. Face coverings over the face and mouth are required. Because social/physical distancing cannot be totally achieved due to changing dynamics in classrooms, campus meetings and other public spaces, masks are required. Due to unexpected encounters, individuals should wear masks in restrooms, break rooms, elevators, hallways and on stairwells. Efforts will be made to schedule classes, events, dining spaces and meetings in spaces large enough for social/physical distancing (six feet or two arm lengths) to be achieved. Face coverings will also be required in mass gatherings in larger spaces regardless of social distancing arrangements following CDC guidelines unless eating or drinking. Non-medical grade face coverings have been and will be provided by Howard College for all employees or students. Eye goggles will also be required in certain lab situations. The first pair will be provided. Clear face shields may be used by faculty for lecture purposes and employees/students for accommodation purposes. If social/physical distancing cannot be achieved, a mask should also be worn. The face covering requirement does not apply to the following:

   i. When working alone in an office or isolated space,
   ii. Behind a plexiglass barrier when distanced,
   iii. Outside when distanced,
   iv. In certain residence hall situations, as outlined in related residence hall information,
   v. In certain athletic program situations, as outlined in related athletic documents,
vi. When consuming food or drink, or seated in a dining area to eat or drink,

vii. Any person younger than 10 years of age or according to child care center regulations,

viii. Any person with a medical condition or disability that prevents wearing a mask, and

ix. Giving a speech for a broadcast or to an audience.

The college will follow the Governor’s Order concerning face coverings

b. After conducting the individual self-screening before coming to campus, individuals will be expected to secondary screen by checking in at the stationary thermal/sanitation stations located in multiple campus buildings.

c. Screening checks will be implemented at the beginning of the workday by the supervisor or designee for children enrolled in Howard Cottage as well as their families.

d. In the case of Health Professions and Cosmetology programs, screening and face covering protocols will follow clinical and state guidelines for both students and clients. Face coverings will be provided by the college in these locations.

e. Any individual showing signs of possible COVID-19 infection will be sent home or asked to leave campus to seek appropriate medical care. A contractor or lessee with an affected employee will be asked to follow the same protocol in the section above that will be followed for college employees and students.

f. Individuals should strive to maintain at least 6 feet separation from other individuals not within the same household. If such distancing is not feasible, other measures such as face covering, hand hygiene, cough etiquette, cleanliness, and sanitation should be rigorously practiced.

g. Wash or disinfect hands upon entering campus and after any interaction with employees, students, the public, or items in the work center.

h. Limit the use of standard-size elevators to four individuals at a time, each located at a different corner of the elevator, to avoid close contact. For individuals not wishing to ride an elevator, stairways may be used. As appropriate, individuals subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act may ride the elevator alone or accompanied by the individual’s caregiver.

i. Social/physical distancing practice of six feet in lines or spaces should be followed according to state guidelines.

j. Plexiglass barriers are used to maintain distance and should be respected.

k. Air purifiers are placed in high-traffic areas.

EMPLOYEE WORK PATTERNS

4. Employee Work Patterns/Accommodations
https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=na7K70fgWEOqlBx0FyhOsj3yh-iPzKZOli3ooUjQK1UQjZDQTNYV1dYUUExQTIWQVk4SVcyMEMwOC4u
5. **Campus-Based Instructional, Bookstore, Residence Hall, Dining Services, Athletics and Fine Arts Protocols**
   
   https://howardcollege.edu/fall-2020/

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**HOWARD COTTAGE**

6. **Howard Cottage/Big Spring Campus Protocols**
   
   The college is following the Open Texas checklists for Child Care Centers.
   
   
   
   In the event of a confirmed case or exposure to a confirmed case, the Cottage will close two to five days for sanitation and contact tracing purposes. Based on the findings relative to contact tracing, decisions will be made relative to extended closure in consultation with local health and licensing authorities. Parents will be notified.

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**HAROLD DAVIS FITNESS CENTER**

7. **Harold Davis Fitness Center/Big Spring Campus Protocols**
   
   The college is following the Open Texas checklists related to gyms.
   
   
   
   If the Fitness Center needs to be closed for sanitation purposes, members will be notified.

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**PUBLIC EVENTS**

8. **Public Event Protocols**
   
   Limited public event and group meetings can begin following state and local guidelines. Interactions with the public will follow the respective protocols in the Open Texas strategic plan and checklists. https://open.texas.gov/

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**NOTIFICATIONS**

9. **Notifications**
   
   a. As appropriate, faculty, staff, students, families and the public will be notified of campus and building closures, class and event cancellations, modified class schedules and any restrictions in place to limit COVID-19 exposure.
b. In accordance with applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations, the college will notify local health officials, faculty, staff and students immediately of any case of COVID-19 while maintaining confidentiality in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), FERPA and other applicable laws and regulations. Due to the small numbers of individuals on our campuses, the campus community is reminded of the importance of privacy and the need to handle reported cases professionally. Since there are a significant number of active cases in the communities of all campuses, it will be noted on the website that active cases exist and individuals should assume that and follow all protocols accordingly. The college has implemented a dashboard [https://howardcollege.edu/covid-dashboard] on its website. The information will be updated every Friday afternoon. Please read the definitions for clarification. [https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/pandemic-preparedness-workplace-and-americans-disabilities-act](https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/pandemic-preparedness-workplace-and-americans-disabilities-act)

c. When the college is made aware of a confirmed case, exposure to confirmed cases and potential exposure, the college will implement contact tracing on campus based on the best information it has and will inform individuals affected and sanitize appropriate locations. Thus, individuals are asked to be mindful of their contacts and places of occupancy while on campus. The college will inform those who have had close contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19 to quarantine/stay home or in their living quarters, to consider testing or require it in some instances, self-monitor for symptoms, and follow CDC guidance if symptoms develop.

Any employee concerns should be directed to their supervisor and/or the Director of Human Resources. Any student concerns should be directed to the campus student services officer.