

Conducting Field Site Visits during the COVID-19 Outbreak: Guidance for Public Health Inspectors

On April 23, 2020 Governor Inslee began loosening the restrictions of the [Stay Home Stay Healthy Order](#) by [restarting low risk construction](#). Returning to public life will not happen like an on/off switch. This slow, careful return will feel more like a dial turning restrictions up or down in response to new information and data.

State and local public environmental health staff continue to conduct field site visits and inspections deemed essential to protect public health. With the loosening of restrictions and reopening of businesses and construction in the coming weeks and months the need for field site visits and inspections will increase. This guidance is intended to assist field staff/health inspectors in preparing for and conducting field visits safely.

Initial contact with customers

Inform your customers about precautionary measures and alternatives

- Prior to conducting any field visit, you should contact the facility to discuss the need for the inspection and field visit. Ask the facility to limit the number of people at the field visit, if possible. Ask them to call and cancel the appointment if they are feeling ill, especially if they are having any of the following [symptoms](#): fever, chills, repeated shaking with chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell, coughing, or difficulty breathing. Assure them you will do the same.
- Let your customers know you are taking precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Share any COVID -19 safety plans your organization has developed ([COVID-19 Safety Plan Template for Critical Infrastructure](#)). Let them know you are washing your hands frequently, physical distancing, wearing a cloth face covering, sanitizing equipment routinely, and are aware of your possible impact on others.
- If anything concerns you during an inspection, remove yourself from the area and call your supervisor. If you encounter workers or members of the public who appear ill, you can discontinue an inspection at any time. If you feel unsafe about conducting field visits for any reason, talk to your supervisor.
- If you know operators [who are at a greater risk for serious complications](#) from COVID-19, then you may want to reschedule. Consider alternate inspection methods such as phone interviews, sending records, FaceTime, WebEX, Zoom, etc.

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Unscheduled site visits

- Limit unscheduled field visits unless absolutely necessary. For those companies who are operating as normal, unscheduled visits may be appropriate.
- Consider the sensitivity of unscheduled site visits/inspections. If a facility is not comfortable with an inspection during this time, re-evaluate the necessity of completing the inspection. If there is a significant risk to public health, or an immediate business need, measures should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission, and the facility should be reminded of the requirements of licensure to operate. Contact your supervisor if in doubt.

Timing of inspections

- Prior to conducting any field visit, determine if the visit is necessary to protect public health or if it can be delayed.
- If overnight stays are required for a field visit/inspection follow your agency's COVID-19 policy or guidance on overnight travel and work directly with your supervisor about logistics.
- You may be delayed in conducting site visits due to circumstances beyond your control due to closures, transportation issues, or travel restrictions.
- Consider if a face-to-face visit is necessary. If there is an alternate way to conduct inspections besides a site visit, you should explore that option. It could involve a phone interview, sending documents for inspectors to review, or a video chat tour of the facility. It may be possible to gather the information by asking for pictures of facilities or log books.

Vehicles and field tools

Instrument decontamination

- Clean the surfaces of tools using accepted industry practices. Probes and other tools should be sanitized with alcohol pads or other approved methods in between inspections. If possible, bring your own tools and do not share the tools with others during the inspection.
- Wipe down all shared pens, clipboards, phones, or other equipment with sanitizing wipes after and prior to each use. Double bag instruments if possible. Discard outer bag after each test.
- If you usually require someone to sign the inspection, consider not requiring a signature at this time. For inspections requiring signatures, it is permissible to have inspector type the employee's name.

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- Be aware of where you store your equipment bag, laptop/clip board, etc.

Vehicle disinfection

- As much as practical, an inspector should drive the same vehicle.
- Shared vehicles should be disinfected at the beginning and end of each use.
Commonly touched areas to disinfect/clean include:
 - Outside door handles;
 - Inside door handles and surrounding surfaces;
 - Instrument controls, gear shifts, control knobs;
 - Steering wheel;
 - Cup holders;
 - Seat belts;
 - Center console
 - Keys and key fobs; and
 - Seat adjustment controls.

Protecting yourself and others during an inspection

Health inspectors should follow any COVID -19 safety plans the facility, field site or business has established especially any requirements for visitors to the workplace.

Physical Distancing

During the field visit continue to practice physical distancing, including:

- Maintain a minimum of six feet of distance between yourself and others when feasible.
- No handshakes.
- Avoid sharing equipment such as pens, clipboards, tools, and other frequently used items. If items must be shared clean and/or sanitize them between uses.
- Limit the number of people in attendance to only essential staff.
- Enter small areas alone, such as walk-in freezers, well houses, or other small closed-in areas, and discuss any findings in open areas.
- Wash or sanitize your hands upon arrival and departure; and after touching frequently touched surfaces such as door handles.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands especially your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow or a tissue. Throw away the tissue immediately after use and wash hands. (For tips, see [Respiratory Hygiene/Cough Etiquette in Healthcare Settings](#)).
- Avoid unnecessarily touching surfaces.

Hand washing

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Wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds routinely at each site and after touching any potentially contaminated surfaces and at beginning, during, and end of an inspection. If handwashing facilities are not available use alcohol-based hand sanitizer and wash your hands at the earliest opportunity.

Use personal protective equipment (PPE)

PPE may be needed to prevent certain exposures, but it should be used as a last resort and should not take the place of other more effective prevention strategies such as the engineering and administrative controls above. Check the DOH, L&I, OSHA and CDC websites regularly for updates about recommended PPE for COVID-19.

- Use the PPE you would normally use during a site visit or inspection, such as gloves, sanitizer, goggles, face shields and respiratory protection etc.
- Use appropriate PPE you have been trained and properly fitted to use.
- Recommend wearing a well fitted [cloth face covering](#) during a site visit where you cannot maintain six feet of distance from others. Wearing a cloth face covering does not a substitute for physical distancing. Wearers should wash their hands before and after touching and adjusting the mask. To preserve PPE for the medical community, surgical masks or N-95 respirators should not be used unless normally required to complete a site visit or inspection.
- Ensure gloves are used only when needed based on the hazard. Gloves may be rationed for the medical community or otherwise in short supply. Avoid touching your face with gloves. Gloves are not a substitute for washing or sanitizing your hands frequently.
- If PPE is required to conduct an inspection but unavailable, consider rescheduling the inspection.

If an inspector starts to experience symptoms before, during or after inspection

- **Before:** Cancel inspection and notify supervisor.
- **During:** Discontinue inspection. Notify your supervisor as soon as possible.
- **After:** Notify supervisor. Identify facilities you inspected within the last 48 hours.

Other considerations

Be aware customers will likely have questions and concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic. Do not share opinions on what public health measures and restrictions may be loosened or tightened in the coming weeks or months. Instead direct them to the DOH Coronavirus website: doh.wa.gov/Coronavirus or coronavirus.wa.gov for the most up-to-date information and guidance.

More COVID-19 Information and Resources

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Stay up-to-date on the [current COVID-19 situation in Washington](#), [Governor Inslee's proclamations](#), [symptoms](#), [how it spreads](#), and [how and when people should get tested](#). See our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for more information.

The risk of COVID-19 is not connected to race, ethnicity or nationality. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Share accurate information with others to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading.

- [WA State Department of Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [WA State Coronavirus Response \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Find Your Local Health Department or District](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Stigma Reduction Resources](#)

Have more questions about COVID-19? Call our hotline: **1-800-525-0127**. For interpretative services, **press #** when they answer and **say your language**. (Open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.) For questions about your own health, COVID-19 testing, or testing results, please contact your health care provider.

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