



Strategies for Continuing Healthy Homes Activities While Social Distancing

Within the healthy housing field, there is an intense interest in learning about innovative adaptations and new ways to continue healthy homes activities during this time of social distancing (also called “physical distancing”). In response to this interest, requests for information and tools, and ongoing conversations between the National Center for Healthy Housing (NCHH) and multiple stakeholders across several of our key initiatives, we’ve published this peer-sharing series entitled Strategies for Continuing Healthy Homes Activities While Social Distancing. The examples highlighted in this series provide not only a firsthand perspective of the exciting work undertaken by this and other change leaders around the country to develop new strategies or layer additional components into larger systems but also a way to contact them for additional information. Use these real-world strategies as a resource to maintain, improve, and expand healthy housing activities or when considering your own local possibilities during this difficult time.

City of Paterson, NJ: Integrating Lead Poisoning Prevention Outreach and Awareness into COVID-19 Contact Tracing

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Strategy Goal

As part of our contact tracing efforts related to COVID-19 response, City of Paterson Division of Health staff are calling and informing people that they have tested positive for the virus, working with them to develop a list of recent contacts, and then systematically reaching out to the recent contacts to inform them of their exposure to the virus. As part of this effort, we are intentionally incorporating messaging on the principles of healthy homes, and specifically lead poisoning prevention, to help create a safer home environment as people are spending an increased amount of time in their homes and also to reduce risks related to the transmission of COVID-19.

Description

As municipal health department employees, we are currently working as case investigators/contact tracers for individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19. In an effort to help “flatten the curve” and mitigate the spread of the disease, we must call everyone who tests positive and interview them in order to obtain their contacts for tracing. In many ways, this is similar to the work we are already doing for our elevated blood lead cases, which require outreach to educate patients/clients on best practices to help reduce the risk of lead poisoning.

Our contact tracing protocol requires asking about the total number of people who live in a household and their ages. On average, a typical contact tracing interview takes about 45-60 minutes if the individual lives alone. When any additional individuals reside in the household, the interview takes approximately 60-90 minutes depending on the number of additional household members, regardless of their ages. If the household has children below the age of six, we use this opportunity to provide additional education on childhood lead poisoning prevention and the general principles of healthy homes. This efficient layering on of educational lead poisoning prevention information

makes sense as many actions recommended to prevent childhood lead poisoning and create a healthy home environment can also mitigate the in-home spread of COVID-19, such as frequent hand washing for both children and adults in the home.

As a second step, we also cross-check the household address in our internal lead inspection database to find out if the property has been inspected for lead by the health department. If the database shows that the property was previously inspected and found to have lead, we provide detailed education on potential lead hazards, lead-safe practices, and healthy homes. If the property has not been inspected, we encourage residents to ask their landlord to have the property evaluated; or if they are the property owners, to have the property evaluated themselves; and mail them detailed literature on how this can be accomplished. Although anyone with children under age six residing in a home built before 1978 can request a lead inspection from the health department, we advise residents to work with their landlords as much as possible so that (1) the landlord is proactively aware of the inspection and any potentially issued abatement orders, and (2) potential retaliatory eviction actions are mitigated. Another approach to consider involves the health department proactively offering inspection services and education to property owners/landlords on uninspected properties directly. This approach makes the health department the instigator of the inspection instead of the resident and gives the landlord information on potentially available supporting resources at the start.

A quick additional note that while this brief is focused on the phone calls and contact tracing efforts that occur after a positive COVID-19 test, the City of Paterson Division of Health has also recently added healthy homes-related information into the educational packets distributed to all individuals tested for COVID-19 at health department testing events. Partnering with your local health department, or other agency in your city or state responsible for contact tracing or testing related to COVID-19, would be a beneficial first step for those wondering how approaches like these that integrate healthy homes messaging could be implemented into ongoing COVID-19 response efforts in their respective cities.

Materials, Supplies, and Capacity Needed

- Contact information: In this example, information about COVID-19 patients is received via the New Jersey Communicable Disease Reporting and Surveillance System (NJ CDRSS).
- Lead hazard/inspection information: In this example, the City of Paterson (Division of Health) internal database of lead hazard/inspection information is used to cross-check flagged COVID-19 addresses identified by NJ CDRSS.
- Adequate staffing and training of all personnel.
- Literature on lead hazards and healthy homes.

Resources

- Johns Hopkins Contact Tracing Course: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/covid-19-contact-tracing?edocomorp=covid-19-contact-tracing>

For additional examples and resources related to the COVID-19 pandemic, visit ...

https://bit.ly/NCHH_Pandemics

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The National Center for Healthy Housing makes no claims of medical or legal expertise and cannot claim that these protections are adequate. For medical questions, consult a qualified healthcare worker; for legal issues, seek proper legal advice.

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