**How does a public health lab practice social distancing?**

**Risk:** Some tasks within public health labs work best with a high level of person-to-person contact, because sharing these tasks improves efficiency (teamwork!). In our current situation, if one staff member becomes infected with COVID-19, the remaining close-contacts will be quarantined for 14 days. This has the potential to stop critical testing (COVID-19 or other).

**Assumptions/Resources:** All ideas are on the table. The WA PHL is operational 24/7 during the outbreak.

**Brainstorm**

**Microbiology**

**Impact if staff are quarantined:** reduced capacity to perform the tests that we are continuing to perform under COOP. In addition COOVID-19 testing capacity will be diminished.

**Ideas for social distancing:**

* Box lunches (eliminate buffet style serving)
* Make a touchless thermometer available for staff
* Make hand sanitizers and disinfecting wipes available at tables, computers and phones
* Disinfect door knobs, keyboards, phones etc. on a regular schedule
* Enforce distancing in some way for meetings, lunch time etc. We have some really small tables with 3-4 chairs around them.
* Stagger shifts so that fewer people are in the building at a time.
  + Microbiology staff mostly supportive
* Limited work from home time (2 hours per day for instance)

**Newborn Screening**

**Impact if staff are quarantined:** Limited or no testing would be able to be performed (depending on the number of close-contacts that are quarantined). WA NBS has a MOA with TX NBS: they have capacity to test approximately 700 specimens each day. This would mean that we would only send them newborn specimens and only follow-up specimens linked to a previous specimen with abnormal results.

**Ideas for social distancing:** The morning hours are where we have the most interactions with one another: during specimen receiving/sorting and punching specimens into plates. Before and after this set of tasks, the analysts are typically in their own section of the laboratory beyond six feet of the next employee. Analysts and lead workers have frequent interactions about worklists and any special circumstances (instrument troubleshooting, special requests, etc.). We can envision using technology more in these circumstances also. Here are what staff came up with:

* Wear masks while sorting and punching specimens. Lab workers are already wearing gloves. Add eye protection throughout the day, to inhibit touching eyes.
* Segregate work tasks. Physically divide the mail sorting into sections greater than six feet from one another. Two staff can sit in the existing area (typically 5-6 staff sort mail here). There are other counter tops in the lab and office areas that can be used to sort specimens.
* Only use every other punch indexer, creating more than six feet of buffer space. This slows down punching operations. We have room for three people punching in this suggested seating pattern (usually we have the use of six machines).
* Sterilizing punchers, stampers, work surfaces after use.
* Setting down tools, stacks of cards, etc. instead of handing them off from person to person
* Staggering shifts would separate staff from one another.
  + We have Alpha (M-F) and Bravo (Tu-Sa) teams already built to provide coverage on Mondays and Saturdays. The teams could shift work hours so there was not overlap (eg. 7am to 3pm and 3:30pm to 11pm). Disinfect the work surfaces in between shifts.
  + The teams could shift work days so there was no overlap (team Alpha works Su-W 10h shifts and Su-Tu 10h shifts on alternating weeks; team Bravo works Th-Sa 10h shifts and W-Sa 10h shifts on alternating weeks). This gives us seven days a week coverage with no overlap between teams.
  + In either of these scenarios, if one person tests positive, their team is quarantined, and the other team goes to M-Sa work for two weeks to cover.
  + A challenge with staggering NBS shifts is that we interact with a common set of PHL staff in central accessioning. Perhaps the person-to-person interactions with central accessioning could be reduced/removed by process engineering.
* Limited work from home time (1h for analysts; 2h for lead workers?)
* Using conference calls and GoToMeetings instead of in-person meetings

**Environmental Lab Sciences**

**Impact if staff are quarantined:** reduced capacity to perform the few tests that we are continuing to perform under COOP. If further reductions in personnel take place depending on how many people are quarantined we would be either extremely limited or unable to continue to offer services affected by absences. We currently have CT, marine biotoxins, water bacteriology and radiation teams working per the COOP. The ability to shift hours is limited due to limited TAT from sample receipt or sample set up to reporting in the water/biotoxin testing areas. Radiation team that is currently on site is small and using workstations that are physically separated, staggering shifts would create a safety concern should a person go down for any reason related to their job, at least 2 people need to be onsite at all times and additional individuals available in the wing to help in case of an emergency.

**Ideas for social distancing:**

* Provide folks the option to work during other shifts provided there are three or more people in the wing, for workflows that allow it.
* Recommend that folks hold lunch meetings in open spaces and keeping at least 6 feet from each other.
* Recommend that meetings are held over GoToMeeting or in open spaces to keep people distanced.
* Allow the staff that can work from home to do so during hours when they don’t have to be in the lab.
* Recommend that folks do not group up for breaks.
* Mouse room, use dedicated respirator equipment for each individual that works in there.

ELS Hallways

* Staff will do their best to keep at least 6ft apart at all times.
* Do not group up for breaks.
* When needing talk to people in offices try to do so from the doorway keeping at least 6ft away whenever possible.

E21 Biotoxin Lab

* Staff will do their best to keep at least 6ft apart at all times.
* Shucking activities: make sure 2 sinks are empty between staff when 2 people are working at the sinks.
* Only 1 person works in the blending & weighing station at a time
* E-21b Reduce 4 person office to having no more than 2 people in the room at once.

E-22, E42, E44, E64 ELS Main Labs

* Staff will do their best to keep at least 6ft apart at all times.
* Only 1 persons working in a chemical fume hood at a time.
* Only one staff person at a time in 2 person desk areas.

E-3, E4&5, E40, & E-63, Instrument rooms

* Staff will do their best to keep at least 6ft apart at all times.
* Only 1 person in the room at a time whenever possible.

E-41 Water Lab

* Staff will do their best to keep at least 6ft apart at all times.
* Only 2 pipetting persons in area-
* Pull tubes onto a cart if an 2nd pipetting station is needed to reduce people in pipetting area with incubators.
  + Each Pipetting team to use different incubators to avoid crossing over each other.

**Operations**

**Impact if staff are quarantined:** Must have maintenance staff on-site or on-call. If central accessioning staff were all gone, others from PHL would need to step into those roles. Safety officer is critical to be on-site or on-call. Training personnel may be able to work remotely.

**Ideas for social distancing:**

* Go-to meeting availability
* Utilize radios for communication
* Maintenance to be scheduled for lab space or conference rooms
* Still utilize after hours on call number for maintenance staff
* 2 or 3 shifts to minimize staffing where applicable
* Minimize staffing levels in CA and Support Services over different shifts
* Minimize foot traffic in these area
* PPE for CA staff since their shipping/receiving of samples is 7am-5pm (majority of samples)
* Staggered shifts start/end times
* Staggered lunch times

**PHL-located Health Technology Solutions:** Team will telecommute with Steve Lin (supervisor) on-site. Weekends they will be on-call.

**Other ideas to enhance this effort:**

* Explore the possibility to leave as many doors propped open as possible to minimize the amount of surfaces touched by multiple people.
* Institute a sanitizing team that cleans door knobs, door sides, bathroom doors and handles, and other frequently touched surfaces a few times per day.
* Switch to ordering single packaged lunches to minimize people talking over the food.
* Have people make a daily log of who they interacted with and for how long during the day…? This sounds a bit too much…but would help the epi-response should we need it.
* Dramatically increase the availability of hand sanitizer all over the lab.
* Utilize email and phone if applicable as main communication tools.
* Recognize this is a difficult time and be creative in finding ways to cheer each other up/support one another.

**Input from PHL Directors Listserv Query:**

* We are discontinuing all group meetings, we will use conference calls or zoom.
* We are asking everyone keep a distance of 6 feet apart when speaking in person.
* We are expanding to multiple shifts to allow flexibility and greater distance between people.
* We all need to increase our cleaning frequency of high contact surfaces.

**Other statements:**

Supervisors and PHL IMT Managers must have the ability to retain sufficient staff in the PHL to maintain COVID-19 testing.