



COVID-19: Essential Service Guidance for Syringe Service Programs

While many nonessential businesses and services in New York City have been suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, syringe service programs (SSPs) are considered essential services and continue operating. Services include:

- Distribution of safer drug use supplies (such as syringes and naloxone)
- Distribution of food and personal hygiene items
- Access to medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), including methadone and buprenorphine

This document provides guidance to SSPs on how to provide services to people who use drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has disrupted many people's access to basic needs and routines for safer drug use; the services SSPs provide are vital to supporting the health of people who use drugs. Thank you for continuing this important work during this difficult time.

Note: All employees must wear face coverings when customers (or program participants) are present. Employers must provide face coverings for employees at no cost. For more information, please review the [State Order](#) and see below for additional guidance. Read the State Order by visiting coronavirus.health.ny.gov and searching for "Executive Order 202.16."

How to Keep Yourself and Others Safe

- **Stay home if you are sick.**
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
 - Be especially careful to wash hands before interacting with participants, before eating and handling food, and after coughing, sneezing or nose-blowing.
 - If you have a supply of hand sanitizer, make it available and prominently visible for participants to use as they enter the program.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when sneezing or coughing. Do not use your hands.
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Do not shake hands.
- Monitor your health for fever, cough, difficulty breathing, sore throat and other symptoms. If any of these symptoms occur, stay home (do not go to work) and contact a health care provider to discuss next steps. Information about signs and symptoms of COVID-19 are evolving and subject to change. For a complete and updated list of symptoms, please visit the Symptoms and What to Do When Sick web page at nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.
- Create more personal space between yourself and others, including by keeping at least 6 feet from others. This is called physical distancing.

- Wear a face covering. A face covering is any well-secured paper or cloth (like a bandana or scarf) that covers your nose and mouth. Every New Yorker must wear a face covering when outside the home if they cannot maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others, as required by a New York State Executive Order. For more information about face coverings, visit nyc.gov/facecoverings.
- Regularly wipe down commonly touched surfaces with bleach, antimicrobial wipes or other products.
 - Examples of commonly touched surfaces include sinks, tables, countertops, faucets, doorknobs, light and appliance switches, cabinet handles, handrails, phones, and computer mouse and keyboards.

Staffing

- Anticipate staff absences and prepare by planning for skeletal operations; programs should suspend all nonessential work such as syringe litter counting, reporting and clean-up to focus on essential services.
 - To provide these essential services, SSPs can use contract funds to meet emergency program needs, including for the purchase of materials not typically purchased using standard contracted funds.
- Rotate scheduling of on-site staff to reduce exposure risk. As much as possible, keep staff in the same group. Avoid moving staff back and forth between groups.
- Staff who are 65 years or older or have a chronic disease or condition (including lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, heart disease, a weakened immune system, obesity, diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, cancer) should be accommodated with work that reduces their exposure to other staff or program participants, or not report to work.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- All staff must wear a face covering at work.
- All clients should be triaged at the entrance and given a face covering if they arrive without one.
- Disposable gloves are an additional safety tool for reducing COVID-19 transmission, especially in situations where there is no access to soap and running water. While gloves provide additional protection, it is still important to avoid unnecessary contact as well as to not touch your eyes, nose or mouth with gloved or unwashed hands.
 - If you use disposable gloves, be sure to remove them correctly. Guidance about removing gloves is available at cdc.gov/niosh/nptl/pdfs/PPE-Sequence-508.pdf.

Supplies Inventory

- Take weekly inventories of safer use supplies, naloxone and hygiene items.
- Regularly place orders to replenish supplies.
 - Currently there is no shortage of sterile injecting supplies at the state level.

- Currently there is no shortage of naloxone supplies at the city level.
- If your inventory is sufficient, distribute as many supplies as needed.
 - Plan ahead with participants to determine the supplies they will need in the coming weeks.
 - Provide at least one naloxone kit each time you engage with a participant. Offer more than one to support increased supplies in the community.
 - In-person group naloxone trainings should be suspended; one-on-one training can be conducted as needed and on premises if space allows a minimum of 6 feet of distance between each person. If distance technology is available, virtual group trainings can be provided.
- Pre-package supplies in advance for distribution to participants.
- Print copies of the Health Department’s “COVID-19: Guidance for People Who Use Drugs” and distribute copies along with supplies. Visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus and click on the “Prevention and Groups at Higher Risk” web page to find the guidance document.

How to Dispense Supplies Safely

- Maintain at least 6 feet of distance from participants:
 - If participants are entering the program site, limit the number of people who enter at a time and ensure they maintain at least 6 feet of distance from one another.
 - If dispensing supplies from a window, van or curbside location, ensure participants maintain at least 6 feet of distance from one another while in line. Consider marking off safe distance intervals with tape or other markers.
 - Consider a plastic curtain between dispenser and the client.
- For each participant, gather all supplies into one bag.
 - If your program usually allows participants to take the supplies they need from a larger source, change your program’s dispensing policy so that participants tell staff what they need and staff gather supplies for them.
 - Space permitting, bags should be left on a counter, desk or other surface for the participant to collect in order to limit direct contact.

Food Distribution to Participants

- Distribution of prepared meals should be temporarily suspended.
 - Only distribute individually sealed food and beverage items to SSP participants.
 - Bundle food items with safe drug use supplies to minimize contact.
- Direct participants to nearby food pantries for additional resources. Visit nyc.gov/helpnow and search for “food assistance” for a list of additional resources.

Medication of Opioid Use Disorder

- For programs that have a buprenorphine prescriber on-site, ensure that participants have continued access to ongoing care. If there are shortages in coverage, please contact the NYC Health Department (mwright8@health.nyc.gov) to identify programs that can provide emergency support.
- SSP staff should talk to participants who are interested in starting methadone or buprenorphine about their options during this time.
 - To learn more about buprenorphine treatment via telehealth, visit oasas.ny.gov/medication-assisted-treatment-telehealth or call NYC Health + Hospitals' virtual buprenorphine clinic at 212-562-2665.

Additional Guidance and Resources

- For additional guidance on the safe provision of harm reduction services, refer to “Syringe Services and Harm Reduction Provider Operations During the COVID-19 Outbreak” at harmreduction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID19-harm-reduction-providers-1.pdf.
- For guidance about safer drug use, refer to “COVID-19: Guidance for People Who Use Drugs.” Visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus and click on the “Prevention and Groups at Higher Risk” web page to find the guidance document.
- **NYC Well:** NYC Well offers a number of well-being and emotional support applications (apps) for help with coping. NYC Well staff are available 24/7 and can provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. For support, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692- 9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat online by visiting nyc.gov/nycwell.
- **New York State's COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline** at 844-863-9314 is available seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. The helpline is staffed by specially trained volunteer professionals who are there to listen, support and offer referrals if needed.
- For more information on COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus. For real-time updates, text “COVID” to 692-692. Message and data rates may apply.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 5.23.20