Governor Northam Outlines Plans for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Virginia has no confirmed cases of COVID-19

RICHMOND—Governor Ralph Northam today announced that state officials are executing longstanding public health plans in response to the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Virginia currently has no confirmed cases of COVID-19, and state officials are continuously monitoring the virus worldwide. Governor Northam, joined by state public health officials, held a media briefing in Richmond today highlighting the Commonwealth's preparations.

"The Commonwealth is taking this public health issue seriously, and we have a plan in place to respond to COVID-19," **said Governor Northam**. "The Virginia Department of Health has some of the country's leading public health experts on its team, with deep experience guiding public health emergency responses, and I have great confidence in their ability to guide Virginia in this situation."

Last month, the Trust for America's Health ranked Virginia's public health emergency preparedness in the "high performance tier" among all states. The Commonwealth earned high marks for emergency management accreditation, hospital safety, and public health lab testing capacity. The findings came in the report, Ready or Not: 2020 Protecting the Public's Health from Diseases, Disasters, and Bioterrorism.

Virginia's public health and safety experts established an Incident Management Team in January, shortly after scientists first identified the virus in Asia. The team of experts from across state government is leading the Commonwealth's planning and response. This team is in regular and close communication with government and private sector partners.

"The Virginia Department of Health is closely monitoring the virus, to understand where it has appeared and to learn from the experiences of local communities around the world," **said Secretary of Health and Human Resources Daniel Carey, MD**. "While the risk is still low here in Virginia, state agencies are focused on preparation efforts, and we are encouraging Virginians to practice good hygiene measures and continue following updates from state and federal health officials."

As of this week, potential cases of COVID-19 will be tested at Virginia's Division of Consolidated Laboratory Services, rather than being tested at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. Virginia-based testing is expected to generate results within a few hours, allowing for faster responses.

Although COVID-19 is not spreading in Virginia and the risk here is low, officials said Virginians can take precautions to prevent the potential spread of this disease:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol if soap and water are unavailable.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.

Officials also warned against misinformation and the stigmatization of certain populations, particularly Asian Americans and individuals of Asian descent.

"The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19," **said State Health Commissioner M. Norman Oliver, MD, MA**. "There are also many everyday preventive measures that you can take to help stop the spread of respiratory viruses like COVID-19."

Dr. Oliver has previously served as incident command chief during plans for a potential natural disaster. State Epidemiologist Dr. Lilian Peake is Virginia's incident commander in charge of the COVID-19 management team. Dr. Peake has previously served as the State Health Official in South Carolina, and she is the Medical Director for the Preparedness Program at the Virginia Department of Health. She was also head of VDH's Thomas Jefferson Health District during the H1N1 outbreak.

"Our team is tracking the virus and meeting daily to discuss the situation," **said Dr. Peake**. "The risk to Virginians right now is low. But this is a dynamic situation that is changing daily. Being able to test potential cases here in Virginia will help us protect public health by providing results more quickly, so we can prevent the spread of disease and protect our communities."

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. The virus that causes COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus, which was first identified during an outbreak investigation in the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei province. Risk of infection is dependent on exposure. Close contacts of people who are infected are at greater risk of exposure.

Accurate, reliable information about COVID-19 can be found on the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) website, vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus or the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website, cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html.

VDH is closely monitoring and investigating any reports of illness potentially associated with COVID-19 in Virginia. VDH will update its website every weekday with the number of people tested and test results. Only individuals who meet both clinical and epidemiologic criteria for COVID-19 need to be tested. To protect patient confidentiality, VDH will not provide additional details about individuals undergoing testing.