

NJ Higher Education Secretary Announces Coronavirus Guidance for Colleges, Universities; Urges Institutions to Prepare Amid Outbreak

Institutions Should Have Plans in Place to Address Potential Cases, Continuity of Business Operations

With 23 novel coronavirus cases now identified in New Jersey — including one associated death — Higher Education Secretary Dr. Zakiya Smith Ellis today announced [guidance](#) specific to colleges and universities that includes considerations for institutions as they make decisions that impact campus life.

These considerations include handling basic needs for those who need it (such as housing and food); notifying the surrounding community – including municipal and county leadership and the local business community – and decision-making involved with re-convening in-person instruction if an institution has decided to move its classes online.

Institutions of higher education should review and update their Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs) to outline their response to a potential case, including identifying the appropriate individuals involved in the response and developing a communication strategy during an emergency.

“While there is no evidence of widespread community transmission in New Jersey, the most important thing for colleges and universities to do now is plan, prepare and ensure their plans are reflective of the current reality, understanding there are a lot of unknowns,” **Secretary Smith Ellis said**. “It is crucial that institutions follow guidance developed by our Office, the New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and stay informed of updates as they become available.”

The New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) is aware of many institutions’ decisions to extend spring breaks, move classes online and suspend study abroad programs.

“We understand that maintaining the health and safety of the college community is of utmost importance and that institutions are making careful considerations out of an abundance of caution,” Secretary Smith Ellis said. “Our Office is in regular communication with institutions, fielding questions and concerns, and we are here to support them as this situation evolves.”

In making those decisions, institutions should consider how to make appropriate accommodations for students whose primary residence is a college campus. Institutions should consider whether closing campuses would pose risks to food and housing security.

As part of the state’s coordinated response to address the outbreak, Governor Phil Murphy on Monday [declared a State of Emergency](#) across all 21 counties to ramp up New Jersey’s efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. This allows the Murphy Administration to utilize state resources to assist affected communities responding to and recovering from COVID-19 cases.

The CDC expects more cases to be detected across the country — including more instances of person-to-person spread — as the outbreak continues to expand and testing capacity in the U.S. increases. CDC

has released [interim guidance](#) for administrators of colleges and universities in planning and preparing for COVID-19, along with recommended response measures for those with the virus in their community.

Universities should postpone or cancel study abroad programs that could expose students and staff to potential community spread of COVID-19 and assist students in their return home. Prior to traveling, individuals should consider the potential risks that may be involved in visiting their destination, including the risk of transmission and the risk of quarantine upon returning. Destinations experiencing sustained community transmission should be avoided. Currently those countries under a [Level 3 Travel Health Notice](#) as designated by CDC include China, Iran, Italy, and South Korea. Depending on travel history, individuals will be asked to stay home for a period of 14 days from the time they left an area with ongoing transmission.

Any person or group planning a trip outside of the United States should visit the [CDC website for current travel advisories](#) regarding any restrictions on travel as this situation is evolving.

Travelers returning from countries with sustained community transmission will undergo a health screening and up to 14 days of self-quarantine with health monitoring to ensure they have not contracted the virus and do not pose a public health risk. Accommodations should be made for all asymptomatic (without symptoms) students and staff under monitoring and must not present to work nor school for 14 days from their last date in a Level 3 country. Travelers will be asked to self-quarantine and self-monitor as directed by public health recommendations and to seek care if ill. Institutions should be prepared to offer alternate instruction while a student is quarantined.

Travelers who have been quarantined for 14 days and have remained asymptomatic may return to school unless they meet [other criteria for school exclusion](#).

If a community or institution has cases of COVID-19, local health officials will help identify those individuals and follow up on next steps. Institutions should establish relationships with local public health officials now and identify points of contact before a case is identified. Please visit the [DOH's interactive local health directory map](#) to determine the local health authority within your jurisdiction.

“We do not recommend that students be required to obtain a doctor’s note in order to be excused from class. This may dissuade those who are ill from staying out of class and crowd doctors’ offices with patients who do not need to be seen,” **Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli said.** “Students who visit health services should be instructed to wear a mask when they present with respiratory symptoms and be placed away from others. As a reminder, COVID-19 presents with signs and symptoms that may be indistinguishable from much more common respiratory viruses, like the flu. Students and staff should not attend class and work when they’re ill, regardless of the cause.”

Since the [beginning of last month](#), OSHE has been working with DOH through the state’s Coronavirus Task Force to monitor the global outbreak and the impact it may have on New Jersey’s colleges and universities. In addition, OSHE convened an internal Coronavirus Response Team last week to discuss proactive outreach and preparedness planning, and conducted an audit of institutions’ EOPs, which are required by law to be submitted every five years.

Secretary Smith Ellis and Christopher Neuwirth, Assistant Commissioner of Public Health, Infrastructure, Laboratories and Emergency Preparedness at DOH, hosted a conference call on Wednesday with colleges and universities to address questions and concerns related to the outbreak and campuses’

preparedness activities. This call was in addition to another hosted by Governor Murphy and Commissioner Persichilli last week with K-12 and college leadership.

OSHE will continue working with colleges and universities as this situation evolves and share updated guidance and information as it becomes available from DOH, CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO). Please call the public hotline run by the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System (NJPIES) at 1-800-222-1222; email ncov@doh.nj.gov with questions that will be answered by DOH subject matter experts; and follow OSHE on Twitter at [@NJHigherEd](https://twitter.com/NJHigherEd) and DOH on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/njdeptofhealth) @njdeptofhealth, [Facebook](https://facebook.com/njdeptofhealth) /njdeptofhealth, [Instagram](https://instagram.com/njdeptofhealth) @njdeptofhealth and [Snapchat](https://snapchat.com/add/njdoh) @njdoh.