



Public Health Information Sharing with First Responders

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

Updated April 11, 2020

Q: How do I know if I am responding to a situation that involves a COVID-19 positive person?

As per a directive issued by the Attorney General (AG) and Commissioner of Health, if a COVID-19 positive laboratory result has been reported to the local health department (LHD) in your county or municipality, the county/regional public health agency (aka "County LINCS Agency") provides that information to your County Prosecutor's Office (CPO) so a confidential flag can be placed in the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system used by law enforcement, emergency medical services (EMT) and firefighters (referred to collectively as "First Responders" in this document). This information sharing allows First Responders to take all necessary precautions when responding to a situation involving a COVID-19 positive person.

However, even with this process in place, there is no way to know for sure if you are responding to a situation that may involve a COVID-19 positive person. Not everyone who has COVID-19 will be tested for it. Some people may not have symptoms, and some people may have mild symptoms and do not need or seek health care. In addition, there may be people who were tested elsewhere (e.g., Pennsylvania or New York) and are not in the New Jersey data system, or non-residents who are working in or visiting New Jersey and were tested in their home state. As such, you should always assess your surroundings when you respond to a situation and, whenever possible, follow COVID precautions such as social distancing, use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and good hand hygiene. More information about COVID precautions can be found at www.nj.gov/health/coronavirus.

Q: How are new COVID-19 positive persons added to my municipal CAD system?

Every day, County LINCS Agencies submit a list of names and addresses of persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 to their CPO. The CPO then shares this information with the Chief Law Enforcement Executive (LEE) in the municipality where the COVID-19 positive person resides. A single point of contact (POC) designated by the Chief LEE then enters a flag in the CAD system.

Q: Is the information in the flag in the CAD system informing First Responders that an individual has tested positive for COVID-19 confidential?

Yes, this information is confidential, sensitive, personal and medical information pursuant to the Emergency Health Powers Act (N.J.S.A 26:13-1, et seq.) and New Jersey Communicable Disease law (N.J.S.A. 26:4-1, et seq. and N.J.A.C. 8:57-1.1).

Q: What if my area is served by a county or regional CAD system?

If your area uses a county and/or regional CAD system, the CPO shares the list of names and addresses of persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 with a single POC from your county and/or regional CAD, and that single POC will enter flags in your CAD system.

Q: What if I am an EMT or firefighter and my CAD system is separate from the municipal CAD system?

Some EMTs and firefighters use a CAD system that is separate from law enforcement. If this is how things are structured in your area, the Chief LEE in your municipality will direct their single POC to share the list of names and addresses of persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 with a single POC from your agency, and that single POC will enter flags in your CAD system.

Q: Can the single POC who receives the list of names and addresses of persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 share that list with anyone else?

No, the single POC cannot share the list of COVID-19 positive persons with anyone else. The single POC can only use the list for the purpose of entering a confidential flag in the CAD system. The single POC is responsible to ensure the security and confidentiality of the list.

Q: How are COVID-19 persons removed from my CAD system?

In the daily list of COVID-19 positive persons sent to CPOs, County LINCS Agencies will note any COVID-19 person that has been cleared from isolation so their flag can be removed from the CAD system. For the purpose of this information sharing initiative, County LINCS Agencies are noting COVID-19 positive persons as cleared from isolation when 30 days has passed from the date of their COVID-19 positive test. COVID-19 positive persons may also be removed from a CAD system when a LHD receives new information about a person's address and the case is then transferred to a different jurisdiction.

Q: Why does the number of COVID-19 persons reported to First Responders change, have missing or invalid information, or not match the number of COVID-19 cases reported the day before?

There are many reasons why the number of COVID-19 persons reported to CPOs may change, may have missing or invalid addresses or may not match the number of COVID-19 persons reported the day before. To understand these reasons, it is important to know how COVID-19 persons are reported to public health and what LHDs do when new cases are created.

New Jersey Administrative Code requires all laboratories to report COVID-19 test results to the LHD where the person resides. Laboratories may report results electronically or by secure fax. When new COVID-19 test results are reported, they are entered in the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) secure, online Communicable Disease Reporting and Surveillance System (CDRSS) and assigned to LHDs. LHDs call and interview new cases reported to their jurisdiction and conduct public health investigations to identify and advise high-risk contacts. All of this occurs daily, and new information obtained from laboratories, healthcare providers, LHDs and COVID-19 cases is continuously updated in CDRSS. Once a day, County LINCS Agencies compile reports from CDRSS to provide COVID-19 information to CPOs.

Information included in reports from County LINCS Agencies and/or LHDs may be impacted by some or all of the following:

- **Delay in getting cases entered in CDRSS.** When laboratory results are faxed to NJDOH and LHDs, instead of being submitted electronically, they have to be manually entered in the system. With

a high volume of results, this can take several days. Faxed laboratory results are becoming more common as more laboratories test for COVID-19.

- **Delay in getting CDRSS cases assigned to LHDs.** Nearly a quarter of all COVID-19 positive laboratory tests do not have a patient address and cannot be assigned to a LHD. It can take several days to obtain this information from laboratories and healthcare providers.
- **Delay in getting CDRSS cases assigned to the correct LHD.** CDRSS uses a mapping algorithm to assign cases to LHDs. In many instances, there is insufficient information to map cases to the correct municipality (e.g., P.O. Boxes). LHDs have to manually review cases and, if needed, transfer cases to the correct jurisdiction. In areas with a high volume of cases, verifying all new addresses and transferring to the correct jurisdiction can take several days.
- **Delay in getting current address.** Cases are initially assigned to LHDs according to addresses provided by laboratories or healthcare providers, which may be outdated or incorrect, or may not reflect where a person is currently staying. When LHDs receive new cases, they interview people to confirm where they are staying and, if needed, transfer cases to a new jurisdiction. In areas with a high volume of cases, interviewing all new cases can take several days. In addition, addresses may change over the duration of a person's illness, such as when someone is hospitalized or admitted to a nursing home.
- **Unable to get current address.** Sometimes a person will refuse to provide their address to the LHD, or they give an incorrect or outdated address. This may be due to factors such as fear of being stigmatized, fear of being penalized (e.g, undocumented persons) or fear of being refused services.
- **Current address does not match driver's license or other legal address.** Cases are stored in CDRSS using the address reported by a laboratory, healthcare provider or case. This may not match a person's driver's license, tax record or other previously reported address. It is important to remember public health is not the same as law enforcement; LHDs are seeking information to conduct public health investigations, and this does not require proof of address or matching other databases such as DMV.
- **Conflicting reports coming from different sources.** CDRSS is a system that was designed for public health use in monitoring and controlling communicable disease. There are thousands of public health professionals who use CDRSS every day, where new information is entered in the system and cases are being updated continuously. Depending on the time when a report is compiled from CDRSS, the number of cases and the amount of information in each case can be different. It is important to maintain a standardized protocol and obtain data from one source (i.e., your County LINCS Agency or CPO) to avoid misinformation and confusion. It is also important to remember these cases only represent a fraction of what may be occurring in your community.

Q: Can a First Responder tell their friends and neighbors that a person tested positive for COVID-19 or share an address of a person who tested positive for COVID-19?

No, First Responders cannot disclose the confidential flag in the CAD system to anyone, except in limited situations involving other First Responders who need to know this information. For example, an EMT who is alerted to the confidential COVID-19 flag in CAD system should tell the other EMT in the same ambulance who is also responding to the same call for service so that appropriate PPE can be donned.

Q: What happens if this information or the flag in the CAD system is misused or mishandled?

The misuse or mishandling of this information will jeopardize the ongoing ability to share this information. Any misuse or mishandling of this information may result in legal action against the individual or organization responsible for the misuse or mishandling of this information, including prosecution. Additionally, a First Responder who operates under a license or certification issued by the State who misuses or mishandles this information will jeopardize that license or certification.

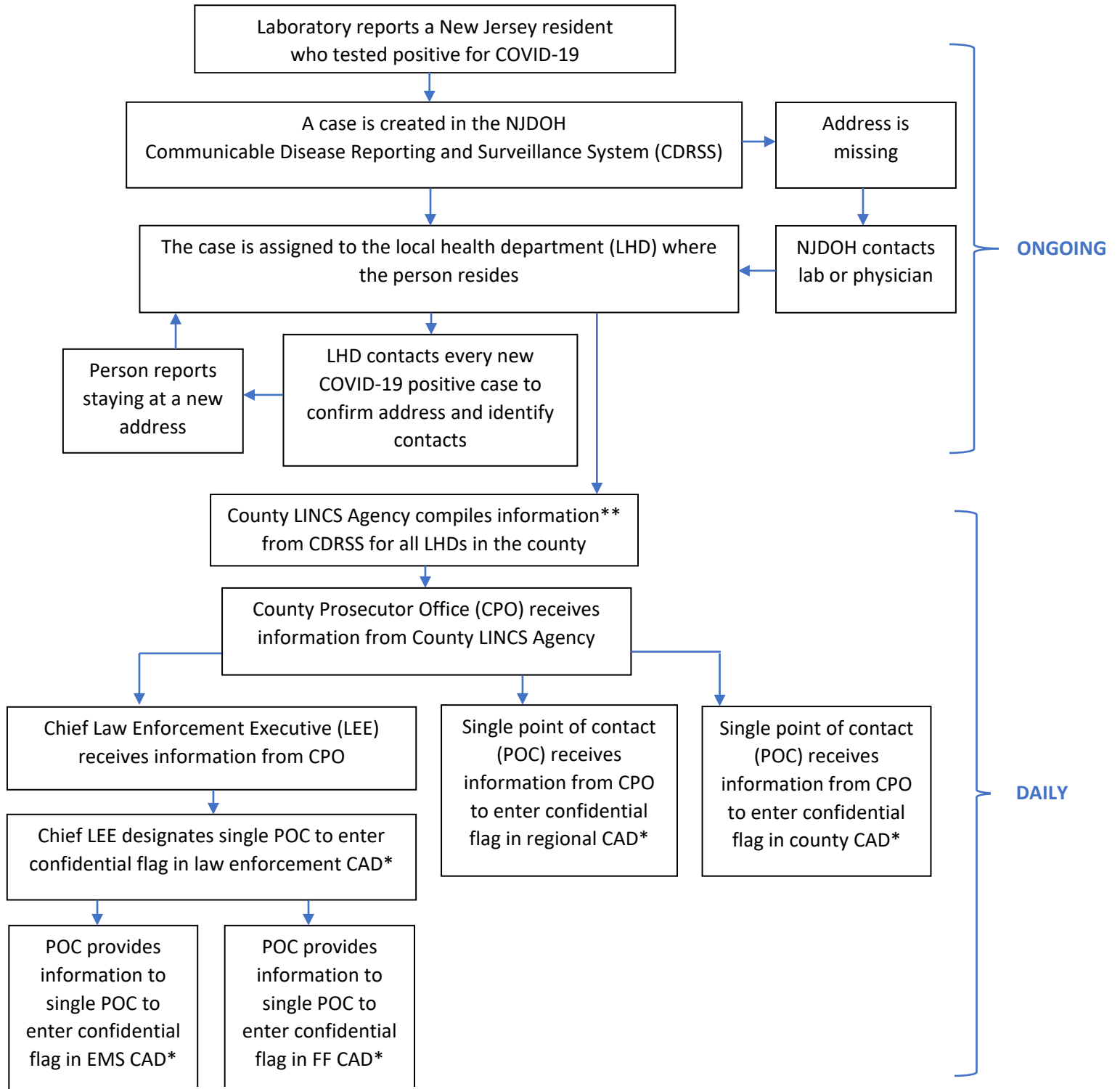
Q: How long can COVID-19 flags remain in CAD systems?

The single POC for your CAD is responsible for securely and completely deleting flags in the CAD system when notified that a flag should be removed, such as when a person is cleared from isolation or moves to a new address (see FAQ above). In all cases, the single POC is responsible for securely and completely deleting all lists and all COVID-19 flags in their CAD system when the Governor declares the public health emergency has ended (which was declared in Governor's Executive Order 103).

Q: What happens if the designated single point of contact goes on leave and is not available to enter the flags into the CAD system?

The Chief Law Enforcement Officer should use the information received from the County Prosecutor's Officer to enter the flag(s) into the CAD system or should designate a new single point of contact to enter the flag(s) into the CAD system.

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**Information shared with first responders includes name and address.

*Case is "cleared" after 30 days and must be removed from all CADs.