

# SAFETY DIRECTOR BULLETIN

April 2020

## Control and Prevention of COVID-19 Exposures During Municipal Solid Waste and Wastewater Operations

Public employers must maintain a level of continuity of services to their residents while protecting them and their staff. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently published guidance for solid waste and wastewater management workers and employers.

According to OSHA, generally, handling waste that is suspected or known to contain or be contaminated with COVID-19 does not require additional precautions beyond those already used to protect workers from the hazards they encounter during their routine job tasks in solid waste and wastewater management.

Preventing infections while handling solid waste follows the typical hierarchy of controls; using engineering and safe work practices to protect workers from potential exposure to COVID-19, and providing personal protective equipment (PPE) as a last resort. Depending on work tasks and potential exposures, appropriate PPE for protecting workers from the virus may include gloves, gowns, masks, goggles or face shields, and/or respirators.

### **Municipal Waste and Recycling**

Workers and employers should manage municipal (e.g., household, business) solid waste and recycling with potential or known COVID-19 contamination like any other non-contaminated municipal waste.

Use typical engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, and PPE, such as puncture-resistant gloves and face and eye protection, to prevent worker exposure to the waste streams (or types of wastes), including any contaminants in the materials, they manage. Such measures can help protect workers from sharps and other items that can cause injuries or exposures to infectious materials.

Employers should consider requiring employees to drive separately in trucks to encourage employee distancing.

The Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) also released COVID-19 guidance for its members. SWANA recommends some of the following strategies for waste and recycling industry employers:

- Actively encourage sick employees to stay home and separate sick employees.
- Perform routine environmental cleaning in the workplace. Wipe commonly used surfaces like telephones, doorknobs, and handles with disinfectants. Advise employees before traveling to take certain steps.
- Check the CDC's Traveler's Health Notices for the latest guidance and recommendations.
- Advise employees to check themselves for symptoms of acute respiratory illness before traveling.
- Ensure employees who become sick while traveling notifies their supervisor and promptly call a healthcare provider for advice if needed.
- Employees who are well but who have a sick family member at home with COVID-19 should notify their supervisor and refer to CDC guidance for how to conduct a risk assessment of their potential exposure.

- If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace but maintain confidentiality as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

## **Wastewater**

Coronaviruses are susceptible to the same disinfection processes as other viruses, so current disinfection conditions in wastewater treatment facilities are expected to be sufficient. This includes conditions for practices such as oxidation with hypochlorite (i.e., chlorine bleach) and peracetic acid, as well as inactivation through the use of ultraviolet irradiation.

According to OSHA, there is no evidence to suggest that additional, COVID-19-specific protections are needed for employees involved in wastewater management operations, including those at wastewater treatment facilities. Wastewater treatment plant operations should ensure workers follow routine practices to prevent exposure to wastewater, including using the engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, and PPE normally required for work tasks when handling untreated wastewater.

The CDC also stated that “Wastewater and sewage workers should use standard practices, practice basic hygiene precautions, and wear personal protective equipment (PPE) as prescribed for current work tasks.”