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What are the legal requirements for facilities and programs to report outbreaks?

Section 32.1-37 of the Code of Virginia requires certain facilities or programs to report the presence or suspected presence of an outbreak to the local health department (LHD). Additional information about those required to report can be found in the Administrative Code under 12VAC5-90-90. The most recent amendment to this requirement went into effect on January 18, 2023.

Who is required to report?

The person in charge of any residential or day program, service or facility licensed or operated by any agency of the Commonwealth, school, or summer camp is required to report. This includes child care facilities, assisted living facilities, correctional or other detention facilities, mental health programs, and other group settings where outbreaks of illness might occur.

Anyone required to report in accordance with Virginia's reportable disease list is also required to report suspected outbreaks to the Health Department.

What diseases should be reported?

The local health department should be notified when an outbreak is suspected, even if no specific disease has yet been diagnosed. An increase in any illness or presentation different than before that might be spread from one person to another or that might be caused by a common exposure (e.g. contaminated food or water) should be reported. The diseases that most commonly cause outbreaks in group settings are respiratory illnesses, such as influenza, gastrointestinal illnesses that cause vomiting or diarrhea, and rash illnesses, such as chickenpox or scabies. Other conditions, such as acute environmental exposures (e.g., carbon monoxide poisoning, pesticide intoxication) might also cause outbreaks and should be reported.

What is an outbreak?

An outbreak is an increase in the number of cases of a disease above what is normally expected in a specific location or population over a specific time period. The increase is often sudden. When 2 or more persons are experiencing similar symptoms, you should report this to your local health department (LHD) to help determine if an outbreak is occurring.

Which health department should be contacted? How should it be contacted?

The local health department serving the city or county in which the facility or program is located should be telephoned immediately if an outbreak is occurring. It may also be reported through VDH's Suspected Outbreak Reporting Portal. Contact information for Virginia's health districts and

their component city or county health departments is available at the VDH Local Health Districts page.

What will the health department do when they receive an outbreak report?

Health department staff will collect and assess information about each ill person, such as the date illness began, symptoms experienced, and exposure history. Specimens might be collected for laboratory testing. The health department might need to interview people at the facility or program, both those who are ill and those who have not been ill, to identify factors that might be associated with illness. Under 12VAC5-90-90.d of the Virginia Regulations for Disease Reporting and Control, it has been clarified that persons reporting an outbreak may report identifying and contact information for individuals included in the outbreak. Most importantly, the health department will recommend steps to follow to stop the outbreak and reduce the risk of disease.

How can I get more information?

- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the VDH Local Health Districts page.
- Visit the VDH website for information on the Virginia Regulations for Disease Reporting and Control.

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