



a nonprofit institute for public health

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Good day. My name is Dr. Rob Heininger. I am a public health professional, medical doctor, and currently serve as the medical director for Public Health Management Corporation, home to the Pennsylvania Public Health Association. As a former police officer and outbreak investigator for the U.S. Army, I know that robust contact tracing is an essential investigative tool in the Public Health toolbelt. Without this basic piece of detective work, disease can spread silently and unchecked putting the public at risk. Whether it be through crime, disease, or other safety concerns, a community under threat is one that cannot thrive economically or otherwise. Contact tracing provides the data necessary for public health officials and individuals to make informed decisions to keep themselves and their neighbors safe.

Contact tracing is an essential part of Pennsylvania’s response to COVID-19.

Each person with COVID-19 infects, on average, two to three other people. This means that in only ten rounds of infection, one positive case can turn into more than 59,000. Until there is an effective vaccine, it is crucial to break this chain of infection so that we can prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed, return to work and school, and continue reopening the economy.

COVID-19 can be transmitted before people have symptoms, which makes it even more important to identify everyone who may have had been exposed so that they can immediately begin isolating themselves – even if they don’t feel sick. The best way to prevent new infections is through rapid testing, contact tracing, and voluntary social isolation. All SARS-CoV-2 positive test results are required to be reported to Pennsylvania’s National Electronic Disease Surveillance System, which enables the department to assign a contact tracer to perform an investigation. Contact tracers have been trained to help COVID-19 patients recall everyone they have had close contact with while infected, reach out to those contacts, and provide information and support to help people safely self-quarantine.

Pennsylvania has decades of experience providing effective contact tracing for other infectious diseases.

Contact tracing is an essential and effective public health tool that has been used for decades to prevent the spread of everything from foodborne illnesses to sexually transmitted infections like HIV. Contact

tracing was critical to controlling the 2003 SARS outbreak and the outbreak of Ebola in 2014. A combination of contact tracing and vaccination is what enabled the worldwide eradication of smallpox in 1978. While contact tracing has never been performed on this scale in Pennsylvania, it is simply an expansion of an existing health system with proven success.

Contact tracing is effective at suppressing COVID-19 outbreaks, especially when combined with technology.

A study from Shenzhen, China found that contact tracing reduced the average time it took for new cases to be confirmed from 5.5 to 3.2 days and reduced the amount of time it took to isolate infected people from 4.6 days down to 2.7. Countries that have had significant success in controlling the spread of COVID-19 have all implemented large-scale contact tracing programs. Many of these contact tracing programs incorporate, not only patient interviews, but also technological approaches. To aid the work of contact tracers, Pennsylvania recently released COVID Alert PA, a free app that alerts PA residents to COVID-19 exposures based on anonymous Bluetooth signals that determine when users are near each other.

Contact tracers are trained, knowledgeable public health professionals with supervision from epidemiologists.

Contact tracing requires informed staff with knowledge of infectious disease, excellent interpersonal skills, and an understanding of patient confidentiality. Contact tracers are required to receive training on disease transmission according to CDC principles, including epidemiological principles of isolation and quarantine, the ethics of data collection and use, risk communication, crisis counseling, and cultural sensitivity. In addition to contact tracers, the Pennsylvania Department of Health employs supervising epidemiologists, disease intervention specialists, and a CDC Senior Policy Advisor to provide follow-up recommendations when a COVID-19 case or outbreak is identified. At a time when many Pennsylvanians have lost their jobs, contact tracing provides many new employment opportunities across the state.

Without contact tracing, Pennsylvania will lose the economic progress it has made so far.

Contact tracing is what has enabled all 67 PA counties to enter the Green Phase and expand the capacity of nonessential businesses. Even one missed case can start a new surge of infections in an area that was

previously under control. Without contact tracing, regions that are starting to reopen and recover will need to return to the Red Phase stay-at-home restrictions. Contact tracing can slow the spread of COVID-19 so that large-scale shutdowns are unnecessary, and Pennsylvanians can continue returning to their normal routines.



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