

Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Contagious Disease Outbreak Planning and Response in South Carolina



South Carolina Institute of
Medicine & Public Health

Executive Summary

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In July 2021, the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health (IMPH) and the North Carolina Institute of Medicine (NCIOM) launched the Carolinas Pandemic Preparedness Taskforce. This two-state taskforce was charged with documenting lessons learned during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and developing actionable recommendations to inform future contagious disease outbreak planning and response efforts.

As the first taskforce jointly convened by IMPH and the NCIOM, the Carolinas Pandemic Preparedness Taskforce included more than 80 experts and key perspectives from both states across many areas representing public health, health care associations and health systems, health care providers, academia, community representatives, philanthropy, social services, behavioral health providers, advocates for vulnerable populations and public safety/emergency preparedness organizations. Partnering agencies prioritized diversity in perspectives, expertise, experience and demographics among taskforce membership, resulting in wide, multi-disciplinary stakeholder engagement and a taskforce report produced by each state that reflects a shared vision.

The taskforce's vision for pandemic preparedness, response and recovery in South Carolina is a system and culture that centers the needs of vulnerable and historically marginalized populations. By acknowledging the detrimental effects historical inequities have on marginalized populations, the taskforce aimed to develop recommendations that would bolster a system that elevates strategies to achieve equity, fosters collaboration and utilizes data to inform decision making in preparing and responding to contagious disease outbreaks for a more resilient, equitable and prosperous state.

List of Recommendations

Public Health Infrastructure

- PH 1. Fund increased workforce development and maintenance for the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.
- PH 2. Evaluate opportunities to expand inclusion of community-based individuals and organizations in formal contagious disease outbreak planning and response efforts.
- PH 3. Improve and expand communications channels between state agencies and local organizations to better reach and accommodate all South Carolinians.
- PH 4. Follow evidence-based guidance at the state leadership level for preparation and response to contagious disease outbreaks.
- PH 5. Provide funding to expand and sustain existing mobile models of public health delivery.

Data

- DAT 1. Facilitate statewide participation in an interoperable Health Information Exchange to ensure frictionless portability of health information between all providers, clinical laboratories and public health officials in the state.
- DAT 2. Utilize surveillance and projection data from validated modeling techniques designed for communicable disease transmission during contagious disease outbreaks.

Workforce

- WF 1. Strengthen the health care workforce to combat shortages and ensure ongoing capacity to plan for and respond to contagious disease outbreaks.
 - WF 1a. Scale health apprenticeship programs for high school students and recent high school graduates.

Workforce

- WF 1b. Create a structured process to guide nursing students to smaller programs in the state if spaces for upper division classes in larger universities are unavailable.
- WF 1c. Increase the availability and sustainability of clinical site placements for future health science students and residents to combat workforce shortages.
- WF 1d. Identify, develop and implement mental health support programs for health workers.
- WF 1e. Continue to research and deploy alternative health care staffing models and explore technology solutions or partnerships to maximize or extend the capabilities of health professionals.
- WF 2. Evaluate opportunities for community health workers to increase the capacity of the contagious disease response workforce.
- WF 3. Better support the workforce that responds to contagious disease outbreaks.
 - WF 3a. Develop a statewide definition of essential workers to be used during contagious disease outbreaks.
 - WF 3b. Develop a plan to address burnout among essential workers during public health emergencies.
 - WF 3c. Ensure sustainability of continuing education for health and human service providers through virtual platforms during communicable disease outbreaks lasting longer than three months.

Education

- EDU 1. Keep schools open during contagious disease outbreaks but develop the infrastructure and capacity to shift to virtual and hybrid learning as needed to prevent the interruption of education.
- EDU 2. Evaluate and implement opportunities to improve scientific literacy in South Carolina from Pre-K through terminal degree programs.
- EDU 3. Provide effective learning opportunities that protect medically vulnerable students and staff during contagious disease outbreaks.

Supply Chain

- SPC 1. Use data-informed decision-making to ensure adequate, equitable maintenance and distribution of personal protective equipment.
- SPC 2. Ensure the availability and sustainability of programs/organizations that provide food to those in need during contagious disease outbreaks.
- SPC 3. Lift procurement restrictions to reduce bureaucratic burdens and increase efficiency during public health emergencies.

Health Care Delivery

- HCD 1. Define, evaluate and implement standing orders for testing and vaccination during contagious disease outbreaks.
- HCD 2. Refine and implement policies to protect those residing in congregate living settings during contagious disease outbreaks.
- HCD 3. Redeploy the Virtual Grand Rounds Programs established in 2020 during future contagious disease outbreaks.

Behavioral Health

- BH 1. Coordinate to develop, sustain and scale policies and programs that increase access to behavioral health services in South Carolina to ensure ongoing comprehensive care that is adaptable to public health emergencies.
- BH 2. Continue to increase access to naloxone and/or other opiate antagonists to reverse overdoses.

Telehealth & Broadband

- THB 1. Continue and scale efforts to provide broadband access to all South Carolinians.
- THB 2. Enact policies that ensure that telehealth services expanded under COVID continue to be authorized to provide increased access to care and to prevent disruption of care during contagious disease outbreaks.