

4-13-2020 Fighting COVID-19: Flattening the curve in your food facility

(The views and opinions expressed in this blog are strictly those of the author.)



Controlling the spread of COVID-19 in food facilities is really quite similar to controlling the spread of the virus in the broader community.

In the broader community, if there is a lack of effective monitoring, ineffective controls, no effort at distancing and a sluggish response, the disease will spread quickly and the number of new cases will rapidly overwhelm the healthcare system. That's why we hear about the drastic strategies being employed to decrease the number of new cases and to "flatten the curve."

The same holds true for the food industry. Food manufacturing facilities, for example, are merely a microcosm of the broader community. In turn, as community spread continues, it is no longer uncommon to hear reports about food industry employees (or their family members) who are now testing positive for COVID-19. Indeed, it is no longer a matter of "if" it will happen, but rather "when."

Food companies should plan accordingly.

How to best respond when an employee tests positive can vary significantly based on the circumstances in any given case. In addition to taking action appropriate to an infected employee, companies will also need to determine whether other employees may have been exposed. We all agree that "close contact" is generally defined as being within 6 feet of a positive COVID-19 case for a prolonged period of time. With that said, the meaning of a "prolonged period of time" has varied wildly, ranging from only a few minutes to as long as 10 to 15 minutes. I tend to focus on the employee, his or her position and duties, as well as the expression of symptoms and the degree.

In turn, considering that the goal in food facilities, as in the broader community, is to flatten the curve, my recommendation has always been to take an extremely liberal approach and cast the widest net possible. If you try to nickel and dime COVID-19, or the definition of "close contact," you will lose.

Indeed, as the fight against COVID-19 continues, examples are being illuminated all over the country. One of the nation's largest meat processors, for example, recently halted operations at an Iowa pork facility after more than two dozen workers were infected with COVID-19. In Pennsylvania, a processing facility suspended operations after 130 workers were sickened.

4-13-2020 Fighting COVID-19: Flattening the curve in your food facility

(The views and opinions expressed in this blog are strictly those of the author.)

To safely and effectively respond to the incidence of COVID-19, all companies need to take drastic measures to limit the opportunity for introduction and spread. Indeed, investing \$10,000 today can save your company \$1,000,000 tomorrow. Encourage employee education. Encourage employee self-reporting. Encourage employees who are sick to stay home. And, without exception, **pay them**. Cast the widest safety net possible, and your company will survive. Food safety, and employee safety, **is not competitive**. As members of the food industry, we are responsible for the health of the nation and, increasingly, the world. We cannot falter and we cannot fail. When you are faced with decisions involving COVID-19 management, please err on the side of caution. Don't be afraid to cast a wide net and don't be afraid to ensure employee health. If you can be courageous, you will flatten the curve in your facility, and flatten the curve for the world.



Thank you for all you do.



LEGALLY SPEAKING BY SHAWN STEVENS

As principal of Food Industry Counsel LLC, Shawn Stevens helps food industry clients protect their brand by proactively reducing their food safety exposure.