



*"Partnering to make recycling strong through economic and environmentally sound solutions"*

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## Best Management Practices for Recycling Facilities During COVID-19 – Webinar Summary

The Northeast Resource Recovery Association, your recycling nonprofit, held a popular free webinar on April 15, 2020 to address questions and concerns about how municipalities can operate trash and recycling services as safely as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reagan Bissonnette, NRRA Executive Director, and Bonnie Bethune, NRRA Member Services Manager, were joined by Dr. Ben Locwin, an expert on infectious disease epidemiology based in Portsmouth, NH. The recording of the webinar, along with the presentation slides, is available at <https://nrna.net/resources/nrra-coronavirus-resource-page/>.

The following provides a summary of the questions asked and briefly summarizes the answers provided during the webinar, including timestamps (in red) indicating when each question was asked. *The answers provided below are only a brief summary. Please listen to the webinar recording for the complete answers.*

### **0:07** Introduction

Reagan reviewed the purpose of webinar, thanked attendees for providing essential services, and introduced the speakers: Reagan Bissonnette, NRRA Executive Director, Bonnie Bethune, Member Services Manager, and Dr. Ben Locwin, an expert in infectious disease epidemiology.

### **4:18** Please briefly answer the following:

**What COVID-19?** Coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as COVID-19, is an upper-respiratory tract illness disease caused by a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2.

**What are the symptoms?** Fever, coughing, shortness of breath.

**Who is most at risk?** Older adults (60+) and people who have severe underlying chronic medical conditions like heart or lung disease or diabetes.

### **7:00** How does the COVID-19 virus spread?

It spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Spread is more likely when people are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet; better off distancing at 10 feet or more). COVID-19 may be spread by people who are not showing symptoms. About 25% of people infected may not show symptoms for many days or potentially several weeks.

### **10:10** Many people have heard about a New England Journal of Medicine study that indicates the COVID-19 virus can live on the following materials for varying amounts of time: Airborne 3 hours; Copper 4 hours; Cardboard 24 hours; Stainless steel 72 hours; Plastic 72 hours. Can you provide some context regarding how well the results of this study reflect real life?

In the study, the virus was released into the air in the form of tiny aerosols produced by a nebulizer. In real life, most respiratory droplets that you cough or sneeze sink to the ground faster than the smaller aerosols used in the study. The amount of the virus remaining on the surfaces tested in the study was incredibly small by the end of those time periods. When the virus deposits on a surface, it begins to degrade. On cardboard, for example, which is a dry surface for a virus, the desiccation (aka degradation) tends to

happen quickly. Overall, the risk of infection from surfaces is low compared to the risk of infection from the air. Just because the COVID-19 virus might be present on the surface does not mean you'll become infected unless you touch the surface and then bring your hands to your face and touch your mouth, nose or eyes. If your hand behavior is very vigilant, the route of infection from contacting surfaces is virtually nil.

Dr. Ben Locwin, as quoted in a Seacoast Online article: "[A]mong the confirmed cases COVID-19 worldwide, none are being attributed to the patient making contact with a surface where the virus is persisting from and then self-inoculating themselves by touching their mouth, nose or eyes before washing or sanitizing their hands..."

**15:10 Reagan reviewed the interim guidance provided for solid waste operators by OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration):**

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

*Recycling:* As with municipal waste, employers and workers in the recycling industry should continue to use typical engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, and personal protective equipment, such as puncture-resistant gloves and face and eye protection, to prevent worker exposure to recyclable materials they manage, including any contaminants in the materials.

**16:58 (Audience Question) How accurate are reports that only 1% of the population has been tested for COVID-19?**

Very accurate. Neither of the current tests are particularly robust. Over 300,000 tests have been done, which is actually about 1/10<sup>th</sup> of 1% of the population.

**19:25 Since operators and residents are much more likely to get infected from the air than from surfaces, should social distancing at facilities should be the highest priority?**

Yes. We should be much more concerned about contracting the virus from close contact with infected people than from contact with surfaces that may have virus on them. Employees or residents who are sick should stay home. Modify operations at facilities to allow for proper social distancing and proper use of PPE (personal protective equipment). Social distancing will allow you to be safer, then couple that with defensive barriers like PPE.

**21:36 NRRA Member Examples - Social Distancing Measures.**

We have a Facility Impact Report on our website that is being regularly updated. It includes specific examples of how facilities are modifying their operations during the pandemic. Examples include: Lebanon used spray paint on the ground to identify a 6-foot box in front of their recycling areas; swap areas are closed; buildings/offices are closed to the public; no assistance with trash or recyclables is being provided by facility staff; reduced visits to facilities are requested; Keene, NH increased hours on Saturday to spread out people on their busiest day; and some household hazardous waste collection days have been cancelled.

**24:53 The CDC now recommends that everyone should wear masks when near others in public. What kinds of masks should operators be wearing?**

When possible and when available in settings with others around, you should be wearing a mask. Since February 24<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Locwin issued his first recommendation for people to wear masks whenever possible. Keep in mind that masks are not a substitute for proper social distancing, but rather a supplement. Some masks protect the wearer, like N95s for hospital workers who can't socially distance from infected people.

Other masks are more focused on protecting people from the wearer, like cloth masks. Though any mask tends to be better than no mask to protect the wearer (ex. even double wrapping a scarf).

**28:47 NRRA Member Examples - Using Masks.**

Examples include Swanzey, NH, where residents have been making cloth masks for operators, and Chittenden Solid Waste District, which purchased washable cloth masks online. Masks (as well as gloves and eye protection) remind us and others that we are in a special situation and need to be careful. These are behavioral clues for us to be mindful of what we are doing.

**30:56 Although the risk of infection from surfaces is much lower than from the air, should operators be wearing gloves? If so, what kind? How often should they be changed?**

Yes, it's worthwhile to wear gloves. But if your behavior is not changing as a result, then the PPE won't necessarily help and may be harmful. The combination of gloves and good hand hygiene can help prevent self-inoculation. Nitrile gloves provide a broad spectrum of chemical protection and can be worn under regular safety gloves. Gloves should be changed as often as need be to maintain that protective barrier. After removing gloves, wash hands before touching anything else like your face or your phone screen. Then put on new gloves.

**34:55 Should operators be wearing eye protection? If so, what kind?**

If there is a potential for splashing or misting of particles during operations, eye goggles or safety glasses that fit close to the face would be safest. But recall that there hasn't been a confirmed case of transmission through eye or surface contact yet. It could happen, but it is unlikely. Operators should be more concerned about high velocity impacts to the eye than COVID-19 transmission into the eye. Any eye protection should be designed for the work being done.

**36:37 (Follow-up Question) With respect to face shields, if they are not tight fitting, should people have tight fitting glasses under their face shield?**

Probably not to protect against coronavirus infections.

**38:43 NRRA Member Example - Eye Protection.**

Keene, NH sorting line staff wear eye protection (plus gloves, bibs, and masks).

**39:31 (Audience Question) If someone gets COVID-19, with or without symptoms, will that person have immunity to reinfection?**

Yes. We have no reason to suspect they will not be immune after recovering from COVID-19. This is not a super resilient virus, despite what the news might lead us to believe. Faulty tests could be the reason for some reports out there of repeat infections.

**42:50 (Audience Question) How often would you recommend washing cloth masks?**

Wash cloth masks daily at the end of day. Washing more often is probably not practical for operators. Wash with regular soap and water, then dry before use.

**45:13 What is the risk of contracting COVID-19 from handling contaminated recyclables, including baling them?**

It is unlikely to acquire the virus from surface contact. As for acquiring the virus from baling material, like plastic, it's extremely unlikely. Recognize that much of the material coming in has already been sitting around for many days or weeks, so the likelihood that any active virus is on the surface is extremely low. This is especially true if the material has been outside in the sunlight, as ultraviolet light tends to destroy all

viruses as well. You would need 100% of the plastic surface to be covered to possibly get enough virus into the air for exposure and infection. This is tremendously unlikely.

**47:36 What is your advice for facilities with respect to handling money? Is taking credit cards better than cash?**

The virus can last longer on credit cards (made of plastic) than cash (more like paper and cardboard), but cash is handled by more people. Either way, you can't get sick from surfaces unless you touch your face afterwards. A better system is to avoid touching the cash or credit card entirely. A cash box system could be good where exact change is required, or a system where the resident can get change themselves.

**50:46 NRRA Member Examples - Handling Money.**

Some communities have stopped charging disposal fees. Some are dealing with cash only, checks only, invoicing, or using a collection jar or box. Scales are closed in some instances for weighing and charging for items. Some communities are suspending Pay-As-You-Throw and tag programs or residents are being asked to hold a ticket to punch.

**52:34 If one employee tests positive for COVID-19, what is the next step for the rest of the staff and for the facility (i.e. sanitizing)?**

Sick employees should go home immediately. The biggest risk is for people who may have been in close contact with the sick employee where air was exchanged. Disinfect shared surfaces (ex. shared keyboard), but otherwise there is little risk to others. Disinfecting can be done with 70% isopropyl alcohol solution and then wiping with a clean rag. Once the infected person has been removed from the area, there is little remaining risk for others. Assume anybody nearby could have potentially been infected and should be monitored for a few days. Maintaining social distancing is the best preventative strategy.

**55:11 Should protocols for handling materials and social distancing be temperature or humidity dependent?**

Warmer weather alone will not alleviate the spread of the virus. But when warmer weather drives people outside and they are less congregated outside, that helps. Humid weather helps reduce viral spread, in part because humid air settles the respiratory droplets and viral particles to the ground faster. Viral particles are also less viable in humid air for less time. As humidity increases, we will probably see a decrease in the spread of COVID-19.

**57:25 (Audience Question) Do we know if mosquitos or ticks can transmit the virus from person to person?**

The answer is not 100% clear, but the answer is likely no. The best available data we have is that pest vector transmission does not occur.

**58:45 (Audience Question) Under any circumstances should we open trash bags to remove visible bio or autoclave bags from inside another bag?**

Following the OSHA guidelines, operators should handle municipal solid waste as they normally have done so. There would be a greater risk trying to take out the medical waste bag, so leave it.

**59:33 (Audience Question) Should operators change their clothes before going home?**

The risk of surface contamination is very low. If people are interested in reducing that small risk as much as possible, they could wear an apron or change their clothes. Even clinicians working with infected patients all day are not going beyond the standard of changing and washing their clothes, washing their hands, and taking showers when they get home.

**1:01:06 (Audience Question) What is the status of possibly getting a vaccine for the COVID-19 virus?**

Several vaccines are in trial now. We won't see the results of the clinical trial until November of 2020 at the earliest, and that's on an accelerated timeline. If they start manufacturing a stockpile now, assuming it will be approved, we won't see public release of enough human doses until Q1 of 2021 at the earliest.

**1:03:26 NRRA Resources**

*Resources for Everyone:*

- COVID-19 Resources Page at [www.nrra.net](http://www.nrra.net), including Facility Impact Report
- Free Full of Scrap email newsletter (sign up at <https://nrra.net/#newsletter>)
- Summer webinar series being planned

*Resources for NRRA's Municipal Members:*

- Weekly member calls Wednesdays at 9 am
- Private email listserv

**1:04:45 Conclusion**

Post webinar survey, continuing education credit, and acknowledgement for USDA Rural Utility Services grant support.