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The Cayuga County Health Department (CCHD) has seen an increase in COVID-19 cases this fall, with a significant increase just since the Thanksgiving holiday. Not only are we seeing an increase in the number of people testing positive for COVID-19, but we have seen a disturbing increase in hospitalizations and deaths. In recent months, worksites have been the source of many exposures and clusters, a cluster being two or more linked cases not living in the same household.

Cayuga County is in a much different situation than we were nine months ago when New York Pause was initiated. Most businesses and schools were shut down before Cayuga County had its first confirmed case. Today, we face a much different reality. New York reopened, Cayuga County businesses and schools have been operational at the same time cases continue to rise. Despite working to control and limit the number of infections, increased community spread is impacting many worksites. As we move forward and work to keep businesses open in Cayuga County, CCHD and the Cayuga Economic Development Agency (CEDA) would like to urge local businesses to take proactive steps, rather than being reactive, when it comes to COVID-19 exposures in the workplace. Such steps include:

Remind staff to stay home when ill.

- Employees should not be coming to work with any symptom of COVID-19. This includes mild illness, such as a runny nose, head ache, congestion and cough.

Keep at least six feet apart from non-household members.

- If you must work within six feet of each other for short periods, each person should properly wear a facemask over their mouth and nose.

Masks should be worn at all times, unless at a workstation alone.

- Masks should be worn when social distancing cannot be maintained and when moving freely about the office.
- Keep your mask on if you cough or sneeze, and still cough or sneeze into your sleeve.
- Wash masks regularly.

Do not allow employees to eat or gather together.

- Breakrooms, conference rooms and work luncheons have contributed to exposures and positive cases.

Reduce the number of staff in the workplace at any given time to the extent possible.

- Stagger shifts.
- Have people work in groups – group A on site and group B off site.

Allow those who are capable and comfortable working from home to do so.

- Different employees have different needs and preferences. Some employees prefer to be or are more productive in the office, others are as (or more) productive at home. Talk to your employees about their preferences and whether they have a setup that would be conducive to working remotely. If you aren't sure, consider a trial run for employees that are interested and have job functions that can be done off-site.
- Remote work requires trust and communication. Be sure to set clear expectations and check in regularly.

These steps are not always easy or convenient, but are preferable to managing a preventable outbreak or mass quarantine. Furthermore, if trends don't improve it is likely that our community will be forced to institute additional restrictions. If and when it comes to that point, employers will be more prepared for these restrictions if they are starting to implement these measures voluntarily now. Better yet, voluntary implementation may help to avoid mandatory restrictions all together. Proactive measures like these are how each individual business can do its part to keep the economy open.

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