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GOVERNOR

CABINET FOR HEALTH AND FAMILY SERVICES

DEPARTMENT FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

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Eric Friedlander
SECRETARY

Steven Stack, MD
COMMISSIONER

May 13, 2024

Dear Health Care Facility Operator, Long Term Care, or Assisted Living Administrator:

Re: Guidelines for Controlling Norovirus and Other Gastrointestinal Outbreaks in Health Care Facilities

Infectious gastroenteritis is common in healthcare facilities in Kentucky. These illnesses can cause nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, and stomach cramps, in addition to headache, low-grade fever, muscle aches, and fatigue. A common cause of gastrointestinal outbreaks in institutional environments is a virus called norovirus. This virus is very contagious and can easily spread from person to person through contaminated hands, surfaces, or food, particularly in congregate living situations.

We understand that when residents become ill, it can place a higher demand on staff time, cause stress for staff and residents, and potentially affect the financial status of your healthcare facility. To assist you in protecting the health of your staff and residents, the Kentucky Department for Public Health and the Office of Inspector General in the Cabinet for Health and Family Services have developed guidelines designed to reduce the number of gastrointestinal outbreaks, prevent the spread of illness, and assist in quicker recovery. Although targeted toward norovirus, this guidance includes appropriate precautions designed to prevent the spread of contagious diseases that transmit through the fecal-oral route. While the guidance is not written into state nursing facility licensure and federal certification laws, the OIG encourages adherence to these standards as part of each facility's infection prevention and control program, under 42 C.F.R. 483.80, and promotion of a sanitary environment, under 42 C.F.R. 483.10(i)(2) and 483.90(i).

These guidelines update and replace earlier joint Kentucky Department for Public Health and the Office of Inspector General guidance issued to long-term care facilities, assisted living and nursing homes in 2022. For ease of use, it is purposely divided into sections that address various roles within the facility. Our agencies encourage you to discuss the recommendations contained in this document with supervisors and staff who work in each of the areas outlined. A multidisciplinary, team approach to infection prevention and outbreak control is likely to prove the most successful.

One of the first steps in controlling an outbreak of any infectious disease is early recognition. The Department for Public Health urges your healthcare facility to report illnesses involving two or more residents with like symptoms or two or more staff with like symptoms to your local health department. The reporting of infectious disease outbreaks is required by law in Kentucky, but it will also help health departments to better assist your facility and minimize the number of affected individuals.

Your local health department, the Department for Public Health and the Office of Inspector General will continue to respond to and offer assistance in case of an infectious disease outbreak in a healthcare facility. An infection prevention and control program that assures a sanitary environment and prevents the development and transmission of disease and infection protects the health and safety of your residents, staff, and visitors. A copy of this guidance is being sent to every licensed long-term care and assisted living facility in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

The Department for Public Health and the Office of Inspector General hope that the tools provided with this letter will prevent or reduce the occurrence of gastrointestinal illnesses in your facility.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Lovely', with a stylized flourish at the end.

David T. Lovely
Acting Inspector General
Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathleen Winter', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kathleen Winter, PhD, MPH
State Epidemiologist & Director
Division of Epidemiology & Health Planning
Kentucky Department for Public Health