



# COVID-19

## NOTES ON MIGRANTS

AN ICMHD HEALTH POLICY CONTRIBUTION



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## CONTENTS

<b>03</b>	Migration and migrants
<b>03</b>	Migrants and COVID-19
<b>03</b>	Migrants and health care
<b>04</b>	Preventing infection
<b>04</b>	Dealing with infection
<b>05</b>	Mobilizing help
<b>05</b>	Coping with infection
<b>06</b>	Dealing with COVID-19 death
<b>06</b>	Remember

## MIGRATION AND MIGRANTS

Migration continues to be an essential ingredient of socioeconomic development everywhere. Whether it is a case of people moving from the countryside to cities to find work, or people crossing seas and borders to meet host country demands for new labour, migrants are an integral part of the modern world. They bring with them new skills and talents, and a willingness to take on jobs that host societies have difficulty filling. Despite this, migrants tend to be overlooked by many health and social service systems. They are also vulnerable to exclusion, stigma and discrimination, particularly if “undocumented” or irregular. Today, in the context of COVID-19, a neglect of migrants will make it impossible to stem the pandemic. These Notes are designed to remind national and local authorities that the war against COVID-19 cannot be won if migrants are forgotten; *unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno*, or one for all, and all for one, must guide the fight against COVID-19.

## MIGRANTS AND COVID-19

Like all viral infections, especially respiratory ones, COVID-19 targets people in vulnerable settings. Because of the types of work many of them do and the crowded social environments in which they often live, both regular and irregular migrants may be especially vulnerable to COVID-19 infection.

- identify and quickly “map” and get to know all migrant populations
- map them by age, gender, language, and ethnicity
- learn where they live and what their living situations are like
- learn migrants’ pre-quarantine health profile
- work with community leaders in finding ways of reaching them
- get healthcare and social services to reach out to them innovatively
- work with employers and unions to reach out to them constructively
- ensure that employers act responsibly with migrant workers
- work with NGOs and other groups familiar with migrant communities
- develop national and local COVID-19 policies inclusive of migrants

## MIGRANTS AND HEALTH CARE

Legal and administrative regulations as well as language differences can limit the access migrants, especially irregular ones, have to quality health care. Many of the same factors can also mean migrants may not be aware of what they must do to avoid COVID-19, and what they must do if they, or those around them, are infected. The economic and labor crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic will also mean that many migrants will be pushed into unemployment, underemployment and working poverty. This will affect their access to health and health care, especially in fee-for-service medical systems. Irregular migrants may be particularly affected and must not be overlooked. They too are part of the larger community.

- ensure, and be seen to ensure, equity in access to health/social services
- facilitate COVID-19 testing in the same way as for host community
- provide out-reach and follow-up for migrants with COVID-19 symptoms
- work with health insurance personnel to ensure the coverage of migrants
- provide cultural mediators and translators wherever necessary

## PREVENTING INFECTION

Preventing infection will always be the first and most important challenge to take up with migrants. Social distancing must be encouraged, no matter how difficult it is in the settings in which many of them live and work. At the same time, every opportunity must be taken to promote and facilitate other basic prevention actions such as hand washing with soap and water, wearing masks if there is any suspicion of infection, and self-isolation if symptoms are present.

- develop easy-to-understand prevention messages in migrants' languages
- remember that different cultures may have different attitudes to disease
- phrase messages in culturally acceptable and meaningful ways
- emphasize scientifically sound prevention, and dispel fake news
- make COVID-19 prevention part of migrant radio, TV, print conversations
- make use of mobile phone systems because most migrants use them
- get COVID-19 prevention into all the social media that migrants use
- make sure COVID-19 infolines workers are sensitized to migrant needs
- look for migrant volunteers to help as prevention messengers
- remember that migrants are often forced to live in crowded dwellings
- try to find solutions to overcrowding by making other space available
- remember that most migrants are chronically poorly paid
- provide soap, water, and alcohol-based hand cleaning solutions
- provide and encourage mask-use, especially if infection is suspected
- remember that migrants often cannot easily access healthcare services
- make it possible and known that migrants can use all healthcare services
- provide transport where necessary for migrants to access testing and care
- encourage healthcare staff to welcome and be sensitive to migrants

## DEALING WITH INFECTION

At some point, COVID-19 infections will occur in migrant communities in just the same way as they will in the larger host public. Migrants may however be reticent to trust local authorities, and they are much less likely to reveal themselves once they get sick if they are stigmatised or risk deportation. If and when infections do occur, migrants should act and be helped to act as anyone else should. Any infection prevented and any onward transmission that is averted in migrant communities, helps to avert an infection in the larger public as well. For many migrants, especially those in irregular situation, the steps they will need to take may nevertheless be more complicated than for other people, and healthcare and social services personnel must be alert to this be ready to help them with difficulties in following COVID-19 recommendations.

- promote and ensure testing for COVID-19 virus is available for migrants
- provide transport where necessary for migrants to access testing and care
- remember cultural attitudes and beliefs may interfere with testing
- remember that in some situations women may not easily participate
- look for ways of overcoming this if it becomes clear
- find ways of presenting testing in ways that make it acceptable



- highlight the fact that infection information is not shared with the police
- determine if and to what extent self-isolation is feasible in migrant houses
- look for possible ways of increasing the feasibility of isolation
- consider other options, including space in other dwellings or buildings
- ensure everyone in households is conversant with prevention steps
- ensure everyone in households is conversant with isolation protocol
- facilitate protective materials, such as gloves and masks
- facilitate soap, disinfectants, and gloves with instructions on their use
- explain what other signs/symptoms others in household should look for
- explain how infected persons should be cared for (food, liquid, fever control)
- ensure the name and address of the person is shared with central registry
- organize follow-up visits to check on case and others in the household
- monitor and record progress

### **MOBILIZING HELP**

Depending on the size and cohesiveness of the migrant community and its culture, it may be possible to mobilize support from within the community. Where this is the case and if and where there are health promotion/protection volunteers, it can be a help to local health and social services personnel who are overworked and may not be familiar with the migrant community. Help in the form of carefully ensuring infected people are “never alone”, and have access to food, water, fever control medication and conversation. Unprotected proximity, however, is dangerous and care should always be taken in proposing community help.

- ask if there are any informal helping associations in the community
- ensure helpers know what they should and should not do, and how
- determine the degree of religiosity and if religious leaders are present
- determine what other leaders are present and available
- ensure they are all aware of COVID-19 and its seriousness
- assess if the community is fatalistic or personal-power-to-change oriented
- promote community engagement where appropriate and safety is assured
- ensure factual information is available and understood by the community
- do everything possible to “normalize” infection and avoid stigmatization
- monitor and report, where possible, all actions, outcomes and trends

### **COPING WITH COVID-19**

Coping with COVID-19 in migrant communities should always follow established health protocols. Depending on what options exist, migrants with COVID-19 should be reported and followed up by trained healthcare personnel. If presenting moderate (manageable) diseases try to keep people at “home”; in the case of more serious complications (such as severe breathing difficulties) people should be hospitalized.

- determine which and where relevant hospitals are available
- plan proactively and make arrangements with hospitals
- make sure migrants are eligible for tertiary care
- ensure quality care will be available and costs will be covered
- keep family, friends and community leaders updated
- do everything possible to “normalize” infection and avoid hysteria
- take action to avoid stigmatization of infection and infected persons
- take action to dispel wrong information, beliefs and comments
- ensure migrants can access psychosocial help where needed

## DEALING WITH COVID-19 DEATH

Some COVID-19 deaths are inevitable. In migrant communities these deaths may not be interpreted in the same way as in the host community. Cultural beliefs and traditional approaches to death may require special management. This can often present difficulties for migrant communities, local authorities and funeral workers. The importance of death and burial traditions and customs, be they religious or not, should not be underestimated in terms of what they can mean for the social and psychological wellbeing of family and the community at large.

- work proactively with community leaders to understand burial customs
- determine if management of bodies is likely to present health problems
- determine if it is going to be possible to meet burial requirements
- discuss and problems with community leaders and explain carefully
- work with community leaders to find acceptable options
- show respect of migrant community customs even if impossible to meet



### REMEMBER

Like all of us, migrants have rights and these are embodied in UN agreements. Migrants are part of a long historical economic and social process that has always been a part of human and societal evolution. Today, migrants are essential, and irreplaceable and what happens to migrants will happen to the larger community. What goes around has a habit of coming around.

**UNUS PRO OMNIBUS, OMNES PRO UNO. ONE FOR ALL, ALL FOR ONE!**

