

7/10/2020 – Covid-19 Closures Lessons Learned – Guest Article by Sara Nelson, Fremont Brewing

What are you going to do when one of your employees tests positive for covid-19? Here are some lessons learned by Fremont Brewing after one of our employees tested positive less than two weeks after we re-opened.

WHAT HAPPENED: An employee who works one shift a week at Fremont Brewing's tasting room, the Urban Beer Garden, alerted management that they had tested positive for covid-19. They were asymptomatic but got tested because of an upcoming visit with parents. Long story short, we immediately shut down all operations because that person had had contact with people in other departments. We required everyone to get tested and submit their negative result to HR before coming back to work. (We covered the cost of the tests and paid everyone for their normal hours.) Interestingly, out of about 70 people, no one else tested positive.

Also, lacking a mandated contact tracing system in Washington state, we posted on all our social media channels that anyone who had visited our UBG on the date of our employee's last shift should monitor their health and seek testing if they were concerned about exposure. Those posts quickly got picked up by local media, including a front-page article in the Seattle Times. Most coverage and social commentary commended our transparency but there were the expected trolls. We resumed normal operations five days and tens of thousands of dollars in losses later.

Based on our experience:

- DO have a plan right now for what you'll do when an employee tests positive or was exposed to someone who has tested positive so you don't have to figure out what to do on the fly. We had created a plan in March based on that federally produced one-pager, advice from our distributor, and what we thought was common sense and having that blueprint enabled our quick response.
- However, DON'T go overboard. Lacking laws or enforceable requirements for what to do if an employee tests positive, our course of action was driven by "an abundance of caution" to keep our staff and customers safe and healthy. We've since learned that shutting down completely was not entirely necessary from a public health perspective. The science about coronavirus spread has progressed since March and your plan should be based on the [CDC's latest recommendations](#) for employers. Among other things, they recommend testing strategies based on employees' prior results, exposures to others, and functions within the organization so you don't necessarily have to send everyone home.
- Even better, DO consider getting professional help, especially if you have multiple facilities and/or a taproom. Realizing that we can't just shut down every time someone tests positive, Fremont Brewing has contracted with a [consultant](#), an MD with a specialty in epidemiology, who creates "back-to-work" protocols for business owners (a quickly expanding niche). She'll generate new, granular protocols based on a) CDC recommendations, b) the layout of our facilities, and c) our organizational chart – i.e. number and responsibilities of employees in each department, public-facing or production, interaction with people from other departments, distributors, accounts, etc. She will also prescribe a testing regimen(s) to be performed at the University of Washington Virology Department, interpret the results, and modify our protocols accordingly. Getting testing done at one place with whom we have a pre-existing relationship will be more efficient and enable us to anticipate staff down-time while waiting for results. **All this will cost us much less money than shutting down next time.**
- Finally, NO NEED to overshare on social media. If your state or county does not require contact tracing in the hospitality sector, consider implementing a voluntary contact tracing system on your own. It could be as simple as putting one phone number per party on a clipboard – and less painful than the potential blow-back of trying to do the right thing over social media. Plus, many of our older and thus more vulnerable guests don't monitor our channels so relying on social media isn't necessarily the best way to alert them of possible exposure (which is not required but falls into the "do the right thing" category).

Dealing with this pandemic is going to be a long slog until there's a readily available vaccine so it's best to be prepared for the inevitable positive test result. Your response should be based on local regulations, CDC recommendations, and your own moral compass. Be cautious yet practical in order to keep making and selling beer. Ending on a positive note, I believe the craft beer community – breweries and our customers alike – is generous of spirit, committed to the common good, and acts with integrity and responsibility. We can work this out -- we *all* want to stay open and healthy.