

We Got the Call...An Employee at our Law Firm was Diagnosed with COVID-19 (By Jessa Baker, COO, Applegate & Thorne-Thomsen)

By [LawVision](#) on March 23, 2020



This was written by [Jessa Baker](#), COO at Applegate & Thorne-Thomsen. She is a former colleague at LawVision and wanted to provide insights and guidance after managing a COVID-19 case at her firm.

At the time of writing this blog there are 585 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Illinois. One of them is an employee at our law firm.

As Chief Operating Officer it's my responsibility to anticipate organizational challenges and proactively position the firm to navigate the unexpected. Recent events have transformed the unexpected into our new reality.

By many accounts, our firm was ahead of the curve in our response to COVID-19. We proactively went down rabbit holes of "what if" scenarios, thinking most of them were far-fetched. We laughed at the ridiculousness of our creativity. They have all become a reality.

I credit our firm for a culture of leadership that respects divergent perspectives. It helps us make better decisions. We acted swiftly in transitioning to virtual operations. On March 12th all employees were given the opportunity to work from home along with any tools necessary to do so. The next day nearly 95% of our employees were working remotely. The work from home flexibility that many of our employees enjoyed prior to this crisis and the technology in place to provide that flexibility made the quick transition to a firm-wide virtual environment possible.

We took steps to address the needs of our organization and our employees. On March 17th we held a virtual firm happy hour. Employees introduced their children and pets. We learned cocktail recipes and got tours of baby nurseries. It brought us together, and we were featured on the news the next day as an example of organizations coming together in a time of crisis and uncertainty. This was us:

<https://chicago.cbslocal.com/video/4486458-law-firm-holds-virtual-happy-hour-for-employees-during-pandemic/>

I wasn't prepared for this pandemic to hit home... both literally and figuratively. I'm sharing my story so that you are.

On March 19th I got "the call" that one of our employees tested positive for COVID-19. This colleague is a critical part of our business continuity team and came into close regular contact with many individuals at the firm. I made some good choices during the ensuing hour. There are other things I'd do differently. For consideration, I offer some practical tips

based on my experience.

Before the Call

Develop your Communication and Action Plan

Once you inform building management of a positive case of COVID-19 they will inform all tenants ASAP. ***This is not the time to begin developing your messaging.*** Proactively assemble your Employee Assistance Program, tele-health and health insurance information. Leverage knowledge management from your insurance broker. Contact your building management team.

Clarify Protocol and Expectations With your Building Management Team

Cleaning Protocol

- What services are provided?
- What is the cost of those services?
- How quickly will the cleaning begin?
- How quickly do employees need to vacate the space?
- When will it be safe to return to the office?

Information your Building Will Require if an Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19 (I was asked the following):

- When was the last time this individual was in the building?
- What is their typical path of travel?
- Are they a member of the building's health club?
- When did they begin showing symptoms?

Anticipate Concerns

Your employees will have a lot of questions. Some of the questions I received include the following:

Concern for the Individual

- I'm really worried about _____. How are they doing?
- When was _____ last in the office?
- Did _____ display any symptoms?
- Does _____ know how they were exposed to COVID-19?

Concern for Self

- Do I need to get tested? If so, what is my next step?
- I don't have a primary care physician. What should I do? Is there a general number?
- We had some firm luncheons in the last 2 weeks. I assume ___ participated. Is that enough to get tested?
- Aside from my physical health concerns, what mental health resources does the firm provide?

Operational Concerns

- I am currently in the office. How quickly do I need to leave?
- What if I need to get something from my workspace?
- What steps are being taken to clean the office?
- How long will the cleaning take?
- When will it be safe to return?
- Am I mandated to work from home? If so, for how long?
- What should I do if I have an office services need (mail/print jobs/etc.)?
- Who advised the firm in making your recommendations?

While these questions all seem self-evident in hindsight, I answered them on the fly at the time. I have not provided my responses. The reason is two-fold. First, this is a rapidly evolving pandemic. Some of my answers are already outdated less than 48 hours later. While you need to anticipate these questions, you also need to be prepared for real-time responses. Second, and more importantly, your answers need to be tailored for your unique circumstance. Your leadership style, management team, organizational culture, size, geography, practice areas, demographics and technological agility will all inform your response.

During the Call

Needs-Based Questions

Proceed from a place of empathy when speaking with an employee who has tested positive for COVID-19. They will be experiencing a myriad of new emotions. Instruct them to remain at home, seek medical treatment consistent with CDC guidance and not appear for work. Focus on questions about their personal needs, including the following:

- How are you feeling in response to the news?
- What support systems (family, friends) do you have to help you navigate?
- What resources can we provide?
- How can we ensure you have the time required to rest and recharge?

Interaction-Based Questions

Clarify and assess their interaction in your workspace. Ask the questions required by your property management team. Ask questions to understand how extensively the employee came within 6 feet of others at your firm in the last 14 days. In

our case, that interaction was significant.

Privacy Questions

Inform the infected employee that you will need to notify individuals with whom they worked closely in the last 14 days. I asked if our employee wished to remain anonymous as part of those notifications. They did not.

After the Call

- Remain calm
- Follow your pre-determined communication plan
- Inform you building management team
- Consider the impact to the employee's immediate team members, including unique emotional needs, capacity modification and workflow management
- Be prepared for additional potential positive cases
- Practice self-care as you continue to navigate the uncertainty that lies ahead

We're all looking for ways to help each other during these unprecedented times. I share my experience in the hope that your path will be a bit easier to navigate should you face this same challenge. If you've found it helpful, please pay it forward in some small way.