Friday, May 8, 2020

On April 30, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued new guidance titled Strategies to Mitigate Healthcare Personnel Staffing Shortages. As maintaining appropriate staffing levels is essential to providing both a safe working environment and proper patient care, the guidance offers a series of recommendations on contingency plans that healthcare providers experiencing staffing shortages may wish to consider. The guidance also highlights the importance of communicating mitigation strategies clearly to healthcare professionals to help alleviate some of the “anxiety and stress” they may be experiencing while working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fundamentally, the CDC urges healthcare facilities to evaluate their staffing needs to determine the minimum number of personnel “needed to provide a safe work environment and patient care.” Once a facility understands its minimum staffing needs, the CDC recommends the facility reach out to local, state, and federal public
health partners for assistance in identifying additional healthcare professionals who are available for hire, when needed.

In addition, the CDC recommends healthcare facilities proactively:

1. adjust schedules and/or rotate healthcare personnel to positions that support essential procedures, visits, and patient care activities;

2. hire additional healthcare personnel;

3. “develop[] regional plans to identify designated healthcare facilities or alternate care sites with adequate staffing to care for patients with COVID-19”;

4. develop plans regarding when and how healthcare personnel who have had an unprotected exposure to SARS-CoV-2, but who are asymptomatic and not known to be infected, will be allowed to continue to work; and

5. develop plans regarding when and how healthcare personnel with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 may return to work.

For healthcare facilities already facing staffing shortages, the CDC recommends implementing crisis strategies, including developing regional strategies to send patients to alternate healthcare facilities or alternate care sites and beginning to allow asymptomatic healthcare professionals who have had an unprotected exposure to SARS-CoV-2 (but who are not known to be infected) to continue to work subject to recommended risk mitigation measures. As a last resort, if staffing shortages continue despite the use of other mitigation strategies, the CDC recommends implementing criteria to allow healthcare professionals with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases to work, even if they have not met all of the CDC’s normal return-to-work criteria. If a healthcare facility chooses to implement this type of plan, the CDC offers detailed recommendations regarding additional precautions to take.

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