

# Guidance for researchers on COVID-19 preparation

To: The Rowan Research Community

From: Dr. Beena Sukumaran, VP for Research

Dear Colleagues,

Rowan University continues to closely monitor the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019, known as COVID-19. With the ongoing concern about the spread of this disease, laboratories and research facilities should begin to plan for the possibility of a disruption to normal operations.

With this memo, we are asking all principal investigators and directors of laboratory facilities to develop contingency plans for their own labs or shared labs.

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

In the event of staff shortages, shutdowns of specific buildings, or closing of the entire campus, the University will make every effort to maintain essential services to research buildings, such as power, heating and cooling, and information technology. In addition, Animal Welfare and Environmental Health and Safety will maintain critical functions. It is understood that people responsible for these essential operations will be stretched further than usual and will thus have essentially no ability to provide help to individual labs. In addition, note that general support services such as maintenance may also be delayed.

Faculty who lead research groups and facilities are responsible, and best-positioned, for planning how to operate smoothly in a disrupted environment or how to safely curtail research. In particular, we urge you to think through how you would cope with a *lack of people* who can physically be in your lab, and *disruptions in supplies of materials* you need to run your labs. Part of good planning will be to establish clear communication and roles within your group for addressing these questions.

## **PLANNING SCENARIOS**

While it's impossible to predict exactly what to plan for, it could be useful to consider disruptions that last two weeks or more, across a few general scenarios:

- What can you do to implement social distancing in your research? What would it take to stagger work times in the lab, increase distances between people to six feet or more for extended work times, or find alternatives to write-up spaces in close quarters?

- What would you do if just your group or building were quarantined or unable to come to work?
- What would you do if the entire campus were closed (except for maintenance of essential services as listed above)?
- What supplies are critical to your operations and how can you best protect against disruptions in the availability of those materials?
- What changes would be required in your operations if core or shared facilities were not available?

In thinking through these questions, you might further consider:

- How would you organize a system where you were allowed to send an individual person, one at a time, into the lab to perform essential functions? Such functions might include research animal monitoring and care, cell culture maintenance, or equipment maintenance (using a Google calendar to organize and communicate visits). How would you train them to sanitize their work areas before they leave?
- How would you assign such roles?
- How would you communicate needs within the group (Bioraft, Slack, email, Google Docs, etc.)?
- Are there areas of cross-training that could be organized in your lab, making your operations more robust?
- Are there people in other lab groups, separated enough that they might not be affected by a quarantine in just your group or building, who could help maintain critical operations in your lab?
- Are there cell lines or tissues that could be preserved by freezing? If so, how long would it take to do so?
- How long would it take to shut down equipment and experiments? Have you documented the safest and most expeditious procedures for doing so?
- Are there remote control monitoring devices or back-up power supplies that would help maintain critical equipment?
- Even with essentially normal services of electricity and other utilities, brief outages could occur. What special contingencies might arise if such a disruption occurred when your lab was unoccupied?

- Have you reviewed this contingency planning and emergency procedures with all researchers and staff in your group including graduate students, postdocs, etc.?

*For research that involves direct interviews, surveys and focus group with research subjects, we would suggest moving it to an electronic format. Researchers can submit a modification to the existing IRB protocol reflecting that they will conduct electronic interviews, surveys and focus groups.*

In all cases, we urge you to first keep the safety of yourselves, your lab group members, and the broader community foremost in your mind. For information on basic safety practices and planning, please see updates and FAQs at the University's [website for COVID-19 information](#).

**Measures you can take to prevent the spread of illness among your group if the risk of COVID-19 increases within the Rowan community:**

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds. Hand sanitizer is not a substitute for hand washing in the laboratory.
- Disinfect common laboratory areas and touch points with approved virus disinfectants (e.g. doorknobs, sink handles, freezer doors, fume hood sashes, telephones).
- Remind staff to stay home when they are not feeling well (fever, shortness of breath, cough, upset stomach).
- Consider alternating work schedules to meet the demands of the laboratory while limiting close contact with others.
- Identify work that can be done from home or remotely, such as data analysis, programming, numerical analysis, etc.
- Test and update remote work technologies such as VPN.
- Avoid in-person meetings. Use remote work technologies such as Webex conferencing (or other conferencing tools you use such as Skype, Google Meet).

**Other safety considerations:**

- Ensure that individuals performing critical tasks have been adequately trained and understand whom to contact with technical or safety questions.
- Avoid performing high-risk procedures alone. When working alone is necessary, exercise maximum caution.
- Notify colleagues of your schedule when working alone for an extended period of time. Let someone call you or you call them periodically so they are aware that you are safe.

- Ensure that high-risk materials (radioactive, biohazards and chemicals) are secured.

**Research related questions:**

The Division of University Research staff may be teleworking if there is a shutdown of campus.

- For any proposal development questions, please send questions to [Tracey Sharpe](#).
- For any questions related to proposal submission, send questions to [PreAward@rowan.edu](mailto:PreAward@rowan.edu)
- The Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) is reviewing questions relating to the allowability of costs associated with any disruptions or delays to sponsored projects stemming from the COVID-19. Send questions to [PostAward@rowan.edu](mailto:PostAward@rowan.edu) about current awards. The federal funding agencies are working on how to handle these disruptions. Once they publish their guidelines, OSP will share it with the Rowan research awardees.
- For research compliance related questions with respect to IRB, IBC and IACUC, please contact [Sree Murthy](#).
- For any technology commercialization or licensing issue, please contact [Yatin Karpe](#).
- For any general questions or directions on whom to contact, please email the AVP [Sarah Piddington](#) or VP [Beena Sukumaran](#).