September 10, 2020

To: Food Premise Operators
Re: Safe operation of food premises during the COVID-19 pandemic

I am writing to share public health advice on prevention of COVID-19 in restaurants and other food service establishments. As you know, BC restaurants were closed for in-person dining by public health orders from March 20 until May 19, when dine-in service was again permitted under the province’s Restart Plan. We applaud the innovation demonstrated by the sector to limit COVID-19 transmission in restaurants, with the large majority of restaurants implementing guidance from WorkSafeBC and operating under COVID-19 safety plans as required. However, while nearly all restaurants have implemented distancing or barriers between parties, close contact between staff and customers remains a risk for transmission of COVID-19.

We would like to share recommendations based on scientific knowledge of COVID-19 prevention, and reflecting observations of VCH Environmental Health Officers, restaurant staff and patrons. This letter does not replace WorkSafeBC requirements. It is meant to emphasize priority measures to prevent COVID-19 among staff and customers.

1. Staff must stay home if experiencing symptoms
Numerous restaurant staff diagnosed with COVID-19 have reported working with symptoms including cough and sore throat. It is crucial that staff experiencing symptoms that may be COVID-19, however mild, are supported in the decision not to work. Staff with symptoms can be encouraged to contact their health care provider, call 811, or utilize the self-assessment tool on the BC Centre for Disease Control website (www.bccdc.ca) to determine if they should be tested for COVID-19. If staff test positive for COVID-19, Public Health will contact them and provide direction on required actions such as isolation.

2. Limit close contact between staff and customers, and between staff
COVID-19 is primarily transmitted by respiratory droplets when people are in close, face-to-face contact. While it is understood that taking and serving orders requires some contact, keeping these interactions brief and at a distance limits the risk to staff and customers alike. As much as possible, staff should also limit close contact between one another, including during work activities and breaks.

3. Understand the limitations of non-medical masks
The most important measures to prevent COVID-19 are keeping people who may be infected away from the workplace, and minimizing close contact. Wearing a non-medical mask can be an added line of defense for times when close contact is unavoidable, but should never replace those other measures. Non-medical cloth masks may reduce the spread of droplets from the wearer to others, but are variable in their effectiveness at reducing the risk of infection for the wearer. Face shields that do not directly cover the mouth and nose are not recommended. More information about masks is available on the WorkSafeBC website.

We hope that this information is helpful for control of COVID-19 in your operations. To discuss COVID-19 prevention in restaurants, please contact our Health Protection program at EHVC@vch.ca or 604-675-3800.

Sincerely,

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