

# Contact Tracing and COVID-19: Using a Tried-and-True Sexually Transmitted Disease Strategy to Stop the Novel Coronavirus

STD Prevention  
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STORIES**



## How can DIS help contain the spread of COVID-19?

*For more than 40 years, DIS contact tracers have helped halt infectious disease outbreaks, particularly STDs (sexually transmitted diseases). Prior to COVID-19, more than 2,200 local, state, and federal DIS were working throughout the country to protect their community's health.*



Experienced DIS have the expertise to train and mentor new case investigators and contact tracers in the fundamentals of identifying infected people quickly and effectively mapping out networks of potentially infected people.



Current DIS can help trainees navigate and make the most of newly emerging [case management tools](#) – improving case tracking while eliminating the exposure risks associated with face-to-face communication.



All DIS have access to a number of well established CDC programs to support any training or career development needs related to controlling the spread of COVID-19.

The United States, alongside the rest of the world, is in the midst of our greatest public health challenge in more than a century: the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health infrastructures all over the world are now on defense to keep the highly infectious respiratory illness at bay thanks to the fast-moving transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19)<sup>1, 2</sup>. We will all breathe much easier when we slow the spread—but how do we get and stay there?

One key strategy includes using one of our basic defenses against communicable diseases—boots-on-the-ground public health teams. These teams actively track infected networks of people, offer guidance on testing options, and educate people to prevent and control further disease transmission. This methodology, known as contact tracing, has helped contain other modern pandemics such as Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). [Contact tracing](#) is also how [Disease Intervention Specialists](#) (DIS) in health department sexually transmitted disease (STD) programs work on a daily basis to curtail the spread of STDs around the country.

## Who are STD DIS?

DIS are public health professionals who work directly in communities to find people diagnosed with diseases,

**30%** of STD/HIV DIS are conducting COVID-19 contact tracing

**78%** of the STD/HIV health department workforce are or have been deployed to COVID-19 emergency response

**31%** of STD programs serve as the leaders for their state or city's COVID-19 contact tracing efforts



like STDs and HIV. They interview people diagnosed with a disease and find people they have had contact with to stop transmission and prevent new infections from happening — all while maintaining confidentiality to ensure privacy. These community disease detectives are among the first responders deployed in a public health emergency, such as Zika and Ebola, and they're trained to hit the ground running, assessing and addressing sometimes unanticipated scenarios. "Thinking outside the box is a great ability to have in a fast-moving deployment situation," said 25-year veteran DIS Yvonne Cruz, a public health advisor with the City of Chicago's Department of Public Health.

Throughout her career, Cruz has deployed many times to areas facing a disaster or disease outbreak. In the last five years alone, she has worked in Puerto Rico to respond to hurricanes, earthquakes, and the Zika outbreak; in New Mexico to assist with home health care outreach; and in Malawi to provide humanitarian aid. **"I deploy on a frequent basis – I thrive on focusing on the specific tasks that arise when helping communities through public health challenges. I know my job is well-done when I get thanks directly from the people I help."**

## Applying a well-honed skillset to a new challenge

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in the first few months in the U.S., Cruz [deployed to Virginia for over two weeks](#)<sup>3</sup> to help a community in a county that is home to two meat-packing plants. "Since COVID-19 was spreading so rapidly at the time, it was important to get crucial health information to the Hispanic employees of the local poultry plants," said Cruz, who speaks English and Spanish, "but we also needed to reach other concerned Hispanic members of the surrounding community." Being resourceful also comes with the territory. Cruz noticed the sizeable Haitian Creole population in the county lacked help with translating crucial safety messaging. "Maintaining a good contact network within CDC is a high priority for me, so I was able to land a recruit for the Virginia outreach who spoke Creole – ensuring even more anxious community members could access important health and safety information."

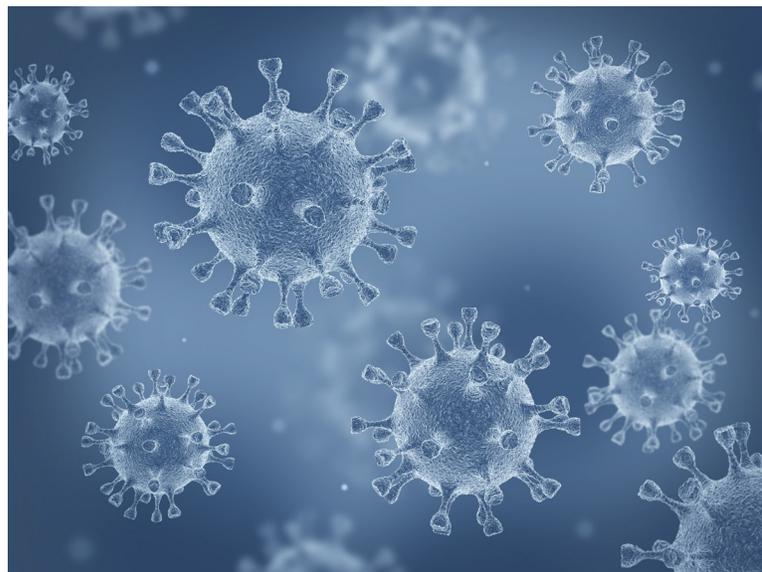
### References:

1. Yuen K-S, Ye Z-W, Fung S-Y, Chan C-P, Jin D-Y. SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: The most important research questions. *Cell Biosci* 2020;10:40.
2. Valencia DN. Brief Review on COVID-19: The 2020 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2. *Cureus* 020;12(3):e7386.
3. Vogelsong S. CDC team headed to Virginia to help combat coronavirus spread in poultry plants. *Virginia Mercury*, 28 April 2020, via NBC12.com. Available: <https://www.nbc12.com/2020/04/28/cdc-team-headed-virginia-help-combat-coronavirus-spread-poultry-plants/> [accessed 7 August 2020].
4. Infographic stats: <https://www.ncsddc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/STD-Field.Survey-Report.II.Final-8.6.20.pdf>

While in Virginia, Cruz also performed contact tracing of coronavirus infections, blood draws for antibody testing, and with assistance from the Virginia National Guard, completed over 1,400 COVID-19 tests and collected almost 900 community testing surveys during two days of drive-through testing. "It took several days of rapport-building to get everyone to trust the process, but it was worth it – we got a lot accomplished with complete cooperation."

## Time-tested methods pave the way for new public health trainees

As thousands sign up in the coming weeks and months to join the ranks of case investigators and contact tracers to stop the spread of the coronavirus, Cruz says DIS—who have a wealth of hands-on experience in contact tracing—are a reliable resource to lead the way. "A lot of contact tracing for COVID-19 will be by phone, which will require the ability to probe contacts for accurate information without making them feel defensive. Input from DIS on these training techniques will be essential. I believe in what we do. It's critical and it works."



Learn MORE at [cdc.gov/std](https://www.cdc.gov/std)

- [COVID-19 Resources for Health Departments](#)
- [DIS Partner Services and Contact Tracing Resources](#)
- [STD Outbreak Response Resources](#)