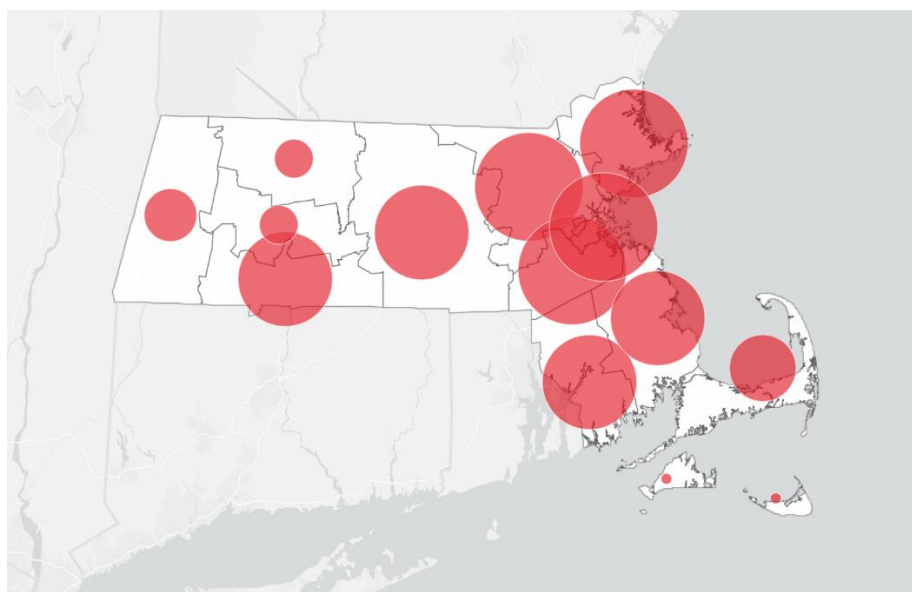


Massachusetts Local Health Department Social Media Toolkit for COVID-19

*Guidance for Communicating Critical Information and Updates
to Your Local Population through Social Media*

April 22, 2020



Map of reported cases of COVID19 in MA as of 04/15/20 from MassLive

<https://www.masslive.com/coronavirus/2020/03/coronavirus-map-shows-massachusetts-covid-19-county-by-county-cases.html>

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Introduction to Social Media Toolkit for Local Health Department Communication about COVID-19

The following toolkit provides support for LHDs seeking to establish and expand their social media presence for COVID-19 communication. The toolkit is tailored for LHDs in Massachusetts with populations of 60,000 or less. This toolkit can be used by LHDs to select social media platforms, create messages, and develop outreach strategies. Furthermore, it describes how to engage student volunteers to help manage social media accounts. Overall, the toolkit seeks to provide step-by-step guidance for LHDs on how to effectively leverage social media to help residents during COVID-19, as well as to lay a strong foundation for communicating through social media in years to come.

Section 1: The Value of Social Media Use

Social media can be a beneficial tool for Local Health Departments (LHD) in Massachusetts for communicating current, up-to-date information about COVID-19 with your local population. A variety of different age groups use social media to collect data and maintain social connections. Older generations use social platforms to stay in touch with loved ones and gather information from peers on how to protect themselves. Younger generations use social platforms as a resource for receiving facts and updates about how to stay healthy in this challenging time. While social media use across all ages has increased with people staying at home, not everyone uses social media or has technology access, so it is a tool to increase reach.

The CDC encourages public health organizations to leverage popular social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. In their Interim Guidance for Public Health Communicators to prepare for COVID-19, the CDC explains that “social media can help promote key messages and quickly update people with new information.” Another benefit that the CDC describes is that social media platforms offer direct access to target audiences, “providing opportunities to engage in real-time discussions for information gathering and evaluation purposes.” The CDC suggests that organizations customize, localize, and redistribute CDC messaging on social media.

Conflicting information, as well as misinformation, is rampant as individuals share speculations about the situation, and followers reshare posts that are not verified, making it difficult for the public to find reliable information. LHDs are a trusted source of information during this rapidly changing situation. The creation of social media accounts by LHDs can combat the spread of inaccurate and harmful information. Your city or town can help equip individuals with primary source details about COVID-19 prevention strategies and updates.

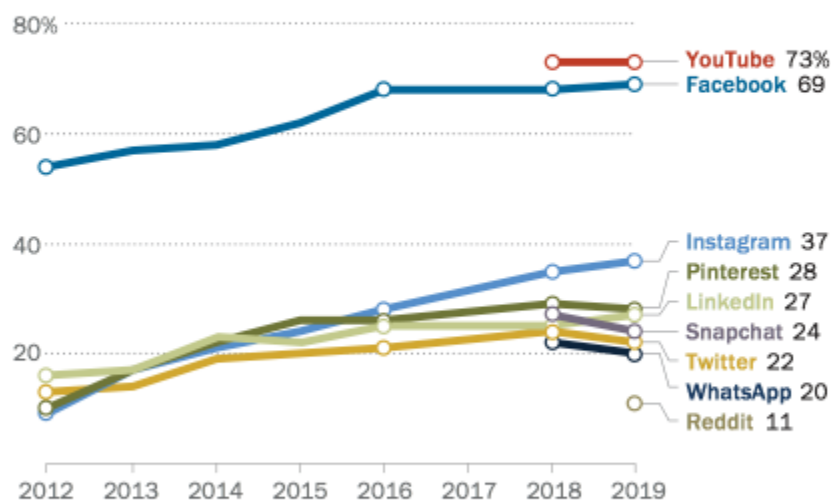
Section 2: Selection of Social Media Platforms

The Pew Research Center has conducted extensive analyses about social media engagement, and they found that in 2019 at least 72% of Americans used some type of social media platform. According to their data, the most popular platforms currently are Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Twitter is also frequently used by people who want real-time updates and information. The chart below demonstrates trends in social media popularity, with Facebook and YouTube being used by over 50% of the population as of 2019. Given the results of the PEW study, LHDs should focus on establishing a social media presence on a few different platforms to reach a broad audience. LHDs should primarily focus on developing accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following three sites enable the posting of diverse types of media, such as text, images, and videos. While YouTube is a popular platform, its design is for the posting of video content, and it will be labor-intensive for LHDs to develop and manage video content at the frequency required to keep the

population updated. Therefore, LHDs should concentrate their initial social media efforts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Facebook, YouTube continue to be the most widely used online platforms among U.S. adults

% of U.S. adults who say they ever use the following online platforms or messaging apps online or on their cellphone



Note: Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp. Comparable trend data is not available for Reddit.
Source: Survey conducted Jan. 8-Feb. 7, 2019.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Section 3: Message Creation Strategies

- a. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter enable different types of messages to be shared. It is vital to keep in mind that a post for one website can be reformatted to share on other platforms.
 - Facebook: Facebook is the world's largest social network. LHDs can create pages, and Facebook users can "like" these pages. On the page, your LHD can write messages consisting of a combination of text, video, and images. There is no word count limit. Followers can repost, like, or comment on your posts. Your LHD can also follow pages of other users, such as other health departments or individuals, and repost, like or comment on other posts. Also, there is the opportunity to message with other users privately.
 - Instagram: Instagram is a photo and video sharing app that allows users to share media with the associated text. There is not a feature to share text-only posts, so all posts require accompanying audio-visual media. Users can follow your LHD's account, and you can follow other users. There is also the opportunity to message with other users privately. Additionally, your posts can be synced with Facebook, so that Instagram posts appear on your LHD's Facebook page.
 - Twitter: Twitter is a social networking/microblogging platform that enables the exchange of short status messages with a 280-character limit. Your LHD can make a Twitter account and post short messages with associated videos or images. In addition, your LHD is able to follow

the accounts of other health departments, or users, and repost, as well as like or comment on other posts.

b. General Guidelines:

- Always give simple, credible, accurate, consistent, and timely information.
- Use a variety of platforms and share the same content across all platforms.
- Distribute audience-specific health messages and materials. When possible, customize information to make it specific to your local city or town.
- Use local images to make messages attention-grabbing and compelling. Our suggestion would be to amass an online repository of images to use throughout various platforms after obtaining consent to use the images.
- Ensure that messages are available in multiple languages, according to the demographics of your population.

Section 4: Important Messages to Communicate During COVID-19

Before disseminating information to the population that an LHD serves, it is essential to consider the necessary demographic information and health literacy status of the population. What might work in Brookline may not be appropriate for usage in Chelsea, where the population is smaller than 60,000 and predominantly Spanish speaking. Furthermore, messaging addresses the needs of individuals of all age groups. It may be necessary to post some messages targeted to the elderly population, and others tailored to families with young children. The images in this section are examples of materials produced by the CDC and other health agencies about COVID-19. They can be used or repurposed for communication for your city or town. More templates and publicity resources are available at [Coronavirus fact sheets and resources: How to protect yourself from COVID-19.](#)

a. Share current information regarding restrictions, bans, and ordinances:

With travel restrictions and bans on limits to social gatherings, many people may not be able to gather general information about their community through the means that they previously relied on (word of mouth, radio during a commute to work, etc.) As a way to effectively educate the population about evolving restrictions to help protect the general public, LDHs can provide real-time posts of Facebook and Twitter with any current changes. Up to date information from the MA Department of Public Health can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-information-for-local-boards-of-health>.

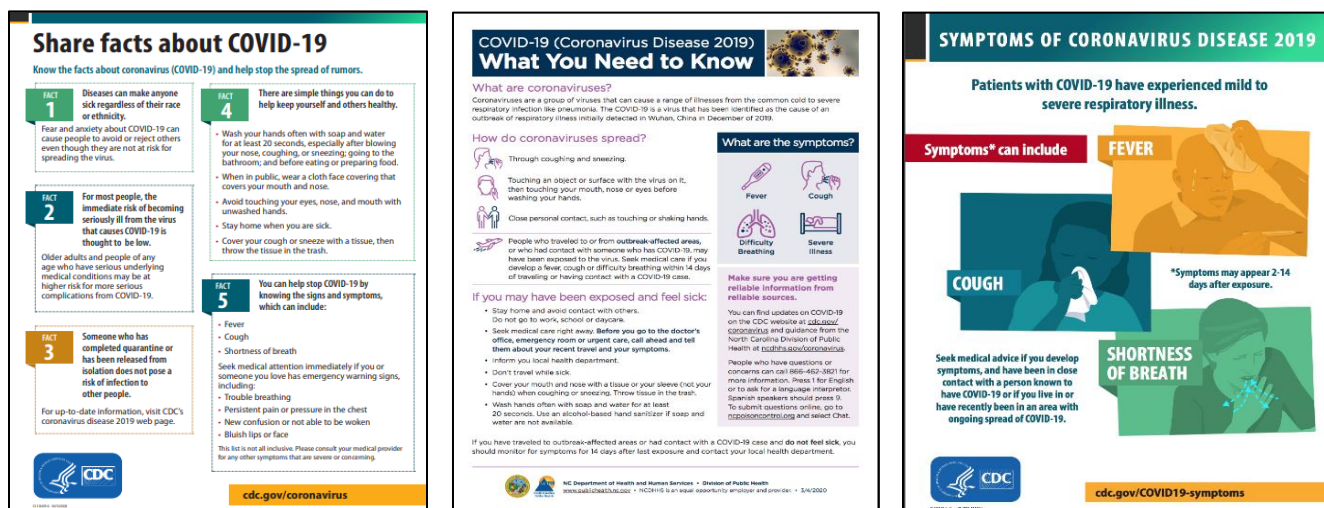
COVID-19 Facts and Resources:

- CDC - COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease: Share Facts, Not Fear
- CDC - Symptoms of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Available in English, Spanish, and Chinese)
- NC Department of Health – What You Need to Know

b. Share facts about COVID-19:

Given the plethora of information available on the internet, it is hard to discern what is credible and reliable. With first-hand access to public health knowledge, LHDs can provide the public with

accurate information. The use of social media should be to share general facts and information with residents.



c. Share Important Updates and Contacts

Sharing COVID-19 updates should be an essential component of every LHDs' social media presence. With the amount of uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, people are desperate for accurate, recent information that is pertinent to their daily lives and community. While LHDs need to share broader information from the state and federal government about lockdown status, travel bans, vaccines, etcetera, when polled informally about what kind of information residents want from their LHDs, residents express wanting up to date numbers in their local community and information on what specific resources are available for their city or town. The following are a few methods to keep your residents updated with locally specific information:

- Use Facebook or Twitter to give residents daily number updates as to the number of suspected cases, the number of positive cases, number hospitalized, and the number of deaths related to COVID-19.
- Use either Twitter posts or create a pinned announcement on Facebook that tells residents what stores/restaurants are open or closed.
- Use all platforms to update residents about current policies, such as curfews, mask-wearing guidelines, and stay-at-home restrictions.
- Create a discussion thread within a Facebook group to allow for residents to share what resources are available at different local grocery stores (ex: Stop and Shop has toilet paper today, Shaw's has hand sanitizer, Market Basket has restocked their flour, etc.) This allows for a "living document" for people to plan their grocery trips better and also find a sense of community when they are no longer able to communicate in person.
- Use Facebook and Instagram to allow users to either share or see photos of how the community is coming together to help one another. Examples of what may be shared are images of groceries being delivered to healthcare workers, of church groups offering free childcare for essential workers, as well as of homemade mask distribution to non-healthcare workers.
- The CDC has created its toolkit with broader information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Keep in mind that while information like this is beneficial, residents in the community may want more tailored information.

Best Practice Advice

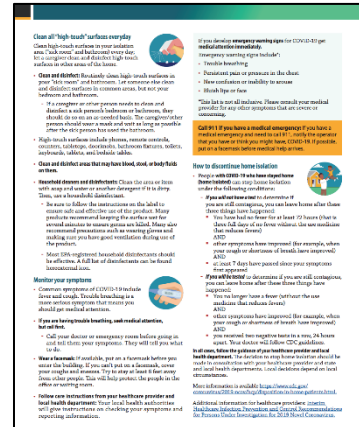
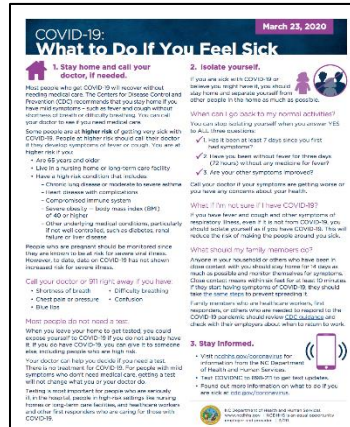
The future is very tenuous right now, so social media is a way to provide as much up-to-date information as possible about future events and planning. For example, your LHD can share information about event cancellations and scheduling, current social distance measures, as well as timelines for how long residents should expect to stay home.

d. Instruct Individuals About What to Do If They Feel Sick

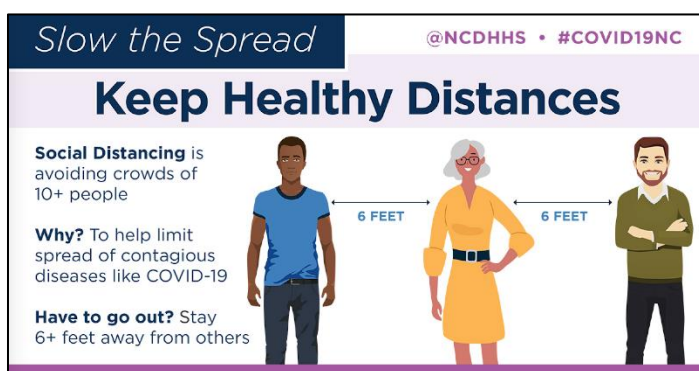
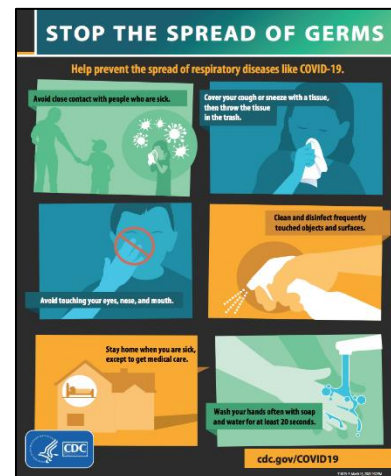
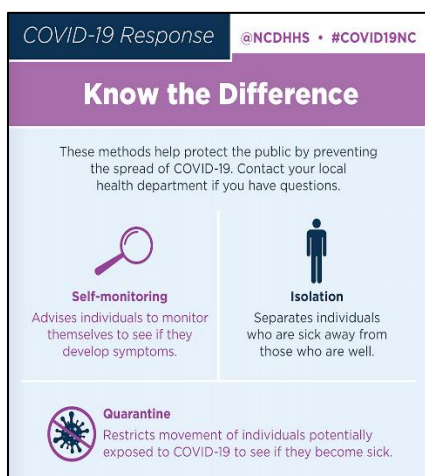
As many health clinics and hospitals are overwhelmed by patients at this time, education is critical to ensuring that the use of resources is effective. Individuals can benefit from instructions about what steps to take if they feel sick, and this type of guidance can ultimately reduce the burden on the health system and protect the community. LHDs can use social media to provide advice to residents about how to monitor and manage symptoms that may resemble COVID-19. Sharing medical guidance about COVID-19 on social media can help triage individuals towards the proper level of care.

What to do if You Feel Sick:

- CDC - What to do if you are sick with 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) (Available in English and Spanish)
- NCDHHS - What to do if you feel sick



e. Advertise Best Practices for Social Distancing and Hygiene Guidelines about social distancing and hygiene practices are flooding public news sources. Within this climate, it is not only hard to determine what is credible information, but it is also hard to determine what information applies to whom. Your town will benefit from locally oriented updates about business, travel, and contact restrictions. Residents also need timely information about local recommendations for personal protective measures, such as masks and glove-wearing. The CDC provides general guidelines about how to isolate, sanitize, and prevent the spread of germs among your residents. It will be essential to modify these materials or to develop customized content for your local population to provide concrete guidelines based on your county's current policies and regulations.

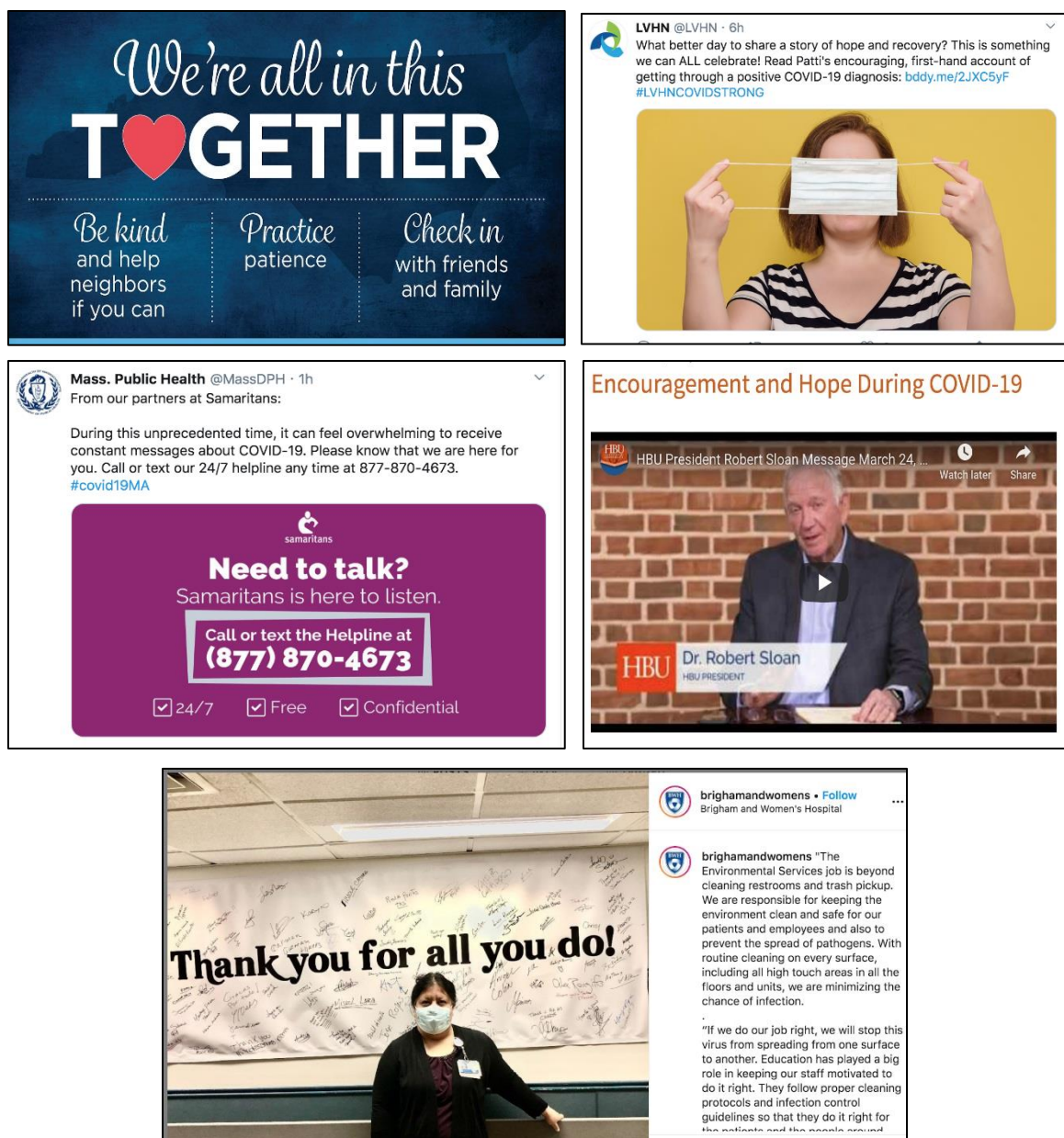


Best Practices for Social Distancing and Hygiene:

- English:
CDC - Stop the Spread of Germs (COVID-19)
- Spanish:
CDC – Detenga la propagación de los microbios. Ayude a prevenir la propagación de virus respiratorios como el nuevo coronavirus 2019
- Chinese:
CDC – Stop the Spread of Germs (2019-nCoV)

f. Provide Encouragement

Sending messages of encouragement to your local residents can foster a sense of community and solidarity. In this challenging time, many individuals are experiencing feelings of isolation, loneliness, and other emotional challenges. The use of social media is to be a tool to show care and concern for individuals in your community. Spreading messages of hope, such as individual stories of recovery, may help to raise morale. Social media is also an effective means of promoting services that are available for mental health.



g. Let People Know How They Can Help

Individuals who are healthy and have the capacity to help others during the COVID-19 outbreak may not know where to start; with this in mind, social media should share information about local service programs. LHDs should communicate with organizations to find out about service needs and opportunities. Your LHD can then post opportunities on social media platforms. Also, your LHD can share general tips about how to help others during the pandemic.



Section 5: Examples of Public Health Departments Using Social Media

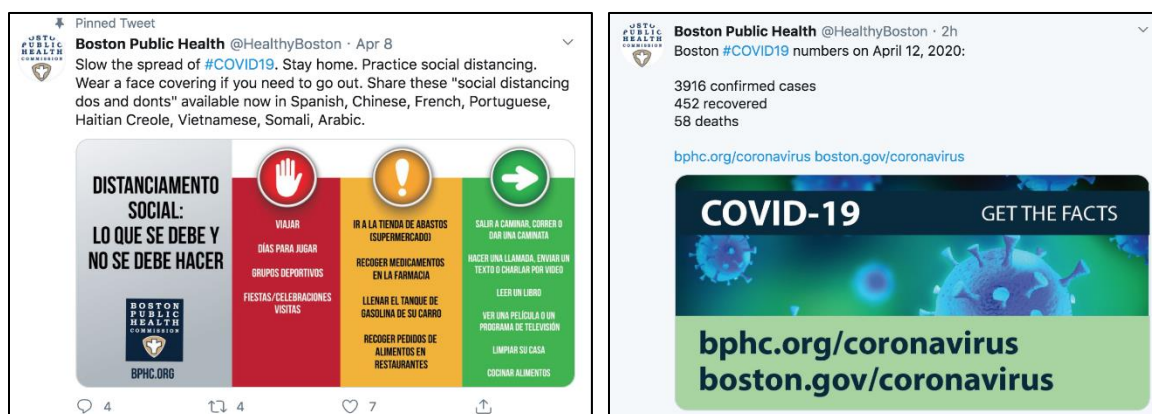
Three examples of MA LHDs that are already using social media are Boston, Springfield, and Arlington. These three LHDs primarily have a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. On average, the LHDs post 3-5 times a day on every platform. They leverage photos and hashtags to draw attention to their posts. For example, Springfield has posted the following tweet pinned at the top of their Twitter feed to provide their followers with links to up to date information from reputable sources.



Below, we have included links to the social media pages for Boston, Springfield, and Arlington to provide examples of good content and engagement, as well as a few more examples of posts from the Boston Public Health Commission:

- <https://www.facebook.com/HealthyBoston/>
- <https://twitter.com/HealthyBoston>

- <https://www.facebook.com/pg/CityofSpringfieldMA/>
- <https://twitter.com/SpfldMACityHall>. https://www.facebook.com/pg/Arlington-Health-Human-Services-1503961206546404/posts/?ref=page_internal
- <https://twitter.com/ArlingtonHHS>



Section 6: How to Engage Student Volunteers as Social Media Managers for COVID-19 Communication

Social media curation is a timely responsibility. To expand the reach of your social media campaign and maintain user engagement over time, recruiting additional support will be beneficial. Student volunteers have expressed interest in supporting LHDs. The following are ways in which student volunteers get involved in and support your LHD's social media activities.

- Students can start social media accounts for your LHD and serve as "social media managers" for the accounts. For this arrangement, adequate supervision is essential. Students should report directly to a communications officer at your health department, and all posts should require approval from the communications officer.
- Students can network with partners to implement communication strategies for reaching high-risk and vulnerable populations in your community (for example, people who are homeless, at-risk, or have limited English-language skills).
- Students can help with the design of posts, such as customizing existing materials from other credible sources or developing new content.
- Students can monitor other relevant social media accounts, such as those of the CDC, news media, other health departments, and government agencies.

Section 7: How to Maintain Community Engagement

Your LHD's social media communication can only be effective if people know about its presence. Developing strategies to advertise your LHD's social media campaigns is a critical step to reaching your audience.

- Outreach strategy: Simply having a Facebook page or Twitter account will not automatically increase engagement. It is vital to let your population know about not only the existence of these accounts but also how your LHD plans on using social media to provide up to date information. LHDs should utilize both online and print advertising strategies to spread awareness about their social media accounts, and the advertisements should include information about how the LHD plans to use social media to disseminate information during COVID-19. On the LHD website homepage, links to the social media accounts are to be featured. It may also be useful to advertise social media accounts on local platforms, such as news

channels and radio stations. Another way to promote social media platforms is to build relationships with community partners, such as churches and schools. Community partners can advertise social media accounts through posters and listservs, and if they have their own social media presence, they can repost messages from the LHD.

- **Frequency of Updates:** To maintain audience engagement, posts about updates are regular. It is difficult to give guidance on the optimal number of messages an LHD should post per day. LHDs in MA, who currently use social media, post about 5-10 messages per day. LHDs should be proactive about updating the population but should balance the frequency of posts with the quality of posts. Redundant messaging can be helpful to emphasize important updates or recommendations; however, overutilization of social media platforms can overwhelm users and detract attention from critical information.
- **Two-way communication:** It is always essential to evaluate engagement by residents on social media posts to assess whether or not the dissemination of information is effective. To engage the community and to help combat the isolation felt during this time, it is especially important to allow for avenues of two-way communication. Examples of this would be to have weekly town hall meetings through a web-based platform where people can ask questions or the use of Twitter chats for the same function. Discussion threads on Facebook, as mentioned above as a way for community resource information to be shared, are also effective.

Section 8: How to Evaluate Engagement on Social Media

The table “Metrics for Social Networks’ Posting Success” presents information about how to track engagement on social media. Each social media platform has different mechanisms for users to engage with content. Tracking objective and quantitative data can be a useful way to understand the extent of your LHD’s reach on social media. In the short term, the number of followers of your LHD’s account can be an excellent metric to understand how many people have heard about your social media presence. In the long-term, engagement with content will become more critical, such as the number of comments and likes on posts.

In addition, qualitative data can be beneficial to help gather information about the subjective aspects of your LHD’s social media presence. Surveys can be a useful way to understand information that cannot be communicated by numerical data, such as user opinions about the content on the accounts, as well as its being useful, original, or appealing. In the current climate, the most practical and feasible survey administration method would be over the internet, through social media outlets. Followers are able to complete the form through public posts or private messages. The survey should be short to make it convenient for users to complete. Feedback from other professionals in both public health and social media may also be beneficial in understanding if there are areas of opportunity for content modification or stylistic improvement.

Given the rapidly changing nature of social media and the healthcare situation, it is essential to keep in mind that the curation of social media accounts is an iterative and continuous process. Content management must be proactive, and user engagement efforts must be maintained. As social media and situations evolve, it will require new strategies for messaging and evaluation.

Metrics for Social Networks' Posting Success				
Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	LinkedIn	Pinterest
→ Likes	→ Followers	→ Retweets	→ Likes	→ Repins
→ Shares	→ Likes	→ likes	→ Shares	→ Referrals
→ Comments	→ Comments	→ comments	→ Comments	→ Conversions
→ Clicks	→ Video views	→ video views	→ Clicks	
→ Engagement	→ Engagement rate	→ referrals	→ Engagement	
→ Referrals		→ conversion rate	→ Referrals	
→ Video views		→ engagement rate	→ Video views	

Graphic by: DevriX

DevriX

Section 9: Next Steps and Social Media Use Beyond COVID-19

Establishing a social media presence at this time will be beneficial for your LHD beyond the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media will continue to play a central role in news production and generation in the future. Learning to use the various platforms at this time will enable your LHD to build a robust network for disseminating information in the years to come. While the initial time investment of learning the platforms can seem intimidating and time-consuming, it will be worthwhile in the long-term for maintaining transparent and timely communication with your residents. COVID-19 is transforming social interaction, and compelling society to adopt new practices that are challenging and unfamiliar. Your LHD can leverage the current situation as an opportunity to tap into modern and innovative methods of connecting with your residents, starting with social media.

A Note from the Editor

The creation of this toolkit was intended as an introduction to social media use for Local Health Department communication about COVID-19. During the rapidly changing times, the content of this toolkit will require continuous updating and revision. We welcome your feedback to help us improve the resource. Please contact Lisa Gualtieri, PhD, ScM by email lisa.gualtieri@tufts.edu with any feedback, questions, or suggestions regarding this toolkit specifically, or related to the broader topic of social media use during COVID-19.