

University of Washington launches online training for contact tracing to fight COVID-19

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Screengrab from one of the training videos in the Every Contact Counts training website. Credit: University of Washington

As businesses and public spaces reopen across the nation, the old-school public health detective work known as contact tracing is becoming a major component of the battle to contain the novel coronavirus that

causes the deadly COVID-19 disease.

It's an investigative strategy long used for finding and informing people exposed to contagious diseases, such as measles and STDs, and now agencies across the country focused on combating the pandemic need support to expand their workforce to conduct [contact-tracing](#) interviews and save lives.

To provide [training](#) for this expanding workforce, the University of Washington's Northwest Center for Public Health Practice created the free, online course Every Contact Counts to support public health agencies—including smaller, rural public health districts and tribal health departments—to help their existing and growing workforce in the art and science of conducting a contact-tracing interview.

"At the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice, we were keenly aware of the strain public health workers and agencies were under long before the novel coronavirus hit," said Betty Bekemeier, professor in the UW School of Nursing and director of the center. "As COVID-19 spread, we knew from practice partners that a training was needed for the public health workforce that could quickly and efficiently assist a wide variety of public health agencies."

While Washington state has launched a large-scale effort to train contract tracers, other states and their partners can take similar steps using Every Contact Counts instead of creating all of their own training from the ground up. This is why Every Contact Counts was developed at the request of and in partnership with the Kansas Health Institute, which has been helping Kansas enhance its contact-tracing efforts at the state level. Now, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment is requiring Every Contact Counts as part of its training plan for all new contact tracers.

"We wanted to create a foundational training that not only met the needs for us in Kansas, but could support other states across the country in assisting their own local health departments where a lot of the COVID-19 containment work is being done," said Charles Hunt, a senior analyst with the Kansas Health Institute. "While many local health departments manage their own contact-tracing workforce, they need access to training resources, like Every Contact Counts, that set their staff up for success and protect their communities."

The federal Health Resources and Services Administration promoted the training in an email to public health professionals, along with the National Network of Public Health Institutes and other national organizations.

With Every Contact Counts, professionals will learn to describe contact tracing and why it's important to public health, articulate why COVID-19 is unique when it comes to contact tracing, identify the key components of a successful contact-tracing interview and complete an interview with confidence, clarity and compassion.

Since each state has slightly different policies for containing the outbreak, the UW training provides a foundation for performing contact tracing and a certificate to verify successful completion of the course.

"Contact tracing is going to be an essential part of our reopening and containment efforts moving forward," said Janet Baseman, professor of epidemiology in the UW School of Public Health whose work with UW graduate students provided the basis for the training. "We need to trace every contact possible, because every contact counts in stopping this disease."

Cold-calling people who have tested positive for the virus or who may have been exposed to it—and getting them the information and help they

need to self-isolate—can be challenging. While some will be thankful for the information and help, others can be annoyed or agitated. Protecting privacy is paramount in these encounters, and some subjects may actively resist engaging with the interviewer. The UW training is designed to help interviewers approach, with skill and compassion, the fears and the sudden, dramatic change in their lives that subjects face.

The training falls into three main categories—what contact tracing is, contact-tracing specifics for COVID-19, and communicating with cases and contacts. Exercises include interview skill-building videos, section quizzes and an exercise where participants practice key decision-making during a contact interview.

At the end of the course, there's a final assessment. Participants who receive a score of 80% or better will get a non-credit certificate of completion that they can download and use to verify the training they received.

"With Every Contact Counts, we want public health professionals to feel like they have the knowledge and resources to complete a contact-tracing interview with confidence, clarity and compassion," said Sarah Manchanda, e-learning manager at the Northwest Center. "We know they will be talking to community members who are scared, overwhelmed or possibly even dismissive of contact-tracing efforts. This training helps interviewers prepare and practice so they can provide needed information in a way that encourages people to listen and slow the spread of COVID-19."

The Northwest Center for Public Health Practice developed this training, which was made possible thanks to a grant from the Kansas Health Foundation and contributions by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the Kansas Health Institute.

More information: www.nwcphp.org/training/every-contact-counts

Provided by University of Washington

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