

Minnesota Amazon warehouse has 88 COVID-19 cases

June 24 2020, by Kavita Kumar and John Ewoldt



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Amazon.com Inc.'s giant fulfillment center in Shakopee, Minn., has joined the ranks of the state's workplaces with a large number of employees sickened by coronavirus, with at least 88 of its approximately 1,000 workers testing positive for the disease caused by the virus.

Proliferation at the Amazon facility has been slower than at several meatpacking plants that have been the worst-hit Minnesota workplaces. In those cases, hundreds of people contracted the COVID-19 in April and May and a handful of deaths occurred.

But another 99 workers at other Amazon sites in the Twin Cities have also tested positive for the illness since it arrived in Minnesota earlier this year, state health officials said Monday. No Amazon workers have died and 11 have been hospitalized.

"We certainly have seen more cases in some other work sites, but Amazon is one of the largest outbreaks in a warehouse or distribution plant," said Kris Ehresmann, director of infectious disease for the Minnesota Health Department.

Separately, 11 workers at the United Natural Foods Inc. warehouse in Hopkins, Minn., which employs nearly 900 people, have also tested positive, the health department said.

State officials are reaching out to employers when clusters at workplaces begin to emerge.

"Anytime we have a situation in which a [work site](#) is a critical workforce and they're in a position where they don't have the luxury of working from home, or working in a cubicle ... you tend to see a greater likelihood of transmission," Ehresmann said.

In the case of Amazon, the state's data provides a rare glimpse of the

spread of the virus at its facilities. The Seattle-based company, one of the nation's largest employers, has resisted disclosing the number of cases even as workers press for more information.

On Monday, Jen Crowcroft, an Amazon spokeswoman, reiterated the company's previous statements that infection rates at its sites are at or below the rates of communities they are in. She didn't provide details that could be corroborated.

Amazon alerts workers via text messages when there are confirmed cases at their worksite. But workers have complained that the company doesn't say how many people are involved.

"That's really scary," William Stolz, an Amazon [worker](#) in Shakopee said after being told about the state's data Monday.

Amazon requires workers to wear [face masks](#) and takes temperatures of workers. But Stolz said it's frustrating that workers haven't been given more information so they can decide whether it's worth the risk to work.

"All we have to go on in some vague text messages they send every few days that say there are new cases plural," he said. "But we have no idea if that's two or 10."

While the largest COVID-19 outbreaks in Minnesota were in meatpacking plants, coronavirus continues to spread through other large workplaces that stayed open through the pandemic.

About 132 workers have now tested positive at Viracon's architectural glass factory in Owatonna, Minn., which closed down for a deep-cleaning for two days last month.

Ehresmann said the health department has been in touch with Amazon

and provided guidance to mitigate the spread.

The number of cases at the Amazon fulfillment center in Shakopee could be even higher than 88. Whenever positive cases are reported to the state, the health department interviews the infected individual to get information such as where they work.

While 187 people who had tested positive said they worked at Amazon, not all of them listed which location they worked at. In addition to the 88 in Shakopee, 22 said they worked at Amazon's warehouse in Eagan, 14 in Brooklyn Park, and 5 in Maple Grove. The other 58 Amazon workers did not specify a location, leaving it unclear where they work.

The risk to customers who purchase items from Amazon is low, Ehresmann said. While transmission through surfaces is possible, it's not the primary way the virus spreads. And some studies have shown that cardboard is not often good "at keeping the virus viable," she said.

The fulfillment center in Shakopee is also the subject of an Occupational Safety and Health Administration investigation after the Awood Center, a Minneapolis workers advocacy group, filed a complaint about it in April. That same month, a small group of workers also protested outside the warehouse to object to the firings of some workers and to call for stepped up safety measures and benefits such as paid leave for those who don't feel safe working.

"We are supporting the individuals who are recovering," said Crowcroft, the Amazon spokeswoman, who added that Amazon has spent more than \$800 million in the first half of the year on COVID-19 safety measures.

Suleman Ahmed is convinced he got the coronavirus from working at the Shakopee fulfillment center since he has worked around many other workers who have been sick. He started feeling sick in late April and

tested positive for COVID-19 a week later. He thinks Amazon should have closed to help slow the spread.

"It's affected me a lot—I'm still struggling," he said, noting that he hasn't yet returned to work because he still has stomach issues.

At UNFI's huge facility in Hopkins, the key distributor of goods to Cub Foods and dozens of other groceries in the state, four workers who tested positive for COVID-19 were in quarantine Monday. The others have recovered from the illness.

"None of the confirmed positive cases at our Hopkins distribution center are through associate to associate transmission at work," Andre LaMere, senior vice president of risk and safety at UNFI, said in an e-mail.

"We're finding that some associates are making choices away from work that are placing them at a high risk of exposure, such as not practicing social distancing while attending gatherings in public places."

Tom Erickson of Teamsters Local 120, which represents workers at the facility, questioned how the company can be certain the illness wasn't transmitted at work. "We've requested their tracing methods since the beginning of April but they're not answering questions," he said.

UNFI provided employees with thermometers to take home for daily health screenings before reporting to work. It also said that temperature checks started Monday. Anyone with a fever or a temperature of 100.4 degrees or higher will be sent home. The company said it requires face masks at work and set up a process for contact tracing.

©2020 Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Minnesota Amazon warehouse has 88 COVID-19 cases (2020, June 24) retrieved 17

April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-minnesota-amazon-warehouse-covid-cases.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.