

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, Bureau for Public Health (BPH) continues to respond to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in West Virginia. BPH is working closely with communities, state agencies, along with local and federal partners to monitor the ongoing risk of COVID-19 and ensure the health and protection of all individuals in West Virginia.

As the end of the 2020-2021 school year approaches, it is important for organizers of graduations and related events to consider how ceremonies may be held while observing suggested state and local guidelines. BPH offers the following guidance to help protect individuals, their families, and communities from COVID-19 during these ceremonies and related activities. Decisions to host graduation ceremonies remain at the discretion of the college, university, and local school district leaders, provided the events do not conflict with any executive orders in place at the time of the event. Colleges, universities, and schools retain the authority to postpone graduation ceremonies.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Sore throat
- Recent loss of taste or smell

PERSON-TO-PERSON TRANSMISSION

- Occurs via small droplets from the nose or mouth of the infected person when they cough, sneeze, or exhale.
- Virus can remain on surfaces for a limited time period. Although less common, transmission may occur from touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.

GENERAL PREVENTION

- Learn about COVID-19 from reputable sources.
- Maintain physical distance of at least 6 feet between yourself and others.
- Encourage proper handwashing.
- Clean and sanitize surfaces often.
- Do not share food, drinks, etc.
- Wear cloth face coverings.
- Stay home if you feel sick.
- Isolate sick individuals.
- Get vaccinated when you are eligible to get a vaccine.

PEOPLE WHO SHOULD NOT ATTEND IN-PERSON

GRADUATION CEREMONIES

- People at [high risk](#) for severe illness from COVID-19 should stay home. Consider recording or livestreaming ceremonies.
- Those who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 should stay home for 10 days from symptom onset date or test date, if asymptomatic.
- Those who have been in close contact with someone who has COVID-19 should stay home for 14 days from their last exposure to a confirmed case.
- Individuals experiencing or those who have someone in their household experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.

RISK OF VIRUS SPREAD

Colleges, universities, and schools are encouraged to consult their local health department on questions related to health and safety if hosting a graduation ceremony. The following factors contribute to the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 and should be considered individually and together to determine the risk of infection at a graduation ceremony:

- **Virtual vs. in-person ceremonies:** Virtual ceremonies, or those with a minimum number of attendees, ideally consisting of the separate families and the school officials, pose lower risk for the spread of COVID-19.
- **Community levels of COVID-19:** Higher levels of COVID-19 in the community increase the risk of spread at any event. When considering whether to attend or host a graduation ceremony or a related event, families and friends should check the [levels of COVID-19](#) in their community.

- **The location of the event:** Activities in poorly ventilated indoor locations increase the risk of spread of COVID-19. Outdoor locations held during the daytime or those with open windows and doors are better alternatives.
- **The duration of the event:** Lengthy events pose a greater risk than shorter events.
- **The number of people at the ceremony/event:** Ceremonies/events with more people pose greater risk than those with fewer people. Limiting the number of attendees helps avoid higher risk of spread.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR GRADUATION CEREMONIES

The following ceremonies are all included in this guidance: graduations, commencements, moving up ceremonies, kindergarten roundups, and substantially similar activities. Virtual (recorded or livestreamed) or drive-through ceremonies remain the safest way to celebrate, especially for families who have individuals at high risk for COVID-19.

- **Football Stadiums or Larger Arenas:** This would include limiting guests to accommodate total capacity, seating families in every three rows in the stadium, and seating graduates 6 feet apart.
- **Drive-ins or Similar:** When families arrive, they remain seated in cars to allow for minimal physical engagement. This type of ceremony can be held in large parking lots. Weather considerations related to heat and rain should be addressed, especially as all cars would need to be turned off in order to conduct the ceremony. Safe walking pathways would need to be outlined for graduates to exit the vehicles and safely collect their diplomas. Similarly, large projected screens and sound equipment may be required. Students and families without vehicles would need alternative seating and transportation.
- **Increase the Number and Decrease the Size:** Instead of hosting one ceremony, a series of smaller ceremonies may be hosted in the same venue. This would allow smaller cohorts of the graduating class to participate in a ceremony, with the ceremony repeated to accommodate all graduates and any permitted guests. Schools may want to create consistency by pre-recording speeches and students walking across the stage,

and then splice videos together into a comprehensive, keepsake ceremony video.

- **Individualized Ceremony:** Schedule students to arrive in waves that allows them to walk in front of the school while families watch from a designated area or drive-by in cars to take pictures. See below for staging information. This would require precise scheduling, traffic control, etc., and may be appropriate for smaller graduating classes in less trafficked areas.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO HONOR GRADUATES

- Ask for individual videos with short messages to their graduating classmates. Using these recordings, along with the traditional filmed speeches by invited speakers, creates a longer film highlighting the graduates' school experiences and provides a long-term memento.
- Highlight individuals on social media each day with special hashtags that allow for family, friends, and community members to congratulate individual students (who agree to participate) with photos and messages.
- Schedule a graduation parade where graduates decorate their cars, line-up, and drive a prescribed route. Community members may socially distance along the parade route and cheer graduates as they drive past. There could be a specific place where each car stops, allowing the school or district official to pose with the car and hand the passenger or driver the diploma.
- Work with local city or county officials to block off a road. Allow the senior and 1-2 family members to stand along the road (socially distanced) and have school or district personnel present the diplomas. Timing, size of class, and environmental contexts should be considered.
- Postpone the graduation ceremony to a future time when physical distancing measures may be relaxed or host them in one year as an "early reunion" (if circumstances allow).

PHYSICAL DISTANCING MEASURES

Physical distancing means maintaining at least 6 feet distance between individuals who are not from the same household or cohort at all times. Ceremony organizers and venue operators should consider necessary measures to facilitate physical distancing of attendees/families/cohorts during in-person



ceremonies/events, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Arranging seating so that audience members face in the same direction and so there is at least 6 feet distance between each person or household/cohort.
- Maintaining empty seats between each household/attendee to keep 6 feet distance; consider alternating rows of seating.
- Marking the standing locations of graduates waiting in line to collect their diplomas.
- Assigning seats to each attendee when attendees RSVP or purchase tickets.
- If graduates will be walking across a stage, having them line up in small groups, maintain 6 feet distance from each other and everyone else before, during, and after the procession, and return to their seats once they have completed their procession.
- Establishing a one-way procession by using floor markings, signs, barriers, and staff or volunteers to maintain one-way flow of traffic and discouraging gatherings in close quarters and high-traffic areas.
- Avoiding or adapting practices that otherwise include close physical contact between graduates, staff, or faculty, such as hand shaking, hugs, or passing items from one individual to another (e.g., diplomas), unless they are part of the same household or cohort.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY MEASURES TO BE CONSIDERED

- Consider the procession and support required to maintain acceptable distance.
- Consider whether masks will be suggested or required.
- Consider how diplomas will be collected when a student's name is called. Staff may consider placing the diploma on a table for the student to collect. Students may choose to walk across the stage, collect the diploma from the table, and pose for a picture individually or appropriately distanced from a school/district official.
- Set expectations, policies, and guidelines in advance, and reiterate those before the ceremony day and at the start of the ceremony, to ensure overall health and safety.
- If ceremonies are held outdoors over the summer, sun exposure and heat should be considered, and appropriate precautions should

be taken related to shade, availability of water, etc.

- Speakers should not share microphones.
- Designate a staff member or volunteer to take photos of graduates as they cross the stage. Audience members should not approach the stage to get photos.
- Encourage safer alternatives to cheering, yelling, and whistling, such as clapping and noisemakers.
- Avoid passing items from one individual to another (e.g., diplomas, awards). Diplomas, certificates, and awards can be placed on a table for graduates to pick up.
- For sales of tickets, school merchandise, and commemorative items, cashless or no-contact payments and transactions should be used to the greatest extent possible.
- Discourage photographs of groups or individuals who are not part of the same household or cohort.
- Schools may want to limit attendance to two guests per student as a way to control for crowd size, and then broadcast the ceremony (or provide online) for others.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [CDC considerations for events and gatherings](#)
- [Protect yourself and others](#)

Questions and concerns can also be directed to the 24/7, toll-free COVID-19 information hotline:

1-800-887-4304

