



COVID-19:

**Ensuring continuity of
ATS service globally**

Background Information

The outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) presents a complex scenario for air navigation service providers (ANSPs) who are charged with the essential task of ensuring the safe, orderly flow of air traffic despite challenging conditions.

COVID-19 originally discovered in late 2019, was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. In response, many countries and territories have imposed travel restrictions on citizens to limit further spread and organisations, institutions and companies have implemented new guidance to protect staff and stakeholders – including individuals who provide or support the delivery of air navigation services.

Individuals are encouraged to stay abreast of the latest information on the COVID-19 outbreak, available on the WHO website (www.who.int/) and through national and local public health authorities.

Here CANSO also offers guidance for organisations and companies within the air traffic management industry on how to navigate this complex situation.

Understanding COVID-19

According to various medical sources, the COVID-19 virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person, specifically between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet/2 meters) and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

When an individual with COVID-19 coughs or exhales they release droplets of infected fluid. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Most of these droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects – such as desks, tables or telephones. Individuals who touch the contaminated surfaces, and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth can contract COVID-19. In other words, COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to the seasonal influenza virus.

It is not certain how long the COVID-19 virus survives on surfaces, but it seems to behave like other coronaviruses. Studies suggest that coronaviruses (including preliminary information on the COVID-19 virus) may persist on surfaces for a few hours or up to several days. This may vary under different conditions (e.g. type of surface, temperature or humidity of the environment).

There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent illness is to try and avoid being exposed to the virus.

ANSP efforts to maintain business continuity

As the COVID-19 global pandemic continues to cause serious public health concerns, air traffic volumes have fallen due to a reduction in passenger demand and travel restrictions imposed by States. ANSPs are assessing the changing traffic forecasts to ensure the provision of safe and optimal air navigation services (ANS). Based on forecasts, ANSPs in several regions are expecting a further, short-term air traffic demand decrease due to additional measures enacted to halt the spread of the virus.

ANSPs are taking extraordinary measures to ensure the health of employees during this time in order to provide the maximum level of continuity in the provision of ANS and maintain connectivity across Flight Information Regions (FIR). The primary focus at this critical stage of the pandemic is to ensure that the essential operational and management staff remain healthy by taking all necessary measures in line with global and national health directives and recommendations.

To help ANSPs better understand the potential operational impacts associated with the COVID-19 virus and what mitigations members are taking to manage this rapidly changing situation, CANSO has collected best practices and approaches to the current issues to help members navigate these uncertain times.

Please note that since this issue is evolving, this document may be modified as more information becomes available. New versions will be noted.

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Important considerations for ANSPs during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant challenge for ANSP business continuity. It is recommended that dedicated crisis/emergency response teams be assembled to assist with planning and communications and that facility leads be named to deal with individual facility issues. These individuals will be responsible for advising on the best approach and assessing considerations that are particular to your organisation and operation.

Below are a series of recommendations for ANSPs looking to safely manage organisational welfare and operations based on information from CANSO member best practice worldwide.

I. Preventing the infection of essential staff

1. What is the difference between essential and non-essential personnel?

Essential personnel are those in positions that are required to ensure the safe, orderly and expeditious delivery of air navigation services (control, advisory, technical and system support).

Non-essential personnel are those who do not have a direct contribution to the safe and expeditious delivery of air navigation services.

2. What are the three most important precautionary measures when minimising essential employees' exposure to COVID-19?

The three most important measures to take involve workplace cleanliness, social distancing and social responsibility.

1. Workplace cleanliness includes increasing the facility and workstation cleaning frequency; establishing a process for deep cleaning of the facility on a periodic basis; providing suitable cleaning materials, including rubber gloves, so ATCOs and other essential staff can clean their workstations and individual headsets; and making hand sanitiser readily available throughout the facility.
2. Effective social distancing measures include not allowing visitors into the facility; deferring non-essential training for operational personnel; segregation of incoming and outgoing operational teams, including dedicated break areas for the segregated teams; and increasing the space between ATC workstations (if possible).
3. Social responsibility measures include taking individual temperatures at least three times a day; washing hands regularly; adjusting personal travel plans; and staying at home if individuals feel unwell. You should be proactive in distributing information

to staff on COVID-19, so that staff can recognise symptoms and closely monitor their own health, and understand the social responsibility measures they should take. You may want to consider taking additional precautionary measures such as providing temperature taking stations at the building entrance so that employees coming on duty or departing the facility can monitor their temperature.

3. Should a temporary restriction of who is allowed into a facility be implemented during a pandemic outbreak?

This depends on what stage of pandemic spread an ANSP is experiencing at a given point in time.

In the early stages when the virus is beginning to spread, steps should be taken to limit facility access to essential personnel in order to reduce the risk of exposure. This basically means those individuals who are specifically providing direct air traffic services (cleared for take-off, cleared to land, turn right, turn left, climb, descend, etc.) should only be allowed in the operational facilities during this critical period. Exception should be made for maintenance technicians when there is a need to address critical systems and equipment that directly support ATC services and for cleaning personnel who are charged with cleaning/disinfecting the facilities. All other personnel, including management who are not providing direct oversight of air traffic control functions, should refrain from entering a facility during the outbreak portion of the virus lifecycle.

Once this critical phase of the virus lifecycle has passed, individuals who have had either 1) a negative test for the virus or 2) who are asymptomatic but have been checked and/or cleared by a medical professional, can slowly be allowed back into the facility in a phased approach. Coordination and open communication with facility management, labour organisations and medical representatives supporting the facility, if applicable, is advisable.

4. How do you institute social distancing in the ATC operational environment?

While each operational environment is different, most ATC control towers and control rooms are configured in such a way that operational positions are in close proximity, making social distancing a challenge. Maintaining the recommended six feet (2 meters) of distance between individuals may not be possible for individuals on position and controlling live traffic. While there is no hard and fast rule for how to achieve social distancing in an operational setting, the suggestion is for facility management and labour representatives to work together to determine what is feasible. In some instances, reduced traffic volumes and adjusted shift schedules may provide opportunity for workstations to be left empty between staff on position.

5. How should cases in which essential staff are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 or believe they have come in contact with someone who has the COVID-19 virus, but have not tested positive for the virus be handled?

In the current circumstance, employees who are experiencing symptoms should not be in the workplace in order to reduce the risk of exposure for other staff. Employees should self isolate and should seek a COVID-19 test according to local public health procedures. If the individual is not tested but their symptoms subside, medical advice should be sought on safe return to work.

6. What should be the process to return to work if an individual has tested positive for COVID-19 and is now recovered and is no longer experiencing symptoms?

Check guidance from local public health authorities. In some areas two consecutive negative COVID-19 tests are necessary to determine that the individual is virus free, while in other areas the public health guidance suggests waiting three days following the complete absence of any symptoms. Consultation and open communication with employee groups and labour organisations is advisable.

7. For ATCO shared workstations/positions, is the use of common hand-held microphones advised?

Shared headsets/microphones are a risk for virus exposure. Personal headsets should be used and headsets should not be shared with others. Just like with shared workstations/positions, personal headsets should be cleaned before and after each use. In some cases additional measures such as keyboard covers can make shared workstations easier to clean.

8. What should be the process to return to work if an individual has not tested positive for COVID-19 but has been requested to self-isolate for a period of 14 days for other reasons (e.g. recent travel)?

If the individual has completed the 14 day self-isolation period *and* has not experienced any symptoms associated with COVID-19, an ANSP could make the decision to allow the individual to return to normal duties. Consult guidance from local public health authorities.

9. Under what circumstances should management communicate to employees that there is a confirmed COVID-19 case(s)?

Management has a responsibility to share information determined to be necessary to protect the health of employees in the workplace, but should maintain confidentiality as required by not disclosing an infected employee's name unnecessarily. Operational staff should be notified there is a confirmed case and the guidance of local public health authorities should be followed with respect to the potential exposure of other employees who may have come into contact with the confirmed COVID-19 case(s) (i.e. self isolation and health monitoring).

Management should work with their labour partners and keep apprised of guidance from local health officials regarding transmission of the illness and precautions that should be taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Management should treat this as they would any other illness in the workplace and continue to protect employee privacy interests while providing sufficient information to all operational staff related to protecting themselves against the spread of COVID-19.

10. What should management do if individuals display symptoms of COVID-19 while on duty?

Essential or non-essential staffs that appear to display symptoms (i.e. fever, cough, shortness of breath) should be separated from other individuals and sent home immediately. The employee should be requested to stay home until symptom free. Management should make this determination based on objective evidence only (not suspicion). Note sneezing is not a symptom of COVID-19.

11. What should management do when an individual says they are uncomfortable sitting next to a colleague with cold or flu-like symptoms?

Encourage the employee with cold or flu-like symptoms to go home and stay home until they are no longer sick. Global health organisations or local health guidelines can be helpful in such circumstances, such as requiring individuals who have symptoms to stay home and not come to work until they are free of fever (100.4° Fahrenheit/38 degrees Celsius or greater using an oral thermometer), and any other symptoms for at least 24 hours, without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom-altering medicines (e.g. cough suppressants).



II. Ensuring business continuity

12. Should on-the-job-training (OJT) continue for ATCOs in training during the COVID-19 pandemic?

It is important to consider the specific circumstances for your operational situation, including your overall staffing levels, the number of students in training and the stage of training your students are currently at. While traffic levels have decreased globally during the pandemic, and you may be experiencing significantly reduced traffic in your airspace, there will be a time when traffic levels will start to trend back upward. When that occurs, the need to have enough certified ATCOs to handle increasing demand will be a potential issue. While there are challenges with obtaining the recommended six feet (two metres) of distance between individuals, especially in special circumstances found in OJT sessions, facility managers should work with their labour partners to determine what is achievable and whether measures can be put in place to ensure this important activity can continue.

13. What are ANSPs doing with regards to rostering to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19?

ANSPs have implemented several creative rostering methods to help mitigate the effects of COVID-19 exposure and possible spread amongst essential staff. Some ANSPs are re-programming all operational shifts with the aim to create “closed” work shifts that allow the organisation to better manage a quarantine period should any “direct contact” or infection occur. Reduced traffic levels have increased the ability of many ANSPs to roster in such a manner. Scenario documents on how to institute a roster mitigation and other best practices for rostering and scheduling can be found on the [CANSO COVID-19 resources page](#).

14. How do ANSPs complete critical maintenance activities without increasing exposure for ATCOs or other operational personnel?

Suspending maintenance activities during a pandemic situation is not practical. However, measures can be taken to limit the exposure to air traffic and maintenance personnel. For instance, whenever possible, remote maintenance should be the preferred activity as it keeps individuals from being in contact with each other. Routine periodic maintenance can be rescheduled and a posture of restorative maintenance only can be adopted. When there is a need for ATSEPs to enter an operational environment, airspace can be handed off by ATCOs to adjacent sectors and the positions vacated while maintenance is performed. ATSEPs can be required to use rubber gloves to conduct maintenance activities and areas should be cleaned once activities are completed prior to ATCOs occupying the position. Another possible measure is to suspend all maintenance activities until a future date and only respond to critical technical failures that jeopardize the ability to provide safe air traffic services. As is common with other facility specific activities, facility management and labour representatives should discuss the options that work best for the unique operational environment.

15. What happens if a ATCOs medical certification is expiring soon?

During a pandemic, visits to doctors for non-essential matters are often limited. For this reason many state regulators have been granting a 90-day extension of individual medical certifications to allow continuity of operations. You should discuss this possibility with your regulator.

16. What happens if an individual or individuals in your operation test positive for COVID-19?

While this is an evolving situation, several ANSPs have experienced this already. As mentioned in question 13, one best practice undertaken by many ANSPs is to arrange operational rosters with the aim of creating work shifts to allow segregation of operational staff into two or three teams (depending on staffing levels). This enables the rotation of operational duties such that all staff don't overlap or come into contact with the other teams. This configuration allows a suitable quarantine period (usually 14 days) for a team should an employee test positive for COVID-19 while the other teams, who have not been exposed, continue to maintain service.

In the case where rostering segregation has not taken place, when operational staff has either tested positive, or has been in direct contact with someone who has a confirmed case of COVID-19, a number of factors should be considered. Service provision should be relocated to a contingency area or facility if available while the facility is thoroughly cleaned, especially operational positions and common areas. A determination should be made as to the scope and breadth of potential COVID-19 exposure by individuals in the facility based on a review of shift scheduling. Management must determine the scope of isolation required and the steps necessary to mitigate impact to operations. All facility personnel who may have been in contact with the affected staff should be contacted and instructed to take steps consistent with local public health guidance (i.e. either be tested by a medical professional if they are experiencing symptoms or self-quarantine at home).

17. What other operational business continuity issues do I need to be thinking about?

While air traffic volumes may be depressed due to traffic restrictions and the erosion of passenger demand, there is still a considerable amount of traffic to be safely managed. Many regions are experiencing higher volumes of air cargo in order to provide for essential supply chains. Normal or near normal traffic volumes will eventually return and your emergency management team should carefully consider potential complications that might be experienced when that happens. Decisions taken now that might harm your ability to resume normal operations should be carefully weighed, particularly measures that might affect currency of ATC licences and therefore necessitate additional training.

Additional Resources

In addition to information issued by the World Health Organization, several parties have issued guidance to on COVID-19 specifically for the aviation community. The links below provide access to additional resources on this important issue.

ICAO www.icao.int/Security/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx

ICAO www.icao.int/Newsroom/Pages/ICAO-Council-adopts-covid.aspx

ICAO www.icao.int/safety/Pages/COVID-19-Airport-Status.aspx

CAPSCA www.capsca.org/CoronaVirusRefs.html

IFATCA www.ifatca.org/2020/03/coronavirus-guidance/

ACI www.aci-europe.org/industry-topics/covid-19.html

IATA www.iata.org/contentassets/f1163430bba94512a583eb6d6b24aa56/airlines-erp-checklist.pdf

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CANSO | Transpolis Schiphol Building, Polarisavenue 85e,
Hoofddorp, North Holland 2132 JH, Netherlands