



Minimizing Risk of COVID-19 Exposure in Shared Housing

National Park Service

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Executive Summary

The National Park Service (NPS) considered current information on how the COVID-19 virus spreads, transmission rates, the availability of rapid testing, and availability and effectiveness of vaccinations in deciding to update its policy on shared housing¹. The latest information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that, despite the availability of vaccines, the best mitigation measures in congregate settings (e.g., college dorms, prisons) continue to be social distancing and mask wearing. Further, the emphasis of the Biden Administration is on protecting the workforce and stopping the spread. Therefore, as a baseline, the NPS should continue to limit shared housing to one person per bedroom for the 2021 season to protect our workforce from the spread of COVID-19. The baseline applies to all in-park housing including that for commercial visitor service providers such as concessioners and other partners. There may be circumstances or prevention and mitigation strategies that could provide for exceptions. Any exception must be approved by the Deputy Director, Operations, in consultation with the respective Regional Director and Regional Public Health Consultant.

For more information on how to implement this guidance within housing policies including questions about the rental rate, see the supplemental [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#).

The NPS will update this document as the CDC updates its guidance.

Discussion

The CDC acknowledges that shared housing increases the risk of exposure to COVID-19. The health, safety, and well-being of NPS employees, concessioners, and other commercial service providers, leaseholders, volunteers, and partners is a top priority of the NPS. We must protect our health so that we are able to care for our visitors.

As a person's risk of exposure to COVID-19 varies depending on community factors (e.g., infection rates) and the ability to implement [CDC prevention strategies](#), decisions on how to safely use shared housing will be made at the local level within the parameters outlined in this document. Moreover, parks, commercial visitor service providers, and partners should continuously monitor risk levels and mitigation strategies which could alter their operations (e.g., if confirmed COVID-19 cases increase in the park or local community, the park may decide to decrease shared housing operations).

What We Now Know about COVID-19

Scientists have learned more about SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, since the NPS first released this guidance in May of 2020. Additionally, there are new prevention and mitigation strategies that were not previously available. The NPS considered the discoveries and advancements in Table 1, as well as the most recent information from the CDC, to form the recommendations in this document.

¹ For the purposes of this document, shared housing is defined as any arrangement where two or more unrelated persons can share a bedroom, bathroom, or a kitchen. A small percentage of family units reside in shared housing



Table 1: Recent COVID-19 Discoveries and Advancements and Impacts to Shared Housing

Discovery or Advancement	Description	Impact to Shared Housing
Information about how the virus spreads	The virus most commonly spreads in respiratory droplets transmitted during close, prolonged contact with an infected person. Much less commonly, the virus spreads by airborne transmission and has been recognized to infect others more than six feet away. These transmissions occurred within enclosed spaces that had inadequate ventilation. Transmission by touching surfaces is not thought to be a significant source of COVID-19 transmission.	The highest risk of transmission occurs when people are in close, prolonged contact with each other in closed, poorly ventilated spaces.
Case increases	Although the number changes daily, there are significantly more people infected with COVID-19 now, compared to when this guidance was first released.	Case increases in the local community and at the park increases the risk to people in shared housing.
More testing is available	The availability and the accuracy of tests have improved. Testing is one component of a comprehensive strategy to reduce COVID-19 transmission.	Testing is a prevention strategy. At this time, there is not CDC guidance on testing specific for shared congregate housing. The NPS developed screening testing guidance which will be updated once CDC releases additional guidance.
Vaccinations have begun	States are distributing vaccines. The current authorized vaccines are very effective.	Although vaccination is a prevention strategy, at this time, the DOI does not provide guidance on how/when vaccination can be used for operational decisions. If the CDC recommends using vaccinations to manage risk in shared housing, the NPS will update this guidance.
New variants have emerged	Multiple variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 are circulating. Scientists are studying the new variants. Early evidence suggests some of the variants may be more transmissible, at least one may have more severe outcomes. Additionally, scientists are studying how and if the variants might change the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines.	If the variants result in higher transmission rates, there is greater risk to people in shared housing.

Understanding the Spectrum of Risk in Shared Housing Occupancy

The ability to prevent exposure and respond to and mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 in shared housing varies, so park leadership must decide the level of risk to assume. Table 2 presents examples of housing scenarios on a continuum of increased risk.

Table 2: COVID-19 – Shared Housing Scenarios

Scenario	Description	Risk Assessment	Risk Scale
Scenario 1	Each person has own bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and living room	There is little risk of COVID-19 exposure between people living in shared housing	



Scenario	Description	Risk Assessment	Risk Scale
Scenario 2	Each person has own bedroom but shares a kitchen, living room, and/or bathroom	There is some risk of COVID-19 exposure between people living in shared housing. Risk is reduced if prevention and mitigation strategies are followed.	
Scenario 3	Two or more unrelated people share sleeping space	There is high risk of COVID-19 exposure between people living in shared housing.	

Scenario 1 is the starting point all parks should strive for in shared housing in order to minimize exposure. Parks, at their own discretion and with strong prevention and mitigation plans in place, may elect to assume the risk associated with scenario 2. A park can only use the scenario 3 approach for park employee housing or housing for its commercial visitor service providers or partners after a comprehensive, robust plan is developed (see the [Developing a Shared Housing Plan](#) section below), submitted to the Superintendent and then the Regional Director, and approved by the Deputy Director, Operations.

Regardless of the scenario, it is important to note that a large proportion of transmission occurs through social gatherings in off-duty hours. Strict adherence to prevention and response/mitigation activities at all times should be promoted.

Developing a Shared Housing Plan

Any park, commercial visitor service provider, or partner with shared housing should develop and implement a plan to regularly assess, prevent, and respond to COVID-19 in shared housing. Plans that include a shared sleeping space proposal (scenario 3) must be submitted for approval. To develop a Shared Housing Plan, the NPS recommends using the steps in the below table.

Table 3: Recommended Steps and Resources for Developing a Shared Housing Plan

#	Action
1	Use the NPS Risk Assessment Tool to determine risk and gather information that will inform the shared housing plan Note: The tool should be used regularly as a monitoring tool as the risk level will change.
2	Review NPS and CDC guidance to inform the shared housing plan. Consider the following sources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDC Guidance for Shared or Congregate Housing • NPS Quarantine and Isolation Guidance • NPS Action Steps • NPS Screening Testing (if screening testing will be used as a prevention and response/mitigation activity).
3	Once developed, the park’s Superintendent should review and accept the plan. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the shared housing plan restricts occupancy to one tenant per bedroom, implement the plan. • If the shared housing plan includes shared sleeping space, the plan must be approved before the plan can be implemented. To obtain approval, the Superintendent submits the plan to the Regional Director who will review and route the plan to the Deputy Director, Operations. This step is consistent for all shared housing including that provided by the park, commercial visitor service providers, and partners.

If after taking the above actions the park is still unsure about the level of risk for their unique housing programs, they may consult with a Regional Public Health Consultant.



The plan must address the following components:

- How will new residents be onboarded into shared housing (e.g., what information should be provided during check-in, should any restrictions be added to the lease agreement?)
- What is the proposed quarantine period, if any, before bringing people into a shared living or workspace? Note that, per CDC interim guidance, fully vaccinated persons who meet criteria will no longer be required to quarantine following an exposure to someone with COVID-19 if they have been fully vaccinated against the disease within the last three months, show no symptoms, and meet the following criteria:
 - Are fully vaccinated (i.e., received the second dose in a 2-dose series at least two weeks ago or received a single-dose vaccine at least two weeks ago)
 - Are within three months following receipt of the last dose in the series
 - Have remained asymptomatic since the current COVID-19 exposure.
- How will individuals at [high-risk for severe illness](#) be encouraged to self-identify with their supervisor? Individuals who have an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 should consider the risks of shared housing and are encouraged to raise any issues with their supervisor.
- How will clear direction be provided to people living in shared housing on the following requirements:
 - Masks must be worn at all times when inside a shared living facility, but outside of their private bedroom, except when dining and bathing. For more information on the requirement, see the February 2, 2021 [memo from the Deputy Director, Operations to all NPS employees](#) on Implementing Executive Order No. 13991: Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing and [Mask-Wearing for Commercial Visitor Service Providers and Partners](#).
 - All employees, contractors, and volunteers must self-monitor for COVID-symptoms as outlined in the [DOI Workplace Safety Plan](#). If displaying symptoms, stay home and notify your supervisor (preferably by phone).
- How will prevention and response/mitigation activities to promote social distancing be used? Specifically, the plan should address the following:
 - Rearrange furniture to encourage people to stay six feet apart.
 - Assign common living quarters or specific shared areas, like bathrooms, to residents who work in the same area or unit (i.e., cohort style housing based on shared-risk categories).
 - Prohibit intermingling among residents in private living quarters at all times and prohibit non-residents from entering the shared living facility unless absolutely necessary.
 - If relevant, stagger meals, breaks, and food preparation times rather than allowing all residents to prepare their food or dine at socially conventional times. Consider encouraging 'grab and go' options, dining outdoors, or dining inside their living quarters.
 - Remind individuals to limit or consider refraining from activities and sports in common areas where residents come into close contact during non-work hours.



- What COVID-19 prevention supplies (e.g., soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizers that contain at least 60% alcohol, and disinfectants) will be provided in shared housing? How will the prevention supplies remain stocked and what guidance will be provided to tenants to promote proper use?
- How will people in shared housing be encouraged to abide by [CDC guidance](#) for cleaning and disinfecting.
- How will the sharing of common items among residents be limited? For example, encourage residents to use and store their own supplies (e.g. dishes, drinking glasses, cups, laundry detergent, shampoos, eating utensils) and to keep personal items (e.g. toothbrushes) in personal containers/totes and never placed directly on shared surfaces.
- How will hand hygiene be promoted (i.e., encourage hand washing, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, or use disposable gloves after handling shared items, after handling and disposing of trash, and when cleaning up shared areas).
- How will ventilation in shared housing be improved, consistent with [CDC residence ventilation guidance](#) and DOI's COVID-19 [Workplace Safety Plan](#)? Please remember that any changes to an HVAC system should be well informed. Always consult a HVAC system expert before making any changes.
- How will the shared housing plan be flexible so that adjustments can be made if transmission rates rise? For example, should some bedrooms/units be reserved for self-quarantine or self-isolation purposes?
- How will confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases or exposures be managed in shared housing? The plan should provide specific details about how to immediately isolate and support the resident (while protecting his/her privacy). What is the plan to further limit and prevent exposures and illness among other residents? This could include establishing separate and safe onsite or offsite living quarters to isolate or quarantine as indicated in CDC guidance. See [COVID-19 Action Steps](#).

In addition to the minimum requirements in the DOI guidance, NPS employees, commercial service providers, and partners should consider the following prevention and response/mitigation activities in shared housing plans:

- Develop pods or cohorts. A pod/cohort is defined as a group of people (e.g., wildland fire crew) that work together for a defined period of time with limited/no interaction with people outside the pod. Pods are considered a “scenario 3” shared housing situation and require approval from the Deputy Director, Operations.
- Incorporate screening (testing). NPS's [guidance on screening testing](#) and [CDC Guidance for Expanded Screening Testing](#) can serve as a reference to those developing a testing plan.
- Encourage vaccinations. Although CDC has not yet provided guidance for vaccination as the basis for increasing congregate housing occupancy density, the currently available vaccines are very effective and highly encouraged.

Commercial Service Provider and Partner Housing

This guidance is applicable to commercial service providers such as concessioners and other partners that have in-park housing. Failure of the commercial service provider or partner to effectively implement their shared housing plan will result in requirements to revise the plan including the possible revocation of any one-person



per room exception. Failure to comply with their plan may also be reflected in their performance evaluations and could, if unresolved, result in suspension or revocation of the commercial service provider or partner's authorization.

Resources

- [NPS Coronavirus Response Information](#)
- [NPS Risk Assessment Tool](#)
- [NPS Shared Housing Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#)
- [DOI Employees COVID-19 Information Portal](#)
- [DOI Recommendations for Mitigations & Managing COVID-19 Exposures & Illness in Shared/Congregate Housing](#)
- [DOI Workplace Safety Plan](#)
- [CDC Guidance for Shared or Congregate Housing](#)
- [CDC Guidance for Expanded Screening Testing](#)
- [CDC FAQs and Communication Resources for Wildland Firefighters](#)
- [CDC Ventilation Guidance](#)