



CMAA Crisis Communication White Paper

*When Disaster Strikes – Prevention, Communication,
and Recovery: Norovirus Outbreaks in Clubs*



**CLUB
MANAGEMENT
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OF AMERICA**

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Introduction

The best time to plan strategies for managing club disasters is before they occur. Though often busy with higher priority issues, when club managers plan for possible threats, they can assess the best management strategies with informed input. They can also train stakeholders to reduce the occurrence of some threats and avoid the urgency that affects decision-making for an in-process crisis.

CMAA presents this series of Crisis Communication White Papers with the hopes that

- (a) they will provide useful suggestions contributed by club managers who have experienced the crisis and
- (b) none of these crisis management tools will ever need to be implemented!

What Is Norovirus?

Overview

Norovirus is a contagious virus causing vomiting and diarrhea in infected persons of all ages. ⁽¹⁾ Other symptoms can include nausea, stomach pain, fever, headaches and body aches. Dehydration can result, especially in young children, older adults, and those with other illnesses.

Norovirus is sometimes incorrectly called “stomach flu” or “stomach bug,” but it is not related to the flu which is caused by the influenza virus. Norovirus outbreaks frequently make the news when they result in illnesses for hundreds or even thousands of people on cruises, but only about 1 percent of reported norovirus outbreaks occur on cruise ships. They also create serious problems for persons in many other situations including employees, members, and guests at clubs.

Unfortunately, the norovirus is easily spread and does so as persons:

- Have direct contact with those who are infected.
- Consume contaminated food or water.
- Touch contaminated surfaces and then put their unclean fingers in their mouths.

Norovirus symptoms typically appear 12 – 48 hours after exposure and may last for two days. In most cases, medical treatment is not required. However, infected persons can spread norovirus from the time they start feeling ill to at least three days after they have recovered (no symptoms are exhibited).

People Cause Norovirus Outbreaks!

Foodborne illness occurs when foods are contaminated with micro-organisms that contaminate the food (food infections) or when organisms in the food create toxins (poison) that contaminate the food (food poisonings).

Norovirus outbreaks occur when persons contaminated with the virus touch food, food preparation, storing, and other surfaces, serving utensils, or related items. The virus from the infected person contaminates food which then spreads the illness to other persons. Therefore, effective and on-going procedures to minimize direct contact with food by those infected with norovirus are critical.

More About Norovirus Outbreaks

Most norovirus illness outbreaks occur when the virus is spread by persons who are caring for others such as family members or in healthcare situations. It is also spread when infected persons including club members and employees contaminate food and/or the environment in which food is stored, prepared, or served.

Infected employees may touch ready-to-eat foods with uncovered hands. Any food served raw or handled after cooking can become contaminated with norovirus. Contamination can occur at the source (examples: shellfish including oysters where caught or produce on a farm when sprayed with contaminated water). Leafy greens including lettuce and fresh fruits are commonly involved in norovirus outbreaks, but any food served raw that is incorrectly handled during preparation or cooking may become contaminated. Note: the virus is still transmittable for two weeks after it attaches to a surface.

Norovirus “Numbers” (2)	
Millions of people become ill	About 20 million people in the United States become sick from norovirus each year.
Number 1 cause of foodborne illness	Norovirus is the leading cause of disease from food in the United States.
Norovirus is contagious	As few as 18 viral particles of norovirus in one’s food or on one’s hands can contaminate food and make those who consume it ill. The amount of virus particles on the head of a pin can infect more than 1,000 people. <i>Source: Journal of Medical Virology. August, 2008.</i>
Food service workers spread illness	Infected food service workers cause about 70% of reported norovirus outbreaks attributed to contaminated food.
Food service employees work when ill	About 20 percent of food service workers report working while sick with vomiting and diarrhea symptoms.
Food service workers touch ready-to-eat foods	About 55 percent of norovirus-attributed outbreaks caused by infected food service workers occur when they touch ready-to-eat foods with their bare hands.
Food service workers infrequently wash their hands	Observations of food service workers indicate proper hand washing procedures are used only 25 percent of the time.

Preventing Norovirus Infections

Basic preventive procedures to minimize norovirus outbreaks should be consistently followed. Compare your existing food handling procedures to those suggested in this section and revise them as needed to ensure basic norovirus prevention tactics are consistently used. Club managers who experience a norovirus outbreak often retain the services of food safety assessment specialists, and this section reviews many of their likely recommendations.

Infected food service employees are involved in 70 percent of norovirus outbreaks for which the source(s) of contamination have been reported. Best prevention practices involve:

- Requiring infected food service employees to stay home. Note: this is discussed further in the section “**Ill Employees Must Not Come to Work**”. Persons infected with norovirus should not prepare or handle food while they have the symptoms and for three days after symptoms are no longer present.

- Ensuring food service employees use proper handwashing and hand drying tactics and do not touch ready-to-eat foods with uncovered hands. Note: utensils and single-use disposable gloves should be used to handle these foods. Raw fruits and vegetables must be properly rinsed, washed, and handled before service. Knives, cutting boards, and other kitchen tools used to pre-prepare these items must also be properly sanitized.
- Cooking shellfish thoroughly and not serving undercooked (below 140 F; 60 C) oysters and other shellfish.
- Replacing serving utensils at least every 30 minutes on buffet lines and other food self-service alternatives. Note: this is the club's only defense against contamination by members and guests.
- Washing table linens correctly and handling them properly both before use and after they are removed from tables.
- Providing effective training programs so food service employees know and can follow proper food handling practices.
- Cleaning and sanitizing food preparation and serving surfaces and applicable utensils on a regular and scheduled basis. Note: a chlorine-based product or other Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – approved sanitizer that protects against norovirus should be used. ⁽³⁾ Note: this is an important concern because many sanitizers are ammonia-based and do not blend well with bleach.

It's Easy to Say "Wash Your Hands!"

Experts agree that proper and frequent handwashing is critical to control norovirus outbreaks. However, clubs must provide properly-equipped handwashing facilities where needed to enable employees to follow this rule. Complying with this requirement may require redesign of some work stations and capital costs for purchase of sinks, plumbing/drain access, and other related factors.

Proper handwashing requires use of soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds (approximately the time needed to sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice).

Hands should be washed before beginning work, after breaks, after using the restroom, before handling foods, when changing food preparation tasks, and after touching potentially contaminated surfaces. Lather your hands by rubbing them together with soap. Be sure to lather the backs of your hands, between fingers, and under finger nails.

Proper hand drying is also needed and requires disposable towels or heat or air transfer hand dryers.

Note: alcohol-based sanitizers can be used in addition to (not as a substitute for) handwashing. However, while many hand sanitizers can prevent the spread of flu, they are typically ineffective against norovirus because different viruses cause the two diseases.

Note: for additional information, see reference 4.

Food Service Employees Need Food Safety Skills

Not surprisingly, norovirus prevention, management, and recovery efforts involve food service employees. Staff members are the most important component in a comprehensive plan to ensure “best practice” procedures are consistently used to help reduce the incidence of norovirus outbreaks.

Generally, all managers and employees who handle food at any stage should receive basic food safety training for each food handling step: purchasing, receiving, storing, issuing, producing (pre-prep, cooking, holding), serving (production to service personnel), and service (service personnel to members and guests). Left-over control and clean-up to ensure sanitized equipment, tools, and work areas are available for subsequent use are also important.

There are numerous possible sources for this training including the National Restaurant Association (ServSafe), local and/or state health departments, and a vast array of other resources (enter “commercial food safety training” into your favorite search engine for examples).

In addition, kitchen managers, chefs, and others with overall responsibility for food safety should be trained and certified by a recognized authority in food safety principles. Doing so will best ensure that all food service workers consistently follow food safety practices outlined in the 2017 Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Code ⁽⁵⁾ and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. ⁽⁶⁾

Train! Train! Train!

The prevention of norovirus outbreaks begins when training ends. Food service employees must constantly use the food safety information they learn without taking any shortcuts. They must be motivated to carefully follow required food handling procedures, and their use of best practice procedures will help achieve the highest possible food safety inspection scores which measure quality food handling practices.

How are a club's food services inspected? Club managers may use inspection forms developed or modified by the local or other health department. Alternatively, clubs may use inspection forms developed by organizations that provide food safety assessment. Note: see reference (2) for an example. As well, some clubs utilize their own inspection forms which are completed on a routine but random basis.

Ill Employees Must Not Come to Work

As stated earlier, norovirus symptoms may last for two days, and the disease can be spread for up to three additional days after symptoms disappear.

Club managers realize the economic aspects of requiring entry-level employees to be absent for a several day or longer time period. Reduced income can create troublesome personal economic problems, stress, and even job retention challenges. It may, therefore, be helpful to consider a combination of sick leave, vacation time-off, wage grants, insurance benefits, on-call staffing, and/or other alternatives to address these concerns.

How does a manager know when an employee no longer carries the norovirus disease? One approach relies on stool analysis results. However, these may not be available for an extended period. Another alternative: request clearance (a “return to work” form drafted by the club) signed by the employee's physician that acknowledges recovery from a norovirus infection. At least one state department of health recommends that

employees be asked when they last experienced norovirus symptoms. Then 72 hours (the time after which norovirus cannot be spread) should be added to this time to represent the employee's potential back-to-work schedule. ⁽⁷⁾

A formal and club-specific policy related to norovirus and club employees may be useful. The reason: the primary control of norovirus relies on the exclusion of ill individuals from food handling activities and from the club itself.

The FDA's 2017 Food Code ⁽⁵⁾ addresses management and employee responsibilities, restrictions, and reinstatement of food employees with vomiting and/or diarrhea symptoms or who otherwise are diagnosed with specific foodborne illnesses including norovirus.

Routinely Clean and Sanitize Work Surfaces and Utensils

It is important to regularly clean and sanitize kitchen surfaces and frequently-touched objects. A chlorine-based product or other sanitizer approved by EPA for use against norovirus should be used according to the label's instructions. ⁽³⁾

The FDA 2017 Food Code ⁽⁵⁾ specifies routine procedures to clean general kitchen workstations including food preparation, storing, and other areas. These and other applicable requirements should be addressed in training, and results should be monitored.

Cleaning activities for food service surfaces should be undertaken every four hours for optimum safety. Cleaning should be done at the start of the work day, as use of the surface changes, and/or prior to a new item being introduced to the food preparation surface. The results of kitchen surface and space cleaning should be monitored on the club's food/beverage department's inspection reports.

Recall that vomiting and diarrhea are symptoms of norovirus infections. Should signs of these problems be noticed in the employee or public restroom or other facilities, special clean-up procedures are required. A useful reference to provide input to the club's clean-up procedures is available in the ***Norovirus Information Guide***. ⁽⁸⁾

Key Points From Club Managers

This section summarizes important key points contributed by club managers who have participated in norovirus recovery efforts. Their informed opinions are offered so readers can keep the following concepts in mind when considering strategies to control an outbreak and implement crisis communication activities.

Key Point #1: Be transparent; it is better to over- than under-communicate. The outbreak will not be a secret – not even for one second! Do not try to control access to information. Remember that a primary goal of effectively managing a crisis is to regain the club members' trust and to reinstate the club's reputation.

Key Point #2: Be proactive but cautious (conservative). If plans are already in place, many important decisions will have been made. Effective follow-through requires the knowledge of "who will do what" to help ensure a proper flow of activities, effective communication, and compliance with completion date requirements. Doing so will indicate that the leader is in charge and his/her team remains committed to excellence.

Key Point #3: Close all the club's food and beverage facilities voluntarily if you have reason to suspect that a norovirus outbreak has occurred. Note: if you wait until the health department acts, the club may not be able to re-open until permission has been received from that agency.

Key Point #4: Manage what you can control now (what is happening) not what you might fear (for example, loss of your job). Note: all of the managers who provided input for this white paper indicated that their

relationship with the Board and club members was actually strengthened by their on-going positive and timely responses to the norovirus crisis.

Key Point #5: The speed, scope, and severity of reported illnesses are important signs of a norovirus outbreak. As well, managers typically rely on input from their local health department and often, from food safety assessment company personnel retained by the club. Those experts recognize norovirus outbreaks because of the large number of persons typically involved who have not consumed the same menu items.

Key Point #6: “Over-correct to the max!” when possible. For example, during the corrective action stage, comments will likely be made that, “it would be nice if we could install a hand wash sink in the dish area.” This may be the time to make these purchases, especially if they are a direct response to the norovirus crisis.

Key Point #7: While the club is closed, communicate with members daily toward the end of each day to indicate what has been accomplished during that day. If possible, provide an estimated re-open date, report any plan changes, and then contact members on the last closed day to indicate the next day’s re-opening.

Note: a final key point relates to a follow-up letter from the Board President to a General Manager who had successfully helped the club recover from a norovirus outbreak. This letter stated the following: “The messages you provided to the membership were on-point and very, very well done. They clearly demonstrated that this was not an acceptable event, that the entire staff and the club were seriously working to resolve this issue, and that the club is sharing what you know as you learn it. What more can anyone reasonably ask?”

Case Study of Norovirus Outbreak In Club

After an introduction and overview, this case study describes the management response to a norovirus outbreak from two perspectives: facility recovery and crisis management and communication with stakeholders.

Note: this case study merges the procedures used by several clubs to manage a norovirus outbreak. It does not represent the action plan of a single club managing a single crisis, nor does it suggest a “best practice” action plan. Instead, the case study describes numerous “real life” factors and situations which General Managers and their teams in a specific club should consider and address with their own action plans.

Introduction and Overview

Following is an overview showing the impact and management of the norovirus outbreak at the Anytown Country Club:

Sunday Brunch	Tuesday Many illness complaints; manager closes food service venues	Thursday Recovery Activities	Saturday/Sunday Open kitchen and main dining room	Tuesday Resume normal club operations
	Monday Club closed; some messages about illnesses	Wednesday Recovery activities	Friday Open food services in sports outlets; conclude other recovery activities	Monday Club closed

The buffet at the Anytown Country Club was served on Easter Sunday, and it was the club’s largest single food/beverage event of the year. The club was closed on Monday, but a few messages from ill members were received on the telephone answering system and the club’s website. The phone calls were almost constant on

Tuesday morning. The General Manager quickly knew there was a significant problem with similar messages such as “Six of us had lunch, and four of us became ill.” In addition, several food preparation and service staff scheduled for work on Tuesday had called in ill.

The club had no action plan or policies relating to club reactions due to norovirus or any other type of foodborne illness outbreak. What should the General Manager do? He knew a “first step” was to contact the Board President, but what should he say?

What Is Our Plan?

What should the General Manager do now, and what is our plan? The first sentence in this white paper states, “The best time to plan strategies for managing club disasters is before they occur.” Without a plan, initial recovery efforts will be slowed as necessary steps are identified and prioritized. As well, mistakes may create the need for re-work and hinder efforts to regain the trust of the club members.

The General Manager quickly contacted several local managers and others who he knew through CMAA-related activities. A peer-recommended a food safety assessment company that the General Manager called to learn about assistance alternatives and associated costs. He also knew there was a legal requirement to notify the health department after three or more reports of illness. Therefore, the club’s attorney was called to discuss applicable details.

From these hurried conversations, the General Manager developed a brief overview of the call to his Board President. He would (a) inform the President about the outbreak, (b) indicate that the club’s food service venues would close, (c) report that the health department would be contacted, and (d) review his conversation with the food safety assessment company. During the call, the President asked several questions, and they were answered as best possible (but, by no means, assuredly!).

Another Challenge Requires Attention!

Proper recovery activities will be a significant concern taking the majority of time the club’s food service operation is closed. However, General Managers must also consider previously scheduled banquet events during this downtime. These commitments usually cannot be met, and sometimes events can be re-scheduled. However, especially with events including wedding receptions, this is not an alternative.

There are only a few alternatives to offer affected members:

- Nearby clubs can be contacted to learn if their banquet teams can host the events.
- After the call to the President, the General Manager notified the health department, and he and his contact there agreed to work together closely as recovery plans were made and implemented.

If most of the club is cleaned including the assigned banquet room and public restrooms, lobby, and other required areas, the club’s spaces may be used, and the event might be catered.

The General Manager next convened a meeting of the senior staff who were present at the club.

- Senior managers were asked to communicate with all their employees. It was important to learn which, if any, staff members had suffered from or lived with someone who had exhibited norovirus symptoms within the last 72 hours.

- Senior food service managers were told to meet with their employees currently at the club, inform them about the problem including the club's closure, and request that these staff leave the facility while clean-up plans were developed. They were also requested to contact (email or text message) employees not at work to provide the same message. Finally, the senior managers were advised to tell all employees that they would be contacted the next morning with further information.

The General Manager contacted the food safety assessment company recommended earlier. Note: precedence about procurement of club services enabled him to make this decision without prior Board approval. He learned that a food safety assessment specialist would be present early the next morning (Wednesday) to assist with the club's planning process. She would also suggest cleaning procedures for different locations, provide clean-up training for senior managers, conduct inspections, and make food handling recommendations, among other responsibilities (see **Facility Recovery Procedures** below).

Contact Your Insurance Company

The Anytown Country Club had business interruption insurance (BII) that might provide insurance proceeds to reimburse for some or all the revenues lost during the club's closure.

The General Manager needed to learn if the club's existing policy covered all reasons for club closure or just specific (*named*) risks. If the latter, a foodborne illness may not be covered and could be considered in the future.

Note: While reimbursement for some lost revenue is worthwhile, the General Manager understood that effective efforts to re-open the club's food services were much more important than ensuring collection of "lost" revenue. The priority of the response efforts would always be to re-open the club and re-establish the trust of the members and the reputation of the club.

Facility Recovery Procedures

Role of Food Safety Assessment Specialist. During the Wednesday morning meeting with the General Manager and senior management team, the food safety assessment specialist recommended several actions:

- Save and quarantine all prepared and in-process-of-preparation foods until health department personnel approved their disposal.
- Closely follow the advice of the local health department.
- Immediately contact all employees and determine those who, within the previous 72 hours, had either suffered from or lived with someone who had the following symptoms: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, headache, or low-grade fever. These employees would not report to work.
- The remaining employees were asked to report to work at noon on Wednesday. After training, they would thoroughly and properly clean all food contact and non-food contact surfaces in assigned areas.

The food safety assessment specialist next conducted a "how to clean" training session with the senior management team and other staff who were on-site. She summed the "targets" of the cleaning: "Clean any place or anything where one can put his/her hand." At the conclusion of the training, these managers were able to train other staff members who would be assigned cleaning tasks.

The specialist explained procedures for the chemical disinfectants to be used. Note: there are several alternative disinfectants ranging from those that must be diluted with water to others that do not need dilution. As well, contact time with the surfaces being cleaned depend upon each specific product. Rinsing

with clean water is required when some approved products are used, and electrostatic foggers can also be used to quickly and uniformly spray approved chemicals on surfaces to be decontaminated. Depending on the specific chemicals used, disposable rags and/or paper towels may be needed and will need to be properly discarded.

Cleaned surfaces must be air-dried after cleaning. Note: items that can be processed in a high temperature dishwasher (final rinse temperature of 1800F; 82.2°C) do not need further disinfection. All equipment which is disassembled must be completely dry before reassembly.

Employees were required to use several items of personal protective equipment (PPE) as they completed facility clean-up tasks: goggles, impervious nitrile gloves, and a face mask (FDA-approved N95 respirators which require a written respiratory protection policy, fit testing, and training). If clean-up concerns also include bodily fluids, a written bloodborne pathogens policy and applicable training are required. Note: in some cases, “gowns” to protect clothing were also used.

Don't Forget the Laundry!

All washable food service linens including tablecloths and napkins must be washed thoroughly. If the club contracts linen laundry, all items including those not yet used should be re-cleaned. If the club has an on-site laundry wash, all items including those that are clean. General suggestions include:

- Handle soiled items carefully without agitating them.
- Wear rubber or disposable gloves while handling soiled items and wash hands after removing the gloves.
- Wash the items with detergent at the maximum available cycle length and then machine dry them.

Facility Recovery Basics. The club's clean-up plan was to work “from the main kitchen out to the dining room.” The priority for areas to be cleaned was the clubhouse including:

- The main kitchen, food and beverage storage areas, ala carte dining room including tables and chairs, bar and lounge areas, and all banquet serving areas, serving equipment, and banquet and meeting rooms including tables and chairs. Note: the surface of every space where hands could normally reach were thoroughly cleaned according to proper procedures.
- All applicable food preparation and service equipment after disassembly. Other examples of items cleaned included utensils and small food preparation equipment.
- Public spaces within the clubhouse in lobbies, hallways, public restrooms, and locker rooms as well as the several overnight guest rooms.
- Food service operations in sports-related venues.
- All non-public areas of the clubhouse including offices, employee restrooms, maintenance rooms, and loading docks.

All aspects of the facility recovery efforts were well-documented and, on a by-area basis, the start and finish times and names of team members assigned to the clean-up of each space were recorded.

It was not possible to hire a significant number of non-club employees, so an “all-employees-on-deck” approach was implemented. Note: the team of clean-up employees included the General Manager and all senior management staff who were not ill. Long hours were worked, but not 24-hour days.

Some clean-up activities were physically difficult, and employees were encouraged to work for no longer than a normal shift - or fewer hours, if necessary, and employees were paid their normal compensation rates. Note: just as the primary goal of business interruption insurance was not to generate revenues, the management of labor costs was not undertaken to minimize expenses. Instead, every effort focused on bringing the club back to operation as soon as possible without sacrificing quality goals and to regain the members' trust and the club's reputation as seen by all stakeholders.

Interactions with Health Department. The General Manager of the Anytown Country Club maintained an effective on-going relationship between his club and the Health Department. Daily contacts with the health department were advantageous to the club for several reasons:

- To ensure that procedures recommended by the food safety assessment company's representative are applicable to the area.
- To seek advice about alternative recommendations to clean the club facility and/or to revise food handling procedures.
- To identify the most appropriate time to undergo a health department inspection that would occur for the club to re-open. For example, the General Manager requested two different inspection times: one was for the food service operations in the sports-related facilities (on Thursday) and a second inspection of the main kitchen and ala carte dining room, bar, lounge, and banquet operations in the clubhouse (on Friday). While this may not have been a typical request, it was granted because of the close working relationship between the club and health department.
- Members appreciate the reinforcement that the club passed the health department's inspection with high scores when they receive the letter announcing the club's re-opening dates.

The Health Department is Your Partner!

Those in the local health department should be viewed as consultants—not inspectors. Consultants identify potential problems and suggest how they might be addressed. In contrast, an inspector notes problems and requires they be fixed.

Club and health department personnel should work together as partners to identify and correct food safety-related problems. The health department's assistance can be invaluable as it provides on-going assistance, conducts final health inspections, and potentially communicates with any club members who contacted its personnel. Note: the General Manager of the Anytown Country Club generally communicated with the health department at least daily.

Club Re-Opening Procedures

Early on Thursday afternoon, the food safety assessment specialist conducted an inspection of the food service facilities at sports venues which were to open on Friday morning. These outlets included snack bars at the swim and tennis court areas, and a rest area with limited food and beverage offerings at the halfway house. They easily passed the inspection, which was followed by another one undertaken by the health department which also noted no problems.

An inventory sufficient for Friday operations was ordered from selected cooperative vendors that included chilled beverages, packaged snacks, and related items that did not require preparation at the club's main kitchen.

The results of the successful food safety inspections undertaken by representatives of the food safety auditing company and the health department were posted on the club's website, and the General Manager informed members immediately after each report was posted. Note: both this notice and the one following it on Friday announcing the re-opening of all club food services included a very important central message. The General Manager accepted responsibility for ensuring the safe service of food in a safe environment and stated that the food service operation could resume because this assurance could be given.

While the sports-related inspections took place, a food and beverage supervisor reviewed hand washing procedures and conducted a 45-minute basic food safety training program with the employees who would staff the snack bar venues.

The sports-related operations opened and operated with a limited menu at their normal times on Friday.

On Friday afternoon, the food safety assessment specialist conducted an initial inspection followed by a Health Department official who conducted a second inspection of the main kitchen, food storage, and dining areas for ala carte and banquet operations. Both inspections identified no problems, and plans were implemented for the Saturday evening dinner and Sunday buffet. Food orders were placed with preferred vendors based on estimated weekend usage to assist vendors with the club's "fast turn-around" request.

Since the club laundered its own linens, banquet tablecloths, and napkins could be processed before use according to the club's required schedule. All food and beverage employees who met the 72-hour "no norovirus symptoms" requirements attended a mandatory food safety training program on Friday that included an emphasis on proper handwashing procedures.

At the completion of that program, food pre-preparation activities and mise en place for Saturday's ala carte dining operations were undertaken. There were no catering functions planned until the weekend after the re-opening of food service operations in the clubhouse. However, the banquet program "officially" opened on Tuesday because the General Manager believed that would encourage some members to use small unoccupied banquet rooms for unscheduled meetings.

Saturday was very busy, and all food/beverage employees except those who were not norovirus symptom-free for 72 hours were called to work. Saturday activities were related to the weekend re-opening of the main kitchen and were of three types:

- Receive products ordered from vendors for the weekend.
- Pre-prep food items as needed for the Saturday evening dinner and Sunday Buffet.
- Prepare and serve food items as needed for the Saturday evening and Sunday Buffet operations.

The kitchen and main dining room opened on Saturday evening, and the traditional buffet was offered on Sunday. All food outlets in the clubhouse were opened on Tuesday with the same operating days and hours as those before the norovirus outlets. Note: The Board President, several other Board members, the General Manager, and their spouses attended the re-opening of ala carte dining on Saturday and the Sunday Buffet.

The General Manager spent much of the time on Saturday evening and during the Sunday buffet "managing by walking around." He spoke to all the members he could, expressed concerns about the norovirus outbreak, and answered all questions posed about the re-opening process. He was very pleased to learn that almost everyone seemed to understand and appreciated the efforts to prepare the facility for re-opening. Likewise, many members responded favorably about the content and frequency of messages they received.

Other Training and Quality Assurance Processes. The club contracted with the food safety assessment company for an end-of-month inspection for the next three months and for three quarterly inspections thereafter. The results of these inspections identified only small problems that were easily corrected. Good

news: the total food safety score increased from about 94 percent to 98 percent acceptable ratings one year after the first monthly inspection after the outbreaks.

The club's management team also conducted unannounced inspections using the health department's food safety review factors about 3 weeks after re-opening and now does so unannounced (but approximately every three-four weeks). In addition, the club now requires the recording of temperatures in all food storage areas three times daily, and replacement of serving utensils on buffet and ala carte kitchen serving lines every 30 minutes. As well, mandatory pre-shift meetings lasting about 10 minutes are frequently used to emphasize standards addressed in food safety training.

The General Manager and Food/Beverage Director carefully monitored all aspects of the food and beverage operation for four weeks following the reopening. They personally completed the club's food safety inspection report at that time and were very pleased with their observations and inspection results.

Additionally, the Anytown Country Club implemented a new quality assurance process for holiday events and other exceptionally large banquet and related activities. A food and beverage manager would be assigned to act as a food production and service process inspector to ensure that all the club's food safety policies and procedures were consistently being followed.

During the second month after re-opening, two cross-functional teams were formed. One team was assigned to review and make recommendations about the club's existing food safety training program for new food and beverage employees. The second team was tasked with developing a "Food & Beverage Safety Standards of Operation" manual that would:

- Cite observable standards that can be assessed during food safety inspection.
- Provide content for training programs.
- Be used for on-boarding techniques for food service employees.

See supplemental material provided online with this resource.

Crisis Management and Communication with Stakeholders

Key Points from Club Managers (on page 6) emphasized the need for General Managers to provide on-going, current, and accurate information updates for the club's Board and members. It stressed the importance of transparency and to communicate about the club's closure of food service venues as soon as possible. Daily updates are appreciated by members because they learn about the club team's efforts to correct problems and deliver the experiences they expect. What must the Board and Club members need to know, and when should they know it? The answers to these questions help to suggest the content of communication alternatives between the Board, General Manager, and club members.

Assume No "Private" Communication!

Ever-present social media usage and personal conversations including those by members and staff present opportunities for "private" messages to be shared with others including media in the public domain. A useful suggestion about composing emails – state only what is acceptable in a newspaper headline – applies to all written communication including messages to members. The "bottom line:" be honest but select words carefully because they can be used against you in the court of public opinion.

Most crisis communication experts suggest that one person should be chosen as spokesperson for communication with stakeholders. However, identifying one or two back-up persons is also important.

(Consider, for example, the possibility that the named leader is among those who becomes ill from the outbreak!) Basic selection factors emphasize that this person should:

- Represent the entire club
- Be knowledgeable about the situation
- Genuinely care about the content and quality of messages provided

Typically, the spokesperson representing a club has been its Board President or General Manager/Chief Operating Officer. There is likely to be history and precedent within the club about the appropriate person, and the General Manager and Board President understand who this person is. The governing bylaws for many clubs specify that the Board President communicates with members, and the General Manager interacts with the public. If this approach is used, the General Manager will likely still provide the primary information to the Board President for transmittal to members (and will probably write most of this information as well). In the current case, the General Manager, who has been in the position for several years, is the spokesperson.

Knowing that effective communication is a critical responsibility, the General Manager had previously enrolled in a media training (crisis communication) course as a professional development opportunity. An advantage: the information learned would be very helpful during the present situation, but also in so many other aspects of his management activities.

Communication with President and Board Members. It is important that the General Manager participate in a general meeting with the club's Board within 24-48 hours of club closure (typically the sooner the better!). Board members will be receiving input and questions from members and the provision of current and accurate information to help with their responses is necessary.

The General Manager will likely have almost constant dialog with the Board President through several or more conversations daily. These conversations can help the manager to, for example, discuss capital costs related to the outbreak and procedural changes of importance to members. Note: perceptive board members will notice the General Manager's genuine concerns about and interest in doing all possible to regain the members' trust.

It is expected that some club members will communicate individually with the General Manager and/or Board President and respond to general communications sent to the members. Responses to these messages should quickly follow their receipt. Venues for member communication include email, texting, and the members' section of the club's website.

Content (Topics) of Communication Sent to Board and Finance and Food/Beverage Committee Members

- Results of food inspections for several months after the club's food service venues re-opened along with copies of completed inspection forms.
- List and estimated costs of food service-related equipment purchases:
 - Food storage equipment and ice stations
 - Handwashing stations (kitchen and breakroom)
 - Motion-operated toilets (in selected restrooms), faucets, soap dispensers, and hand dryers
- Details of food safety assessment company inspections: monthly for a specified number of months and quality inspections thereafter with unannounced inspections by club managers.
- Revisions to food safety training for food and beverage employees:
 - All new food/beverage employees will view 30-minute food safety video and separate handwashing video
 - Mandatory and on-going food safety training for all food/beverage staff
 - Mandatory food safety certification for all food/beverage managers and supervisors
- Statement from the General Manager about the critical importance of serving safe food in a safe environment.

Note: the content of messages to all committees will be similar, but more financial details may be presented in the message to Finance Committee members.

Communication with Club Members. Four basic types of communication best ensure that the members learn and remain informed about the norovirus outbreak and the club's recovery efforts addressed to it.

- An initial letter to state the problem and pledge suitable corrective actions that will maintain the club's standards, minimize the possibility of a recurrence, and re-open the club's food service venues as soon as possible.
- Daily updates to report actions taken since the previous communication.
- A final message to report a return to normal operations.
- Communications at any time from members to the General Manager along with applicable responses.

Below illustrates three messages a manager can send to members updating the process. The first initially explains the club's norovirus outbreak. The second shows the possible content (topics) of a daily message to up-date members about norovirus recovery efforts. And the the final message indicating the club's return to normal operations.

Managers and their teams should consider the need for additional types of messages including special communications about the purchase of capital equipment. Other purposes include to share food safety inspection reports on a continuing or ad hoc basis, and "special" club re-opening activities, if any.

Initial Letter to Members

Dear Members

This morning (Tuesday) we began receiving numerous telephone calls from members and guests who attended the Easter buffet on (date). We now know that approximately 100 members, guests, and employees experienced symptoms consistent with a norovirus outbreak. We are working closely with the local health department to properly address the situation. To ensure the safety of our members, guests, and staff, the club's food service operations will completely close today and remain closed for several days to ensure all conditions contributing to this problem are addressed. We will provide daily up-dates.

Your club upholds high food safety standards with an excellent track record. First and foremost, we want to ensure this will never happen again. We will be addressing all problems discovered and hope to regain your trust and confidence as we do so.

I would like to apologize for this very serious problem. Please contact me directly with questions or comments. I can be reached at (phone number) or (email address). We will learn more about this situation within the next twenty-four hours and will then provide more information.

Very Sincerely,

Sample Content (Topics) of Daily Message to Members

Topics include:

- Norovirus is the likely cause of outbreak (and a fact sheet about norovirus is provided).
- Remediation and clean-up efforts are described, and a complete list of recovery actions taken today are on the club's website (website address).
- Information about the food safety assessment company with a note stating a copy of the day's inspection report is also on the club's website.
- Physical plant improvements that detail the addition of several hand washing sinks in employee and member access areas.
- Staff training about food safety is currently being conducted in both English and Spanish.
- Today's interactions with the local health department.
- Financial impact of the norovirus outbreak and shutdown including the estimated cost of food disposed, lost revenue, and incurred additional expenses for ala carte and catered events.
- Information about the opening of sports-related facilities (on Friday), the clubhouse's main dining room (Saturday), and the Sunday buffet. Note: the club manager indicates that the club has received the highest rating available based on the health department's inspection for the cleanliness of the club food service operation.
- Statement that the club's banquet operation will open the following weekend.

Final Message to Members

Dear Members

Now that our club is back in full operation, I want to represent our Board and staff to express our gratitude for your support following the norovirus outbreak. I also want to express my most sincere apologies if you, your family, and/or guests were affected by the norovirus outbreak and/or the club's remediation efforts.

One of our goals has been to contact *every* member and *every* guest who attended Easter Brunch at our club to apologize for this unfortunate experience. Unfortunately, we do not know the names of all guests who attended or how to reach them. If you or your guests became ill following the Brunch and you did not notify the Club, please contact (*name*) and (*phone number or email address*) with this information. Your input will be kept confidential.

Your Board of Directors has waived all charges for all members who attended the Easter Brunch. The Board feels that this gesture is an appropriate, but insufficient response to those who became ill. Therefore, the Board has decided to invite all members who became ill to return to our club for either the Memorial Day Picnic or our Fall Founder's Day Picnic at no charge.

Enclosed you will find a certificate inviting you and the same number of guests as in your Easter Brunch party to return to one of these events at no charge. When making your reservations, please let the Catering Department know that you would like to use your gift certificate.

I would like to again thank you for your support over the last several days. We have had an overwhelming positive response to the handling and communication of this crisis. This leads us to believe that we are restoring your trust and confidence. Please let me know about any follow-up questions, observations, or concerns.

Sincerely,

Interviews with News Media. The General Manager at the Anytown Country Club felt fortunate because, while the community did have a local television network affiliate, he only had three contacts with reporters from the local newspaper about the norovirus outbreak. Two were interviews (on Wednesday and Friday), and the third was an email inquiry on Sunday.

Whenever he spoke to a news media representative, there were three messages the General Manager wanted to express:

- We are concerned about anyone and everyone who is affected.
- We are working with the local health department and a food safety assessment specialist to prepare the club for re-opening.
- We are committed to always upholding the highest food standards for which we are known.

The General Manager always requested that media questions be submitted in writing so the proper response could be prepared. However, he knew this request would not always be honored and that, in crisis communications, media personnel often reserve their "best" questions to receive an honest reaction.

He also knew that journalists were likely to ask six questions about an on-going crisis:

- Who
- Where
- What
- Why
- When
- How

The topics identified above relate to four basic questions:

- What happened?
- Could it have been prevented?
- What caused it to happen?
- What does it mean?

Note: More information (“Common Journalists’ Questions About Emergency or Crisis”) is available to help you prepare for an interview with news media representatives. Readers can review this topic online with the supplemental material.

Questions asked by the news media representatives included those related to *(a)* How many people were harmed? *(b)* Is the situation under control? *(c)* What is being done in response to what happened? *(d)* Why wasn’t this prevented from happening and *(e)* What are you doing to prevent a future occurrence?

The General Manager knew that it was important to address all questions in a way that communicated the truth and helped the club re-establish trust and credibility in the short-and long-term. He understood that, to do this, his messages needed to express empathy in all communication, regardless if this was by spoken or written words.

In Conclusion

There are many (preferable!) ways for a club to improve besides successfully recovering from a norovirus outbreak. However, as we refer to our case study of the Anytown Country Club, one can see that the strategies used by the club did make it better for the future. For example:

- It now uses numerous food and beverage operating procedures that will improve the food safety and quality of menu items it offers to its members and guests.
- Its food and beverage employees will now be better trained, and the department will have a comprehensive series of standard operating procedures to help manage costs and better ensure consistency in the menu items offered to members and guests.
- The club will meet higher standards of cleanliness as procedures for maintaining public areas within the clubhouse are implemented. Consider the housekeeping department’s use of “touch points” when assessing routine cleaning procedures. Example: instead of cleaning the door knobs or handles once daily, personnel will now clean the door’s push plates more frequently every day. Also, the philosophy of “clean everything people can touch” is a priority concern as handrails, mill work, and furniture is cleaned and cared for.
- The successful recovery reinforced the perceptions of Board and club members that the General Manager and his team understood the club’s mission, wanted the club to be very successful, and had the knowledge, skills, and abilities to meet the needs of those served by the club. As well, the General Manager is considering the provision of a brief overview about the club’s norovirus outbreak response

and plans as part of the New Board Member Orientation for the first several years after the event. The reason: to illustrate how the club's staff carefully considers its members as they plan and implement strategies to move toward attainment of the club's mission.

Online References (all websites were available as of September 27, 2019)

1. Enter: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: About Norovirus.
2. Steritech (www.steritech.com) Check out "Resources for Your Location"
3. Enter: EPA – approved surface sanitizers for norovirus protection
4. Enter: "Centers for Disease Control. Handwashing: clean hands save lives" Note: this reference contains a video showing proper handwashing procedures.
5. Enter: U.S. Food and Drug Administration. FDA Food Code 2017.
6. Enter: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Norovirus Prevention.
7. Private communication. Connecticut Department of Health. Food Protection Program. To Meredith Picarelli-Khattar. Date unknown.
8. Enter: Safe Mark Best Practices. Norovirus Information Guide. Food Marketing Institute.

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