

COLLEGE FOOTBALL IS NOW A CONTACT (TRACING) SPORT: LESSONS FOR EMPLOYERS IN 2020

Insights
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COVID-19 won this past college football Saturday. The Southeastern Conference (SEC) football schedule for November 14 originally included seven games. Only three were played, none of which included ranked teams No. 1 Alabama, No. 6 Texas A&M, No. 11 Georgia, and No. 21 Auburn. These four SEC games were not canceled, however, because several players or staff *had* COVID-19, but rather because they were identified through **contact tracing** to have been *exposed* to the virus and thus were required to quarantine.

Contact tracing is the process of identifying individuals who have had close contact with someone who has or is suspected to have COVID-19. It is this process that led to several game cancellations because a number of SEC teams had an insufficient number of available players to field a team. SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said, “candidly, the numbers around contact tracing — and I think you’ve heard from some of what I’ve learned from our coaches’ comments — have emerged as one of our challenges to playing.”

Contact tracing is good exercise for maintaining a safe work environment and should be conducted by every employer to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, the SEC’s dire situation this past weekend highlights how disruptive contact tracing can be, both for the SEC and employers isolating workers who have been exposed to COVID-19.

6-15-48 / CDC GUIDANCE ON CONTACT TRACING

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that those identified through contact tracing quarantine for 14 days. The SEC's protocols for contact tracing follows the guidance from the CDC, which defines [close contact](#) as someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a ***cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period starting from 48-hours days*** before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 48-hours days prior to test specimen collection) until the time the infected person is released from self-isolation, regardless if either person is wearing a mask or other face covering at the time of exposure.

Employers should follow this technique, known as the [6-15-48 analysis](#), while conducting contact tracing in the workplace. The employees identified as meeting the 6-15-48 parameters should quarantine for 14 days. If your company is part of the nation's critical infrastructure, you may follow different [CDC guidelines](#) in lieu of quarantining 6-15-48 employees who are asymptomatic. However, all companies can use the guidance above to identify exposed, or 6-15-48, workers.

Sankey noted that very few players have actually tested positive for COVID-19, "but the contact tracing has the potential to magnify even one positive test," Sankey said. Nick Saban, legendary coach of Alabama, echoed this: "The social-tracing part of it is the reason that these games are being canceled. It's not the numbers of players that are testing positive." Saban voiced the frustration that many have with the contact tracing system, saying, "you're quarantining people and you don't even know if they're sick or not. That's the part that's more difficult to manage, but it is what it is."

Like the SEC, if an employer has several exposed workers to a single COVID-19 case, several members of your team will be off the office playing field for several days.

LESSONS FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers should take note of the issues the SEC is currently experiencing due to contact tracing and take the following steps to minimize close contact between employees:

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1. **Limit close contact between employees**, like enforcing social distancing, installing partitions between work stations, utilizing remote work, and staggering shifts and breaks, which will help minimize the impact of contact tracing on your workforce.
2. **Strictly follow the 6-15-48 protocol.** When conducting contact tracing, take additional time to ensure the exposed employee meets each of the 6, 15, and 48 guidelines. Often, employees originally thought to meet those guidelines did not. Further, note that the CDC only requires looking for close exposure 48 hours prior to symptoms or the administration of a positive test (if person with confirmed case is asymptomatic) instead of longer periods of time often utilized by employers.
3. **Isolate infected individuals.** Remain diligent when taking actions to ensure ill workers do not report to work or go home as soon as they exhibit symptoms. Ask employees each day about symptoms, as signs of COVID-19 can appear suddenly.
4. **Clean and disinfect the workplace.** After a confirmed COVID-19 case, you should follow the [CDC guidelines](#) for cleaning and disinfecting the workplace. But the most proactive employers don't wait until confirmed cases to clean their facility. Your cleaning staff or a third-party sanitation contractor should clean and disinfect all areas (e.g., offices, bathrooms, and common areas) on a frequent basis and much more often than the pre-pandemic cleaning schedule.

Taking the steps above will hopefully keep your team safe and minimize the number of times contact tracing is required in your workplace. This is a constantly evolving area, as scientists continue to learn more about the COVID-19 virus, and you should be prepared to adapt your policies to changing guidance.

CONCLUSION

Fisher Phillips will continue to monitor the rapidly developing COVID-19 situation and provide updates as appropriate. Make sure you are subscribed to [Fisher Phillips' Alert System](#) to get the most up-to-date information. You should also keep handy our [4-Step Plan For Handling Confirmed COVID-19 Cases When Your Business Reopens](#) in the event

you learn of a positive case at your workplace. For a more thorough analysis of the many issues you may encounter from a labor and employment perspective, we recommend you review our [FP BEYOND THE CURVE: Post-Pandemic Back-To-Business FAQs For Employers](#) and our [FP Resource Center For Employers](#).

This Legal Alert provides an overview of specific developments. It is not intended to be, and should not be construed as, legal advice for any particular fact situation.