



Infection prevention and control (IPC) measures at the IOM Migration Health Assessment Centre (MHAC) in Accra, Ghana. © IOM 2020

CONTEXT

Since it was initially reported on 31 December 2019, the novel coronavirus causing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread rapidly across the globe, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The pandemic has affected many countries and forced governments to take unprecedented actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, as well as to mitigate its impacts in terms of health, society and the economy.

Restrictions on international travel, in-country movement limitations imposed by host governments, temporary cessation of visa application centres and general safety considerations have resulted in the temporary suspension of many of IOM's routine pre-migration health activities at the instruction of host governments or the recommendation of United Nations Resident Coordinators. As a result, IOM has begun adjusting its programming and engaging in discussions with its member states regarding how it can best support the response to COVID-19 and its aftermath and continue to promote the health and well-being of migrants.

CAPACITY TO RESPOND

Since 1951, IOM has delivered pre-migration health activities (PMHA) on behalf of destination countries and migrants. These activities are undertaken through 71 IOM Migration Health Assessment Centres (MHACs) located across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, as well as through mobile teams in remote areas and a large network of partner service providers. IOM has an experienced health workforce engaged in pre-

migration health activities, including over 800 physicians, nurses and other health staff specialized in areas such as laboratory, radiology, medical information technology (IT) and more.

IOM currently operates 26 laboratories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East and collaborates with external partner laboratories. 18 of IOM's laboratories are equipped with GeneXpert instruments, enabling rapid, real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)-based COVID-19 testing to be conducted pending availability of testing kits. The potential use of other testing modalities for COVID-19 is also being explored.

In addition to laboratory services, many of IOM's MHACs are equipped with radiology and vaccination capacity, as well as treatment capacity for certain conditions.

IOM'S MIGRATION HEALTH ASSESSMENT PROGRAMME (HAP) ACTIVITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

DELIVERY OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Despite the temporary suspension of routine activities in many of IOM's MHACs, IOM has continued to provide essential services to beneficiaries, including:

- maintaining communication with and responding to queries from beneficiaries through its call centres
- continuing to provide directly observed therapy and monitoring to migrants with active tuberculosis
- providing care for refugees with significant medical conditions who require ongoing follow-up and treatment
- monitoring of vaccination cold chain system, and
- upon request, providing emergency migration health assessments for urgent humanitarian cases.

While many MHACs provide only essential services, others have remained or re-opened to a limited extent, depending on the country context; these MHACs have implemented a series of preventive and control measures to maintain the safety of IOM staff and beneficiaries, including reduced appointments to avoid crowding, physical distancing, triage to screen for COVID-19, hygiene measures, awareness-raising and health education for migrants, and enhanced personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff.

ADDITIONAL PRECAUTIONS DURING MOVEMENTS

Additional measures within the context of pre-migration health activities have been implemented to minimize the risk of transmission to beneficiaries during any movements that take place. These include, among others:

- the provision of additional pre-embarkation checks;
- distribution of COVID-19-related health education materials and awareness-raising on prevention measures during travel, and
- providing beneficiaries with tissues and hand sanitizer, as well as PPE where required.

GUIDANCE DEVELOPMENT

To ensure that services continue to be delivered safely, IOM subject matter experts have undertaken the development of guidance on topics such as infection prevention and control, COVID-19 triage, remote home monitoring (of suspected and confirmed COVID-19 patients) and laboratory testing. These, in combination with procurement of necessary materials, such as PPE and laboratory test kits, and training of staff, will ensure that the necessary conditions are in place to safeguard migrant and staff safety and to allow for the provision of both traditional and new services.



Infection prevention and control (IPC) training for staff in Accra, Ghana. © IOM 2020

SUPPORT TO OTHER PROGRAMMES AND PARTNERS

IOM HAP is actively engaging with national and international partners, including by:

- providing technical assistance to Ministries of Health and others
- supporting screening for COVID-19 at points of entry (PoE)
- providing COVID-19-related primary or acute-care services
- donating PPE and other supplies for the COVID-19 response
- conducting training, and
- supporting other migration health programming.

SUPPORT TO THE UN SYSTEM

As part of its response, IOM contributes to the United Nations (UN) systemwide efforts in ensuring that UN personnel and implementing partners are adequately protected with regard to medical needs so that they can continue to fulfill their vital duties across the world – often at the frontline of humanitarian emergencies.

This contribution entails the engagement of IOM HAP medical capacities and infrastructure to provide medical services to UN personnel and implementing partners, including the development of a series of standard procedures and technical guidance documents, based on documentation from WHO and the UN Medical Directors Network, to ensure that international standards and best practices are followed and national standards of care are respected as required.

By taking care of the health needs of its personnel, the UN system, including IOM, is responding to their due diligence responsibility to their staff and are contributing to the protection of public health in the host country.



COVID-19-related health education in Beirut, Lebanon. © IOM 2020

For more information on the above activities please contact the IOM Migration Health Division (MHD) at mhddpt@iom.int.

