

Suggestions to Prepare for a Second Wave of Covid-19 Positive Cases on Sint Maarten

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Red Cross

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A. Introduction

Sint Maarten has strongly felt the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic with loss of lives, increased unemployment rates, increased poverty rates, dependence, social problems, loss of national revenues and a virtual collapse of the tourism sector, the main stay of the economy. The economic and social consequences are expected to be long lasting as the tourism sector is not expected to be back at earlier levels for a considerable period of time.

As can be observed in other parts of the world, a second wave of positive cases on Sint Maarten is not unlikely, especially in view of the lifting of the lockdown, ending the state of emergency, re-opening of all businesses on June 15th, re-opening of the international airport for international air travel on July 1st, higher concentrations of people at public places and, last but not least, the tendency of the general public and businesses to become more relaxed and complacent about following basic prevention measures and guidelines.

What can be considered an additional risk for Sint Maarten is increased Covid-19 transmission if a hurricane hits the island during the 2020 hurricane season. If people need to take shelter in hurricane proof, confined, small and poorly ventilated spaces for longer periods of time and people's immune systems are weakened, the risk of cross contamination could increase.

For these reasons it is essential for Sint Maarten to be well prepared for a second wave, taking advantage of experience gained and lessons learned during the first wave between March and July 2020.

Based on three months of direct engagement in the Covid-19 Response between April 14 and July 7th 2020, the author provides suggestions to prepare for a resurgence of Covid-19 on Sint Maarten for three different scenarios, as follows:

Scenario 1 – Just a few sporadic cases, medical services can easily manage

Scenario 2 – New wave similar or larger than the first wave

Scenario 3 – Several smaller waves occurring from time to time

Before moving into these different scenarios, the next paragraph will deal with actions for consideration to minimize the chance of any of the above scenarios occurring.

B: Suggestions to reduce the likelihood of a resurgence of Covid-19 on Sint Maarten

'Any chain is as strong as its weakest link'

A person with flu-like symptoms who does not timely contact a family doctor or CPS can, if Covid-19 positive, spread the virus to many other people who can then spread it even wider to their family members, friends and close contacts in the public sphere.

Newly identified Covid-19 cases can be used to remind the general public to maintain social distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette and to contact their family doctor or CPS for testing as soon as they develop flu-like symptoms.

Businesses that have not prepared, implemented or sustained preventive measures (for example a Prevention & Safety plan) may easily become a source of transmission of Covid-19, especially those businesses where many people come together and where the type of business involves close physical contact between staff and customers.

Newly identified Covid-19 cases who were infected at a business (company/establishment) can be used to remind businesses about their responsibility to take, implement and sustain preventive measures to protect their staff, customers and visitors against getting and spreading Covid-19. Businesses must continue to have easy access to information on preventive measures they can and should take.

Suggestions

1. The World Health Organization has classified Covid-19 as an infectious disease in the A category. This means that the Ministry of Public Health is the main and leading agency to combat Covid-19.
2. Develop and disseminate an overall policy on testing, follow up, source & contact tracing and communications, including strategy and plan of action.
3. Ensure sufficient capacity (persons and means) for the following activities;
 - o Testing: Protocols, procedures, sufficient qualified staff & means (testing kits and transport)
 - o Follow up: Protocols, procedures, qualified staff and means (transport)
 - o Source and contact tracing: Protocols, procedures, sufficient and qualified staff & means
4. Ensure and prepare sufficient and adequate quarantine facilities
5. Communications: One Government spokesperson, clear & consistent information and messaging, avoid misunderstandings & contradictions

C. Scenario 1 - Just a few sporadic Covid-19 positive cases

Suggested actions:

1. Laboratories, GPs and others carrying out Covid-19 tests are mandated to send both positive and negative test results to Public Health (CPS). Epidemiological data and surveillance information are the key to monitor and fully understand the spread of the disease. Only in this way can Public Health effectively carry out its crucial tasks of mitigation, control and combat.
2. Communicate accurate and correct facts to the public.
3. Monitor rumors, fake news, stigmatization, signals of panic and other public sentiments and communicate facts to reduce those.

D. Scenario 2 – New wave of Covid-19 positive cases, similar or larger than the first wave

Suggested actions¹:

1. Determine a threshold to revive/reactivate the EOC and ESF's (based on # of positive cases).
2. Revive/reactivate the EOC and ESF's as soon as the number of Covid-19 positive cases exceeds the critical limit.
3. Decide on determining factors to re-instate a State of Emergency and announce a full or partial lock down (for example a threshold of the daily increase of Covid-19 positive patients at the ICU).
4. Apply lessons learned from the first lockdown.
5. Determine and communicate timelines (duration of different measures)
6. Regular press conferences and press releases explaining accurate and consistent facts to the public.
7. Scale up capacity for testing, follow up on Covid-19 positive cases, medical care, quarantine facilities and communications.
8. If the size of the second wave threatens to overwhelm the capacity of existing medical services, timely request immediate external support.
9. Ensure sufficient availability of PPE's
10. Closely monitor rumors, fake news, stigmatization, signals of panic and other public sentiments and communicate facts to reduce those.
11. Prepare plans to deal with increased social tensions and unrest.

¹ Including points 1, 2 and 3 above.

E. Scenario 3 – Several smaller waves occurring from time to time

Suggested actions:

1. Closely monitor the prevalence, spread and development of Covid-19 positive cases.
2. If the situation worsens, move to Scenario 2.

F. General suggestions

Public Health Strategy on Covid-19

Determine and communicate the public health strategy on Covid-19 (for example: focus on developing immunity / slowdown of the spread / wide-spread testing / risk reduction / others?).

Project Teams

When a project team is set up (for example the Support Unit to the Task Force to evaluate Prevention & Safety Plans) it is essential to: determine its mandate, its objectives, a defined time line, clear division of roles, tasks and responsibilities, leadership & decision making, allow for sufficient preparation (develop systems, procedures and processes), ensure sufficient capacity building of the team and to have clear reporting & short communication lines to a higher level. If government staff is assigned to take a role in the project team, superiors must respect the need of his/her staff member to be fully dedicated to the work of the project team for the duration of the project.

Inbox management

If a general inbox is opened for the general public or certain target groups (for example the Task Force account or a recently opened public e-mail address for foreigners who seek clarity about their planned visit to Sint Maarten) it is crucial that sufficient capacity of qualified staff is ensured to effectively and efficiently handle the load.

Public information contact numbers

If an important contact number is opened for the public (for example the 914 hotline of CPS), it is essential to ensure sufficient and trained staff capable of efficiently handling and responding to incoming (multilingual) calls from persons with flu-like symptoms who might be Covid-19 positive.

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