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PRESS RELEASE—CONTACT DSPS NEWSROOM AT (608) 576-2491

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## **DSPS Offers Safety Resources, Consultation to School Districts as Many Prepare to Reopen Buildings**

**MADISON, Wis.** – In many parts of the state, parents are getting children ready to head back to the classroom. That means teachers, aids, administrators, food service workers, custodians, nurses, social workers, and others are heading back, too. When they get there, things will look different from what they left last spring. Amid a pandemic showing no signs of retreat, school districts are adapting operations and adopting safeguards to protect both employees and students. In cases with in-person learning, this usually means more than mask requirements and copious supplies of hand sanitizer.

However, while COVID-19 is a new disease, there are resources available, says Breanna Rheinschmidt. The Department of Safety and Professional Services occupational safety inspector wants to make sure districts know where to find reliable information and support. “We work with school districts on safety issues all year long,” Rheinschmidt said. “We have information from reputable sources on how to approach everything from chemical storage to COVID.”

Call volume from the school districts in her region have been up all summer, Rheinschmidt says, and nearly all the inquiries and emails are about COVID. They want to know what precautions to take, whether any help is available for acquiring PPE, where they should go for current information and answers, and whether new products claiming to help mitigate virus spread actually work and are safe to use in schools. “There is a lot of information out there, and not all of it is helpful,” Rheinschmidt says. “Districts understandably have a lot of questions.”

While Rheinschmidt and other DSPS staff members continue to consult directly with districts, they also have been preparing materials to address specific concerns that arise again and again. Those resources include an information document on COVID-19 HVAC considerations, as well as a slide deck on proper PPE use.

“We have been getting a lot of calls about HVAC systems and we have a lot of information, so we wanted to make that available to all districts, especially if they didn’t think to ask or don’t know where to look,” said Ann Jurkowski, a DSPS industrial hygienist. “We also know that school employees often have limited or no experience in using PPE, which doesn’t protect you if you put it on the wrong way, and could contaminate you if you take it off the wrong way.”

Rheinschmidt, Jurkowski and their colleague Jane Dienger also worked closely with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services and Department of Public Instruction to prepare DPI’s [guide](#) for operating schools during a pandemic.

Louise Wilson, school nursing and health services consultant, says DPI welcomed the DSPS input and values the additional resources that DSPS is offering. “Engaging in face-to-face learning while the virus causing COVID-19 remains in circulation, and while no vaccine is yet available, requires thoughtful considerations and careful and detailed planning,” Wilson said. “These new resources developed by DSPS are a welcomed addition to the tools both DPI and DSPS have created to support the return to more traditional forms of teaching and learning while minimizing the risk of spreading COVID-19 among students and staff.”

DSPS Secretary-designee Dawn Crim says it benefits all of Wisconsin when partners and customers take advantage of the department's expertise. "The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the work we do and the value we offer," Secretary-designee Crim said. "While no one is happy about our current reality, it is giving us the opportunity to strengthen our relationship with schools throughout the state, and that is good. We want to work closely with school districts. We want to share our resources and leverage our experience. We want to do our part to keep people safe."

Resources are available on the DSPS Public Sector Employee Safety [webpage](#). Information on other school safety issues and school safety audits are available upon request.

The Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, runs the state fire prevention program, and maintains the award-winning Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.

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