Health Expert Statement Addressing Safety of Reusables and COVID-19

Reuse and refill systems are an essential part of addressing the plastic pollution crisis and moving away from a fossil fuel-based economy. They can create jobs and help build local economies. The COVID-19 global pandemic has triggered a discussion of how to ensure the safety of reusable systems in a public health crisis. Based on the best available science and guidance from public health professionals, it is clear that reusable systems can be used safely by employing basic hygiene. Below are the key facts to keep in mind.

Available Evidence Indicates that the Virus Spreads Primarily from Inhaling Aerosolized Droplets, Rather than through Contact with Surfaces
According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC), “The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person…between people who are in close contact with one another, through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.” While “it may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes,” aerosolized droplets are the only documented method of COVID-19 transmission to date.

Disposable Products Present Similar Issues As Reusable Ones
Studies show that the COVID-19 virus can remain infectious on surfaces for varying times depending on the material. One study showed infectious virus lasted up to 24 hours on paper and cardboard and between 2-3 days on plastic and stainless steel. In another study, infectious virus was not found on print or tissue paper after just three hours, whereas it was active up to 1 day on cloth, up to 3 days on glass, and 6 days on plastic and stainless steel. To prevent transmission through objects and surfaces, one can assume that any object or surface in a public space — reusable or disposable — could be contaminated with the virus. Single-use plastic is not inherently safer than reusables, and causes additional public health concerns once it is discarded.

Reusable Products are Easily Cleaned
Most common approved household disinfectants should be effective for disinfecting hard surfaces, including reusable items, with such surfaces being cleaned thoroughly using a detergent or soap and hot water prior to disinfection if they are visibly dirty. Dishwashers and washing machines should be effective if operated according to manufacturers’ instructions and, in the case of laundry, using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and drying

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items completely. Similarly, washing hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub, and then avoiding touching your eyes, mouth, or nose are effective ways to protect yourself.  

Best Practices for Reusable Products in the Retail Space
#1 Comply with food safety/health codes. Within retail and foodservice, reusable plates, cutlery, cups, and napkins are governed by strict state food safety procedures outlined in health codes. Ware-washing at high temperatures with additional sanitizing procedures are standard in the industry and provide more than adequate protection against virus transmission.

#2. Use additional hygienic practices for COVID. The bottom line is that reusable items are safe to use when cleaned with soap and water, and there is no substitute for thorough hygiene. Retail food establishments should follow Food and Drug Administration guidance regarding retail practices and COVID-19 safety. 

#3. Employ contact-free systems for customers’ personal bags and cups. Systems in which there is no contact between the customer’s reusable cup, container or bag and retail surface areas can protect workers and provide a precautionary approach to addressing COVID-19 transmission. For example, California’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration recommends that “when customers bring their own bags, employees should be instructed to:

- Not touch or place groceries in customer brought bags.
- Ask customers to leave their own bags in the shopping cart.
- Ask customers to bag their own groceries.

#4. Ensure that workers are protected. In addition to investing in safe and accessible reusable systems, other steps retailers can take to protect workers include providing PPE, paid sick leave, reduced occupancy in stores, and requiring customers to wear masks and practice social distancing. Customers should handle their own reusable items when going to shops and stores.

List of Signatories by Country/Region

Titles and affiliations are included to show the breadth and depth of expertise of signatories and are not included to imply endorsement by their employers.

**Brazil**

Dr. Saulo Delfino Barboza, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Master Program in Health & Education  
University of Ribeirao Preto

**Mexico**

Dr. Kirvis J Torres Poveda  
Epidemiologist

**Canada**

Dr Joe Vipond  
Emergency Physician -  
MD. Interim President, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment  
Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment

Joey Lee  
Registered Nurse  
Unity Health Toronto

Olga Hallborg, RN, MPH candidate  
Registered Nurse  
Nelson Jubilee Manor

Laurence Guillaumie, PhD  
Professor  
Université Laval

Raluca Radu, MSN, RN  
Secretary  
Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment

**United States of America**

Nickolas Zaller, PhD  
Professor  
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences

Dr. Steve Luby  
Professor of Medicine (Infectious Diseases and Geographic Medicine), Director of Research at the Center for Innovation in Global Health, Senior Fellow, Woods Institute for the Environment, Senior Fellow at Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies  
Stanford University

Dr. Tova Fuller  
Assistant Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry; Vice President  
University of California San Francisco, San Francisco Bay Area Physicians for Social Responsibility

Dr. Barbara Sattler, RN, DrPH, FAAN  
Professor, Public Health Program  
University of San Francisco

Dr. Paul English  
Environmental Epidemiologist  
Public Health Institute

Corinna Tempelis  
Research Scientist (retired and active)  
California Department of Public Health

Shellie L. Klimen, MSN PHN  
Registered Nurse  
Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital

Michelle Bergen MSN FNP-BC  
Nurse Practitioner  
Saint Ange's Medical Center

Kenna Lee, RN  
Registered Nurse  
Memorial Hospice

Peggy da Silva, MPH  
Training and Education Specialist  
Consulting for Community
Kathleen Roe, DrPH, MPH  
Professor Emerita, Department of Health Science and Recreation  
San Jose State University

Jodi Sherman, MD  
Associate Professor of Anesthesiology and Epidemiology in Environmental Health Sciences, Director, Program in Healthcare Environmental Sustainability (PHES)  
Yale University

John Nwangwu  
Professor of Epidemiology & Global Health  
Southern Connecticut State University

Mark Miller  
Former Director of Research Fogarty international Center  
NIH

Linda Birnbaum  
Retired Director  
National Institute of Health Sciences

Dr. Anthony Panzera, PhD, MPH  
Adjunct Professor  
American University

Dr. Lisa Jordan, PhD, RN, CNE  
Retired Nurse  
Member of ANHE, IAHC, and DC/MD League for Nursing

Dr. Laura Anderko PhD RN  
Robert and Kathleen Scanlon Endowed Chair in Values Based Health Care & Professor  
Georgetown University School of Nursing and Health Studies

Alan Becker, Ph.D.  
Professor, Environmental and Occupational Health  
Florida A&M University

Warren Lavey  
Adjunct Associate Professor  
University of Illinois

Sarah Patrick  
Assistant Professor, Public Health  
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

Gloria E. Barrera, MSN, RN, PEL-CSN  
President Elect  
Illinois Association of School Nurses

Jennifer Gray Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Northern Illinois University

Scott Cassel  
Chief Executive Officer/Founder  
Product Stewardship Institute, Inc.

Sydney Harris  
Sr. Associate, Policy and Programs  
Product Stewardship Institute, Inc.

Nate Horwitz-Willis, DrPH, MPH, MPA  
Assistant Professor, Public Health & Coordinator of Public Health Practice  
Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences

Jean Flatley McGuire, PhD  
Professor of Practice, Health Sciences Department  
Northeastern University

Dr. Shira Fischer  
Physician Policy Researcher  
RAND Corporation

Dr. Suzanne Cashman, ScD, MS  
Professor and Director of Community Health  
University of Massachusetts Medical School

Greylin Nielsen, MPH  
Doctoral Student  
Boston University School of Public Health

Dr. Harlee Strauss, PhD  
Retired, Consultant in Toxicology and Risk Assessment  
H Strauss Associates, Inc.

Pietra Check, MPH  
Course Educator  
Boston University Medical School

Phil Brown  
University Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Health Sciences  
Director, Social Science Environmental Health Research Institute  
Northeastern University
Lindsay Tallon, PhD, MSPH, CPH
Assistant Professor of Public Health
Assistant Director, Master of Public Health Program
Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences

Craig Slatin
Professor Emeritus
University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Dr. Marie O’Neill
Professor of Environmental Health Sciences and Epidemiology
University of Michigan School of Public Health

Laura Senier, PhD, MPH
Associate Professor
Northeastern University Bouvé College of Health Sciences

Joseph Eisenberg
Professor and Chair of the Department of Epidemiology
University of Michigan

Renee Crichlow MD, FAAFP
Director of Advocacy and Policy
University of Minnesota, School of Medicine

Marjorie McCullagh, PhD, RN
Professor
University of Michigan School of Nursing

Dr. Robyn Gilden
Assistant Professor
University of MD School of Nursing

Dr. Kolapo DaSilva
Emergency Physician

Megan Latshaw
Associate Scientist
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Kayla Meza, MPH
Research Assistant

Dr. Richard Cote
Professor and Chair, Department of Pathology & Immunology
Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis

Lise Saffran
Assistant Teaching Professor
University of Missouri Department of Public Health

Louis Mansky, PhD
Director, Institute for Molecular Virology
University of Minnesota Medical School

Greg Kearney, DrPH, MPH, REHS
Associate Professor and Program Director, DrPH Environmental & Occupational Health
East Carolina University

Dr. Beth Rosenberg
Associate Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine
Co-Chair, Public Health Admissions Committee
Tufts University School of Medicine

Anthony L. Schlaff, MD, MPH
Director, Public Health Program
Tufts University School of Medicine

Dr. Bernadette M. Longo, PhD, RN, FAAN
Chair of the Environmental Health Committee
Nevada Nurses Association

Mary Guinan, MD, Ph.D.
Founding Dean Emerita
School of Public Health, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Kathryn J Carey BSN RN CMSRN RN-BC
Clinical Nurse III
New York Presbyterian Hospital, Columbia University Irving Medical Center

Anthony J. Santella, DrPH, MCHES, Adv Cert
Associate Professor of Public Health
Hofstra University

Dr. Richard Novick, MD
Recanati Professor of Science, Emeritus, Member, National Academy of Sciences, Departments of Medicine and Microbiology
NYU School of Medicine

Jilliann Elliott
Associate Professor, Environmental Medicine and Public Health
Mount Sinai
Sergios-Orestis Kolokotronis, PhD
Assistant Professor
SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University

Lori A. Hoepner, DrPH, MPH
Assistant Professor
Department of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences
SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University

Michele Okoh
Senior Lecturing Fellow
Duke Environmental Law and Policy Clinic

Leslie Elliott, Ph.D., MPH
Clinical Associate Professor
University of Nevada, Reno

Justus B. Cohen, PhD
Assistant Professor, Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics
University of Pittsburgh, School of Medicine

Michael P. Koster, MD, FAAP
Division Director, Pediatric Infectious Diseases, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Attending Physician, Division of Pediatric Hospital Medicine and Infectious Diseases Brown University

Kelly Bouthillet DNP, APRN, CCNS, ACNP-BC
Acute Care NP & Clinical Nurse Specialist, Adjunct Nursing Faculty, University of SC, Beaufort President, South Carolina Nurses Association

Dr. John Robert Koethe
Associate Professor
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Arsham Alamian, PhD, MSc, FACE
Associate Professor of Epidemiology
Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology
Director, Master of Public Health Program
East Tennessee State University

Phillip Scheuerman
Professor
East Tennessee State University College of Public Health

Senior Fellow, Center for Humans and Nature, Adjunct Associate Professor, Senior Advisor at the Hastings Center
Vanderbilt University

Chunrong Jia, PhD
Associate Professor of Environmental Health
University of Memphis

Julian Leibowitz, M.D. Ph.D.
Director, MD/PhD Program
Professor of Microbial Pathogenesis and Immunology
Texas A&M University HSC College of Medicine

Hua Zhao, Ph.D.
Professor
The Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine

Patrick O. Pithua, BVM, MSc, PhD, DLSHTM
Associate Professor
Virginia Tech

Dr. James Conway, MD, FAAP
Professor of Pediatrics
Pediatric Infectious Diseases Fellowship Program Director
Director, SMPH Office of Global Health Associate Director, UW-Madison Global Health Institute Medical Director - UW Health Immunization Program
University of Wisconsin – Madison, School of Medicine & Public Health

Tran Huynh
Assistant Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health
Drexel University School of Public Health

Dr. Darci Martinz DNP & FNP candidate, BSN, RN
Public Health Administrator
Community Leadership Academy/Victory Preparatory Academy

Dr. Ben Locwin
Healthcare Executive (Pharmaceutics and Vaccines), State Public Advisor
State Science & Public Health Task Force, Senate Office Advisory Panel
Anne Katten  
Pesticide and Work Safety Project Director  
CRLA Foundation

Elgin Avila MPH, CPH  
Founder/Principal Investigator  
Equitable Health Solutions, LLC

Dr. Krista Farey  
Staff Physician  
Contra Costa County Health Services  
Richard Rothenberg  
Regents’ Professor  
Georgia State University School of Public Health

Dr. Lisa Jordan  
Associate Teaching Professor, Biology  
Department  
Drew University

Erika Halsey, MPH  
APHA member, Climate and Health Subtopic Committee

Dr. Shanda Demorest, DNP, RN  
Member Engagement Manager  
Practice Greenhealth

Katheryn Cortes, BSN, RN, OCN  
Registered Nurse  
Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

Ralph Brindis MD, MPH  
Clinical Professor of Medicine  
University of California, San Francisco

Laura D. Kramer  
Professor of Biomedical Sciences  
University at Albany, School of Public Health

Jeffrey E. Korte PhD

Rosemary Valedes Chaudry, PhD, MPH, RN  
Retired RN, Public Health

Austria

Dr. Hans-Peter Hunter  
Deputy Head and Senior Scientist  
Department of Environmental Health, Medical University of Vienna

France

Dr. Barbara Demeneix  
Professor  
Comparative Physiology Laboratory, National History Museum, Paris

United Kingdom

Dr. Jennifer Cole  
Research Fellow, AMR  
University of London

Dr. Tamara Galloway  
Professor, Ecotoxicology  
University of Exeter

Charlotte Williams  
Professor of Chemistry  
Oxford University

Italy

Ferdinando Laghi, MD  
President  
International Society of Doctors for the Environment

Dr. Monica Zoppé  
Research Scientist  
CNR

Vittore Casarosa  
Senior Research Associate  
CNR-ISTI

Liliana Cori  
Research Technologist  
Institute of Clinical Physiology, National Research Council, Italy IFC-CNR

Dr. Agostino Di Ciulla, MD  
Internist President of the Scientific Committee  
International Society of Doctors for Environment (ISDE) – Italy

Dr. Stefani Gatti  
Presidente APS Comunità Interattive-Officina per la Partecipazione AIP2

Dr. Susan George  
ex Head of Course on Business, Public and NGO Communication  
Pisa University
Cyprus

Dr. Konstantinos Makris
Associate Professor of Environmental Health, Director of Water and Health Laboratory
Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus
International Institute for Environmental and Public Health

Greece

Vini Dimitra
Paediatrician, MSc, Director of Thalassaemia Unit
General Hospital of Nikaia

Lia Patsavoudi, Ph.D.
Professor of Biology
Dept. of Biomedical Engineering, University of West Attica

Switzerland

Jane Muncke
Chief Scientific Officer
Food Packaging Forum

Professor Valérie D’Acremont
Tropical Diseases and Global Health Centre for Primary Care and Public Health University of Lausanne

Israel

Prof. Hagai Levine
Chairman, Israeli Association of Public Health Physicians
School of Public Health, Hebrew University-Hadassah

Dr. Hagit Ulanovsky
Environmental Health Risk Management consultant
Co-founder & director, SP-Interface

Rachel Golan, PhD, MPH
School of Public Health, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Uganda

Dr. Iddi Matovu
Program Manager-DREAMS
Rakai Health Sciences Program-RHSP

Uganda (cont.)

Dr. Fred Nalugoda, S. Stat, MHS
Director of Kalisizo Field Station, Junior Principal Investigator
Rakai Health Sciences Program-RHSP

Dr. Godfrey Kigozi, MBchB, MPH
Medical Officer, Junior Principal Investigator
Rakai Health Sciences Program-RHSP

Malawi

Vita Mthi
Researcher and Public Health Professional Knowledge Action Change

Tunisia

Semia Gharbi
Teacher and expert in science and management of environment AEEFG

South Africa

Rico Euripidou
Environmental Health Campaign Manager groundWork

Philippines

Dr. Geminn Louis C. Apostol
Professor and Lead Environmental Health Specialist, Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health
Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health

Ramon Lorenzo Luis Rosa Guinto, MD DrPH
Founder & Chief Planetary Doctor, PH Lab
Next Generation One Health Adviser, Lancet One Health Commission at the University of Oslo

Dr. Jonathan Jadloc - National Chair, Climate Change Committee, Philippine College of Physicians

Malaysia

Dr. Sharifah Norkhadijah Syed Ismail
Senior Lecturer, Department of Environmental and Occupational Health
Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Universiti Putra Malaysia
Taiwan

Tsu-Nai Wang
Professor, Department of Public Health,
College of Health Science, Kaohsiung
Medical University, Kaohsiung

Dr. Pei-Shih Chen, PhD
Chair, Professor of Public Health
Kaohsiung Medical University

Guey Chuen Perng, PhD
Professor, Department of Microbiology and
Immunology
College of Medicine, National Cheng Kung
University