

From today's Chicago Tribune:

Restaurants face revolving infection risks

Guides exist, but what happens after positive test differs



At Alinea, where manager Rizqi Soeharsono works, two staffers tested positive for COVID-19 within weeks of each other, forcing shutdowns each time. (Nam Y. Huh/AP)

BY GRACE WONG

On June 1, The Alinea Group announced on Twitter that an employee tested positive for COVID-19. Even though that employee had not worked in eight days, every other person who worked the same day was tested, and the restaurant closed for cleaning. A few weeks later, another employee tested positive, and the restaurant repeated the same steps.

Early last week, Longman & Eagle, a take on a traditional drinking inn in Logan Square, announced on Instagram that it would be closing because it also had an employee who tested positive for COVID-19. Its entire staff is quarantining and being tested, and the space is being cleaned, the post said.

Although the city gave restaurants the green light to open indoor dining up to 25% capacity as part of phase four of the pandemic plan, which started last Friday, some restaurant operators are wondering if it's worth it to do so with COVID-19 infection risks still present.

"If every time someone tests positive the restaurant must do a fire drill of testing, shut down, deep clean, re-open, then that becomes very troubling and planning is uncertain," said Nick Kokonas, co-owner of The Alinea Group, in an email. "Just not very sustainable long-term. If there were daily, fast testing at \$2 per test with instant results, we'd simply test everyone every day. Easy."

But such a test doesn't exist. The restaurant group, which includes Next, Aviary, Roister and Alinea, spent about \$8,000 on reimbursing affected employees for getting tested, and despite the good news of all negative results, the cost of testing all the employees exceeded the profits of being open.

And then there's the question of contact tracing. Some affected restaurants, like Longman & Eagle, have relied on social media to alert guests that an employee was affected. Kokonas said he was not assigned a contact tracer from the city or state, but no guests would have been affected because the restaurant group was not open for dining in at the time.

Other restaurants are taking contact tracing into their own hands. Sun Wah BBQ, the North Side Hong Kong restaurant famous for its Peking duck, is requiring all guests to sign a health declaration that provides the restaurant with personal information so owners can contact trace if needed. Tweet, the popular Uptown brunch spot, is figuring out a plan to have at least one person from each party provide a phone number.

Restaurants say they remain frustrated, confused and isolated, especially when it comes to contact tracing. But the city points to the guidelines that it has shared with all business owners, including restaurants.

According to the Chicago Department of Public Health, when a positive COVID-19 case that is found in a business is reported to CDPH, a case investigator calls the patient to discuss the illness and identify close contacts. Then, a contact tracing team calls the identified contacts to talk about exposure and make referrals.

If there are two or more cases at a business within 14 days, then the employer is required to report it to CDPH, which will work with the business to assess risk and make additional recommendations. CDPH issued a document June 16 with guidelines for businesses should they have someone test positive.

More than 200 people from CDPH and partnering organizations are working on contact tracing, including more than 150 CDPH and city employees. More than 90%

of case investigations are initiated within 25 hours of assignment, according to a statement from CDPH. The department hopes to have about 800 contact tracers by mid-September by connecting with community-based organizations and health care partners.

To mitigate risk, many restaurants are sticking to takeout and delivery for now. Luella's Southern Kitchen in Lincoln Square said in an Instagram post that it cannot provide the safest environment for its team and guests without data.

"We are preparing to reopen and working on the logistics of doing so but want to be encouraged that the reopening is safe and the businesses that have decided to reopen haven't gotten any new cases or at least the amount that unfortunately do are low," the post says.

Kokonas said he had mixed feelings about the city moving into phase four, and that success would be dependent on the public's willingness to take precautions and other businesses' ability to adhere to strict guidelines. At The Alinea Group, the city, state and federal guidelines are considered a baseline to add onto, not the ideal goal.

The owner of another restaurant that had an employee with COVID-19 said the store has received no guidance from the city but follows protocols recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in addition to the ones by local government. He wished to keep his name and his restaurant's name anonymous out of fear for his business, saying that he did not want to add to the anxiety that customers or his employees may feel about the situation. Even following the most stringent health and safety protocols can only do so much, he said.

"It's worthless if someone, employee or customer, comes in the store with covid and no symptoms; that's the big unknown danger," he wrote in a Facebook message. He also said he did not receive any calls from the city, nor was he assigned a contact tracer or given information on how to contact trace himself.

Won Kim, owner of Bridgeport's Korean-Polish restaurant Kimski, isn't opening for on-premise dining for now. His decision is based on his own experience: In April, he tested positive for COVID-19, thus beginning a harrowing eight weeks of high fevers and pneumonia that left him unable to stand. He has since recovered, but said he wishes the experience on no one.

Most of his duties fell to his sous chef during that time, but he said there are just some responsibilities, like creating recipes and ensuring quality, that still fall on his shoulders, on top of working with, reassuring and monitoring the comfort of a staff already anxious about their survival during a pandemic.

Although the restaurant's parking lot is being converted to a patio, Kim said he's laying low for now and in no rush to open for dining in, either outdoors or indoors.

“I just want to be extra, extra safe,” Kim said. “It’s the only fair thing to do for your co-workers.”

Restaurants are held to extremely rigorous health codes, so if an employee were to get sick, Kim believes it would be because a guest was not exercising the same level of caution. He believes that the city went to phase four too quickly.

“It’s scary and it’s terrifying, and we don’t want to get anyone sick and we have to look out for our employees, that’s really important to us,” Kim said. “We want to make people comfortable and a little more safe, we just don’t know how that looks like or what that is. We’ve done everything on our own.”