Using Facebook to Help Locate People With or At Risk for COVID-19

BACKGROUND

In the United States, use of social media to communicate has become increasingly common, and for many people it replaces traditional methods of communication such as mail and telephone calls. In some instances, people use Facebook Messenger (now merged with Instagram) for messages and calls instead of a cell phone, at least in part because it can be accessed via Wi-Fi and does not require a paid cell phone plan. When traditional methods fail, Facebook can facilitate more rapid communication with people who are infected with or exposed to an infectious disease. Health departments can adopt policies that allow Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS) and Case Investigation/Contact Tracing staff to access Facebook to locate individuals, investigate and communicate with potential Contacts, and identify events or gatherings where the person was potentially exposed. Internet waivers and issuance of cellular phones may be necessary to incorporate the use of Facebook into program practice. Health departments and contracted community-based organizations should seek guidance from their Public Information Officer or other designated communications staff to create a specified account for contact tracing staff to use for this purpose, using departmental logos and listing the location of the agency. Personal accounts should never be used for official public health communication.

A key use of Facebook is to quickly communicate with the Index Case or Contact, especially if they are not responding to telephone calls or have not provided a telephone number. Facebook Messenger is a no-cost tool for communication that allows people to send and receive messages and calls without paying for cell phone plans.

STEPS

1. Verify

Before communicating with an Index Case or Contact via Facebook Messenger, it is very important to verify that the Facebook profile identified through your search is the correct person, especially because there could be multiple accounts listed with the same name. If you are unable to verify which profile belongs to the Index Case, you should not send a message. It is best to have at least two pieces of information to verify that you have the correct person. To verify the person's identity, use any combination of the following methods:

Photos:

- Search other databases such as DMV or Corrections to compare photos of the person to their profile picture or other posted photos.

"About" Tab:

- Location: Match current or previous city of residence.

- Date of Birth: Match DOB or age (if provided).

- Work: If their place of employment is listed, match with information provided during the interview (this

works especially well if the exposure occurred at their workplace or if they were named by a coworker).

- Education: If their education history is listed, match with information provided during the interview (this works especially well if the exposure occurred at their school or university).

"Friends" Tab:

- Review the person's "Friends" to see if they are associated with others named in the investigation, especially the Index Case who named them.

- Review "Friends" to see if the person has friends who match their emergency contact or someone else living at the same address such as a family member, partner, or spouse.

"Timeline":

- Scroll through their timeline to see if you find "Happy Birthday" posts that match the reported date of birth.

- Review posts on their timeline to see if the person is tagged or posts anything that confirms their identity. You can also review who "likes" their posts to confirm known associates such as a coworker, Index Case, known Contact, or family member/emergency contact.

2. Contact

- Send a concise message that clearly states the reason you are trying to reach them but does **not** specifically mention the disease they have been exposed to. Suggested wording:

> **"Hello, my name is [insert name] and I work at the [insert] health department. I need to speak to you right away about an urgent confidential health issue. Please call me at [insert number] as soon as possible. I am available Monday through Friday from [insert hours]. Thank you."**

- If the recipient has questions about the legitimacy of the initial message, send a follow-up message instructing them how to verify that you work for the health department or organization, being careful to ensure that the name of the disease is not revealed in the link to preserve confidentiality. Suggested wording:

> **"To verify that I work for the health department you can check the employee directory [insert link] or go to this page to learn more about what I do [insert webpage]. We value your privacy and protect your personal information, please do not share any health information here. You can find our full privacy and data protection policy at [insert link]."**

- Consider the timing of your message. Send the message early in the day and avoid sending messages if you will not be available to reply promptly (e.g., before a day off). People will be frustrated if they cannot reach you back.

- Respond in real time to return messages. Ensure you have a process for checking your Messenger inbox frequently or keep the app open on your desktop or cell phone so you can respond quickly if they send a message back to you. If one account is being used by multiple staff members, ensure that someone is assigned to stay logged in every day. Non-responsiveness makes people question the validity of the message and could cause them to feel disregarded.

  *TIP: If there is a green dot next to the person's profile picture that means they are currently active in the application – this is the best time to send a message.

- Messenger can also be used to make calls if used on a mobile app from a cell phone. If you can see that the person is active (green dot) and they have not responded to your message, you can place a direct call to them via the Messenger call function.

- If you do not successfully reach the person, consider sending a message to someone close to them, such as a family member or friend, and asking them to give the person a message. You can identify a good contact person by scrolling through timeline posts and seeing who is most active on the person's page (best is a close friend or family member, especially "mom"). Your message should reveal as little as possible to maintain confidentiality. Suggested wording:

> **"Hello, my name is [insert name] and I need to locate [insert name] about an urgent personal issue. Please ask them to call me at [insert number] as soon as possible. I am available Monday through Friday from [insert hours]. Thank you."**

3. Investigate

In addition to using Messenger to communicate, Facebook can be a helpful tool to enhance information discovered (or withheld) during the interview.

- Before reaching an Index Case or Contact, do a brief search of their Facebook profile and posts to their timeline. This may provide information about their recent activities including travel, events they attended, people they were with, and who they are associated with from your investigation.

- You may be able to identify potential Contacts based on posts or photos that "tag" another person. You can see if those people are identified as Contacts, and if not, choose to either initiate notification of them yourself (without, of course, ever mentioning the identity of the Index Case) or ask the Index Case about them during the interview.

- If the events or potential Contacts you identify through the Facebook investigation do not get named by the Index Case during the Contact gathering portion of the interview, gently raise the issue with the Index Case before ending the interview. Suggested wording:

> **"I saw on your Facebook page that you were at a wedding this weekend. Let's talk about the people you had close contact with at the wedding."**

4. Pitfalls

- Some profiles have privacy settings that prohibit viewing the key details of their profile that allow for proper identification and investigation.

- People may have more than one Facebook profile, making it difficult to determine which to use for contact. It is best to view the posts on each of their pages and start with the page that has the most recent activity. You can also message each of the person's profiles to increase the likelihood of response.

- People without a telephone may not be able to call back as instructed in the message. The investigator may need to call the person using the call function in the Messenger mobile app to make initial contact. From there, it is best to set up a time to speak over a secure telephone line rather than discussing protected health information via the Messenger call function.

- Messages sent from people who are not "Friends" do not result in a notification, so the person you are contacting may not see the message unless they log in to Messenger for another reason. It is not recommended to send a "Friend Request" to an Index Case or Contact as it could inadvertently divulge that they are being investigated by the health department.

- People may question the legitimacy of the message or believe it is a hoax. Be prepared to verify your role. Easy ways to do this are to provide a link to your jurisdiction's employee directory, recommend the person call a main line and ask to speak with you, send a picture of your business card, or develop a web page describing the DIS/Contact Tracing program and send a link. See these examples:

  » https://www.phila.gov/programs/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/contact-tracing/

  » http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/Pages/dis.aspx

- Sometimes it is hard to get people to call as a result of sending a message on Messenger. You can get trapped in a series of messages back and forth. If this happens, gently reinforce that you cannot provide details via Messenger due to medical privacy laws and encourage them to call you right away.

5. Considerations for Privacy and Data Protection

- Messaging apps have varying privacy and data protection features. Facebook Messenger, for instance, retains message content on their servers and only offers opt-in end-to-end encryption for one-to-one chats. Contact tracing activities should adhere to privacy principles and follow local privacy and data protection laws. Special attention should be given to the privacy of Index Cases and Contacts as well as the protection of their health information on these apps. An approach that respects privacy is also more likely to succeed as individuals avoid participation in privacy-sensitive schemes that seem untrustworthy.

- Due to lack of privacy and HIPAA-compliant security features on Facebook Messenger, it is important to avoid any release of protected health information via the application. Avoid providing details about the specific diagnosis or exposure event to the Index Case or Contact via Facebook. Use the minimum amount of detail necessary to accomplish the goal of reaching the Index Case or Contact for interview or notification.

- To preserve the security and confidentiality of both Index Cases and Contacts, the Facebook investigation and related communications should not result in intentional or inadvertent release of information about associations between cases and contacts.