



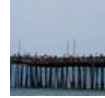
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Here's what happens when a contact tracer calls you



By MARIE ALBIGES
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Epidemiologist Lisa Engle is photographed outside of the Chesapeake Health Department building on Friday, May 15, 2020. (Kaitlin McKeown/Virginia Media)

For weeks, Virginia's health officials have been talking about contact tracing.

They've been telling us that the key to [reopening the economy](#) safely and getting the coronavirus under control was ramping up testing — still woefully lacking in the state — and contact tracing.

[The scientific art of contact tracing](#), which is a way of connecting the people who have tested positive for a disease to those they might've infected, has been around for centuries, but it didn't become a household term until the coronavirus took hold.

And as Virginia moves toward reopening while the number of cases continues to climb, the need to scale up contact tracing is becoming dire. People who have been in contact with COVID-19 patients need to be warned that they were exposed and told to quarantine as restaurants, stores and beauty salons reopen.

It seems like a simple enough concept, but it could quickly get complicated. Was it as easy as calling people and telling them they came across someone with the coronavirus? Were epidemiologists knocking on doors and chasing down people an infected person might have brushed in the grocery store? Were they trying to find out who touched the gas pump before me?

Interviews with medical professionals and university professors left me with more questions, so I set out to find out what happens during a contact tracing interview.

I didn't want to contract the virus myself, and convincing a stranger to let me listen in on an interview didn't seem likely. Plus that wouldn't fly with HIPAA, the law that protects people's private health information.

So the Chesapeake Health District proposed the next best thing: a mock interview, in which I pretend to be a patient with COVID-19.

On Wednesday, I got on the phone with epidemiologist Lisa Engle. We settled on the terms — she would ask me questions as if I were a COVID-19 patient, and I would tell her exactly how I spent my days leading up to when I was tested. At the end of the interview, she would shred her notes on my fake illness, and I could write about it.

To start, I blindly made up a few symptoms: chills, a fever of 100.2, a cough and loss of taste and smell.

She asked me about my medical history — again, I felt lucky telling her I had no pre-existing conditions. I'm 28, active, healthy, taking no medications. Already, I was imagining the other calls she must get, from the more vulnerable population whose lives have changed even more drastically than mine since the pandemic reached Hampton Roads.

After we settled on May 9 as the onset date of my symptoms, Engle explained that research shows people are contagious a few days before their symptoms start, so we had to go back to May 7. She asked me to look at a calendar and tell her where I went and with whom I came into contact on that day and the subsequent days up to being tested.

“We're trying to determine who you might've exposed that may need to quarantine,” she said.

I told her about traveling to Richmond last Friday, going into a large room with about 20 to 30 officials and reporters, and listening to Gov. Ralph Northam tell Virginians what Phase 1 of reopening the state would look like. I said I took off my mask to ask Northam a question. Engle asked if there was anyone around me at that point (there wasn't).

I was surprised that Engle didn't count my Richmond outing as a possible "exposure." It was the longest amount of time I'd spent around people other than my partner and people at the grocery store on day 3 of my fake infection. I also stopped for gas on my way home, which sparked more questions ("Was anyone near you? Did you talk to anybody? Did you wash your hands after pumping gas?"). Otherwise, I was fortunate enough to be able to stay home, venturing out only occasionally for exercise.

But my casual stops at the local nursery and playground — I was thinking of the germs left on the monkey bars I was using as a pull-up bar — weren't raising alarms from the other end of the line. It appeared I wasn't lingering near people long enough to warrant a notation in Engle's notebook.

"You're doing very, very good," Engle told me. "This is how we control this, (with) the social distancing. Until everybody gets this, we're going to have a lot of cases."

My partner, who lives with me and goes to work every day, wouldn't fare so well, Engle said. In this fictional tale, he'd have to be quarantined, and we'd have to live in separate bedrooms until I was no longer contagious.

He has a high-contact job, seeing up to 200 people a week and spending minutes — 10 seemed to be the magical number that Engle referred to — with each customer. I knew he wouldn't be pleased about being fake quarantined from that moment to 14 days after I stopped showing symptoms.

Engle said an interview with my partner, who also showed coronavirus symptoms in this scenario, would mean asking him to describe every single encounter with every single customer each day since he began feeling ill. My interview with Engle lasted about 45 minutes; I imagined his would take days.

One recent case took three days to trace, she said. It was complicated — there were visits from stepchildren, trips to doctors' offices.

Her office has 25 people tracing cases in addition to their other responsibilities in Chesapeake. She thinks her department will get 30 new tracers out of the 1,000 additional personnel Northam has proposed hiring.

Health secretary Dan Carey said when the coronavirus hit Virginia, the department had 200 contact tracers, many of whom had additional responsibilities within the department. Since the pandemic took hold, he said the state has ramped up to 600 tracers. The state recently contracted with 10 staffing agencies to bring on the additional 1,000 personnel.

Less than 2% of Virginians have been tested for the coronavirus. As of Thursday, 27,813 people have tested positive, and nearly 1,000 people have died, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

A document cited among Virginia's top health officials from Harvard University's center for ethics titled "Roadmap to Pandemic Resilience" recommended adding an additional 100,000 contact tracers in the U.S.

The roadmap also recommended using contact tracing apps, which work like this: When a user tests positive for the virus, and he or the healthcare professional reports that to the app, anyone who also uses the app and has recently been through the same locations as the COVID-19 patient would receive an alert on their phone and a recommendation to be tested.

State health officials have also been talking about apps and “other possible technologic solutions” to contact tracing and case monitoring, according to emails obtained by The Virginian-Pilot through the Freedom of Information Act.

Dr. Lisa Lee, a professor and public health expert at Virginia Tech, said those apps are crucial to containing the virus.

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam gestures during a news conference at the Capitol Monday May 4, 2020, in Richmond, Va. Northam announced a phase one opening of the state beginning May 15.(AP Photo/Steve Helber)(Steve Helber/AP)

“Moving quickly is going to require something more than the old-fashioned going to knock on a door and asking people who they’ve been in contact with,” she said. “It’s really important that we leverage technology to help us, and we do that in a way that doesn’t cause harm.”

Engle told me after the interview — when I’d put my reporter hat back on — that she was discouraged by how people were reacting to the governor’s first phase of reopening. She’s seeing fewer people wearing masks and hearing that more people are venturing out.

“People are becoming lackadaisical about it,” she said. “We can start all over again.”

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That means contact tracers will have to “go after more people,” Engle said. Right now, she’s tracing a lot of cases like mine, in which there’s little contact with other people, and the infected are staying home. And she can’t force anyone to answer questions, nor can she compel contacts to quarantine. She recently had a guy give a fake name and lie about who he was.

And when things start opening up and people stop social distancing?

“This interview will be a lot longer,” she said.

Staff writer Peter Coutu contributed reporting.

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Marie Albiges



Marie Albiges writes about state government and politics. A graduate of Christopher Newport University, Marie has previously covered local government, courts, breaking news and education in Williamsburg and Texas.

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