

Panasonic worker at Tesla's NY factory tested positive for COVID-19

A Panasonic employee at Tesla's solar panel factory in Buffalo, New York tested positive in March for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, according to internal emails obtained by *The Verge*. It's the fourth known employee at Tesla's US facilities to test positive for COVID-19, following one at the Gigafactory in Nevada, and two office workers in California.

It's unclear when the worker received the positive test results, but the employees at the plant were notified in an email on March 28th. A spokesperson for Panasonic North America told *The Verge* on Wednesday that it didn't learn of the employee's positive test until this past weekend, sometime before the email went out.

The infected employee was not in the office after March 17th, according to the emails, which a current employee provided to *The Verge* on the condition of anonymity. On March 20th, Panasonic announced plans to shut down its operations at the New York factory for two weeks. That shutdown has now been extended to at least April 19th, according to one of the emails. Tesla has also temporarily shut down its own operations at the New York factory, though CEO Elon Musk has said he wants to reopen it "as soon as humanly possible" to make ventilators, possibly with medical technology company Medtronic.

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One of Panasonic's HR bosses told employees in the March 28th email that the company performed a "thorough contact tracing" effort and notified "all employees that were indicated to have been in close contact" with the worker on March 17th. The company also performed a "thorough cleaning and disinfecting" of the employee's work station before the shutdown. It's unclear if Panasonic notified any workers the infected employee interacted with before that, though, as the company did not go into specifics beyond a statement it provided.

"We can confirm that a Panasonic employee from our Buffalo facility has been diagnosed with COVID-19. We wish them good health and a speedy recovery," the company said in the statement provided to *The Verge*. "This was one of several scenarios Panasonic has extensively planned for as nothing is more important than the health and safety of our employees and the communities in which we work."

Days before the shutdown, president of Panasonic Solar North America (PSNA) Mark Shima told employees he was returning to Japan to renew his visa before it expired on April 1st, according to a letter posted to a bulletin board at the Buffalo factory, a photo of which was viewed by *The Verge*. Shima told employees that he had a "couple of things to do in Japan" and will have to quarantine when he returns, so his "next appearance to PSNA will be expected around April 27th (Tentative)," according to the letter.

"Safety First!"

Shima told employees he will work remotely either from Japan or in Buffalo in the meantime. "Please take care of yourself and your family's health, use precaution for any decease include [sic] Coronavirus and flu. I'm so sorry for my absence during this extremely hard time but sincerely appreciate your understanding and great job. Safety First!"

Panasonic announced in February that it will stop making solar cells and modules at the New York factory later this year,

ending a nearly four-year relationship dating back to 2016. The company also helps make batteries for Tesla's cars at the Gigafactory in Nevada. Panasonic starting winding down operations at the Nevada factory on March 20th following a statewide shelter-in-place advisory. Tesla followed suit one week later.

<https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/1/21202389/panasonic-worker-tesla-buffalo-gigafactory-coronavirus-covid-19>