COVID-19 Homeless System Response:
Staying Safe While Going Back to the Office

Homeless services agencies across the United States are in various stages of opening their doors. Offices, drop-in centers, and more are inviting the public back in even though COVID-19 continues to spread. Thinking beyond the everyday precautions we have all been practicing—face masks, handwashing, and social distancing—how can we protect workers and the public from the virus once we return to work? Below are several considerations for workplace safety and minimizing the spread of COVID-19.

General Considerations

- Check state and local authorities for updates for returning to the workplace.
- Educate staff on how COVID-19 is spread: CDC Video on COVID-19.
- Develop protocols and policies for the workplace during COVID-19 (see considerations below).
- Create an ongoing communication plan for updating staff as information evolves.
- Designate a staff member who will be the point-person to track COVID-19 cases in the area.
- Ensure that staff have adequate gear to remain safe. Use virtual or remote meeting platforms rather than bring people together in one room.

Office-Based Considerations

- Create a plan for bringing people back to the office that includes guidelines and safety tips. Protocols should include provision of sanitary and hygiene policies, setting maximum numbers of people in conference rooms and offices, and changing the office layout and desk spacing.
  - Connecticut State Department of Education has created a detailed plan for reopening its schools which large and small community-based organizations can pull from or use as an example for developing their plan.
  - Reopening Guidance for Office Workers by the City of Philadelphia offers a plain language, one-page summary of rules for reopening.
- Stagger work schedules and desks so that fewer people are in the office at once, in keeping with social distancing guidelines.
  - Consider allowing high-risk workers to continue to work from home, part- or full-time.
  - Alternate or add additional shifts to improve social distancing.
- Minimize sharing of office space, work vehicles, and desks. When sharing of spaces is unavoidable and/or necessary, clean and disinfect surfaces between workers. Schedule rotating coffee and meal breaks to reduce the number of people in break rooms. Do not share food or drinks.
- Communicate openly and regularly. Make sure safety protocols are conveyed as expectations.
- Determine who is absolutely needed in the office and prioritize bringing them back first. Determine who is most at risk from COVID-19 and allow them to continue to work from home.
- Explore new technology like badges that buzz if they are within six feet of another badge or thermal scanners that can test temperatures in the office.

Physical Work Space Considerations

When bringing staff members back into the office, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) have some suggestions to configure the office space to ensure the safety of all staff and minimize exposure to COVID-19.

- **Work Station Spacing:** Set up offices to allow for social distancing of at least 6 ft. between work stations. If hallways are tight, consider making hallway traffic one way or having a plan for more than one person entering the hallway at the same time. When possible, situate staff in offices where the door can be closed. For more information, view the CDC's Guidance on Social Distancing.
- **Hand Sanitization:** Ensure that staff have places to wash hands with soap. In addition, prepare touchless hand sanitation stations at the office entries/exit. Hand sanitizer should contain at least 60 percent alcohol to be effective. Read the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OHSA) Guidance on Hand Sanitation.

- **Sharing Space and Equipment:** In most offices, there are shared common areas and equipment (e.g., copiers, coffee makers, fridges). When possible, attempt to have staff use their own equipment. For larger shared equipment, consider having sanitary wipes at all shared equipment areas.
- **Office Cleaning Practices:** The CDC has created guidelines for [cleaning and disinfecting facilities](). These guidelines include information for how to clean the workplace regularly and how to disinfect the workplace if someone has been sick.

Basic Protection Considerations

There are five categories of COVID-19 safety measures:

1. Social distancing ensures that people stay a safe distance from one another—typically 6 feet.
2. Hygiene protocols: systems, policies, and tools can prevent the surface contact spread of the virus. Require masks and consider zero-contact protocols.
3. Staffing and operations are revised to ensure distance and safety.
4. Monitoring possible symptoms: touchless thermometers employed as staff begin to come into the office help screen people out in the event they are becoming ill.
5. Information flow means updating and communicating news to keep everyone informed.

Resource List

- The CDC has published guidelines for businesses and workplaces to reduce the spread of the virus.
- The White House has published a Coronavirus website to serve as a source showing all official government resources on COVID-19.
- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's State-by-State Business Reopening Guidance is a collective map with the latest guidance, timelines, and other reopening information for employers.
- The American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) has created industry guidelines for a range of business sectors in its Back to Work Safely Initiative.
- Checklist for Homeless Service Providers During Community Reopening provides tips for protecting clients and staff in homeless shelters and encampments. While safety protocols remain the same (face masks, social distancing, hand washing), it is important to continue connecting clients to care. Continue to evaluate clients for COVID-19 symptoms and work with community coalitions to provide medical respite and help people isolate or quarantine.
- Follow the example of states that have flattened the curve. The University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation has compiled data from each state and provides detailed graphics showing the coronavirus curves in different states.