COVID-19 Response

Bureau Return to Office (RTO) Toolkit

December 2021
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Managers and Supervisors,

**Thank you for your hard work supporting employees and successfully delivering on our mission** while juggling the challenges of a global pandemic and a virtual workforce.

We understand a new set of challenges will arise as we begin transitioning employees back into the office and managing **in-person, virtual, and hybrid work environments**. This **Return-to-Office (RTO) Toolkit** is designed to equip you with **customizable communication, engagement, and training resources, tools, and templates** to effectively lead during this period of transition and beyond.

Thank you for your continued leadership as we **navigate the new way forward, together**.
Health & Safety in the Workplace
How we are prioritizing your health and safety
Our Approach to Workplace Health and Safety

The DOC’s highest priority in reentry is the health, safety, and well being of its workforce, and it has implemented several measures to ready the workplace for employees according to community, building, and medical considerations.

**Community**
- Continuous evaluation of employee transportation and commuting options
- Assessing the availability of childcare options
- Identifying local food and beverage options for employees working onsite

**Building**
- Redesigning facility floor plans and workstations to account for accommodations and capacity limitations
- Applying cleaning and sanitation protocols in line with CDC recommendations
- Utilizing enhanced ventilation and HVAC, including ultraviolet germicidal irradiation to kill airborne pathogens
- Limiting access to not fully vaccinated contractors and visitors, and requiring document verification by senior officials

**Medical**
- Requiring masking and physical distancing in areas of high community transmission
- Utilizing contact tracing and testing for close contacts of known infections
- Requiring COVID-19 vaccination for employees and contractors
- Establishing testing requirements for not fully vaccinated contractors, visitors, and those granted Reasonable Accommodations

94% of DOC employees are vaccinated.*

CDC notes fully vaccinated individuals are **6x less likely to be infected** and **29x less likely to be hospitalized or die** from COVID-19.

* 94% as of 11/22 includes those who have received at least their first dose. 99% of DOC complied with Federal mandates as of the 11/22 deadline.
COMMUNICATE
Methods, templates, and signage for effective communication and employee outreach
Effective communication is critical to supporting your employees as they adapt to new work environments and as the COVID-19 environment rapidly changes. Use the following communication process and principles to quickly develop and deploy effective communications, spread need-to-know information, and engage your employees.

**COORDINATE**
Coordinate with leadership and key stakeholders to understand the current state and required actions.

Sample Work Product:
- Stakeholder Roster
- Fact Sheets

**UNDERSTAND**
Understand the communication need to ensure messaging is relevant to your employees.

Sample Work Product:
- Employee Pulse Survey

**DEVELOP**
Select appropriate communication channel and draft tailored messaging.

Sample Work Product:
- Communications Plan*

**VALIDATE**
Review and validate communication with leadership and relevant stakeholders.

Sample Work Product:
- Draft Communications
- FAQs

**DELIVER**
Distribute communication to the workforce.

Sample Work Product:
- Emails
- Newsletter

Throughout this process, make sure your communications are:

**AUTHENTIC**
Messages should express core values. Communicate in a human voice. Stakeholders should hear from the source.

**TAILORED**
Messages are tailored to ensure the audience is receiving the information at the right time through the preferred channel.

**TRANSPARENT**
Transparency can earn trust. Be clear with stakeholders what is and isn’t known.

**CREATIVE**
Create compelling content to reach more stakeholders with well-crafted messages. Avoid jargon.

**AGILE**
Create content quickly to respond to the cascade of events. Keep messages brief and refer to experts. Provide a call to action.

**FAST**
Act with speed to fill the information vacuum. Delays may look like you are hiding something.

*See sample Communications Plan template on side 11*
Leveraging Strategic Communication Channels

Leveraging the right communication channels can make employee outreach faster, more effective, and more engaging. Managers and Supervisors should work with their Bureau leadership to utilize the following communication channels to maximize employee outreach.

Sample Communication Channels

Virtual Town Halls*
Virtual & In-person Team Meetings
Podcasts
Digital Signage
Video
Webcasts
Bureau Intranet
Emails
Infographics

In Person

Mobile

Print

Text Messaging
Blogs
Employee Apps
Collaboration Tools
Pulse Surveys
Facility Posters & Signs
Banners
Reference Guides
Newsletters
Welcome Back Email Template

Consistent and transparent employee communication facilitate smooth transitions and a positive employee experience. Managers and Supervisors can tailor the below welcome back email to meet the specific needs of their Bureau and workforce.

All –

I would like to extend a warm welcome as we begin our return to work!

As we navigate this transition, I would like to emphasize that your health and safety remain my top priority and your well-being is the primary driver for all workplace decision. Over the next few weeks, I would like to meet with each of you to discuss ways I can best support your transition to the workplace, what you need to be successful in our new environment, and your preferences for collaboration and team engagement.

In the meantime, please check out our COVID-19 Information Hub for the latest information on Bureau and Department of Commerce (DOC) health and safety best practices, policies, and protocols.

I thank you for your ongoing commitment to the health and safety of our colleagues and Bureau community, and I look forward to working with you all to build a better and brighter future as we continue to remain resilient.

Best,
<Insert name>
All -

I am writing to share a few updates regarding our COVID-19 policies due to a shift in the pandemic and public health guidance.

**Current Policy:** Detail the original policy or policies language.

**Updated Policy:** Describe the changes in policy, why those changes are being implemented, and official new language.

**What This Means for You:** Outline impacts to employees (e.g., operating status, daily activities, individual roles and responsibilities).

**Date of Implementation:** Provide the date the new policy will take effect.

As always, thank you for your continued dedication to keeping yourselves, families, and communities safe and healthy. Please contact <insert POC> for additional questions.

Best,

<insert name>
Workforce Pulse Check Survey

Pulse check surveys enable streamlined data collection and quick identification of employee issues surrounding return to work. Managers and Supervisors can use information gathered from pulse check surveys to make informed work, workplace, and workforce decisions.

Multiple Choice Examples

1. I understand what is expected of me for returning to work
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Neutral
   - Agree
   - Strong Agree

2. I have the tools and resources I need to work effectively in a virtual environment.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Neutral
   - Agree
   - Strong Agree

3. I feel safe returning to work in-person.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Neutral
   - Agree
   - Strong Agree

Open Ended Examples

1. What are your greatest concerns for returning to work and/or working in a hybrid in-person and telework environment?

2. What resources can we provide to improve work productivity?

3. Are you satisfied with the level of leadership engagement and outreach? If not, how can it be improved?

4. What are the ways you prefer to receive information and updates (i.e., emails, newsletters, town halls, etc.)?

Pulse Survey Best Practices

- Maximize participation by keeping surveys short and easily accessible
- Offer both multiple choice and open-ended questions to gather more nuanced employee feedback
- Ensure employees understand why they are taking the survey and how the information will be used
Managers and Supervisors must be prepared to answer employee questions about workplace health and safety to address their concerns, ease anxieties, and build trust. Managers and Supervisors can adapt the below FAQs based on their Bureau's workplace health and safety policies and protocols.

What is the Department doing to ensure a safe and healthy workplace?

The Department and its Bureaus implement several safety measures to protect on-site employees.

- **Cleaning:** We regularly clean, disinfect, and sanitize facilities to ensure your health and safety. In the event of a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the workplace, enhanced cleaning will occur in accordance with CDC guidance.
- **Ventilation:** Facilities are optimizing indoor ventilation to the maximum extent feasible, to increase the proportion of outdoor ventilation, improve filtration, and reduce or eliminate recirculation.
- **Signage:** We post up-to-date on-site signage to encourage healthy behavior and safe interactions.

What can employees do to keep each other safe?

We each play a role in keeping our workplaces safe. Some actions employees can take include:

- Following **mask and social distancing requirements** based on vaccination status and local transmission levels.
- Washing hands with soap and water.
- Staying home if feeling unwell.
- Removing personal items or work materials daily.
- Adhering to all Department and Bureau policies and safety protocols.
- Reporting workplace health and safety concerns to your Manager or Supervisor.

What can employees do to prepare for a safe return to the workplace?

Ahead of employees' return, we recommend they consider:

- **Vaccination:** President Biden's Executive Order 14043 requires all federal employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19, unless they are granted a reasonable accommodation.
- **Commuting:** Getting to work may be more challenging as public transportation service schedules may have changed. We encourage employees to check daily for any updates to changes in public transportation.
- **Training:** We recommend employees complete any required or optional training to understand the protocols in place to keep the work environment safe.
Communication plans are living documents that can help you **stay on track, report progress, and establish manageable cadence and employee outreach**. Utilize the template below to guide your communications planning.

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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COMMUNICATION/MESSAGE</th>
<th>CHANNEL</th>
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Communication Plan Template
**Sample One-Pagers**

**DOC Reentry One-Pagers communicate and reinforce key policies around health and safety.** Leverage the latest one-pagers to help returning employees understand and follow policies.

The Department follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance. The following information applies to individuals in Federal buildings in areas of high or substantial community transmission.

- **Acceptable and unacceptable face masks are defined by the CDC and the Department will adjust policy as necessary based on additional guidance.**
  - For non-vaccinated or partially vaccinated individuals, face masks must be worn in any common areas or shared workspaces, such as open floor plans/cubicles, conference rooms, restrooms, corridors, and elevators.
  - Facilities will provide face masks to personnel, as required and/or available.

- **Face coverings and physical distancing in the office**
  - Our policies will continue to focus on the health and safety of all onsite personnel in Department of Commerce facilities.
  - Following the latest CDC guidance, all employees, contractors, and visitors are required to wear a face mask while in Federal facilities in areas with high or substantial community transmission levels.
  - Individuals who are partially vaccinated or have not yet received a COVID-19 vaccination are required to wear a mask and maintain at least 6’ of distance from others while in Federal facilities.

- **Facility Sanitation Procedures**
  - When it comes to sanitation, the Department of Commerce is committed to your safety. Here’s what you need to know.
  - Daily cleaning and disinfection within our facilities help reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread and keep you safe. In accordance with CDC guidance, each Department of Commerce facility is required to conduct daily cleaning for all high-touch areas.

- **Ventilation in Department of Commerce Facilities**
  - The Department is following the latest CDC and GSA guidelines on building ventilation, heating, and air conditioning.
  - The Department’s ventilation improvements are part of its larger reentry strategy to help keep you safe.
  - Our ventilation solutions prevent the spread of COVID-19 and improve indoor air quality at the same time.

- **U.S. Department of Commerce**
  - DOC Ventilation Solutions
    - DOC-owned buildings follow CDC HVAC recommendations based on existing equipment, current configuration, and re-occupancy schedule.
    - DOC-leased buildings similarly adhere to CDC HVAC guidance when possible.
  - Ventilation upgrades include increased outdoor air ventilation, ultraviolet germicidal irradiation (UVGI), and increased air handling units to kill viruses, bacteria, and fungi.
  - Increased air handling units enhance air ventilation and improve indoor air quality.
  - Increased the quantity of air exchanges of the HCVB HVAC systems by expanding the buildings daily flushing sequence.

- **For the latest Department resources, please visit the COVID-19 Information Hub.**

- **U.S. Department of Commerce**
  - DOC Reentry One-Pagers
    - The Department of Commerce continues to focus on the health and safety of all onsite personnel in Department of Commerce facilities.
    - Following the latest CDC guidance, all employees, contractors, and visitors are required to wear a face mask while in Federal facilities in areas with high or substantial community transmission levels.
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  - Facility Sanitation Procedures
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- **For the latest Department resources, please visit the COVID-19 Information Hub.**
How is the Department planning for employee reentry activities?

There are multiple readiness factors we consider and evaluate when preparing for reentry. All efforts are and will continue to be centered around your health, safety, and well-being.

CDC and other health guidelines are at the center of our decision making. We examine topics like:
- Employee, contractor, and visitor vaccination and testing information
- Contact tracing
- Positive COVID-19 case follow-up activities
- Sanitation requirements

We create a safe working environment for all personnel through numerous building monitoring and reconditioning activities like:
- Facility reconditioning
- Enhanced disinfection
- Mechanical & safety systems (e.g., water, ventilation, HVAC)

We monitor communities to ensure they have necessary workforce support by evaluating local community and facility services like:
- Mass transit options
- Food options
- Dependent care resources

We each have a role to play for a safe reentry.

Properly cleaning and disinfecting of shared equipment and surfaces is an integral part of re-opening Department of Commerce facilities.

Please follow these simple steps to protect yourself and others when sharing equipment on-site within Department facilities.

- Wash hands frequently for 20 seconds before utilizing shared tools and equipment
- Disinfect shared tools and equipment after use, such as phones, printers, computers, and workstations
- Disinfect tools and equipment anytime they are used by or transferred to a new person

For the latest Department resources, please visit the COVID-19 Information Hub.
Sample Signage (Continued)

**DO choose masks that**
- Have two or more layers of washable, breathable fabric
- Completely cover your nose and mouth
- Fit snugly against the sides of your face and don’t have gaps
- Have a nose wire to prevent air from leaking out of the top of the mask

**DO NOT choose masks that**
- Are made of fabric that makes it hard to breathe, for example, vinyl
- Have exhalation valves or vents, which allow virus particles to escape

[cdc.gov/coronavirus]
ENGAGE
Tips and tools for engaging and managing a hybrid workforce
Engaging and building meaningful connections with your employees and prioritizing well-being will be critical to your success as a leader as employees return to work. Use the following tips and tricks to maximize your employee engagement and outreach.

### Conduct 1:1 Check-ins

**Conduct 1:1 check-ins** with employees to ask questions such as:
- Are you satisfied with the current work conditions?
- What do you need to be successful in our current work environment?
- What are your primary roadblocks to working in a hybrid environment?

### Embrace Technology

Encourage employees to embrace technology, such as Microsoft Teams, to **better engage with teammates** while working in a hybrid environment. **This can help** strengthen team culture and **build a greater sense of community**.

### Support Flexibility

As team leaders, determine where you can **build in more flexibility** with your teams. This may include flexible work hour or breaks between meetings. You should **focus on outcomes** and be **clear with expectations**.

### Prioritize Well-Being

Incorporate well-being into work by:
- Reallocating work and renegotiate deadlines when possible
- Starting meetings with a check-in
- Encouraging team members to unplug, rest, and take breaks
- Invest in well-being education
- Practicing gratitude

### Deploy Pulse Check Surveys

Deploy employee pulse check surveys to **gather feedback on their needs** while returning to work. Questions may include:
- Do you have the right tools to work in a hybrid environment?
- Are you satisfied with the Bureau’s health and safety protocols?

### Recognize your Employees

**Recognize and celebrate employees** who are helping create better working environments and supporting their peers as they navigate returning to work.

### Give Meaningful Feedback

Provide actionable feedback to help employees be more successful while working in a hybrid environment. Examples of actionable feedback include best practices while on conference calls, health and safety behaviors, or ways to better utilize technology to stay better connected with teammates.

### Create A Safe Environment

Characteristics of a safe environment include employees who are:
- Able to make mistakes
- Comfortable asking for help
- Confident in offering different opinions
- Show up as their authentic selves
- Establish an “open door” policy
Virtual and Hybrid Norms & Best Practices

Establishing virtual and hybrid norms and implementing best practices can enhance team engagement and collaboration while working in a new environment. Refer to the below tips to start building a positive, productive, and healthy virtual or hybrid work culture for your employees.

Team Unity & Well-Being

- **Encourage Interaction**: Find creative ways to have employees express themselves virtually (e.g., chat emojis, etc.) and be deliberate about team building.
- **Stay Connected**: Don’t over-rely on scheduled meetings and email – pick up the phone.
- **Set Boundaries**: Set core working hours on calendars to avoid meetings being scheduled during non-working time.
- **Schedule Screen Breaks**: Schedule ‘laptops down’ lunches, collective no meeting days, or other times, where team members can be away from their computers to recharge.
- **Role Model**: Reinforce virtual and hybrid norms and promote transparency as employees often take their primary work cues from their manager.

Collaboration

- **Foster Collaboration Equity**: Strive for equal-opportunity participation and reinforce the idea that participation is based on contribution, not location.
- **Leverage Virtual Collaboration Tools**: Use technology platforms to improve communication and interaction (e.g., use chat, tag team members, add comments, create notifications, etc.).
- **Set Collaboration Standards**: Let team determine response times for collaborative tasks (e.g., two hours for chat, one business day for nonurgent emails).
- **Be Accessible**: Share contact info, include mobile number in your email signature.
- **Develop Digital Dexterity**: Ensure team members have access to and understand how to use appropriate collaboration tools for various business activities.

Performance Management

- **Check-In**: Conduct consistent, open, and honest check-ins with employees about their performance and overall well-being.
- **Gain Insights**: Listen and gather information to help assess and support employee performance outcomes.
- **Give Feedback**: Schedule recurring one-on-one, virtually or in-person, with employees to provide ongoing feedback and discuss progress on goals.
- **Be Clear**: Establish clear standards for evaluation, based on variables like outcomes, results, or quality.
- **Be Open**: Set a warm and open tone, pay attention to non-verbal cues, and demonstrate flexibility and compassion as employees adjust to COVID-19 pandemic shifts.
Team Building Exercises

Team building exercises, especially among hybrid teams, helps *foster collaboration, improve communication, and build positive team cultures*. Try the following exercises to keep your hybrid teams motivated and engaged.

**Hometown Tours**: Ask team members to share videos, pictures, websites, or any object that represents their hometown or current city.

**Informal Zoom Rooms**: Hold an informal virtual meeting around lunchtime so team members can chat freely like they would in an office cafeteria.

**Arm's Reach Show and Tell**: Ask team members to find and share something within arm's reach that is meaningful. Ask questions like: “Where did you get it? How long have you had it? Why is it important to you?”

**Themed Lunches or Days**: Assign a theme to lunches or days (e.g., Sports, Holidays).

**Trivia**: Kick start your meetings with a trivia question or host a virtual trivia event; try personalizing questions and/or categories based on your team's interests.

**Pets Channel**: Leverage virtual collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams to create a separate channels or email listservs where team members can share pictures of their pets.
Benefits of Microsoft Teams

- **Improves productivity:** Teams increase productivity by centralizing key documents and making team member collaboration via chats, online meetings, etc. available on a single interface.

- **Increases transparency:** Teams keeps everyone in the loop and supports quick and easy information sharing.

- **Enhances focus:** Teams compartmentalizes information into channels so employees can access documents, meetings, and conversations on-demand.

- **Supports digital workplaces:** Teams supports a seamless move to a digital workplace, allowing employees to take full advantage of the cloud and access information anytime, anywhere on their devices.
SUPPORT

Resources to support mental health
Mental Health Resources

Share the following organizations and information with employees as additional mental health and well-being resources.

**Department of Commerce Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**

**What is the EAP program?**
- Free services and programs designed to address individual, team, and organizational problems
- EAP services and contacts with individuals or families are kept confidential and using this program does not have an impact on an employee's job status

**Who is eligible?**
- Managers, employees, and their families

**What services are available?**
- EAP offers many services, including but not limited to
  - Stress management
  - Work related issues
  - Caregiver support
  - Health and mental health issues
  - Family and marital problems
  - Short term counseling
  - Financial and legal issues

**Mental Health Organizations**

- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- National Institute of Mental Health
- Mental Health America
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
- Mental Health Action Day
Mental Health Quick Tip One-Pagers

Reference the below one-pagers for ideas and tips on how to **prioritize and foster well-being for your employees**.

### Quick Tips: Prioritizing Mental Health at Work

**Establish Work Environment Expectations**
Set and communicate team norms like core working hours, after hours availability, video conferencing expectations, and meeting requirements.

**Respect Team Boundaries**
Foster a respectful team culture of adhering to established working hours, potential time zone differences, and scheduled breaks or vacations.

**Coordinate Breaks**
Schedule "laptop down" breaks to enable team members to step away from their computers to mentally and/or physically recharge.

**Check-in with your Team**
Regularly check in with your team members, keeping an open dialogue to monitor how they’re doing, what works, and what team norms may need adjusting.

**Celebrate Accomplishments**
Recognize and celebrate individual and team accomplishments. Encourage team members to take the time to show appreciation for a teammate's work, support, or collaboration.

**Connect With Others**
Encourage team members to schedule check-ins with team members and people outside of their immediate team to chat about well-being, mental health, family, work/life integration, or any other topics.

### Quick Tips: Fostering Well-Being in Teams

**Create a Safe Space**
Foster a culture of "It’s okay to not be okay" and provide opportunities for team members to share about well-being if desired and on their timetable.

**Maintain Trust**
Encourage team members to respect each other's privacy and create a supportive culture through caring, gentle, non-judgmental, and compassionate conversations.

**Educate the Team**
Provide team members the opportunity to learn more about well-being and mental health, access resources, and take available trainings.

**Build Team Accountability**
Model well-being habits for the team, demonstrating established well-being values and norms and holding team members accountable to following team values.

**Establish Work Buddies**
Establish an accountability buddy system to remind team members to take well-being breaks, share well-being tips and tricks, and check-in on each other.
TRAIN

Methods, platforms, and topics to enhance employee comfort and support reentry navigation
Reentry Training

Managers and Supervisors should consider offering reentry training to prevent the spread of COVID-19, keep the workplace safe, and help employees more confidently return to an office environment.

OBJECTIVES

- Explain COVID-19 safety protocols and policies to minimize spread
- Raise awareness of the behaviors necessary to keep the workplace safe
- Reassure employees that the Department is taking steps to protect them
- Prepare employees to be flexible in an evolving work environment

SAMPLE TRAINING TOPICS

- Workplace Safety Protocols and Policies
- Symptom Reporting & Contract Tracing
- Navigating a Hybrid Environment
- Mental Health and Wellness
Training Best Practices

Employee training can be delivered in-person, online, or through a blended learning approach. Training can consist of asynchronous and/or synchronous content, where employees can learn at their own pace or in live sessions with an instructor and peers.

**BEST PRACTICES**

- Set clear training goals and learning outcomes
- Choose the right training platform and/or delivery method
- Prepare learners and facilitators (e.g., send materials in advance)
- Support choice in participation (e.g., voice, chat, anonymous Q&A)
- Provide follow-up tools, resources, or support
- Promote an inclusive learning culture

**Reentry Orientation**

Consider hosting a first-day training orientation for all returning staff.
POINTS OF CONTACT

Points of contact for reentry support
Bureau Points of Contact

Please use the following template to highlight key points of contact for questions related to return to work.

<Name>
<Email>
<Phone Number>

<Name>
<Email>
<Phone Number>

<Name>
<Email>
<Phone Number>