

USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan

USDA provides critical services for curbing poverty and hunger, makes credit available for rural development (where approximately 20% of Americans live), stabilizes or improving domestic farm income, manages the integrity of critical natural resources, ensures the quality of food supplies, develops markets for agricultural products and services, and sustains the productivity of the Nation's forests, grasslands and natural resources. This workplace safety plan was created in response to a memorandum issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on January 24, 2021 (M-21-15) in response to the Executive Order, [Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing](#), which is part of the [National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness](#).

USDA created this workplace safety plan to guide how Mission Areas, Agencies and Staff Offices can implement public health best practices as determined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). As we have done since the start of the pandemic, USDA will work to balance delivery of our critical missions with adapting to the everyday challenges that COVID-19 presents to the workforce. The health and safety of the USDA workforce and contractors is paramount. This document replaces the existing USDA re-opening playbooks (for the country and for the National Capital Region).

In response to the memorandum we have:

- Issued USDA-wide guidance requiring correct and consistent use of masks and physical distancing consistent with current CDC guidance in all USDA facilities and offices
- Reviewed the safety principles provided by OMB and adapted them to meet the needs of USDA
- Designated a COVID-19 coordination team within USDA, including a Senior Advisor for COVID in the Office of the Secretary who will coordinate the work of this team (see Appendix)

The USDA COVID-19 workplace safety plan is as follows:

Health and Safety

Telework and Remote Work

Employees currently working remotely on a frequent or regular basis (e.g., if on an expanded remote work schedule, such as “maximum telework”) will be given at least 30 days notice and guidance before returning to the physical workplace. In some cases, mission critical work may require a shorter notification period. This information should be included in tailored agency plans (please see below on page 3 for how tailored plans will be reviewed). In determining the advance notice provided to employees, USDA agencies will ensure labor management agreements are followed. USDA will take into account the guidance of the state or local government where the USDA office is physically located with respect to the phases of re-opening. USDA's agency leaders, with support from human resources (HR), will evaluate activities, on an ongoing basis, that may require on-site work. As a general principle, every effort will be made to maximize the use of remote work during widespread community transmission unless it is physically impossible. Generally speaking, occupancy in USDA workplaces will be no more than 25% of normal capacity during periods of significant or high community transmission. Because of the diversity of USDA facilities, controls to ensure that 25% capacity is not exceeded will be implemented at the facility level. Badging data will be leveraged to

monitor capacity. Exceptions will be made in areas where greater than 25% capacity is required for mission critical work (such as laboratories or ports). These exceptions will be handled on a case-by-case basis and must be consistent with CDC guidance. Exceptions to the occupancy limit must be cleared by the head of the agency as advised by the agency's COVID-19 Coordination Team as well as the Office of the General Counsel and in consultation with the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force. In instances where exceptions to the occupancy limit are granted, efforts will be made to adhere to CDC guidance related to masks and physical distancing.

Levels of community transmission will be established by consulting [CDC's COVID Data Tracker County View](#). The identification of USDA facilities in each county and their phase of re-opening is tracked by the USDA Facility Status Tracker. Essential employees whose duties cannot be performed remotely are advised to follow best health practices identified by the CDC.

COVID-19 Coordination Team

USDA has established a COVID-19 Coordination Team which includes a representative from each mission area, Office of Human Resources Management, executive leadership, Office of the General Counsel, occupational safety and health, and two public health experts (see Appendix). The team will work in collaboration with USDA unions. The Office of Operations will provide occupational safety and health expertise for the National Capital Region. Mission areas will leverage their mission area capacity and will be called on to support the COVID-19 Coordination Team. The team is responsible for conducting assessments in order to establish, implement, and monitor compliance with: (a) safety protocols for physical space and masking; and (b) determinations of on-site and telework/remote working. The USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team meets bi-weekly to review compliance with USDA COVID-19 workplace safety plans and protocols, consider potential revisions to USDA's COVID-19 workplace safety plans and protocols, and any other operational needs. The USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team will review draft COVID-19 workplace safety plans and protocols for USDA, make any necessary changes, and submit plans to the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force for review and comment. As appropriate, the USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team may consult with the General Services Administration (GSA), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). For privately owned and Federally leased space, the USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team will coordinate with GSA, building security and safety committees, and facility pandemic coordinators. We will have proactive and iterative engagement with Federal employee unions on draft policies and on policy implementation, per the EO. To the extent USDA agency Collective Bargaining Agreement(s) provide stronger protections to employees than those outlined in this plan, the CBA(s) will be followed.

With respect to training and notification of the workforce, because USDA encompasses such a diverse workforce, we will solicit mission areas and agency input on how they would propose training be conducted/completed for their employees. For example, some may want to leverage town halls while others may decide to include a mandatory training to AgLearn where the USDA workplace safety plan could be posted and employees could certify that they reviewed it.

Face Masks and other PPE

USDA employees, on-site contractors, partners and volunteers must wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth in accordance with current CDC and OSHA guidance. CDC [recommends](#) the following: Non-medical disposable masks, masks that fit properly (snugly around the nose

and chin with no large gaps around the sides of the face), masks made with breathable fabric (such as cotton), masks made with tightly woven fabric (i.e., fabrics that do not let light pass through when held up to a light source), masks with two or three layers, and masks with inner filter pockets. USDA will not allow novelty/non-protective masks, masks with exhalation valves, or face shields as a substitute for masks. Please see communication section below detailing how USDA will inform USDA employees, on-site contractors, partners and volunteers about the mask rule.

To the extent funds are available, USDA will provide masks when requested for staff and visitors. USDA may determine that USDA-supplied non-medical disposable masks should be worn rather than employee-supplied masks. When making this determination, USDA will consult with the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force for advice. If any employee is unable to wear a mask properly, [adaptations and alternatives](#) will be considered. Accommodations will be made for individuals with required documentation and should be in accordance with existing USDA and Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC) guidance.

Appropriate masks must be worn consistently. Masks must be worn while inside all federal buildings, while inside any private office spaces leased by USDA or the federal government, and while riding in USDA vehicles. Masks must be worn in common areas or shared workspaces (including open floorplan office space, cubicle embankments, conference rooms, and USDA vehicles). Masks should also be worn in outdoor shared spaces when physical distancing cannot be maintained. USDA's agencies may provide for exceptions consistent with CDC guidelines, for example when an individual is alone in an office with floor to ceiling walls and a closed door or for a limited time when eating or drinking and maintaining distancing in accordance with CDC guidelines. As mentioned above, these exceptions will be handled on a case-by-case basis and must be consistent with CDC guidance. Exceptions to the masking requirement must be cleared by the head of the respective agency as advised by the agency's COVID-19 Coordination Team as well as the Office of the General Counsel and in consultation with the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force. Agency employees, onsite contractors, and visitors—as well as the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force—will be made aware of any approved exceptions and related science-based risk/hazard mitigation protocols consistent with CDC guidance via USDA communications (detailed below). This document is meant to govern workforce safety practices at USDA, but mission areas may submit tailored COVID-19 workplace safety plans for outdoor shared spaces to the USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team for approval.

Process for tailored plans: The development, updating, and review of tailored facility level plans will be delegated to the agency level. USDA will require that any facility level plans be drafted by the requesting agency and submitted to the mission area pandemic coordinator within one week of dissemination of the final USDA workplace safety plan for prompt review. Those plans will be expected to cite appropriate guidance and compliance and be revised as appropriate based on feedback from the mission area pandemic coordinator before submission to the USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team and the Office of the General Counsel. All plans will be reviewed by the USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team and the Office of the General Counsel for final approval. Agencies are expected to post final plans on the Department's SharePoint site. Each mission area will report their results related to tailored workplace safety plans (e.g., number of plans required, number reviewed, number that required revision, etc.) to the COVID-19 Coordination Team.

Individuals may be asked to lower their masks briefly for identification purposes in compliance with safety and security requirements. In addition to face masks, employees in some positions may be required to wear additional protective equipment, such as face shields. Employees that are required to use respirators for their positions (based on CDC guidance) should continue to use respirators.

USDA employees can considerably make customers and visitors aware of the masking requirement. Customers who will not honor USDA's requirement should be asked, politely, to do so. To the extent funds are available, USDA may purchase masks to provide to visitors but is not required to provide masks. Notice of the mask requirement via written signage must be posted conspicuously at each public entrance on the property along with contact information to reach USDA by phone, mail, email, or the Internet. If the customer refuses, that is the individual's right, but they must be directed to conduct business off-site (over the phone or online) and to please depart the premises. USDA employees should remain respectful yet safe and call for assistance from local authorities if the situation cannot be resolved.

Testing

USDA will await guidance from the CDC about a testing plan for the USDA workforce.

Contact Tracing

USDA's COVID-19 Coordination Team will collaborate with and support the contact tracing programs of mission areas to assist local health departments to identify, track, and manage contacts of COVID-19 cases. Facility pandemic coordinators will implement infection control and workplace safety efforts once informed of a case of COVID-19 (either due to specific symptoms or positive test). Employees who remain on enhanced telework status may choose to voluntarily disclose their positive COVID-19 result to their supervisor. Employees who have physically returned to their duty station must report a subsequent positive COVID-19 result to their supervisor.

Facility pandemic coordinators have the responsibility to make disclosures to local public health officials as required or necessary to provide for the public health and safety of Federal employees and contractors, in accordance with local public health mandates. Within the National Capital Region (NCR), the Director of the Office of Safety, Security and Protection is USDA's NCR pandemic coordinator and has responsibility for notification. Employees who have returned to the office must report if they subsequently receive a positive COVID-19 result. Employees who remain on maximized telework and have not come into a USDA workspace may report a COVID-19 positive result. All positive COVID-19 cases reported must be entered into the Department's SharePoint Tracker tool which is accessible by employees.

If 3 COVID-19 cases occur within a specific building or work setting, it will be the responsibility of USDA's COVID-19 Coordination Team (or a field office/USDA component designee) to determine—in consultation with local public health officials—appropriate next steps. This may include potential redesign of safety practices in the building/work setting and/or reevaluation of work scheduling. USDA will be transparent in communicating related information to the workforce, as relevant and appropriate, consistent with local and Federal privacy and confidentiality regulations and laws.

Travel

USDA employees should adhere strictly to [CDC guidelines before, during, and after travel](#), regardless of whether the travel is personal or for official business. At this time, these include the following precautions: carefully assessing travel risk prior to travel, wearing a mask during all portions of a trip, maintaining physical distance from non-household members, maintaining good hand hygiene by regularly washing hands with soap and water, or using alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available, and getting tested and staying home after higher-risk travel (as defined by the CDC) before returning to the workplace. The CDC has extensive guidelines for both domestic and international travel, and federal workers should consult these resources carefully before deciding to travel. USDA will follow guidance from the Department of State with regard to USDA employees at overseas duty stations.

USDA employees should be aware that they may be required to stay at home for a period of time after official or personal travel before they are allowed to return to the workplace, as well as following any testing guidance once issued. Employees will be notified by their supervisor if they are required to stay at home. Employees who are expected to come to the worksite should notify their supervisor of any personal travel that may lead to a required quarantine. Private transportation for official travel is preferred to use of public or other communal transportation, in combination with other safety/security guidance. For employees who engage in personal travel and who are not able to telework, USDA will encourage employees to take personal leave. USDA will consult OPM guidance as needed to determine next steps should an employee decline to do so after personal travel. For employees who need to quarantine after work-related travel, administrative leave or weather/safety leave may be provided.

Given currently high levels of transmission in the United States, official domestic travel should be limited to only mission critical trips. Any work-related travel must be assessed by managers to determine whether it meets the mission critical requirements and should consider transmission rates in the community to which the employee will travel. International travel should also be avoided if at all possible, unless it is mission critical (e.g., military deployments, COVID-19 response deployments/activities, diplomats traveling, high-level international negotiations that cannot occur remotely). USDA will issue more specific guidance to account for the particulars of our mission, limiting official travel as much as possible.

Symptom Monitoring

If USDA employees, on-site contractors, or visitors are not feeling well, they should not enter the USDA workplace. Federal employees and contractors working on site may be asked to complete symptom screening (such as a symptom questionnaire, an exposure history questionnaire, or a temperature check), on a daily basis or upon entry to the workplace. This information will be used to assess the individual's risk level and to determine whether they should be allowed entry to the workplace. Visitors may also be asked to complete symptom screening before entering a USDA facility. In developing these tools, USDA may adapt the ones used by the CDC. USDA will consider using mobile/web application tools to help facilitate this process. Any individual who develops any [symptoms consistent with COVID-19](#) during the workday must immediately isolate, notify their supervisor, and promptly leave the workplace. USDA has processes in place to provide advice and support to supervisors on any related reporting or HR requirements. Additionally, USDA is evaluating re-establishing facility on-site health units to assist with ongoing health monitoring and prevention services. Until guidance is issued, USDA will consult with the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force with questions related to symptom monitoring for USDA overall or for specific facilities.

Quarantine and Isolation

Any individual with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 will be advised to isolate by their supervisor, pursuant to CDC guidelines, and in compliance with local laws/regulations. Personnel who have had a close contact ([as defined by the CDC](#)) with someone who has COVID-19 should follow CDC and local guidance for quarantine. As mentioned above, employees who have physically returned to their duty station must report a subsequent positive test result to their supervisor. All positive COVID-19 cases reported must be entered into the Department's SharePoint Tracker tool which is accessible by employees.

Confidentiality

All medical information collected from personnel, including test results and any other information obtained as a result of testing and symptom monitoring, will be treated confidentially in accordance with applicable law, and accessible only by those with a need to know in order to protect the health and safety of personnel. USDA will identify a point of contact for all questions relating to personal medical data. Employees will be asked to refer questions related to reasonable accommodation to the coordinators in their mission area, who are familiar with protecting medical data.

Workplace Operations

As mentioned above, USDA will require all employees, on-site contractors, and all persons in USDA buildings or on USDA lands to wear face masks, maintain physical distance, and take other public health measures as appropriate, which may include wearing a face shield or other personal protective equipment (PPE).

Occupancy

No USDA workplaces (owned or leased) will operate above 25% of normal occupancy standards at any given time during periods of high community prevalence or transmission. Because of the diversity of USDA facilities, controls to ensure that 25% capacity is not exceeded will be implemented at the facility level. Badging data will be leveraged to monitor capacity. Exceptions to this policy will be made for mission critical work requiring greater than 25% occupancy (such as laboratories or ports) and made at the discretion of the mission area or agency. As mentioned above, these exceptions will be handled on a case-by-case basis and must be consistent with CDC guidance. Exceptions to the occupancy limit must be cleared by the head of the agency as advised by USDA's COVID-19 Coordination Team as well as the Office of the General Counsel and in consultation with the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force.

Exceptions for office spaces must be cleared by USDA as advised by the USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team and in consultation with the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force. The USDA COVID-19 Coordination Team or the agencies will develop a staffing plan that outlines which employees will work on-site full-time in a USDA facility, on-site occasionally in a USDA facility, or fully remote. Exceptions will be monitored in the facilities tracker on SharePoint.

Physical Distancing

To the extent practicable, individuals will be asked to maintain distance of at least six feet from others at all times, consistent with CDC guidelines, including in offices, conference rooms, and all other communal and workspaces. Distance and testing are not substitutes for wearing

masks. Individuals must maintain distance AND properly wear masks (see guidance above). One-way walkways, reconfiguration of workspaces or office assignments, and other mitigation strategies may be implemented to minimize interactions. As noted above, masks should also be worn in outdoor shared spaces when physical distancing cannot be maintained. Please see communications section below detailing how information is shared with various USDA stakeholders.

Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection

Enhanced cleaning and disinfection in common use/high touch/high density spaces, such as lobbies, restrooms, elevators, and stairwells will be provided. Office space that is in regular use will be cleaned and disinfected regularly, and in accordance with [CDC guidelines](#). Wipes, gloves, and [EPA-approved disinfectants](#) will be made available for individuals to wipe down their workstation and related personal property. Physical barriers such as plexiglass shields may be installed where appropriate. Signage will be provided where share tools and equipment are located to ensure that users disinfect and clean before and after usage.

In the event of a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the workplace (if the individual had been in the building up to seven days prior), enhanced environmental cleaning and disinfection will be performed in accordance with [CDC](#) and [GSA](#) guidance. If such enhanced cleaning is required, we will wait 24 hours before cleaning or disinfecting. If 24 hours is not feasible, we will wait as long as possible. Personnel and visitors may be asked to vacate the affected space until cleaning and disinfection is completed. As mentioned above, all positive COVID-19 cases reported must be entered into the Department's SharePoint Tracker tool which is accessible by employees.

USDA's COVID-19 Coordination Team or local offices, as appropriate, will determine the suitable scope of workplace closures—in some cases, it may be a suite or offices or part of a floor, in other cases, it may include an entire building.

Hygiene

Hand sanitizer stations are to be available at the building entrance and throughout workspaces, and will contain FDA-approved hand sanitizer, with at least 60% ethanol. Personnel will be encouraged to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitizer or alcohol-based hand rubs frequently. They will also be encouraged to follow [CDC guidance](#) on hand hygiene before eating, drinking or smoking, and after using the restroom.

Ventilation and Air Filtration

To the maximum extent feasible, indoor ventilation will be optimized to increase the proportion of outdoor ventilation, improve filtration, and reduce or eliminate recirculation. This has been completed and continues to be monitored for space occupied at the Headquarters Complex and the George Washington Carver Center. GSA and other private landlords handle the other leased facilities in the NRC. Agencies with field offices are responsible for these changes. Additional modifications may be considered in accordance with [CDC guidance](#), including as density increases.

Visitors

The number of visitors to the USDA workplaces will be minimized, and efforts should be made to conduct visits virtually where possible. Specifically, we will restrict visitors to essential, time-sensitive, scheduled visits only, require visitors to be escorted at all times and limit visitor access to non-essential areas of the USDA. Any visitor may be screened, tested if appropriate, and asked to fill out a symptom questionnaire form before entering the workplace. Mask wearing and physical distancing requirements will also apply to any visitors to USDA or USDA leased facilities. Please see the guidance, above.

Staggered Work Times and Cohort-Based Scheduling

Personnel will be encouraged to stagger work times to reduce density, minimize traffic volume in elevators, and avoid crowds during commuting. USDA is also able to implement team or cohort-based scheduling, to help reduce exposure. USDA HR teams will consult with OPM as needed to understand the pay and leave implications surrounding staggered work schedules and other flexibilities.

Elevators

Occupational health professionals in USDA will assess elevators to determine safe occupancy. Individuals must wear masks in elevators and in elevator lobbies. The use of stairs by those who are physically able is strongly encouraged. Signage will be posted to explain current procedures. Occupational health professionals will assess shared space capacity to determine safe occupancy levels. USDA facilities will be responsible for developing controls to enforce elevator capacity limits.

Shared spaces

Shared tools and equipment must be disinfected by users anytime the equipment is used by or transferred to a new person, and disinfectant wipes will be provided by USDA or the agencies. This includes phones, computers and other communication devices, kitchen implements, and other office equipment. Refrigerators, water coolers, and coffee brewers with disposable cups (or a personal re-usable cup/container) and single serve condiments and creamers may be used with proper hand hygiene. Visual markers may be installed to promote physical distancing within common spaces, and furniture may be removed. Steps may be taken to limit the number of people who can use common spaces at any one time, and signage outlining these limits should be prominently displayed.

Agency communication plan to inform Federal employees, onsite contractors, and visitors of current and upcoming policy changes

USDA educates and informs employees, contractors, and visitors to USDA facilities and federal lands in a variety of ways.

Employees and On-Site Contractors

The USDA Intranet is a primary tool for communicating internal messages to staff working remotely as well as on-site. All USDA employees have access to the Intranet; guidance documents, memos, and letters from the leadership are posted regularly. Separately, the Office of the Secretary regularly distributes guidance (talking points) to Subcabinet officials, Agency Heads, and senior staff to help communicate directly to their teams; these leaders provide

guidance to supervisors and line managers. The Office of the Secretary also uses email marketing techniques to reach staff and contractors with important news and information. Using email, USDA issued Department-wide guidance requiring correct and consistent use of masks and physical distancing consistent with current CDC guidance in all USDA facilities and offices. Finally, USDA posts signage and key messages at gateways of entry, doors, reception desks, commons areas such as restrooms and hallways, conference rooms, and Ranger District stations that provide information about policies and procedures related to COVID-19 for staff and contractors alike.

Visitors/Public

USDA websites—USDA.gov as well as hundreds of agency, state office and National Forest websites—are the primary means of communicating with the public. USDA and USDA Agencies also share key messages with the public via social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube). USDA posts signage and key messages at gateways of entry, doors, reception desks, commons areas such as restrooms and hallways, conference rooms, and Ranger District stations that provide information about policies and procedures related to COVID-19. USDA also utilizes radio via the USDA Radio services to distribute prepackaged radio stories and PSAs to radio stations across the country.

Engagement with USDA Unions

USDA's COVID-19 safety plan will be shared with the unions that have National Consultation Rights for feedback and input on implementation. Similarly, each USDA agency will share the safety plan with their respective union(s). This feedback will guide policy development and implementation plans.

Timeline for any updates to existing agency policies

As mentioned above, this document replaces the existing USDA re-opening playbooks (for the country and for the National Capital Region). By doing so, this brings existing policies into compliance with USDA's overall COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan. Any subsequent policy updates or building/facility-specific policy updates will be done in accordance with changes to CDC guidelines and guidance from in the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force.

Appendix: COVID-19 Coordination Team

Areas of expertise	Coordinator Name	Title	Work Desk Phone	Work Cell Phone	Work Email
Executive Leadership	Oscar Gonzalez	Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration		202-997-2067	Oscar.Gonzales@usda.gov
Public Health	Dr. Gregory Parham	Senior Advisor, COVID-19, Office of the Secretary		202-997-2085	Gregory.Parham@usda.gov
Public Health	Dr. Sara Bleich	Senior Advisor, COVID-19, Office of the Secretary		202-997-2178	Sara.Bleich@usda.gov
Occupational Safety and Health	Darren Booker	Safety and Occupational Health Manager		202-819-0558	darren.booker@usda.gov
Human Resources	Mary Pletcher	Chief Human Capital Officer	202-756-7149	202-689-5690	mary.pletcher@usda.gov
Office of the General Counsel	Emily Tasman	Assistant General Counsel	202-720-6056	202-597-4047	emily.tasman@usda.gov