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ACFO-ACAF Sample Return to Work Policy

Over the past few months, federal public servants have gone above and beyond during unprecedented circumstances to continue to provide Canadians with the level of service they have come to rely on. As restrictions are relaxed across the country and Canadians begin to resume our “new normal,” federal institutions will begin drafting return to work policies and procedures. It is crucial that, in doing so, departments prioritize the health and safety of employees as well as institutional operations and readiness.

It is important to remember that COVID-19 is far from eliminated. The risks posed by COVID-19 are ongoing, fluid, universal and applicable to all Canadians. In this context, the federal public service will be challenged to change their habits and behaviours to protect employees and to support the Government of Canada’s efforts to reduce the spread of this pandemic and keep Canadians safe. To that end, individual institutions must implement sustainable, considered policies and procedures that will serve the public service for the foreseeable future.

The following is intended as a guide for best practices as departments begin to transition to a return to work. It is not intended as a comprehensive list of all considerations, which may differ based on location, workspace configuration, number of employees, etc. This guide focuses specifically on ensuring and supporting physical distancing and enhanced cleanliness and hygienic practices in accordance with the Public Health Measures recommended by the Government of Canada.

Guiding principles

When developing return to work policies and procedures, departments ensure that they have thoroughly and thoughtfully considered by the following principles:

Adherence to all to the public health measures (PHMs) and restrictions as issued by the Government of Canada and local health authorities. PHMs are behaviors, actions or the wearing of non-medical equipment which reduce the risk of transmission and infection of viruses. The starting point for any return to work policy is to ensure that the office, including individual workspaces and all common areas, are set up to comply with all PHMs as established by the Government of Canada **before** return to work processes are triggered. Broad-ranging returns to the workplace should also be commensurate with the relaxation of restrictions in local communities and aligned with the locally demonstrated capacity to control COVID-19 transmission. A department must not compel its employees to return to work if doing so would require employees to compromise or disregard current PHMS.

Enabling and supporting continued remote work as a default. To minimize risk to all employees, departments should consider the nature of employees' work and whether work from home (WFH) can continue effectively for some or most. Employees whose work lends itself well to WFH should have the mobility tools, laptops, smartphones, IM, VPN, Collaboration Tools/APPS, etc. they need to continue to work effectively.

Identifying which activities must be resumed at the workplace and ensuring that these activities can be conducted safely. There may be activities that would significantly benefit from or require a physical office setting, such as collaboration of multiple people in-person, engagement with external parties, access to specialized & unique technology platforms only available in the physical office and networks which are solely office accessible, etc. If this is the case, departments must develop and practice policies and procedures (including physical distancing, enhanced cleanliness and hygienic practices, the wearing of non-medical masks, etc.) as to ensure the safety of all employees.

Assessing the factors that impact the availability of employees before they return to the workplace. These factors include but are not limited to: the health of an employee and/or a member of their household as it pertains to any adverse impact that could be caused by contracting COVID-19, presence at home of children under the active care of an employee during the expected work hours, availability of public transportation and of other community services and the availability of auxiliary office work support. Departments should continue to support access to 'Other leave with pay' (code 699) for those who are unable to work from home or return to work.

Creating and communicating clear policies for determining which employees are to return to the workplace. If a position is deemed essential, departments should first ask for volunteers among employees filling that position, as some may be more able or willing to return to work than others.

Guidelines for determining who will be selected to return to work and who will continue to work from home should be clearly established. Essential employees or those required to return to work should be given at least three weeks of notice to make arrangements and transition back to work.

Applying a strong equity and human rights lens. Departments must acknowledge the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on specific groups, such as people with disabilities, women, racialized and Indigenous people and ensure that an equity lens is applied when developing all processes and procedures.

Facilitating and supporting communications and training. Departments must ensure that all employees returning to their workplace fully understand the PHMs they must practice, such as physical distancing, cough etiquette, frequent hand washing and surface cleaning, and are trained on the use of non-medical masks. Departments should also ensure that managers and Occupational Health and Safety Committees have training needed to deal with any mental health issues that may result from COVID-19.

Physical distancing

Physical distancing is a recommended Public Health Measure (PHM) that should be upheld in all federal buildings and will specifically apply to common areas, such as entrances, stairwells, washrooms, elevators, and lunchrooms, as well as to the office spaces themselves, where people meet, work and eat. All departmental return to work policies should be guided by the following physical distancing best practices:

Staggered return to work / shift occupancy. Office capacity must be balanced with physical distancing, which may mean staggered return to work and/or shift occupancy. Even if workstation layouts meet the minimum physical distance, limited occupancy of the workplace will still be required in order to reduce crowding in circulation paths and shared support spaces. Occupancy shifts should be considered in order to allow the entire workforce access to the workplace, but at different times.

Unassigned workstations. Allowing all workstations to be used by everyone will ensure that staggered seating can be easily implemented. Employees may find themselves needing to isolate in response to uneasiness or anxiety during this resumption phase, so enclosed individual spaces should also be unassigned in order to allow all employees access to a private space when needed and to avoid restricting access and underutilization.

Updated workstation orientations. Whenever possible, workstations should be oriented in a way to avoid face to face placement of seats. Open workstations must be set up in a way that ensures appropriate physical distancing (a minimum of two meters) at all times. These measures may require a removal of seats.

Limited occupancy for enclosed offices and other collaborative spaces. Occupancy limitations should be implemented depending on the size of the room, in accordance with physical distancing protocols. Enclosed meeting rooms or other collaborative spaces should also have reduced occupancy. In this case, extra chairs should be removed to help maintain proper distance.

Implementing privacy screens in all open workspaces. Privacy screens and dividers can be useful to provide barriers for physical distancing, limit the promulgation of germs and to help delineate personal space. Universal worksurface panels can easily be attached to work surfaces and tables.

Limited occupancy for kitchen areas. Use of kitchen areas including counter, sinks and other appliances should be limited to one person at a time, respecting physical distancing at all times (marking the floor with tape where appropriate).

Limited occupancy for equipment rooms. Due to their small size, use of equipment rooms, copiers and printers should be limited to one person at a time respecting distancing at all times (marking the floor with tape where appropriate).

Clear, appropriate signage and demarcation. Spaces outside meeting rooms should be clearly marked for those waiting to enter and leave adequate physical distancing for people exiting. Office pathway flows should also be outlined to ease physical distancing. Due to the width of circulation areas in most office environments, departments should consider maintaining unidirectional circulation patterns for corridors throughout offices and workstations. Adequate signage should be provided to reinforce these practices.

Limited obstacles/clutter. Departments should conduct a thorough scan of circulation areas and declutter pathways to limit potential for bottlenecks. Additionally, all non-essential chairs in office areas should be removed.

Establishing a Workplace Visitors Guideline for allowing guests or visitors to enter the workplace.

Departments should consider the number of visitors allowed in the workplace at one time to ensure that physical distancing measures can still be adhered to as prescribed and consider requiring employees to pre-register visitors and guests to monitor how many people to expect in the workplace.

It is the responsibility of all employees to comply with all directives and to ensure that they are keeping up to date with department directives, as well as PHMs and other government recommendations posted via social media, email, physical signage, screen pop-up, hallway TV messages, etc.

It is the responsibility of management to provide clear, specific guidance to employees regarding physical distancing via common communications channels to ensure they are aware of what is changing, what are the expected behaviors and emphasize the reasons behind them.

Non-Medical Masks

A non-medical mask is a mask that fully covers the nose and mouth to prevent respiratory droplets from contaminating people or things in the immediate vicinity of the wearer. The wearing of a non-medical mask is considered a PHM that does not protect the wearer but will protect others – particularly vulnerable populations (e.g. older adults, those with chronic underlying medical conditions or the immunocompromised) – from the wearer in the course of normal activities.

Departments should support the wearing of NMMs in common areas where the social distancing measures cannot always be maintained. The directives for employees on the wearing of NMMs are the following:

- Masks must be well-fitted (non-gaping);
- Employees must avoid moving the mask around or adjusting it often;
- Masks should not be shared with others;
- Masks should be worn for the short periods of time that employees are unable to physically distance themselves from others in public spaces and for no longer than four hours (ex. in elevators, while moving through hallways in buildings);
- Cloth masks should be changed as soon as they become damp or soiled;
- Damp or soiled masks should be placed directly into a washing machine or a disposable bag that can be emptied into a washing machine and then discarded;
- Masks that cannot be washed should be discarded in a regular trash bin and replaced as soon as they become damp, soiled or crumpled;
- When removing a mask, employees should not touch the front or the inside of the mask, instead removing it by grasping the ties or straps with their fingers; and
- Employees should wash their hands thoroughly after removing a mask.

It is the responsibility of department management to provide all employees with NMMs as well as the equipment required to keep the masks clean and sanitary. Managers who have not been issued NMMs or the required equipment for their teams are to contact their superiors.

Cleanliness and hygienic practices

To ensure the occupational health and safety of all employees and to aid in the effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19, departments should adopt an approach to cleanliness and hygienic practices that addresses three key areas of intervention:

- Employee personal hygiene practices
- Cleanliness of individual use spaces, furniture and equipment
- Cleanliness of common use spaces, furniture and equipment

Departments must ensure that all facilities are regularly professionally cleaned and that all sanitation and ventilation systems are in ongoing compliance with the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (COHSR).

management and employees themselves will have distinct but important roles to play in ensuring that these directives are accomplished.

It is the responsibility of all employees to comply with all directives and to ensure that they are keeping up to date with department directives, as well as PHMs and other government recommendations posted via social media, email, physical signage, screen pop-up, hallway TV messages, etc.

It is the responsibility of management to provide clear, specific guidance to employees regarding cleanliness and hygienic practices via common communications channels to ensure they are aware of what is changing, what are the expected behaviors and emphasize the reasons behind them.

Employee personal hygiene practices

Maintaining a level of personal hygienic practices as recommended by the Government of Canada and consistent with Public Health Measures (PHMs) is one of the most important things employees can do to prevent the spread of COVID-19. To that end, departments' directives on hygienic practices are for employees to:

- Wash their hands often and avoid touching their face;
- Cough into their elbow;
- Avoid shaking hands or any other kind of physical contact;
- Avoid touching surfaces when not necessary;
- Sanitize their hands when leaving their office area and entering common areas or operational zones;
- Stay home and do not come into work if they or a member of their household feel unwell; and

- Make daily note of their interactions with others in the workplace as well as the floors and areas they have visited or worked in to facilitate contact tracing in the unlikely event of an outbreak.

Management also has an important role to play in helping to support and encourage appropriate personal hygiene practices. The department's directives for managers are to:

- Ensure that there is always sufficient soap and paper towels and other sanitary supplies in all washrooms, kitchen areas, etc.;
- Provide and maintain hand sanitizer stations in appropriate zones including entrances to offices, hallways and all common areas;
- Support employees who practice appropriate hygiene by not coming to work because they or a member of their household feels ill and not place an undue burden on them by requiring a doctor's note; and
- Afford employees the tools and time needed to record their contact tracing.

Cleanliness of individual use spaces

To support the goal of facilitating cleanliness in individual use spaces, employees should abide by the following directives:

- Adopt a clean desk policy; and
- Share in the responsibility of maintaining cleanliness on surfaces and high touch areas.

To comply with a clean desk policy, employees should clear their desks of clutter, papers, and store away desk caddies and other office supplies in drawers or storage lockers and overhead bins as available. This reduces the number of surfaces to clean within the office, makes it easier to wipe down the desk area before and after use and helps facilitate access by cleaning services. Employees are also asked to wipe down work surfaces, armrests and other high touch areas within the individual work areas before and after use.

To support employees' adherence with the cleanliness directives regarding individual use spaces, management must:

- Ensure that there is always sufficient sanitizer and wipes available to employees; and
- Implement signage throughout the office space reinforcing the new cleaning protocol.

Common areas

To facilitate cleanliness in common areas such as entrances, stairwells, elevators, hallways, washrooms and kitchens, employees should share in the responsibility of cleanliness on surfaces and high touch areas. This includes wiping down surfaces and high touch areas after use.

To support employees' adherence with the cleanliness directives regarding individual use spaces, management must:

- De-clutter common use areas to facilitate circulation and access by cleaning services;
- Have wipes/sanitizer for broad use as employees transition from area to area;
- Ensure that, whenever possible, doors to rooms remain open to encourage air circulation and to avoid excessive touching of handles; and
- Ask employees to wipe down work surfaces, armrests and other high touch areas such as meeting room control touch screens, and buttons on photocopiers and printers within the common use and meeting areas before and after use.