

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-650T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Government Operations, Committee on Oversight and Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal employees perform critical functions across multiple mission areas, from those vital to the long-term well-being of the country to those directly charged with aspects of public safety. Major emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can pose threats to employees' safety and conditions may ebb and flow over an extended period. During these situations, federal agencies have a responsibility to provide an environment for employees to perform their jobs safely and effectively.

This statement provides (1) key considerations based on GAO's prior work for federal agencies as federal workers reenter the workplace; (2) an illustrative example of how the Census Bureau was forced to suspend major Decennial Census field operations and the process it used to resume operations; and (3) key practices for ensuring telework contributes to continuity of operations. This statement is based on a large body of GAO work on pandemic preparedness, reviews of the Decennial Census, and federal human capital management issued from July 2003 through June 2020.

View [GAO-20-650T](#). For more information, contact J. Christopher Mihm at (202) 512-6806 or MihmJ@gao.gov and Michelle Rosenberg at (202) 512-6806 or RosenbergM@gao.gov.

June 25, 2020

FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Key Considerations for Agencies Returning Employees to Workplaces during Pandemics

What GAO Found

The rapidly escalating challenges from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) global outbreak present critical workforce issues for federal agencies to assess and address. GAO's prior work on pandemics and human capital issues has shown that agencies should consider a range of factors to carry out their missions while protecting their workforce and the members of the public with whom they interact.

Key considerations for federal workers' reentry to workplaces. As federal agencies manage operations during the COVID-19 pandemic and plan for their employees to safely return to workplaces, GAO's prior work has shown that it is important for agencies to identify mission essential functions that cannot be performed remotely when deciding who needs to return to the office. Agencies should also consider the exposure risk level and local conditions when deciding whether to reopen offices across the country. To protect employees as they reenter the workforce, it will be important for agencies to have appropriate protection measures in place. For example, agencies should consider how they can ensure adequate distribution of hygiene supplies. They should also consider changes to the work environment to reduce workplace hazards, and implement social distancing strategies.

How the Census Bureau decided to resume Decennial Census operations. The U.S. Census Bureau offers an example of how an agency suspended and resumed operations under the current pandemic. In March 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau suspended field operations of the Decennial Census and took a phased approach to resuming operations at its area census offices. As of June 11, all area census offices had resumed operations. Key aspects of resuming operations at area census offices included: (1) taking a phased approach to restarting operations, such as resuming operations that required less physical interaction first; (2) making operational changes to minimize face-to-face interactions; (3) addressing worker safety concerns; and (4) communicating pandemic plans to ensure continued operations.

Key practices for ensuring telework contributes to continuity of operations. Several key practices GAO previously identified are useful for agencies to help ensure telework contributes to continuity of operations during the current pandemic and in the future. Specifically, agencies should consider based on their current experiences whether: (1) their policies and guidance related to telework are sufficient to ensure that their workforces are telework ready and balances are struck between employees' personal circumstances and work responsibilities; (2) the extent to which their telework infrastructure, including technical support and security, is adequate to support increased telework; (3) procedures and standards are in place that ensure telework does not diminish organizational and employee performance; and (4) the processes, procedures, and tracking systems to collect data provide the information needed to evaluate the use of telework. These assessments will assist agencies in considering broader changes to their policies and procedures related to telework as employees are called back to their duty stations.