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Oversight and Reform, House of
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FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Key Considerations for Agencies Returning Employees to Workplaces during Pandemics

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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.

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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.

Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss how our previous work on pandemics, the 2020 Decennial Census and federal telework, may inform key decisions by federal agencies as they plan to safely return federal employees to their official duty stations. In the event of emergencies including the current Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, federal employees responsible for supporting their agencies' mission essential functions are expected to continue their work in order to sustain agency operations.

Federal employees perform functions across a multitude of mission areas, from those vital to the long-term well-being of the country—such as environmental protection, intelligence, social work, and financial services—to those directly charged with aspects of public safety—including corrections, airport and aviation safety, medical services, border protection, and agricultural safety. The rapidly escalating challenges from the COVID-19 global outbreak present critical workforce issues for federal agencies to assess and address. Major emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can pose threats to employees' safety and hazardous conditions may ebb and flow over an extended period. Federal agencies have a responsibility to provide an environment for employees to perform their jobs safely and effectively.

This statement provides (1) key considerations for federal agencies as federal workers reenter the workplace; (2) an illustrative example of how the Census Bureau (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 and lessons learned for telework to inform opportunities going forward.

We have recently initiated reviews of federal agencies' use of telework and continuity of operations (COOP) plans in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ As part of that work, we plan to assess how agencies incorporate the key considerations and practices we have identified related to pandemic preparedness and telework. We also plan to review the successes and challenges agencies experienced managing

¹These reviews are being conducted as part of our work in response to GAO's oversight responsibilities under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 19010, 134 Stat. 281, at 579-81 (2020).

operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including lessons learned and planned changes to better prepare agencies for the future.

This statement is based on our body of work on pandemic preparedness, federal human capital management, and reviews of the Decennial Census issued primarily between July 2003 and June 2020.² More detailed information on our objectives, scope, and methodology for that work can be found in the issued reports.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Key Considerations for Federal Workers' Reentry to Workplaces

We have previously reported on how federal agencies were planning to protect their federal workers during a pandemic, as well as lessons learned from the H1N1 pandemic, the most recent pandemic experienced by our nation prior to COVID-19.³ Based on these lessons, and further informed by more recent events, we have identified key issues for federal agencies to consider as their employees reenter the workplace.⁴

²GAO, *2020 Census: COVID-19 Presents Delays and Risks to Census Count*, [GAO-20-551R](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 9, 2020); *Influenza Pandemic: Agencies Report Progress in Plans to Protect Federal Workers but Oversight Could Be Improved*, [GAO-12-748](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2012); *Emergency Preparedness: Agencies Need Coordinated Guidance on Incorporating Telework into Emergency and Continuity Planning*, [GAO-11-628](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 2011); *Influenza Pandemic: Lessons from the H1N1 Pandemic Should Be Incorporated into Future Planning*, [GAO-11-632](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 27, 2011); *Influenza Pandemic: Increased Agency Accountability Could Help Protect Federal Employees Serving the Public in the Event of a Pandemic*, [GAO-09-404](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 2009); and *Human Capital: Further Guidance, Assistance, and Coordination Can Improve Federal Telework Efforts*, [GAO-03-679](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2003).

³[GAO-12-748](#); [GAO-11-632](#); [GAO-09-404](#).

⁴We drew these key considerations from surveys we conducted with the 24 agencies covered by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 in 2012 and 2009. Those surveys provided an overview of governmentwide influenza pandemic preparedness efforts. ([GAO-12-748](#) and [GAO-09-404](#)).

Maintain Continuous Communication with Employees

Agencies should maintain continuous communication with employees, and their representatives, during a pandemic. In particular, agencies should identify employee concerns and communicate human capital guidance such as pay, leave, staffing, and other human capital flexibilities to employees to help to ensure the continuity of agencies' operations and mission essential functions. It is important that employees understand the policies and requirements of their agencies, and the alternatives, such as telework, that may be available to them. Continuous communication will also help agencies to provide real-time information to employees as conditions evolve.

Identify Mission-Essential Functions and Employees, and Classify Their Exposure Risk Level

Employees who must work onsite during a pandemic will face varying levels of exposure risk. The level of risk depends, in part, on whether or not they will be in close proximity to people potentially infected with the virus. As a first step, it is important that agencies identify mission essential functions that cannot be performed remotely, as well as the related number of employees who will perform those functions and their risk of exposure. Agencies should consider how they will continue to update their determinations and monitor the associated risks, as these factors could affect decisions on reentry as conditions evolve.

Make Decisions about Reentry Based on Local Conditions

It is important for federal agencies to factor-in local conditions of the pandemic at the component and facility level in their determinations regarding workforce reentry rather than applying across-the-board decisions based on agencies' headquarters locations.⁵ Agencies should consider making decisions about reentry, including precautions and safeguards agencies take, based on the local prevalence of the pandemic at each site. As agencies consider local conditions for reentry, they should share information and cooperate with other agencies located in the same area. These reentry decisions could change over time as the pandemic progresses, such as if there is a second or third wave of outbreaks.⁶ It is important that agencies' plans to protect their workforce for a pandemic are operational at all levels of the organization; particularly for those workers who have to perform mission-essential functions onsite.

⁵Components refer to subordinate entities of departments, such as component agencies, field or regional offices, or other operating divisions.

⁶GAO, *Science & Tech Spotlight: CORONAVIRUSES*, [GAO-20-472SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 3, 2020).

Have Appropriate Protection Measures in Place to Protect Employees

To protect employees as they reenter their workplaces, agencies should have appropriate protection measures in place, by exposure risk level. For example, an agency could make changes to the work environment to reduce workplace hazards, such as by installing sneeze guards as a barrier between employees who must have frequent contact with other employees or the public. Additionally, an agency could provide personal protective equipment (PPE), such as surgical masks, gloves, and N-95 respirators, to employees which, if used correctly, can help prevent some exposures.

Agencies will want to ensure that they have an adequate supply of hygiene supplies, such as hand sanitizers, and a plan for distributing those supplies within the agency. Some basic hygiene precautions, such as encouraging employees to wash their hands or use a hand sanitizer after they cough, sneeze, or blow their noses, can be implemented in every workplace. Agencies will also want to provide supplemental cleaning programs for common areas.

Implement Social Distancing Strategies

Avoiding crowded settings through social distancing strategies is one of the best ways to prevent infection during an influenza pandemic.⁷ Agencies can implement various social distancing strategies to avoid situations that increase workers' risk of exposure to a pandemic virus. For those functions that can be performed remotely, agencies may consider maximizing the use of telework, which is discussed in greater detail later in this statement.

Other strategies agencies should consider include avoiding unnecessary travel, restricting in-person meetings and gatherings, and allowing flexible schedules to reduce the number of employees in the building at the same time. Agencies should also consider workplace reconfiguration (such as building walls or partitions between workstations), office-specific protocols (such as limiting personal contacts among staff), and making decisions about reopening office fitness and childcare centers as part of separate risk-based decision processes.

⁷Social distancing is a technique used to minimize close contact among persons in public places, such as work sites and public areas, with the intent of reducing the rate of transmission of infectious diseases. COVID-19 has brought social distancing practices to the forefront worldwide as a means of controlling local spread of the disease. GAO, *Science & Tech Spotlight: Social Distancing During Pandemics*, [GAO-20-545SP](#) (Washington, D.C., May 13, 2020).

Establish Protocols to Prioritize and Distribute Antivirals and Vaccines

When medical countermeasures—such as antivirals and vaccines—are developed, it will be important for agencies to decide the extent to which these countermeasures will be provided to employees.⁸ In cases where countermeasures are going to be provided to employees, agencies should consider actions necessary to procure them, and establish clearly-defined, well-documented, and consistently-applied protocols to prioritize and allocate their distribution.

Decennial Census—Considerations Made as Area Offices Resume Field Operations

The Bureau presents an illustrative example on continuity of operations and decision making for resumption of operations. The Bureau has both permanent staff in headquarters and a large local field infrastructure of 248 Area Census Offices (ACO) with short-term staff to implement the decennial census.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, just a day before invitations to respond to the 2020 Census were scheduled to arrive in mailboxes across the country, and as peak census operations were set to begin. In March and April 2020, the Bureau suspended operations until June 1 and extended key operations. Since that time, the Bureau announced it would resume operations at additional ACOs each week, and as of June 11 all ACOs had resumed operations. Key aspects of reopening Bureau ACOs included (1) a phased approach to resuming operations, (2) operational changes in response to challenges related to COVID-19, (3) addressing worker safety concerns, (4) communicating pandemic plans to ensure continued operations, and (5) contingency planning for risks.

Phased Approach to Resuming Operations

The Bureau took a phased approach to resuming operations at its ACOs. To make these decisions, the Bureau considered multiple factors including whether the state in which each ACO was located had begun phased reopening, whether data on federally established health criteria supported the decision to restart, and whether the Bureau could meet the safety needs of ACO employees and the public. In our late May survey of ACO managers, responses on the Bureau's efforts to reopen offices varied. For example, 66 percent of ACO managers responding to our late May survey reported satisfaction with the process of recalling office staff,

⁸Medical countermeasures for use during a pandemic may include vaccines, antiviral drugs, personal respirators, and diagnostic tests. Vaccine, considered the first line of defense against a virus, is used to stimulate the production of an immune system response to protect the body from disease. Antiviral drugs are medications that can prevent or reduce the severity of a viral infection.

68 percent with readiness to conduct field operations, and 75 percent with readiness to conduct office operations.

Operations resumed in a phased manner not only by office, but also by function. As the Bureau resumed operations, it was able to resume operations that required less physical interaction, such as Update Leave, in which field staff deliver questionnaires to homes that might not receive mail delivered to their doors. Operations that require interviewing residents, such as Non-Response Follow Up, were delayed until August.

Operational Changes to Maintain Social Distance in Response to Challenges Related to COVID-19

The Bureau has also made a number of changes to its 2020 Census operations to minimize face-to-face interactions. The Bureau modified its Update Leave operation, directing field staff to update the addresses by observation when delivering a questionnaire, instead of knocking on doors to speak with residents.

To reduce in-person contact for the Group Quarters operation, which enumerates facilities such as prisons, nursing facilities, and college dormitories, Bureau officials told us they were contacting facilities to encourage them to shift from in-person enumeration to electronic responses. In late April, the Bureau also authorized its ACOs to call those facilities that had previously opted to respond by providing a paper listing of residents. Census staff asked the facilities to mail the listing back to the ACO rather than having the ACO send staff to pick up the paper listing.

Addressing Worker Safety Concerns

The Bureau stated that it will coordinate with federal, state, and local health officials to put appropriate protocols and procedures in place and ensure adequate PPE and cleaning supplies. In early May, the Bureau announced that it had ordered this equipment for all field staff and that these materials would be secured and provided before resumption of operations.

Bureau officials told us they are distributing PPE and cleaning supplies to its 248 ACOs on a rolling basis, prioritizing delivery to those ACOs that were resuming major field operations, such as Update Leave. In our late May survey, ACO manager satisfaction was relatively high regarding PPE for staff conducting Update Leave (66 percent), the largest field operation being conducted at the time. In contrast, managers at that time reported some of their lowest satisfaction rates when asked about PPE adequacy for their office and field workers more generally (34 and 43 percent, respectively).

ACO managers reported higher satisfaction in late May than in early April with their ACO's ability to safely manage employees and operations during the pandemic (increasing from 55 to 65 percent on average across three questions on this topic). Despite this increase in confidence, managers expressed concerns regarding worker safety in open-ended comments. For example, in late May managers expressed concerns regarding how fingerprinting of large numbers of staff—necessary to fulfill the census mission—could be conducted safely under conditions of social distancing. In addition, more than 15 comments in early April and 11 in late May expressed concerns about the ability of the ACO management teams to telework. These included concerns about the inadequate number of laptops and who was expected to report to their local office.

Communicating Pandemic Plans to Ensure Continued Operations

The Bureau created a COVID-19 Internal Task Force to create a communications plan and appropriate workforce flexibilities. The Bureau sent emails to regional staff with updated information on delaying field operations and prepared documents to answer questions about the delays, office operating status, payroll, hiring, and training.

Responses to our surveys of ACO managers highlighted the need for the Bureau to ensure open lines of communications. Between early April and late May, respondent satisfaction increased regarding the timeliness and clarity of Bureau communication about its pandemic plan; however, satisfaction in these areas remained relatively low. Specifically, reported satisfaction increased for communication timeliness (from 35 to 45 percent) and clarity (from 42 to 51 percent). More than 50 ACO managers commented about communication challenges such as conflicting direction from different sources and guidance received shortly before the implementation date.

Contingency Planning for Risks Including an Epidemic

In May 2019, we reported that the Bureau did not have contingency plans for many identified risks including for major disasters—such as an epidemic—and recommended that it develop contingency plans for all risks that did not have one.⁹ The Bureau updated its risk register for major disasters to include a contingency plan.

According to the Bureau's March 2020 risk register, the contingency plan for any major disaster—including an epidemic—is rapid response,

⁹The Bureau agreed with this recommendation and stated in May 2020 that it planned to have evidence of mitigation and contingency plans by August 2020. GAO, *2020 Census: Additional Actions Needed to Manage Risk*, [GAO-19-399](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2019).

meaning the Bureau would develop a plan to address the risk once it was realized. Bureau officials told us that, depending on the type of major disaster, response would vary widely and even if they had a more detailed contingency plan for a pandemic it would have never addressed the magnitude of the current national emergency that is taking place across the country.

Key Practices for Ensuring Telework Contributes to Continuity of Operations during the Current Pandemic and Provides an Expanded Workforce Option in the Future

We have identified key practices in telework-related literature and guidelines that federal agencies should implement in developing telework programs.¹⁰ Also, in 2011, we reported that the Office of Personnel Management, the General Services Administration, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency had suggested several practices to federal agencies, in various telework or emergency-related guidance documents, for how to ensure telework is part of continuity of operations planning.¹¹ These practices generally align with those we previously identified.

Based on this prior work, we have identified several practices that may be especially useful for agencies to help ensure telework programs contribute to continuity of operations during COVID-19 and other major emergencies. These practices may be especially important if substantial numbers of employees remain out of their workplaces for an extended period or if agencies need to reverse their reentry decisions based on changing public health circumstances. In addition, agencies' experiences with telework during the current pandemic may suggest opportunities to increase the availability of telework in the future. These practices can be grouped into four general categories: (1) policies and guidance related to telework; (2) technology; (3) performance management; and (4) program evaluation.

Policies and Guidance Related to Telework

Major emergencies, such as a pandemic, underscore the importance of establishing and updating clear policies and guidance related to telework as agencies' continuity of operations may depend on employees working remotely for extended periods.¹² Agencies should assess whether their

¹⁰[GAO-03-679](#).

¹¹[GAO-11-628](#).

¹²Policies and guidance related to telework include not only generally applicable telework policies and guidance but also telework-related direction in agencies' continuity of operations (COOP) plans. Under the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, agencies are required to incorporate telework into their COOP plans. Pub. L. No. 111-292, § 2(a), 124 Stat. 3165, 3167 (2010), *codified at* 5 U.S.C. § 6504(d).

policies and guidance were sufficient to ensure that their workforces were telework ready and understood the agency's expectation of employees regarding teleworking during this emergency. The current crisis presents an opportunity for agencies to assess their established policies or requirements to ensure that they (1) balance employees' personal circumstances and work responsibilities, and (2) effectively facilitated communication and engagement among teleworkers, managers, and coworkers. Agencies should institute processes for communicating human-capital guidance for emergencies (e.g., pay, leave, benefits) to ensure they worked effectively.

For example, agencies should consider whether emergency employees (including COOP employees) knew in advance about their mission critical status. If not, agencies should ensure that, in case of future emergencies including a potential resurgence of COVID-19, employees are notified about requirements to report for work, remain at work, work at home, or report to an alternative work site when government operations are disrupted.

Similarly, agencies should consider whether their guidance on workplace health and safety issues was adequate to ensure that teleworkers had safe and adequate places to work off-site, and whether information-security training was provided to all individuals, or managers of individuals, who teleworked during the current pandemic. It is important for agencies to correct any identified deficiencies in the guidance and training to improve the use of telework going forward, including for future emergency situations that may again require telework.

Technology

We have reported that technology concerns are frequently cited barriers to telework.¹³ To effectively use telework as a tool to continue operations during major emergencies, agencies must have an appropriate information technology infrastructure in place that allows large numbers of employees to telework simultaneously. As such, it is important for agencies to assess the extent to which their telework infrastructure was adequate to support increased telework, especially during peak periods, including whether technical support was sufficient, and address any access and security issues they identify.

¹³GAO has recently initiated a review of telework information technology infrastructure and plans to assess agencies initial experiences implementing their telework solutions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Performance Management

Ensuring established organizational performance standards are met is important to maintaining agency operations whether employees are physically present in the office or working remotely. During extended periods of remote work, this could include setting expectations and preferences for how employees communicate with supervisors before telework arrangements begin. Agencies should consider whether their existing procedures and standards meet the needs of employees who teleworked and whether they ensured that telework did not diminish employee and organizational performance.

Program Evaluation

Evaluation of telework may help agencies better understand the impact their increased use of telework had on their ability to achieve goals and accomplish missions, and could allow them to make adjustments to telework moving forward as employees are expected to return to their duty stations. As part of such an evaluation, agencies should assess whether their processes, procedures, and tracking systems to collect data provided the information needed to evaluate telework.

In conclusion, federal agencies have a responsibility to provide safe workplaces for employees to perform their jobs. The evolving and growing challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic present critical workforce safety issues for federal agencies to assess and address as they seek to continue their operations. As I have discussed today, agencies should consider a number of factors when making decisions about employees reentering workplaces. Lessons learned from previous pandemic emergencies, as well as from telework use to ensure continuity of operations, can be helpful as agencies navigate ongoing workforce safety and productivity challenges. Consideration of these factors and lessons learned from agencies' current experiences may better prepare agencies to address and respond to challenges from ongoing and future emergencies.

Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and Members of the Subcommittee, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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