

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104295](#), a report to congressional addressees.

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government employs approximately 2.8 million civilian workers, a workforce that plays an important role in maintaining vital government services. The White House, OMB, and other cognizant agencies issued guidance to support federal agencies as they developed tailored plans for bringing the federal workforce back to offices and safely conducting on-site work.

The CARES Act included a provision for GAO to monitor and oversee the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report (1) examines agencies' approaches to initial reentry planning, (2) assesses the extent to which agencies' workplace safety plans are consistent with federal guidance, and (3) examines the coordination and oversight of federal reentry and workplace safety planning across the government.

GAO analyzed federal guidance from cognizant agencies to identify crosscutting themes for reentry planning, and reviewed OMB guidance on workplace safety principles. GAO assessed workplace safety plans, reentry plans, and relevant documentation from the 24 CFO Act agencies against the themes and principles identified in guidance and interviewed agency officials. GAO also reviewed guidance to identify oversight and coordination responsibilities and reviewed prior GAO work on pandemic preparedness and interagency collaboration.

View [GAO-22-104295](#). For more information, contact Michelle B. Rosenberg at (202) 512-6806 or rosenbergm@gao.gov.

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COVID-19

Federal Agencies' Initial Reentry and Workplace Safety Planning

What GAO Found

Federal agencies adopted a maximum telework posture following the March 2020 national emergency declaration related to COVID-19. In April 2020, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance established a framework for agencies to plan for the reentry of employees to the workplace and cognizant agencies issued guidance in 2020 on how to plan for the eventual return of the workforce to office locations. In response to the call for office reentry, the 24 Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Act agencies developed reentry plans. Agencies' 2020 reentry plans varied considerably. All the agencies developed phased approaches for reentry, though agencies did not progress through the established phases at the same rate and the characteristics of each phase differed by agency. None of the agencies' plans consistently covered all aspects of recommended federal guidance. For example, reentry planning documents for 10 or more agencies did not fully address employee training on reentry, office ventilation controls, and face covering requirements, as recommended by federal guidance.

In January 2021, the new administration established the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force (Task Force) to provide guidance to agencies and required a 25 percent capacity limit for federal buildings, subject to exceptions with approval. It also issued guidance directing agencies to submit plans addressing a set of model workplace safety principles to the Task Force. Agencies' workplace safety plans, in contrast to initial reentry plans, were generally consistent with the updated federal guidance. Agencies' plans cited most safety principles described in the guidance, including the occupancy limit and additional safety measures to protect the workforce, such as face mask requirements and optimized ventilation and air filtration. Agencies also established COVID-19 coordination teams, as required by January 2021 guidance. These teams developed and monitored agency plans, led decision-making regarding safety procedures and exceptions, and coordinated with external groups, including the Task Force.

Federal oversight and coordination were limited for 2020 reentry planning but increased under 2021 guidance related to workplace safety. Initial reentry guidance did not include clear oversight roles and responsibilities. As a result, there was no government-wide oversight or review of initial agency reentry plans. Guidance issued in January 2021 established model safety principles and specific roles for the Task Force, directing Task Force members to guide and oversee agency COVID-19 workplace safety efforts. This increased clarity and oversight and supported consistency in workplace safety planning. The Task Force also used approaches to coordinate workplace safety planning that GAO previously identified as beneficial to support and sustain effective interagency collaboration. For example, the Task Force is made up of relevant participants, including agencies with expertise in health, emergency response, and employee safety. The Task Force supported agencies' COVID-19 response efforts and contributed input to agency workplace safety plans. Updated guidance released in June 2021 indicates that the Task Force and its members plan to continue these oversight and coordination efforts for continued workplace safety and updated reentry planning.