

For a list of the latest coronavirus guidance on **cyberFEDS®**, click [here](#).

Key points:

- **Health, safety concerns are paramount**
- **Telework is a good 'social distancing' option**
- **Supervisors can suggest leave if an employee appears ill**

Agencies are taking steps to stop spread of coronavirus

By David Elfin, **cyberFEDS®** Washington Bureau

IN FOCUS: As the coronavirus continues to spread, federal agencies are issuing a plethora of updated policies beyond the [guidance](#) released by the Office of Personnel Management on March 7 and the regular bulletins from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to a Department of Homeland Security plan obtained by the National Treasury Employees Union, DHS has advised managers that alternative work arrangements can be crucial to reduce the spread of the illness and that telework is also an integral part of preparation and response planning. If an employee displays symptoms of illness, DHS supervisors can suggest leave options for seeking medical attention. If the employee doesn't have any leave, supervisors may suggest telework or approve requests for advanced leave or leave without pay, in certain circumstances. If none of those are possible, supervisors can place an employee on paid, excused absence and order him to stay away from the workplace, but not without first contacting the human resources office.

Nine American Federation of Government Employees members at Fort Belvoir, Va., started two weeks of home quarantine on March 8 after coming in contact with a patient suffering from the coronavirus. AFGE said that the affected employees have been placed on weather and safety administrative leave, per OPM's guidance.

Employees who work on the ninth floor of the Securities and Exchange Commission were told to telework on March 10 after an employee was informed by a physician of possible coronavirus. All headquarters personnel were encouraged to telework pending further information.

The Government Accountability Office is providing regular updates to employees as new information develops. GAO also set up a new page on its intranet with links to advisories from the CDC, the State Department, and the World Health Organization.

"We also provide reminders about how to best protect yourself against the virus and to be telework ready should that become necessary," GAO spokesman Chuck Young told **cyberFEDS®**.

As is the case at many agencies, the Bureau of the Fiscal Service is making hand sanitizer available for employees and is working with its facilities management team to ensure the cleanliness of all facilities. The agency also will be conducting a "tabletop" exercise to determine whether it's prepared to carry out its mission in a pandemic-type scenario, which would include increased telework availability. BFS will also be conducting a test of its emergency notification system to make sure that it's functioning properly.

Keep the workplace safe

Hygiene

- Don't shake hands; use a noncontact method of greeting.
- Schedule regular handwashing reminders by email.
- Cover your mouth when you cough and sneeze.
- Disinfect surfaces like doorknobs, tables, desks, and handrails regularly.
- Increase ventilation.

Meetings

- Use videoconferencing when possible.
- Hold meetings in open, well-ventilated areas.
- Consider postponing large meetings or gatherings.
- Assess the risk of business travel.

Food

- Limit food sharing.
- Strengthen health screening for cafeteria staff.
- Ensure food handlers practice strict hygiene.

Health

- Stay home if you are feeling sick.
- Stay home if you have a family member who is sick.

Source: CDC.

In addition, many agencies, including the United States Postal Service and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, have issued updated pandemic preparedness plans.

Social distancing encouraged

The Internal Revenue Service had asked its managers to implement social distancing principles when possible. These include:

- Discouraging handshakes and other close contact.
- Separating employees by six or more feet in lieu of a partition. If work areas cannot be adjusted to accommodate that separation, managers should consider alternate work sites or telework.
- Teleconferencing instead of face-to-face meetings. If an in-person meeting is required, managers should ensure that seating is arranged so that participants are seated well apart.
- Using flexible/compressed work schedules to help maintain distance between employees.
- Supporting telework options.

However, AFGE has yet to receive a response to its March 6 [letter](#) to OPM Director Dale Cabaniss requesting that all federal employees capable of performing their duties via telework be allowed to do so.

Travel

The IRS is also limiting or postponing unnecessary travel to affected domestic or international geographic areas.

"The agency informed us that they have suspended all non-essential travel for 30 days unless it is mission-critical," National Treasury Employees Union National President Tony Reardon said after meeting with IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig. "To the extent this impacts employee training programs, we urged IRS to explore alternatives such as web-based training programs. We continue to urge the agency to broaden its telework program [by waiving] requirements that frequent teleworkers report to their offices twice each pay period and [to] expand the number of teleworking days for those who are telework-eligible. This would be especially critical in workplaces where local schools have closed."

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation has suspended all non-essential foreign business travel through the end of March. However, the agency said that its domestic business will continue largely as usual.

"We will continue to carry out our mission critical activities that require domestic travel, including examining banks, resolving failed banks, training to meet commissioning, certification or licensing requirements, and training to maintain critical functional or occupational competencies," the FDIC advised its employees. "We will also continue domestic travel for training for the purposes of professional development and maintaining existing accreditations if the training cannot easily be postponed."

Telework doesn't make sense for some

Reardon noted that with tax returns due in a little over a month, the IRS workforce is at its largest with the addition of seasonal employees.

"At the hundreds of Taxpayer Assistance Centers the IRS should consider offering appointments by telephone during the outbreak to replace or supplement the current in-person appointments," he wrote. "These jobs are inherently not telework-eligible so particular attention needs to be paid to those workers."

The same is true of Customs and Border Protection employees who work at airports, border crossings, and ports. According to NTEU, CBP agreed to allow employees to don personal protective equipment such as gloves and respiratory masks as needed and to make sure that supplies of such equipment were ample and accessible.

Resources on [cyberFEDS®](#):

- [Telework Roundup](#)
- [Leave Roundup](#)
- [Quick Start Guide: Weather and Safety Leave](#)
- [Quick Start Guide: Telework -- Workforce Management](#)
- [OPM issues detailed guidance on coronavirus](#) (03/08/20)
- [Looking for guidance on the coronavirus \(COVID-19\)?](#) (03/05/20)