



Addressing Concerns about Returning to the Worksite during a Pandemic (COVID-19)

A GUIDE FOR MANAGERS, SUPERVISORS, DEPUTIES/CHIEF DEPUTIES

As state employees gradually return to their office worksite(s) from remote options, many will have uncertainty about how this transition will occur safely as well as the changes to policies and procedures that may have been implemented. We want every employee to be assured that their concerns are being taken seriously. As state agencies work through the ongoing issues presented by COVID-19, demonstrating the **Three C's of communication, compassion and compliance** will be critical to addressing employee concerns.

COMMUNICATION

- Be responsive to employee concerns by asking open-ended questions and providing answers and resources.
- Determine if an employee has legitimate fears that you can discuss and explain how the agency has taken steps to protect employees.
- Ask what additional information or resources would be helpful for the agency to provide during this time?
- Ensure employees know where to share ideas and in relation to COVID-19.
- Ensure employees receive consistent COVID-19 information from different sources (e.g. leadership, HR, manager) including:
 - Information on changes to the physical workspace that an employee may encounter when returning to the worksite.
 - Information on any new cleaning or hygiene regimens that have been implemented (requiring regular handwashing, following proper coughing and sneezing etiquette, and proper disposal of waste products).
 - Information about personal protective measures that will be provided to employees, including those at higher risk (as defined by the CDC). What will be required and what will be recommended?
 - Information about the processes to comply with social distancing protocols, including how to resume meetings, conferences, and trainings.
 - Information on the processes to resume employee business travel.
 - Information on the processes to resume office celebrations or events.

COMPASSION

- Be thoughtful. Understand that this is a stressful time for everyone, and employee concerns are an expected and normal part of this process.
- Provide information about available resources to assist employees as they manage current work and life responsibilities such as:
 - The North Carolina Employee Assistance Program (NC EAP) is a free state-sponsored benefit program that offers support and resources to address personal or work-related challenges and concerns. Simply call 888-298-3907 or 704-717-5295 to access NC EAP.

Note: Judicial Branch employees use Deer Oaks and UNC System employees use ComPsych.

- Sponsored by N.C. DHHS, the **Hope4NC Helpline** (1-855-587-3463) connects North Carolinians to additional mental health and resilience supports that help them cope and build resilience during times of crisis.
- Sponsored by N.C. DHHS, the **Hope4Healers Helpline** (919-226-2002) is a new initiative in partnership with the North Carolina Psychological Foundation. It provides mental health and resilience supports for health care professionals, emergency medical specialists, first responders, other staff who work in health care settings and their families throughout the state who are experiencing stress from being on the front lines of the state's COVID-19 response.
- Explore what is the most important thing the employee needs right now to work more effectively.
- Ask what additional improvement(s) can be made to current workplace safety measures that would make the employee feel safer in the office.
- Ask the employee if they have concerns about returning to the worksite that are beyond health and safety.

COMPLIANCE CHECKLIST

- Consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employers may make accommodations to employees in “high risk categories” for developing severe response to COVID-19 if the employee has an underlying medical condition(s) that can be evaluated for reasonable accommodation, barring undue hardship.
- An employer can send home an employee with COVID-19 or symptoms associated with it.
- Because the CDC and state/local health authorities have acknowledged community spread of COVID-19 and issued attendant precautions as of March 2020, employers may measure employees' body temperature to determine if they have a fever.
- An employer may require its employees to adopt infection-control practices at the worksite. This may include regular hand washing, coughing and sneezing etiquette, and proper tissue usage and disposal, does not implicate the ADA.
- An employer may require employees to wear personal protective equipment (e.g., face masks, gloves) during a pandemic. However, where an employee with a disability needs a related reasonable accommodation under the ADA (e.g., non-latex gloves, or gowns designed for individuals who use wheelchairs), the employer should provide these, absent undue hardship.
- An employer may screen job applicants for symptoms of COVID-19 after making a conditional job offer, if it does so for all entering employees in the same type of job.

Employers can require employees/contractors to follow workplace infection control practices and PPE requirements at any state facility, even if those requirements vary at different locations.
