COVID-19 Response

Return to Office (RTO) Toolkit

2022

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Managers and Supervisors,

Thank you for your hard work supporting employees and successfully delivering on our mission while juggling the challenges of a global pandemic and a virtual workforce.

We understand a new set of challenges will arise as we begin transitioning employees back into the office and managing **in-person, virtual, and hybrid work environments.** This **Return-to-Office (RTO) Toolkit** is designed to equip you with **customizable communication, engagement, and training resources, tools, and templates** to effectively lead during this period of transition and beyond.

Thank you for your continued leadership as we **navigate the new way forward, together.**

Health & Safety in the Workplace

How we are prioritizing your health and safety

Our Approach to Workplace Health and Safety

Our highest priority in reentry is the health, safety, and well being of its workforce, and it has implemented several measures to ready the workplace for employees according to community, building, and medical considerations.

Community

DOC protects its communities by:

- Continuously evaluating employee transportation and commuting options
- Assessing the availability of childcare options
- Identifying local food and beverage options for employees working onsite

Building

DOC protects its physical workspace by:

- Redesigning facility floor plans and workstations to account for accommodations and capacity limitations
- Applying cleaning and sanitation protocols in line with CDC recommendations
- Utilizing enhanced ventilation and HVAC, including ultraviolet germicidal irradiation to kill airborne pathogens
- Adjusting COVID-19 policies and guidance based on local Community Levels as determined by the CDC.

Medical

DOC observes pandemic health best practices by:

- Requiring masking in areas with high Community Levels as determined by the CDC.
- Utilizing contact tracing and testing for close contacts of known infections
- Encouraging COVID-19 vaccination and boosters for employees and contractors
- Establishing testing requirements for not fully vaccinated employees, contractors, and visitors based on Community Levels as determined by the CDC.

99%
of DOC employees are in compliance with the vaccination mandate.*
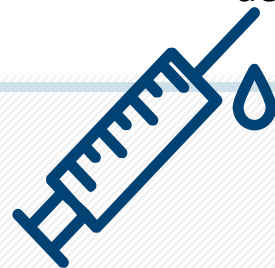
CDC notes fully vaccinated individuals are **6x less likely to be infected** and **29x less likely to be hospitalized or die** from COVID-19.

* 99% as of 11/30 includes those who are fully vaccinated, partially vaccinated, pending a reasonable accommodation, or have been approved for a reasonable accommodation.
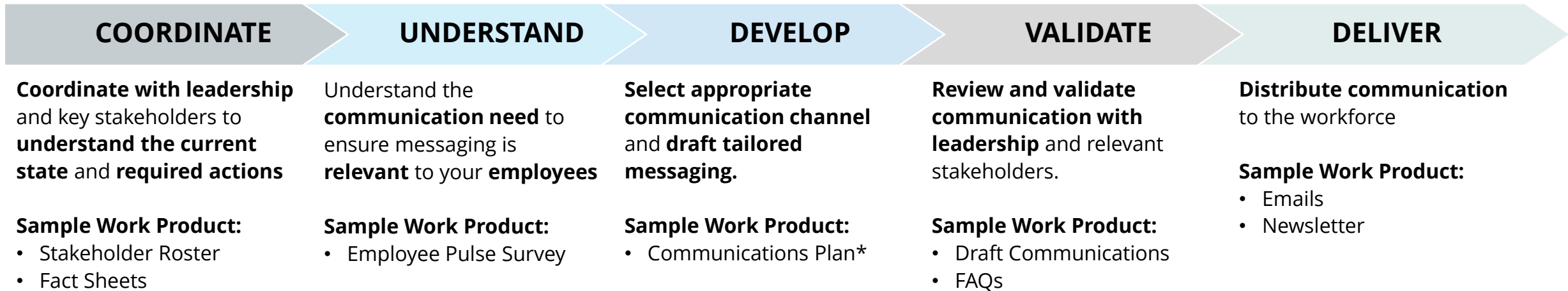
COMMUNICATE

Methods, templates, and signage for effective communication and employee outreach

Developing & Deploying Effective Communications

Effective communication is critical to supporting your employees as they adapt to new work environments and as the COVID-19 environment rapidly changes. Use the following communication process and principles to quickly **develop and deploy effective communications**, **spread need-to-know information**, and **engage your employees**.

COORDINATE	UNDERSTAND	DEVELOP	VALIDATE	DELIVER

Coordinate with leadership and key stakeholders to **understand the current state** and **required actions**

Sample Work Product:
- Stakeholder Roster
- Fact Sheets

Understand the **communication need** to ensure messaging is **relevant** to your **employees**

Sample Work Product:
- Employee Pulse Survey

Select appropriate communication channel and **draft tailored messaging.**

Sample Work Product:
- Communications Plan*

Review and validate communication with leadership and relevant stakeholders.

Sample Work Product:
- Draft Communications
- FAQs

Distribute communication to the workforce

Sample Work Product:
- Emails
- Newsletter

Throughout this process, make sure your communications are:

AUTHENTIC

Messages should express core values. Communicate in a **human voice**. Stakeholders should hear from the source.

TAILORED

Messages are tailored to ensure the audience is receiving the information at the **right time** through the **preferred channel.**

TRANSPARENT

Transparency can **earn trust.** Be clear with stakeholders what is and isn't known.

CREATIVE

Create **compelling content** to reach more stakeholders with well-crafted messages. **Avoid jargon.**

AGILE

Create **content quickly** to respond to the cascade of events. **Keep messages brief** and refer to experts. Provide a call to action.

FAST

Act with speed to fill the information vacuum. Delays may look like you are hiding something.

See sample Communications Plan template on side 11

# Leveraging Strategic Communication Channels

Leveraging the right communication channels can make **employee outreach faster, more effective, and more engaging.** Managers and Supervisors should work with their Bureau leadership to utilize the following communication channels to maximize employee outreach.

Sample Communication Channels

Virtual Town Halls*

Virtual & In-person Team Meetings

Podcasts

Digital Signage

Video

Webcasts

Bureau Intranet

Emails

Infographics

In Person

Mobile

Virtual & Digital
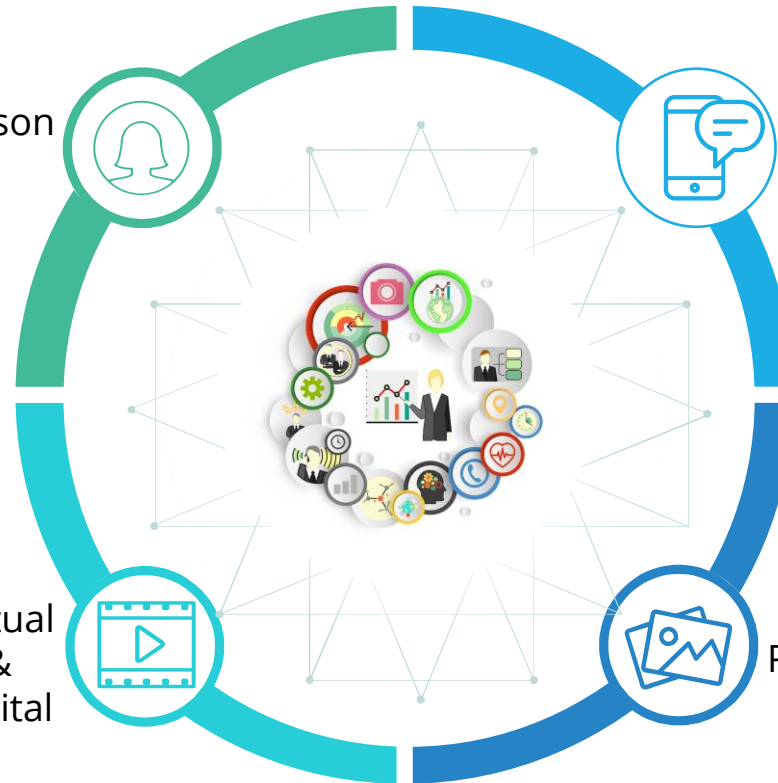
Print

Text Messaging

Blogs

Employee Apps

Collaboration Tools

Pulse Surveys

Facility Posters & Signs

Banners

Reference Guides

Newsletters

Welcome Back Email Template

Consistent and transparent employee communication facilitate smooth transitions and a positive employee experience. Managers and Supervisors can **tailor** the below welcome back email to meet the **specific needs of their Bureau and workforce.**

All –

I would like to extend a warm welcome as we begin our return to work!

As we navigate this transition, I would like to emphasize that **your health and safety remain my top priority and your well-being is the primary driver for all workplace decision**. Over the next few weeks, I would like to meet with each of you to discuss ways I can best support your transition to the workplace, what you need to be successful in our new environment, and your preferences for collaboration and team engagement.

In the meantime, please check out our COVID-19 Information Hub for the latest information on Bureau and Department of Commerce (DOC) health and safety best practices, policies, and protocols.

I thank you for your ongoing commitment to the health and safety of our colleagues and Bureau community, and I look forward to working with you all to build a better and brighter future as we continue to remain resilient.

Best,
<Insert name>

Policy Announcement Template

As the COVID-19 pandemic landscape continues to shift, Managers and Supervisors can **customize the template below to share important policy updates to employees in a clear and consistent manner.**

All -

I am writing to share a few updates regarding our COVID-19 policies due to a shift in the pandemic and public health guidance.

Current Policy: Detail the original policy or policies language.

Updated Policy: Describe the changes in policy, why those changes are being implemented, and official new language.

What This Means for You: Outline impacts to employees (e.g., operating status, daily activities, individual roles and responsibilities).

Date of Implementation: Provide the date the new policy will take effect.

As always, thank you for your continued dedication to keeping yourselves, families, and communities safe and healthy. Please contact <insert POC> for additional questions.

Best,
<insert name>

Workforce Pulse Check Survey

Pulse check surveys **enable streamlined data collection** and **quick identification of employee issues** surrounding return to work. Managers and Supervisors can use information gathered from pulse check surveys to **make informed work, workplace, and workforce decisions.**

Engagement & Outreach

1. Where do you typically receive information related to reentry, the new hybrid work experience, and workforce policies and requirements? Select all that apply.

- Emails
- Newsletters
- Townhalls
- Commerce Connection
- COVID-19 Information Hub

2. How do you like to receive information? Select all that apply.

- Broadcast Emails
- CommerceRewind Newsletters
- Department Townhalls
- Videos
- Commerce Connection
- COVID-19 Information Hub
- Bureau-Specific Communications

3. Are you satisfied with the current level of engagement and outreach? If not, how can it be improved?
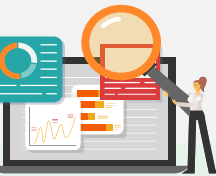
Teaming & Culture

1. I can collaborate with my colleagues effectively whether they are in-person or teleworking.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strong Agree

2. How can DOC help foster a greater sense of community and culture while you work in a hybrid work environment?

3. What types of events have you found to be successful to maintain engagement and culture with your colleagues while teleworking?

Resources and Tools

1. I have the tools and resources I need to work effectively in a flexible work environment.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strong Agree

2. I know how to use the available tools and resources to optimize how work gets done in a hybrid work environment.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strong Agree

3. What specific tools, topics, or resources do you want to learn about to help you work more effectively in a flexible work environment?

Pulse Survey Outcomes

Engagement and Outreach

Utilize the right channels to socialize the right information at the right time, *improving employee engagement and access to key updates in a hybrid work environment.*

Teaming & Culture

Establish **communities of practice** *focused on fostering connection, sharing best practices, and optimizing how work gets done in a hybrid environment.*

Resources and Tools

Develop targeted training and curate resources *to improve employees' ability to deliver on mission objectives in a hybrid environment.*

Workplace Health & Safety FAQs

Managers and Supervisors must be prepared to answer employee questions about workplace health and safety to **address their concerns, ease anxieties, and build trust.** Managers and Supervisors can **adapt** the below FAQs based on their Bureau's workplace health and safety policies and protocols.

What is the Department doing to ensure a safe and healthy workplace?

The Department and its Bureaus implement several safety measures to protect on-site employees.

- **Cleaning:** We regularly **clean, disinfect, and sanitize facilities** to ensure your health and safety. In the event of a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the workplace, enhanced cleaning will occur in accordance with CDC guidance

- **Ventilation:** Facilities are **optimizing indoor ventilation to the maximum extent feasible**, to increase the proportion of outdoor ventilation, improve filtration, and reduce or eliminate recirculation

- **Signage:** We post up-to-date on-site signage to **encourage healthy behavior and safe interactions**

What can employees do to keep each other safe?

We each play a role in keeping our workplaces safe. Some actions employees can take include:

- Following **mask requirements** based on local Community Levels as determined by the CDC

- **Washing hands** with soap and water

- **Staying home** if feeling unwell

- **Removing personal items** or work materials daily

- Adhering to **all Department and Bureau policies and safety protocols**

- **Reporting workplace health and safety concerns** to your Manager or Supervisor

What can employees do to prepare for a safe return to the workplace?

Ahead of employees' return, we recommend they consider:

- **Vaccination:** Encouraging COVID-19 vaccination and booster shots for all employees and contractors

- **Commuting:** Getting to work may be more challenging as public transportation service schedules may have changed. We encourage employees to **check daily for any updates to changes in public transportation**

- **Training:** We recommend employees **complete any required or optional training** to understand the protocols in place to keep the work environment safe

Communication Plan Template

Communication plans are living documents that can help you **stay on track, report progress, and establish manageable cadence and employee outreach.** Utilize the template below to guide your communications planning.

DATE	COMMUNICATION/ MESSAGE	CHANNEL	AUDIENCE	SENDER	FREQUENCY	NOTES

Sample One-Pagers

DOC Reentry One-Pagers communicate and reinforce key policies around health and safety. Leverage the latest one-pagers on the [COVID-19 Information Hub](#) to help returning employees understand and follow policies.

Sample Signage (Continued)

DOC Reentry One-Pagers communicate and reinforce key policies around health and safety. Leverage the latest one-pagers on the COVID-19 Information Hub to help returning employees understand and follow policies.

ENGAGE

Tips and tools for engaging and managing a hybrid workforce

Engaging Employees - Tips & Tricks

Engaging and building meaningful connections with your employees and **prioritizing well-being** will be **critical to your success as a leader** as employees return to work. Use the following tips and tricks to maximize your employee engagement and outreach.

Conduct 1:1 Check-ins

Conduct 1:1 check-ins with employees to ask questions such as:

- Are you satisfied with the current work conditions?
- What do you need to be successful in our current work environment?
- What are your primary roadblocks to working in a hybrid environment?

Embrace Technology

Encourage employees to embrace technology, such as Microsoft Teams, to **better engage with teammates** while working in a hybrid environment**. This can help** strengthen team culture and **build a greater sense of community.**

Support Flexibility

As team leaders, determine where you can **build in more flexibility** with your teams. This may include flexible work hour or breaks between meetings. You should **focus on outcomes** and be **clear with expectations.**

Prioritize Well-Being

Incorporate well-being into work by:

- Reallocating work and renegotiate deadlines when possible
- Starting meetings with a check-in
- Encouraging team members to unplug, rest, and take breaks
- Invest in well-being education
- Practicing gratitude

Deploy Pulse Check Surveys

Deploy employee pulse check surveys to gather feedback on their needs while returning to work. Questions may include:

- Do you have the right tools to work in a hybrid environment?
- Are you satisfied with the Bureau's health and safety protocols?

Recognize your Employees

Recognize and celebrate employees who are helping create better working environments and supporting their peers as they navigate returning to work.

Give Meaningful Feedback

Provide actionable feedback to help employees be more successful while working in a hybrid environment. Examples of actionable feedback include best practices while on conference calls, health and safety behaviors, or ways to better utilize technology to stay better connected with teammates.

Create A Safe Environment

Characteristics of a safe environment include employees who are:

- Able to make mistakes
- Comfortable asking for help
- Confident in offering different opinions
- Show up as their authentic selves
- Establish an "open door" policy

Virtual and Hybrid Norms & Best Practices

Establishing virtual and hybrid norms and implementing best practices can **enhance team engagement and collaboration** while working in a new environment. Refer to the below tips to start building a **positive, productive, and healthy virtual or hybrid work culture** for your employees.

Team Unity & Well-Being

- **Encourage Interaction:** Find creative ways to have employees express themselves virtually (e.g., chat emojis, etc.) and be deliberate about team building.
- **Stay Connected:** Don't over-rely on scheduled meetings and email – pick up the phone.
- **Set Boundaries:** Set core working hours on calendars to avoid meetings being scheduled during non-working time.
- **Schedule Screen Breaks:** Schedule 'laptops down' lunches, collective no meeting days, or other times, where team members can be away from their computers to recharge.
- **Role Model:** Reinforce virtual and hybrid norms and promote transparency as employees often take their primary work cues from their manager.

Collaboration

- **Foster Collaboration Equity:** Strive for equal-opportunity participation and reinforce the idea that participation is based on contribution, not location.
- **Leverage Virtual Collaboration Tools:** Use technology platforms to improve communication and interaction (e.g., use chat, tag team members, add comments, create notifications, etc.).
- **Set Collaboration Standards:** Let team determine response times for collaborative tasks (e.g., two hours for chat, one business day for nonurgent emails).
- **Be Accessible:** Share contact info, include mobile number in your email signature.
- **Develop Digital Dexterity:** Ensure team members have access to and understand how to use appropriate collaboration tools for various business activities.

Performance Management

- **Check-In:** Conduct consistent, open, and honest check-ins with employees about their performance and overall well-being.
- **Gain Insights:** Listen and gather information to help assess and support employee performance outcomes.
- **Give Feedback:** Schedule recurring one-on-ones, virtually or in-person, with employees to provide ongoing feedback and discuss progress on goals.
- **Be Clear:** Establish clear standards for evaluation, based on variables like outcomes, results, or quality.
- **Be Open:** Set a warm and open tone, pay attention to non-verbal cues, and demonstrate flexibility and compassion as employees adjust to COVID-19 pandemic shifts.

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Team Building Exercises

Team building exercises, especially among hybrid teams, helps **foster collaboration, improve communication, and build positive team cultures.** Try the following exercises to keep your hybrid teams motivated and engaged.

Hometown Tours: Ask team members to share videos, pictures, websites, or any object that represents their hometown or current city.
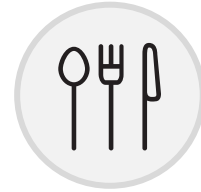
Themed Lunches or Days: Assign a theme to lunches or days (e.g., Sports, Holidays).

Informal Zoom Rooms: Hold an informal virtual meeting around lunchtime so team members can chat freely like they would in an office cafeteria.

Trivia: Kick start your meetings with a trivia question or host a virtual trivia event; try personalizing questions and/or categories based on your team's interests.

Arm's Reach Show and Tell: Ask team members to find and share something within arm's reach that is meaningful. Ask questions like: "Where did you get it? How long have you had it? Why is it important to you?"

Pets Channel: Leverage virtual collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams to create a separate channels or email listservs where team members can share pictures of their pets.

Benefits of Microsoft Teams

- **Improves productivity:** Teams increase productivity by centralizing key documents and making team member collaboration via chats, online meetings, etc. available on a single interface

- **Increases transparency:** Teams keeps everyone in the loop and supports quick and easy information sharing

- **Enhances focus:** Teams compartmentalizes information into channels so employees can access documents, meetings, and conversations on-demand

- **Supports digital workplaces:** Teams supports a seamless move to a digital workplace, allowing employees to take full advantage of the cloud and access information anytime, anywhere on their devices

View and organize teams
Click to see your teams. In the channel list drag a team name to reorder it

Start a new chat
Launch a one-on-one or small-group conversation.

Search a command
Search for items, people, actions, and launch apps

Add tabs
Highlight apps, services, and files at the top of a channel

Manage profile settings
Change app settings, profile pic, or download the mobile app by clicking your picture

Join or create a team
Find the team you're looking for, join with a code, or make one of your own

Profile sheet
Hover over a picture to easily message, email, video call, or voice call

Compose a message
Type and format your message. Add a file, emoji, GIF, or sticker

Add files & collaborate
Let people view a file or work on it together

SUPPORT

Resources to support mental health

Mental Health Resources

Share the following **organizations and information** with employees as additional mental health and well-being resources.

Department of Commerce Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

What is the EAP program?
- Free services and programs designed to address individual, team, and organizational problems
- EAP services and contacts with individuals or families are kept confidential and using this program does not have an impact on an employee's job status

Who is eligible?
- Managers, employees, and their families

What services are available?
- EAP offers many services, including but not limited to
  - Stress management
  - Work related issues
  - Caregiver support
  - Health and mental health issues
  - Family and marital problems
  - Short term counseling
  - Financial and legal issues

Mental Health Organizations

 National Alliance on Mental Illness

 National Institute of Mental Health

 Mental Health America

 American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

 Mental Health Action Day

Mental Health Quick Tip One-Pagers

Reference the below one-pagers for ideas and tips on how to **prioritize and foster well-being for your employees**.

Quick Tips: Prioritizing Mental Health at Work

Establish Work Environment Expectations
Set and communicate team norms like core working hours, after hours availability, video conferencing expectations, and meeting requirements.

Respect Team Boundaries
Foster a respectful team culture of adhering to established working hours, potential time zone differences, and scheduled breaks or vacations.

Coordinate Breaks
Schedule "laptop down" breaks to enable team members to step away from their computers to mentally and/or physically recharge.

Check-in with your Team
Regularly check in with your team members, keeping an open dialogue to monitor how they're doing, what works, and what team norms may need adjusting.

Celebrate Accomplishments
Recognize and celebrate individual and team accomplishments. Encourage team members to take the time to show appreciation for a teammate's work, support, or collaboration.

Connect With Others
Encourage team members to schedule check-ins with team members and people outside of their immediate team to chat about well being, mental health, family, work/life integration, or any other topics.

U.S. Department of Commerce — July 2021

Quick Tips: Fostering Well-Being in Teams

Create a Safe Space
Foster a culture of "it's okay to not be okay," and provide opportunities for team members to share about well-being if desired and on their timetable.

Maintain Trust
Encourage team members to respect each other's privacy and create a supportive culture through caring, gentle, non-judgmental, and compassionate conversation.

Educate the Team
Provide team members the opportunity to learn more about well-being and mental health, access resources, and take available trainings.

Build Team Accountability
Model well-being habits for the team, demonstrating established well-being values and norms and holding team members accountable to following team values.

Establish Work Buddies
Establish an accountability buddy system to remind team members to take well-being breaks, share well-being tips and tricks, and check-in on each other.

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TRAIN

Methods, platforms, and topics to enhance employee comfort and support reentry navigation

Reentry Training

Managers and Supervisors should consider offering reentry training to **prevent the spread of COVID-19, keep the workplace safe, and help employees more confidently return to an office environment.**

OBJECTIVES

Explain COVID-19 safety protocols and policies to **minimize spread**

Raise awareness of the behaviors necessary to keep the workplace safe

Reassure employees that the Department is taking steps to protect them

Prepare employees to **be flexible** in an evolving work environment

SAMPLE TRAINING TOPICS

Workplace Safety Protocols and Policies

Symptom Reporting & Contract Tracing

Navigating a Hybrid Environment

Mental Health and Wellness

Training Best Practices

Employee training can be delivered **in-person, online, or through a blended learning approach**. Training can consist of *asynchronous* and/or *synchronous* content, where employees can learn at their own pace or in live sessions with an instructor and peers.

BEST PRACTICES

Set clear training goals and learning outcomes

Choose the right training platform and/or delivery method

Prepare learners and facilitators (e.g., send materials in advance)

Support choice in participation (e.g., voice, chat, anonymous Q&A)

Provide follow-up tools, resources, or support

Promote an inclusive learning culture

Reentry Orientation

Consider hosting a first-day training orientation for all returning staff

POINTS OF CONTACT

Points of contact for reentry support

Bureau Points of Contact

Please contact the points of contacts below for all questions related to return to work.

<Name>
<Email>
<Phone Number>

<Name>
<Email>
<Phone Number>

<Name>
<Email>
<Phone Number>