

# HHS UPDATE

**NTEU** National Treasury Employees Union

## **HHS Provides Briefing on 'Return to Normal Operations' Guidance**

After ignoring NTEU's repeated requests for a briefing, HHS recently briefed the union on its "Return to Normal Operations" guidance. During the briefing, NTEU brought to HHS its [Safe Return](#) recommendations and raised employee concerns from chapters.

The [agency's guidance](#) outlines three phases of returning to normal operations:

**Phase One:** Maximum Telework and Prepare Workplaces for Re-entry

**Phase Two:** Protect the Vulnerable, Ensure a Safe Workplace, and Restore On-site Critical Functions

**Phase Three:** Normal Operations

HHS is currently permitting all employees to telework, except for those deemed mission-critical and able to be onsite.

The agency is not yet in phase one, as certain criteria must be met, including a 14-day downward trend in positive tests and COVID-like cases, and capacity for local hospitals to treat all patients, including those who do not require crisis care. Although the Office of Personnel Management moved to phase one today, HHS indicated it will give more advance notice to employees.

Maximum telework will continue through phase one and remain an option in phase two. HHS is looking into continuing maximum telework through phase three and is developing guidance in the event of future spikes in coronavirus cases.

Individual Operating Divisions will be developing return to work plans addressing their specific on-site staffing requirements. NTEU expressed concern that without a top-down message from management, return to work plans will be arbitrary and inconsistent across divisions.

NTEU was assured that across divisions, these considerations will be taken in return to work plans: whether employees are in a medically high risk category, have dependent care responsibilities or rely on public transportation. HHS confirmed that all employees will be able to self-certify that they are members of vulnerable groups and will not need medical verification to remain on telework.

As buildings reopen, HHS indicated that divisions must consider proper social distancing, but also whether there is appropriate signage with safety instructions and infrastructure, such as partitions. NTEU asked how HHS will ensure that each building has sufficient personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. HHS will address

these various issues building-by-building and explore additional flexibilities to keep returning employees safe, such as allowing them to work 10 hours per week in the office and the remainder of the time on telework.

NTEU raised concerns that some divisions are not adequately communicating with employees and offered to work with the agency to keep employees informed.

As more information becomes available, NTEU will continue keeping you informed on our work to protect your health and safety and any developments on contract negotiations.

[Learn more](#)

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