



## NASA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

OFFICE OF AUDITS  
SUITE 8U71, 300 E ST SW  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20546-0001

August 3, 2020

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Government Operations  
Committee on Oversight and Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2157 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515-6143

Subject: *Status of NASA's Return to Work Plans*

Dear Chairman Connolly,

We are providing the following information in response to your letter dated June 15, 2020, requesting the Office of Inspector General review NASA's actions regarding reopening the Agency in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Since the start of the pandemic, NASA has been proactive in establishing guidance and communicating information, including routine status updates, to its employees to ensure a safe return to NASA work sites when it is safe to do so. To this end, NASA developed an Agency-wide website (<https://nasapeople.nasa.gov/coronavirus/>) providing updates on the coronavirus and the Agency's response. Additionally, Agency officials have communicated through e-mail, town hall meetings, and frequently-asked-questions documents to inform the workforce.

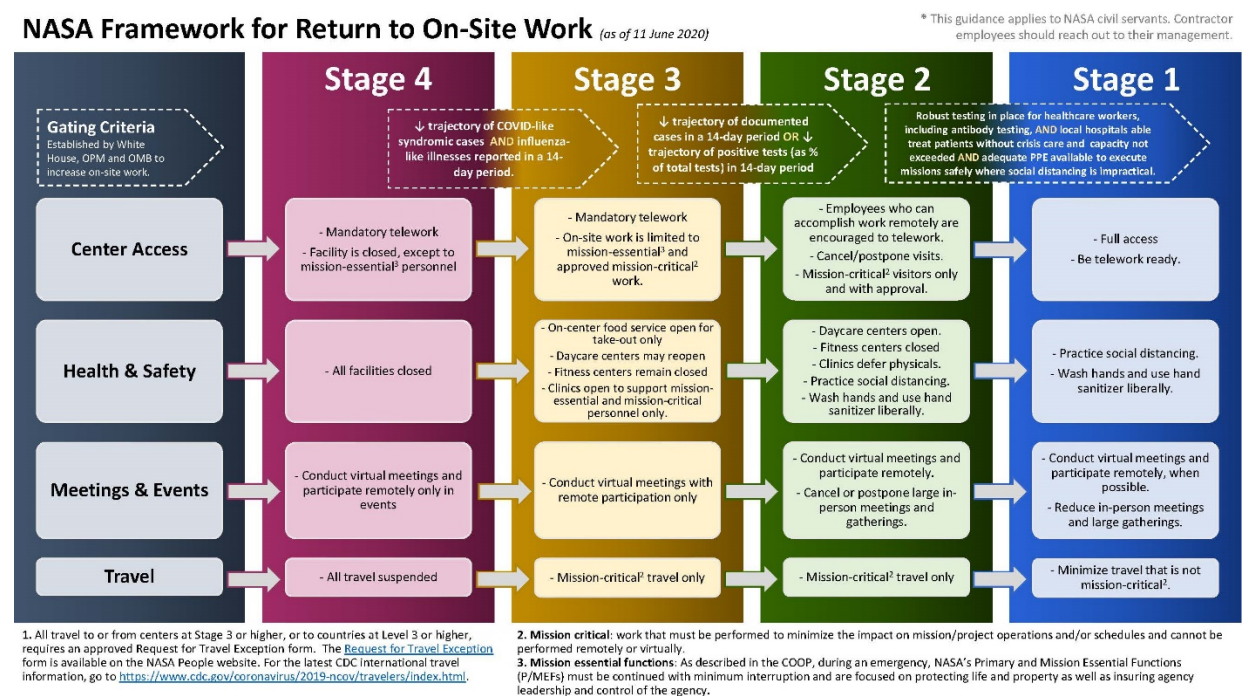
The Agency established five principles guiding its approach to a return to on-site work: emphasizing the health and safety of the workforce as the top priority; utilizing a risk-based, phased approach to return to on-site work; developing Center return-to-work plans focusing on the safest environment while transitioning gradually to accomplish the highest priority tasks; implementation focusing only on work that must be conducted on-site; and continuing to encourage telework for those who are able to do so until further notice.

In order to ensure a safe return to on-site work, NASA developed a Return to On-Site Work Framework that takes into account guidelines provided by the White House, Office of Personnel Management, Office of Management and Budget, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and state health officials.

As shown in Figure 1, NASA’s framework incorporates a four-stage approach with gating criteria between stages. The framework outlines requirements for access to each of NASA’s Centers and other locations, health and safety of the workforce, meetings and events, and travel. For example, Stage 4—the most restrictive stage—establishes mandatory telework and suspends all employee travel, while Stage 2 encourages telework and remote participation in meetings and authorizes travel only for mission critical work.<sup>1</sup> Each Center also developed individualized plans utilizing the Agency framework and taking into account state and local guidelines. Both the Agency framework and individual Center plans are intended to be dynamic documents that will be adjusted as situations evolve, which means that locations may return to an elevated stage if conditions worsen in the local area.

Currently, one NASA Center is at Stage 4, with the remaining Centers and locations at Stage 3. As of July 2020, at 8 of the 10 NASA Centers, approximately 20 percent or less of the civil servant and contractor workforce has been classified as “mission critical” and is working on-site. Kennedy Space Center and Stennis Space Center have between 40 to 50 percent of the workforce on site; the majority of this workforce is contractors. The Agency’s mission critical work includes the SpaceX Demo-2 commercial crew test flight, which successfully launched in May and docked with the International Space Station, and the recent successful launch of the MARS 2020 mission.

**Figure 1: NASA Framework for Return to On-Site Work**



Source: NASA

<sup>1</sup> Mission critical is work that must be performed to minimize the impact on the mission or project operations and/or schedules and cannot be performed remotely.

Most importantly, Agency officials continue to stress that the health and safety of the work force is paramount. Specifically, in an April 2020 e-mail to all employees, the NASA Administrator stressed that as the situation develops, every effort will be made to provide alternate work arrangements for employees who do not feel comfortable returning to work on-site or continuing to work on-site and that supervisors should make alternate work arrangements for these employees without reprisal.

NASA is establishing councils to oversee the transition to return to on-site work as well as implementing new protocols such as requiring face coverings, social distancing guidelines, ensuring personal protective equipment is on-site and available for situations when social distancing cannot be maintained, and enhanced cleaning techniques. For instance, the Agency formed a Clean Team Task Force that includes industrial hygiene professionals from multiple locations exploring options for cleaning NASA facilities and workspaces. The team is also identifying ideal settings for HVAC systems to ensure optimal air filtration and is also identifying the safest cleaning agents. Additionally, in June 2020 NASA established the Transition Guidance Council at Headquarters to identify when conditions warrant a transition from one stage to another based on the Agency's framework, overseeing readiness reviews to ensure a safe increase of on-site employees, and recommending to NASA leadership the timing and implementation of transitions.<sup>2</sup> The council has met monthly since its establishment.

Furthermore, NASA developed a daily checklist for employees to follow before deciding whether to report to work on-site once Centers reopen. The checklist includes guidance for temperature checks, staying home when feeling ill, and ensuring employees bring supplies such as face coverings to wear inside buildings. The checklist also provides details on the "do's and don'ts" once inside a building such as maintaining 6 feet of distance, limiting the number of people in an elevator, and avoiding common areas.

Finally, Agency officials have developed steps for employees to take if they exhibit symptoms of the coronavirus, including requirements for notifying their supervisor if they had been on-site at a NASA facility within the past 14 days. In such a case, the Agency has contact tracing protocols in place to notify individuals who may have been in contact with the infected person. Most recently, the Agency developed a Contact Tracing and Tracking software application to support rapid identification and communication with contacts by providing a centralized, streamlined interface for clinic staff to review and update case information. The clinic conducts all tracing interviews via phone and inputs a subset of interview data for contact tracing into the system to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all identified cases.

Based on our initial review, NASA's Return to On-Site Work Framework and other related initiatives and communications appear comprehensive, sensible, and science-based. In our opinion, NASA is taking appropriate steps to ensure a safe return to on-site work, methodically balancing mission accomplishment with the health and safety of its workforce. As the oversight body of the Agency, we will continue to monitor NASA's plans as they evolve and as more employees return to work on-site.

Senior OIG staff and I routinely have conversations with Agency leadership concerning return to work plans and the pandemic's impact on NASA's missions. In addition, a representative from the OIG attends the Transition Guidance Council meetings and communicates information and decisions made by the council to OIG leadership. Once NASA's plans become more definitive and more employees

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<sup>2</sup> The Transition Guidance Council is comprised of representatives from Mission Directorates and other large Headquarters organizations, as well as subject matter experts from the Offices of the Chief Health and Medical Officer, Chief Human Capital Officer, General Counsel and Communications.

transition to on-site work, the OIG plans to conduct an audit to ensure the plans were implemented and followed appropriately.

If you or your staff have questions or would like to discuss any of the information in this letter, please contact me or Renee Juhans, OIG Executive Officer, at 202-358-1220 or [renee.n.juhans@nasa.gov](mailto:renee.n.juhans@nasa.gov).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'PKMJA'.

Paul K. Martin  
Inspector General

cc: The Honorable Jody B. Hice, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Government Operations

James Bridenstine  
Administrator

James Morhard  
Deputy Administrator

Stephen Jurczyk  
Associate Administrator

Cathy Mangum  
Acting Deputy Associate Administrator

Robert Gibbs  
Associate Administrator for Mission Support