

COVID-19 Reopening Considerations for Faith-based Organizations

While the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organizations to close their doors for an extended period, states across the country have implemented reopening measures, allowing various establishments to resume operations. However, as organizations open their doors once again, there are numerous health and safety concerns to consider.

Specifically, faith-based organizations face unique challenges in minimizing the risks of reopening. After all, the nature of these establishments can make it extremely difficult to uphold social distancing measures and keep high-touch surfaces clean—both of which contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

Review the following guidance to help keep your staff, volunteers and congregation safe as you resume in-person services and ensure a successful reopening. Keep in mind that this guidance is general—depending on the location of your establishment, you may need to account for additional state and local requirements or restrictions.

Staff and Volunteer Health and Safety

Before you can allow your congregation back into your establishment, it's crucial to implement organizational adjustments and procedures to ensure the health and safety of your staff and volunteers. Consider these measures:

- Utilize routine meetings and emails to communicate with staff and volunteers about the steps being taken to prevent COVID-19 exposure within your organization.
- Provide an adequate supply of paper towels, soap and hand sanitizer to allow staff and volunteers to maintain proper hand hygiene.
- Offer tissues to ensure employees and volunteers follow proper cough and sneeze etiquette, as well as no-touch trash bins for tissue disposal.
- Educate employees and volunteers on the common symptoms of COVID-19 (e.g., fever, cough and shortness of breath). Tell them to stay home if they have any symptoms.
- Conduct a wellness check on employees and volunteers each day to ensure they are healthy and safe to enter the establishment. If they answer “yes” to either of these questions, send them home:
 - Have you or any person you've been in close contact with (e.g., family members) been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days?
 - Have you experienced any cold- or flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever, chills, cough, sore throat, headache, stuffy or runny nose, vomiting or diarrhea) in the past 72 hours?
- Provide employees and volunteers with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). This includes masks or cloth face coverings, gloves and—if necessary—face shields.
- Require employees and volunteers to wash their hands after entering the establishment, after touching their mask or face covering, after using the restroom and after leaving the establishment.

Provided by Wallace Welch & Willingham

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- Train employees and volunteers on these topics:
 - How to safely put on, use, remove and store PPE
 - How to maintain proper hand hygiene and follow sneeze and cough etiquette
 - How to maintain social distancing guidelines
 - How to clean and disinfect surfaces and items properly
 - How to enforce health and safety requirements with members of the congregation
 - How to recognize areas or practices that increase the risk of COVID-19 exposure, as well as how to report these concerns
- Implement proper signage throughout the establishment to remind staff and volunteers of proper health and safety practices.
- Establish a process for reviewing employees' and volunteers' organizational health and safety concerns related to COVID-19 exposure and determining mitigation methods in a timely, effective manner.

Cleaning and Disinfection Practices

Because your establishment possesses a wide range of surfaces that employees, volunteers and members of the congregation touch frequently, utilizing proper cleaning and disinfection measures is vital. Use these cleaning and disinfection best practices:

- Maintain a stocked supply of cleaning and disinfection products. Be sure to purchase products that meet Environmental Protection Agency criteria for use against COVID-19. Further, review all product labels, safety data sheets and manufacturer specifications to ensure proper storage and use.
- Designate specific staff to be responsible for maintaining proper cleaning and disinfection practices.
- Keep in mind that, if surfaces or equipment are dirty, they should be cleaned with soap and water, or detergent prior to disinfection.
- Utilize a well-documented system to track how often cleaning and disinfection take place. Increase cleaning and disinfection frequency for the entire establishment, paying special attention to high-risk areas and items—including common areas, seating arrangements (e.g., benches or pews), stage equipment and restrooms.
- Consider the following changes to restrooms:
 - Allow for doors to multi-stall restrooms to be opened and closed without touching handles, if feasible. This could entail adding a foot pull or encouraging occupants to open and close the door handle with a paper towel rather than their bare hands.
 - In single-occupancy restrooms, use proper signage and materials (e.g., paper towels and trash cans) to encourage occupants not to touch handles. Restrict access to single-occupancy restrooms with a key to allow staff to monitor its use and disinfect it regularly.
 - Use signage to encourage occupants to close toilet lids before flushing and wash their hands before and after using the restroom.
 - Provide paper towels for drying hands and adequate trash bins. Prohibit the use of air dryers.
- Install numerous hand-washing (or hand-sanitizing, if hand-washing is not possible) stations throughout your establishment. Specifically, make sure you have these stations located at the entrance and exit of the establishment. Implement signage encouraging employees, volunteers and members of the congregation to use these stations frequently.
- Prevent staff or volunteers from sharing any organizational items or equipment. If employees

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must share any items or equipment, establish proper cleaning and disinfecting procedures before and after each use.

- Ensure proper air ventilation throughout the establishment. Be sure to clean HVAC systems regularly.
- Have employees and volunteers place their work clothing and cloth face coverings in a sealed plastic bag after each use, as if the materials are contaminated. Have these materials laundered by washing and drying on the highest temperature setting possible for the fabric. Ensure staff wear masks or face coverings when handling dirty laundry. If your establishment does not provide laundry services, provide employees and volunteers with instructions for safely washing and drying their materials at home.

Congregation Health and Safety

There are several factors that you must consider in order to promote proper health and safety standards for the members of your congregation. First, it's important to reduce transmission risks. Follow these tips:

- Consider conducting a wellness check on members of the congregation, similar to that of your employees and volunteers, to ensure they are healthy and safe to enter the establishment. If they answer "yes" to either of the following questions, do not let them enter the establishment:
 - Have you or any person you've been in close contact with (e.g., family members) been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days?
 - Have you experienced any cold- or flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever, chills, cough, sore throat, headache, stuffy or runny nose, vomiting or diarrhea) in the past 72 hours?
- Require all members of the congregation to wear a mask or face covering while inside the establishment. Consider storing disposable masks on-site in case a member forgets or loses their mask or face covering.
- Reduce the maximum capacity within your establishment to allow for members to maintain social distancing guidelines. Be sure to use floor markings and signage to enforce social distancing. Keep in mind that, depending on the location of your organization, you may need to account for additional state and local restrictions regarding the number of people allowed in the establishment at a time. Be sure to comply with all applicable rules.
- Designate staff responsible for ensuring members of the congregation park their vehicles in at least every other spot to maintain adequate distancing.
- Consider offering services outdoors rather than indoors (if possible) to allow for adequate social distancing and better air ventilation. In addition, utilize streaming features or other online options to allow vulnerable members of the congregation (e.g., individuals who are elderly or immunocompromised) to watch services from home.
- Limit physical contact between members from different households as much as possible. This might entail the following changes:
 - Restricting the number of people or families permitted to sit on each bench or in each pew
 - Prohibiting greetings that require physical touch (e.g., handshakes, hugs or kissing)
 - Temporarily discontinuing or altering any rituals or ceremonies that require physical touch (e.g., communion or baptisms)
- Keep areas that offer food or beverages (e.g., coffee or donut stations) closed.
- Temporarily discontinue the use of any unnecessary high-touch items within the establishment—such as water fountains, a common cup, writing utensils, religious readings or service flyers. Utilize contactless

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donation options (e.g., online donations or a donation drop box).

- Consider altering any services, rituals or ceremonies that require members of the congregation to speak or sing for extended periods to limit the spread of respiratory droplets.
- If your organization offers child care options or youth programs, only continue these services if your establishment is able to follow this [guidance](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- If your organization offers small group classes, consider holding classes outdoors or online. If you have these classes in person, enforce social distancing guidelines.
- If your organization conducts ceremonies such as funerals or weddings, ensure that all ceremony procedures allow for adequate disinfection and social distancing practices. Make sure that the size of the ceremony is compliant with federal, state and local regulations.

Apart from these practices, it's also crucial to communicate with members of the congregation via your website, email, social media and establishment signage on the steps your organization is taking to protect them and how they can do their part. Include the following information in your communications:

- If you feel sick, stay home. If anyone in your household is sick, stay home as well.
- Consider utilizing our online service options rather than attending in-person services—especially if you are elderly or immunocompromised.
- Minimize contact with employees, volunteers and other members of the congregation as much as possible.
- Wear a mask or face covering at all times within the establishment. Wash or sanitize your hands before and after leaving the establishment.

- If you get the urge to sneeze or cough, cover your nose and mouth with a tissue. Wash your face and hands immediately afterward.
- Keep in mind that some of our services and offerings have been temporarily discontinued. Be sure to plan accordingly.

Additional Considerations

Lastly, review your organizational practices and make any additional adjustments necessary to help limit the spread of COVID-19 and keep your staff, volunteers and congregation safe. Follow these measures:

- Keep any areas that are unable to follow social distancing or proper sanitation guidelines closed.
- Maintain adequate records of all members of the congregation—including names, contact information and visit dates—to be able to assist if contact tracing is needed. Do the same for employee and volunteer records.
- Have a plan in place for adjusting operations in the event that an employee, volunteer or member of the congregation tests positive for COVID-19.
- Ensure that all of your operations and reopening plans are compliant with [CDC](#), federal, state and local guidelines, as well as industry best practices. Consider designating one or multiple employees to be responsible for ensuring compliance.

By following these precautions, your organization can provide in-person services to your congregation once again, while also keeping everyone as healthy and safe as possible. For additional reopening resources and the latest COVID-19 developments, contact us today.