



National Science Foundation • Office of Inspector General
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 20, 2020

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FROM: Mark Bell
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SUBJECT: Report No. OIG 21-6-001, Review of NSF's Plans and Procedures for Employees' Return to Headquarters

In response to a June 15, 2020 request from the House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform's Subcommittee on Government Operations, we conducted a review, as a routine activity, of NSF's plans for returning employees to its headquarters building during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We found NSF's plans to be reasonable, prudent, and consistent with best practices as well as Federal and state COVID-19 related guidance on reopening businesses. As such, this memorandum does not contain recommendations.

We appreciate the courtesies and assistance NSF staff provided during this review. If you have any questions, please contact Mark Bell, Assistant Inspector General for Audits, at mbell@nsf.gov.

Objective, Scope, & Methodology

The objective of this review was to determine whether NSF was employing best practices and existing guidance when deciding whether or when to require Federal employees and contractors to return to the office. To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed Federal and state guidance related to COVID-19 issued between March 1, 2020, and July 31, 2020. This guidance included Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Occupational Safety and Health Administration best practices, Forward Virginia reopening guidance, and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Memorandum M-20-23, *Aligning Federal Agency Operations with the National Guidelines for Opening Up America Again*.

- Reviewed NSF plans and supplementary documentation on agency operations related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Evaluated NSF’s reopening plans against Federal and state guidance.
- Met with NSF officials and staff involved in reopening decisions and planning, including representatives from the:
 - Office of Information and Resource Management;
 - Office of Budget, Finance, and Award Management; and
 - Office of the Director.
- Reviewed results of NSF employee surveys.

We provided a draft of this memorandum to NSF management for review on November 18, 2020. In response, NSF provided clarifying comments but indicated overall agreement with the conclusions.

NSF’s Use of Remote Work to Ensure Continuity of Federal Government Services

On March 16, NSF instructed all telework-ready employees to telework to the greatest extent possible and to follow the CDC’s COVID-19 guidance to prevent illness and recognize symptoms. According to OMB Memorandum M-20-23, agency leaders “must continue to ensure continuity in delivery of Federal government services, protect the health and safety of the Federal workforce, and provide Federal government leadership and momentum as an impetus toward a broader national return to normalcy.”

We determined NSF’s plans and actions aligned with this directive. Despite restricting access to its headquarters building, NSF continued to successfully execute its mission through telework and virtual grant review panels. For example, while working remotely, NSF staff successfully responded to the surge of inquiries and correspondence associated with Rapid Response Research (RAPID) awards. NSF ultimately funded more than 400 RAPID projects, ranging from modeling the spread of COVID-19 to developing new materials for medical masks.

NSF equipped most of its staff to work remotely to ensure continuity of operations when it moved its headquarters from Arlington to Alexandria, Virginia, in 2017. The Foundation further refined its telework capabilities during the summer of 2019, when many of the Metro stations near NSF’s building were closed for several months. NSF’s tools for remote work, including Seamless Mobile Computing and a Virtual Private Network, were in place before access to the building was suspended in April and enabled staff to securely and reliably access NSF’s internal network, applications, and files from their homes. NSF’s Division of Information Systems moved quickly to provide staff with processes and technologies as they transitioned to an all-remote work environment.

NSF’s Multi-phased Plan to Return to Its Headquarters Building

In May 2020, the CDC stated that all employers need to consider how best to decrease the spread of COVID-19 and lower the impact in the workplace.¹ Specifically, considerations should

¹ *Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, May 2020

include activities to prevent and reduce transmission among employees, maintain healthy business operations, and maintain a healthy work environment. Additionally, in May 2020, the CDC provided mitigation strategies for the level of community transmission or impact of COVID-19, acknowledging that as organizations gradually open after the COVID-19 related slowdown, they will need to consider a variety of measures for keeping people safe.² The CDC advised that these considerations include practices for scaling up operations, safety actions (e.g., cleaning and disinfection, social distancing), monitoring possible reemergence of illness, and maintaining health operations. The guidance gives multiple options for safety measures from which organizations can choose to best meet their needs.

The OMB Memorandum M-20-23 also stated that the return to normal operations should align with a geographic area's respective phase in the return to normal operations, while also accounting for agency operational needs, as applicable. As part of easing business restrictions for all business sectors, the Virginia Governor issued guidance for physical distancing, enhanced cleaning and disinfection, and enhanced workplace safety, including:

- encouraging telework whenever possible;
- screening employees;
- using face coverings where 6 feet of physical distance is not possible;
- establishing of practices for physical distancing, including providing clear communication and signage;
- limiting occupancy of physical spaces; and
- routine cleaning and disinfecting of high contact areas and hard surfaces.

NSF's plan to return to the building includes three phases that are consistent with CDC guidance; OMB guidelines for the Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) area; and Virginia's guidelines.³ Phase 1 began June 8, 2020. It allowed access to the building only for mission essential functions that could not be performed remotely, such as obtaining an identification badge or fingerprinting services. Phase 1 also included the implementation of safety measures, including:

- asking individuals screening questions upon entering the building;
- requiring face coverings when entering the building and in common areas;
- installing physical distancing signage and floor markers;
- providing hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes throughout the common areas of the building;
- additional cleaning of high-touch areas; and
- installing protective barriers in customer service areas and point-of-service stations.

² *CDC Activities and Initiatives Supporting the COVID-19 Response and the President's Plan for Opening America Up Again*, May 2020

³ NSF is not required to follow §16VAC25-220, Virginia's *Emergency Temporary Standard Infectious Disease Prevention: SARS-CoV-2 Virus that Causes COVID-19*. However, because the NSF headquarters building is in Virginia, NSF consulted the Commonwealth of Virginia's *Guidelines for All Business Sectors* to help shape decisions on the reopening process.

Phase 2 began July 20, 2020. NSF remains in this phase as of the date of this memorandum. During Phase 2, employees may work in the building on a voluntary basis. In addition to the safety measures implemented during Phase 1, the maximum daily building occupancy is initially limited to 25 percent of capacity. Employees interested in working inside the building must coordinate within their directorates to ensure occupancy limits are not exceeded.

Phase 3 will allow unrestricted access to the NSF headquarters building with appropriate safety protocols. As of the date of this memorandum, there is no projected timeline for the start of Phase 3. NSF is considering Federal, state, and local guidance; infection rates and trends; and NSF-specific needs and requirements to decide when to begin Phase 3.

Results of Employee Survey on NSF’s Pandemic Response

To better understand the workforce’s perception of NSF’s response to the pandemic, NSF conducted three surveys between May and July 2020. NSF reported the results of these surveys in emails to all staff. According to NSF, the May survey, which had a 38 percent response rate, indicated that 88 percent of all respondents felt strongly supported by NSF; 86 percent of all respondents felt that the communication about COVID-19 had been helpful; and 82 percent of all respondents felt they had the resources they needed to support their health, safety, and well-being. Areas of concern identified included the eventual re-opening of the building. In the June survey, which had a 42 percent response rate, 73 percent of respondents reported feeling comfortable with the re-opening approach described by NSF at the beginning of June. Those who responded negatively to that item (six percent) reported feeling that the approach was too vague and ambiguous, citing concerns over health and safety and opening the building too quickly. After the survey, NSF held a virtual Town Hall meeting to address many of the concerns survey participants raised. According to NSF, the July survey had a 51 percent response rate, and 89 percent of participants responded positively to the item “I feel NSF is handling this situation as well as can be expected.”

Conclusion

We found NSF’s plans to be reasonable, prudent, and consistent with OMB and CDC COVID-19 related guidance on reopening businesses. NSF has continued to ensure critical and essential services meet mission needs, protect the health and safety of its workforce, and provide Federal Government leadership regarding the return of employees to its headquarters building. Additionally, employee feedback obtained from the three surveys NSF conducted in May, June, and July indicated that staff were supportive of NSF’s approach.

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