

From: [The Office of the Secretary - OSEC](#)
Subject: UPDATED: COVID Mask Guidance
Date: Friday, March 4, 2022 11:50:48 AM
Attachments: [usda-county-level-mask-requirements-3-4-2022.xlsx](#)
[county-covid-community-levels-030422.png](#)

This email is intended for USDA employees only
******* Please do not respond to this mailbox. Thank you. *******

Dear USDA Employees,

We want to provide an important update on masking protocols at USDA facilities and worksites. Last Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released updated recommendations for mask wearing and other prevention measures depending on the [level of COVID-19 in your community](#). This change represents a significant shift from focusing on transmission rates to now focusing on minimizing the impact of severe COVID-19 illness, minimizing the burden on the health care system, and protecting the most vulnerable. The high rates of vaccination, availability of boosters, and infection-induced protection coupled with the broad access to vaccines, therapeutics, and testing significantly contributed to this shift.

As you know, the Federal government follows CDC guidance. Earlier this week, we received [initial implementing guidance](#) from the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force on masking and testing. The guidance requires that we implement different protocols for masking and testing based on the level of COVID-19 in the county where the USDA facility/worksites is located. COVID-19 levels will be determined on a weekly basis. Accordingly, whether masking and testing is required at a particular USDA facility or worksite will also be determined on a weekly basis.

The initial implementing guidance that follows applies specifically to masking. The new CDC guidance on testing requires us to re-design our approach to screening testing; as soon as we are able, we will issue implementing guidance around testing. Additionally, note that guidance around social distancing (six-feet or more), travel (mission-critical only), and meetings (more than 50+ requires approval) remain in place until CDC and the Safer Federal Workplace Task Force determine otherwise.

Initial Implementing Guidance on Masking Protocols

CDC has provided the attached county-level data showing the [COVID-19 Community Level](#) for each county in the United States. Each county is identified as low, medium, or high, which is determined by looking at the number of hospital beds being used, hospital admissions, and the total number of new COVID-19 cases in an area. Based on the county Community Level, USDA facility masking protocols will be as follows:

- Where the COVID-19 Community Level is **LOW** in the county where a USDA facility or

employee worksite is located: Individuals are not required to wear masks in the facility or worksite, regardless of vaccination status.

- Where the COVID-19 Community Level is **MEDIUM** in the county where a USDA facility or employee worksite is located: Individuals are not required to wear masks in the facility or worksite, regardless of vaccination status. Additional guidance on testing protocols in medium communities will be provided soon.
- Where the COVID-19 Community Level is **HIGH** in the county where a USDA facility or employee worksite is located: Individuals are required to wear masks in the facility or worksite, regardless of vaccination status and consistent with CDC and Safer Federal Workforce Task Force guidance on mask-wearing. Additional guidance on testing protocols in high communities will be provided soon.

Additionally, where a locality imposes more protective pandemic-related safety requirements, those requirements must be followed in USDA facilities or employee worksites within that locality.

All individuals can wear a mask if they choose regardless of COVID-19 Community Level.

Employees Who Work in Multiple Counties

Employees who perform official duties in more than one county must follow protocols for the county they are in. In other words, an employee is required to wear a mask while working in a facility or worksite in a county where the COVID-19 Community Level is **HIGH**, but that same employee is not required to wear a mask while working in a different facility or worksite where the COVID-19 Community Level is **LOW** or **MEDIUM**.

Employees Who Live and Work in Different Counties

Masking protocols are based on the location of the facility at which an employee works. Employees will follow the masking protocols for the county in which they work even if the county in which they live has a different COVID community level.

Masking Due to Quarantine, Isolation or COVID-19 Exposure or Positive Test

People with symptoms, a positive test, or exposure to someone with COVID-19 must wear a mask for the required period consistent with CDC and Task Force guidance for quarantine and isolation. See the [CDC](#) and [Task Force](#) guidance for details

County-Level Data

On Fridays, the COVID-19 community levels will be shared across USDA to guide masking protocols for the following week. The data that we are sharing today will be for masking protocols that will be in effect Sunday, March 6 through Saturday, March 12. In future weeks, we expect to leverage the “Big 3” email that goes out to all employees on Fridays to share the information.

Labor Relations

Although this guidance is being implemented today, USDA Agencies and Staff Offices are expected to engage in post-implementation bargaining with their respective unions, as appropriate.

Impact on Other Workplace Safety Protocols

Other safety protocols established in our Workplace Safety Plan remain in place, and we expect more changes as the health situation evolves and we receive updated guidance from the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force. We will continue to provide updated protocols including on testing as they become available, and the USDA Workplace Safety Plan and FAQs will be revised.

We recognize that the change in the masking guidance is a significant change and is a transition that may feel abrupt or unsettling to some employees. Although masks will no longer be required in **LOW** or **MEDIUM** COVID community levels, some colleagues will choose to continue wearing masks in the workplace. We need to honor their choices and demonstrate professionalism, empathy, and respect for one another.

If you have any questions about this guidance, please email futureofwork@usda.gov. You may also view the attached map on the CDC [website](#). Thank you for all that you do for USDA and the people we serve.

Sincerely,

The Future of Work Task Force

To the extent this policy may constitute a change in a condition of employment for bargaining unit employees, agencies/offices will implement it in accordance with the terms of their current labor agreement and 5 U.S.C. Chapter 71. If you are a bargaining unit employee and have questions regarding the content of this message and its potential impact on a current labor agreement, please refer them to your local union representative.