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COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services

This document provides guidance for places of worship and providers of religious services to support the safest possible environment for faith leaders, employees, volunteers, scholars, and all other types of workers, as well as congregants, worshippers, and visitors.

This guidance does not obligate or encourage places of worship to resume in-person activity. Indeed, it is strongly recommended that places of worship continue to facilitate remote services, particularly for those who are vulnerable to COVID-19, including older adults and those with chronic conditions. Even with adherence to physical distancing, multiple different households convening in a congregational setting to worship carries a higher risk for widespread transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19, and may result in increased rates of infection, hospitalization, and death, especially among more vulnerable populations. In particular, the high risk associated with activities like singing, and group recitation can negate the risk-reducing behaviors, such as 6 feet of physical distancing.

Recognizing the centrality of worship in many people's lives and the spiritual and emotional value of prayer, community, and faith, this guidance provides recommendations for places of worship that choose to resume or expand in-person activities.

The Safest Options: Remote Services and Drive-In Services

A common thread joining many faiths is a deep respect for human life and health, which prioritizes protecting our neighbors and the vulnerable among us. Places of worship may choose to express those values by practicing the safest forms of worship through remote services and drive-in services.

Remote services

Remote services can be streamed online, broadcast by radio, and/or conducted by telephone or dial-in. Remote services are the only way to guarantee places of worship will not become sources of new infection.

Drive-in services

Drive-in services involve congregants driving to a common location and worshipping together from their vehicle, while listening to either a remote service or one broadcast through speakers. If done correctly, these types of services pose a low risk of infection.

Some best practices include:

- Congregants who are living together travel together, without introducing new people to the vehicle.
- Congregants always remain in their vehicles.

- Maintain distance between cars so that there is more than 6 feet between any group of congregants and another group of congregants – particularly if car windows are open.
- Regularly sanitize restrooms and have sufficient soap and hand sanitizer.

For further guidance

Places of worship may look to the additional guidance referenced below:

CDC Interim Guidance for Communities of Faith: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/faith-based.html>

Guidelines for re-configuring places of worship for social distancing

Reconfigure seating and standing areas to maintain physical distancing of 6 feet or more between congregants/visitors from different households. Consider both limiting seating to alternate rows and assigning seating in advance.

Shorten services to limit the length of time congregants/visitors spend at facilities whenever possible. This could include limiting speeches/sermons and asking congregants/visitors to put on garments at home before arrival.

Consider implementing a reservation system to limit the number of congregants/visitors attending facilities at a time. This can include the use of digital platforms or other types of tools.

Consider offering additional times for services or meetings (per day or per week) so fewer guests attend at one time. Dedicate staff to direct guests immediately to their seats upon entry to places of worship rather than congregating in lobbies or common areas.

Consider using ushers to help people find places to sit and stand that are at least 6 feet apart from other guests/household groups. Develop and communicate a plan to welcome and dismiss congregants/visitors from seating areas, altars, podiums, and meeting rooms in an orderly way to maintain physical distancing and minimize crossflow of traffic.

Avoid assembly line type greetings at the beginning or conclusion of services. Ask congregants/visitors to arrive and leave in a single household group to minimize crossflow of people.

Consider assigning spaced household arrival times to minimize congregants arriving all at once. Prop or hold doors open during peak periods when congregants/visitors are entering and exiting facilities, if possible and in accordance with security and safety protocols.

Close or restrict common areas, such as break rooms, kitchenettes, and foyers where people are likely to congregate and interact. Consider installing barriers or increase physical distance between tables/seating when continued use of these areas cannot be avoided. If possible, provide bottled water or touchless water fountains. For touch drinking fountains, discourage forming a line and create markings to allow social distancing while waiting, have paper towels available to touch the fountain, and clean and disinfect frequently.

Remove from service or find low-community touch alternatives for communal/religious water containers, such as fonts, sinks, and vessels. Empty and change water between services/uses. Where there is a possibility of contaminant splash, strongly encourage staff, congregants, visitors, and others to use equipment to protect their eyes, noses, and mouths using a combination of face coverings, protective glasses, and/or face shields.

Reusable protective equipment, such as shields and glasses, should be properly disinfected between uses. When washing is a required activity, modify practices whenever possible to limit splashing and the need to clean and disinfect washing facilities.

Physical distancing guidelines

Continue to provide services through alternative methods (such as via internet live and/or recorded streaming, telephone, and drive-in) whenever possible. Implement measures to ensure physical distancing of at least 6 feet between workers, staff, and congregants/visitors. This can include use of physical partitions or visual cues (e.g., floor or pew markings or signs to indicate where people should sit and stand). Members of the same household may be seated together but should maintain at least 6 feet apart from other households. Encourage congregants/visitors to meet with the same group, particularly when services meet frequently and/or require a certain number of people to be present. This can reduce the spread of transmission by minimizing the number of different individuals who come into close contact with each other. Consider dedicating staff or volunteers to help people maintain distances during services or activities.

Take steps to ensure limited attendance at gatherings that encourage congregants/visitors to travel and break physical distances, such as concerts and large holiday and life event celebrations and remembrances. Discontinue these activities whenever possible.

Children should remain in the care of those in their household unit and not interact with children of other parties at any time while visiting facilities. Close play areas and discontinue activities and services for children where physical distancing of at least 6 feet cannot be maintained.

Limit touching for religious purposes, such as shaking hands or holding hands, to members of the same household.

Cleaning and disinfecting protocols

Perform thorough cleaning of high traffic areas, such as lobbies, halls, chapels, meeting rooms, offices, libraries, and study areas, and areas of ingress and egress, including stairways, stairwells, handrails, and elevator controls. Frequently disinfect commonly used surfaces including doorknobs, toilets, handwashing facilities, pulpits and podiums, donation boxes or plates, altars, and pews and seating areas.

Discourage sharing items used in worship and services (such as prayer books, cushions, prayer rugs) whenever possible and provide single-use or digital copies or ask congregants/visitors to bring personal items instead. Where such items must be shared, disinfect between uses. Disinfect microphones and stands, music stands, instruments and other items on pulpits and podiums between each use.

Install hand sanitizer dispensers, touchless whenever possible, at entrances and contact areas such as meeting rooms, lobbies, and elevator landings.

Consider limiting the number of people that use the restroom at one time to allow for physical distancing. Consider placing a towel dispenser near the restroom exit with signage for using a towel to touch the door or having touchless exit.

Discontinue passing offering plates and similar items that move between people. Use alternative giving options such as secure drop boxes that do not require repeated opening/closing and can be cleaned and disinfected. Consider implementing digital systems that allow congregants/visitors to make touch-free offerings.

Mark walking paths between spaces designated for congregants/visitors to sit/kneel so that people do not walk where someone may be touching the floor.

During meetings and services, introduce fresh outside air by opening doors/windows (weather permitting) and operating ventilation systems.

Modify high-risk religious practices

Consider modifying practices that are specific to faith traditions that might encourage the spread of COVID-19. Examples are discontinuing kissing of ritual objects, discontinuing bathing rites, allowing rites to be performed by fewer people, providing pre-packed communion items on chairs prior to service, avoiding the use of a common cup, and offering communion in the hand instead of on the tongue.

Individual control measures and screening

Ensure proper use of face coverings. Congregants/visitors and staff should be screened for temperature and/or symptoms upon arrival to places of worship and asked to use hand sanitizer and to wear face coverings. Encourage staff and congregants/visitors who are sick or exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, or who have family members who are ill, to stay home.

Post signage in strategic and highly visible locations, to remind congregants/visitors that they should use face coverings and practice physical distancing whenever possible. Use social media, websites, texts, emails, and newsletters to communicate the steps being taken to protect congregants/visitors and staff so they are familiar with the policies (including to stay home if experiencing symptoms or at an increased risk of becoming sick, face coverings, physical distancing, handwashing and/or sanitizing, and cough etiquette), before arriving at the facility. Staff and volunteers are strongly encouraged to remind congregants/visitors of these practices with announcements during services or on welcoming guests.

Consider reaching out separately to those who are ill but desire to be engaged in worship services. Develop a plan to include those participants by phone, video, or a safe alternative.

Monitor for staff illnesses and have staff remain home if they are ill or have been exposed to a person who is ill. Know and communicate where staff and congregants can get tested for COVID-19 if they develop symptoms. Have a clear plan to facilitate contact tracing if an attendee later tests positive for COVID-19.

Recruit non-vulnerable volunteers to assist in activities, particularly those that may require close contact. Limit offerings of classes or services for children to groups of 50 or fewer and devise an age-appropriate plan for children to practice social distancing and wear face coverings.

Avoid the riskiest activities

COVID-19 spreads primarily through respiratory droplets in person-to-person contact (within 6 feet); risk grows as exposure time increases. Some activities at places of worship pose a heightened risk that should be avoided:

Singing and group recitation

Strongly consider discontinuing singing (and post signage discouraging singing), group recitation, and other practices and performances where there is increased likelihood for transmission from contaminated exhaled droplets. Modify practices by calling for silent recitation, using prerecorded music, or having a single singer in a separate area with speaker transmission. If these practices cannot be discontinued, strictly limit the number people reciting or singing, ensure physical distancing significantly greater than 6 feet between people, and consider installing plexiglass to provide physical barriers between people, or opt to celebrate these practices outside with significant physical distancing and other precautions. Use microphones to discourage loud speaking and provide a barrier (plexiglass) for the speaker.

Food and beverages

Discontinue offering food and beverages. Do not hold potlucks or buffet-style meals or events that increase the risk of cross contamination. If food and beverages must be served, provide items in single-serve containers (disposable containers whenever possible), and ensure congregants or others who are living together are seated together and more than 6 feet apart from others. Employees or volunteers serving food should wash hands frequently and wear disposable gloves and face coverings.

Greetings and person-to-person contact

Discourage staff, congregants, and visitors from engaging in handshakes, hugs, and similar greetings that break physical distance. Take measures to remind people to wave or use other greetings.

Additional guidance for in-person activities

As places of worship navigate COVID-19, the guidelines below are designed to make in-person indoor worship and activities safer – recognizing that the safest and recommended options are those listed above, and that larger gatherings pose greater risk. Strict social distancing, wearing face coverings, and cleaning and disinfecting are paramount to reducing the risk of infection for in-person gatherings. Places of worship should develop a COVID-19 plan and be prepared to adapt to updated public health guidance and to restrict in-person activities if the incidence of COVID-19 within their communities increases. Places of worship should provide training to both staff and congregants on their COVID-19 plans and share the new safety protocols and processes by email, video, mail, and posted signage – with frequent updates as new safety protocols are implemented.

Capacity limits

As gatherings grow, they pose a greater risk of becoming a source of COVID-19 transmission. The current statewide guidelines recommend gatherings of no more than 50 people. Where the 50 -person limit cannot be followed in places of worship, these guidelines are recommended:

Set a capacity limit for the place of worship that allows for extensive social distancing (6 feet or more) between congregants. Consider limiting attendance to 25% of building capacity or a maximum of 100 attendees, whichever is lower. Expand capacity limits gradually, rather than all at once, to allow the opportunity to test and improve safety protocols. Conduct multiple small services as opposed to one large service. Consider small, separate services for certain groups – such as those over 65 years of age or those who have serious underlying medical conditions, or those with small children who will have difficulty social distancing. During services for those over 65 years of age or those who have serious underlying medical conditions, enforce strict safety protocols. Consider a reservation system to limit capacity, to assign seating to ensure social distancing, and to allow for contact tracing in the event of a confirmed COVID-19 case and the need to contact exposed individuals. Develop and communicate a social distancing plan that includes where congregants will sit, how they will enter and exit seating areas (including staggered and scheduled arrival times and varied exit times), and how social distancing can be maintained at all times given the physical layout of the place of worship. Use the social distancing plan to determine a safe capacity limit.

Relatively Safe Options for In-Person Worship

Faith communities also cherish fellowship. The desire for the human connection of worshipping together, particularly during a time of crisis, is understandable. However, gatherings of any size pose a risk of COVID-19 transmission. For places of worship that choose to hold in-person activities, the safest course of action is to congregate outdoors and/or in groups of less than 50 people

Congregate outdoors

Where weather and facilities permit, it is safer for worship and other activity to occur outdoors rather than indoors. Some best practices include: Congregants who are living together sit together, at least 6 feet apart from other congregants and groups. Wear face coverings. Refrain from singing and group recitation, which significantly increases the risk of transmission of the virus by projecting respiratory droplets. Consider pre-recorded music or other alternatives. If continuing with singing and group recitation, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn. Restrooms should be regularly sanitized and have sufficient soap and hand sanitizer. Follow applicable guidance below for in-person activities. Congregate in groups of less than 50 people indoors. For in-person services that are indoors, the safest choice is to limit the number of people during a given service. Consider holding multiple services for multiple small groups, limiting to 50 in-person services to special events (e.g., weddings, funerals, baptisms), or limiting in-person activities to private prayer and worship. Some best practices include:

- Congregants who are living together sit together, at least 6 feet apart from other groups.
- Wear face coverings.
- Especially indoors, refrain from singing and group recitation, which significantly increases the risk of transmission of the virus by projecting respiratory droplets. Consider pre-recorded music or other alternatives.
- If continuing with singing and group recitation, increase social distance to at least 10 feet between groups and ensure face coverings are worn.
- Restrooms should be regularly sanitized and have sufficient soap and hand sanitizer. Follow applicable guidance below for in-person activities.