

**Farm Credit Administration
Office of Inspector General**

Inspection Report

**Survey of Farm Credit
Administration Employees on
COVID-19**

I-21-02

June 9, 2021

FCAOIG

Farm Credit Administration
Office of Inspector General



Farm Credit Administration
Office of Inspector General

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The Honorable Glen R. Smith, Board Chairman
The Honorable Jeffery S. Hall, Board Member
Farm Credit Administration
1501 Farm Credit Drive
McLean, Virginia 22102-5090

Dear Chairman Smith and Board Member Hall:

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) completed an inspection on a survey of Farm Credit Administration (FCA) employees on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The objective of this inspection was to conduct a survey on the safety measures and other actions implemented by FCA in response to COVID-19. To address our objective, we developed a 17-question survey to collect employee input. The survey questions were designed based on guidance set forth in Executive Order 13991, *Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing*, and the Office of Management and Budget's memorandum, *COVID-19 Safe Federal Workplace: Agency Model Safety Principles* (M-21-15). The survey had a 72 percent response rate with 225 employees completing the survey. The survey was administered using a web-based platform and responses were collected anonymously.

The survey results showed that employees believed the Agency took positive actions to implement safety measures and other actions in response to COVID-19. The survey showed that most employees were working remotely since the COVID-19 operating changes, and they felt that they have been able to fully perform all work responsibilities in the remote environment. In addition, survey results showed that employees had appropriate resources for telework. 87 percent of respondents reported that they had not observed incorrect mask-wearing, a lack of social distancing, occupancy that was not limited, and other sanitation issues at their assigned worksite.

Survey results identified certain opportunities to provide additional communication to employees on procedures related to COVID-19. We made one recommendation in our inspection. Management agreed with the recommendation and provided appropriate corrective actions.

We appreciate the courtesies and professionalism extended by FCA to our staff during the inspection. If you have any questions about this inspection, we would be pleased to meet with you at your convenience.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Sonya K. Cerne'.

Sonya K. Cerne
Assistant Inspector General for Audits, Inspections, and Evaluations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Survey of FCA Employees on COVID-19

Report No. I-21-02

June 9, 2021

Objective

The objective of this inspection was to conduct a survey on safety measures and other actions implemented by FCA in response to COVID-19.

Recommendation

The Office of Inspector General recommends the Office of the Chief Operating Officer distribute further communications to employees to explain:

- when it is necessary to be physically present during telework operating statuses;
- how mask-wearing and other required workplace safety measures differ in Farm Credit Administration space and non-Farm Credit Administration space;
- trends used in considering the Agency's operating status;
- future remote work arrangements and expectations;
- specific procedures for when and whom to contact regarding a suspected or confirmed coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) diagnoses that affects the workplace;
- specific procedures for official travel decisions and following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines after personal travel;
- symptom monitoring procedures; and
- specific procedures for quarantine and self-isolation after a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis or close contact.

The Farm Credit Administration (FCA or Agency) is an independent federal agency responsible for regulating, examining, and supervising the Farm Credit System (FCS or System) and the Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (Farmer Mac). The Agency's mission is to ensure that System institutions and Farmer Mac are safe, sound, and dependable sources of credit and related services for all creditworthy and eligible persons in agriculture and rural America. FCA's people are a strategic priority and critical to achieving its mission.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic. In response to the pandemic, FCA initiated actions to protect employees and began a mandatory telework status for most employees beginning March 16, 2020. Since then, the Agency has generally remained in full telework status.

To halt the spread of COVID-19 and protect the federal workforce, the President signed Executive Order 13991, *Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing*, on January 20, 2021. The Executive Order requires executive departments and agencies to immediately take action to require compliance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines with respect to wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, and other public health measures by on-duty or on-site federal employees, on-site federal contractors, and all other individuals in federal buildings and on federal lands. To support implementation of the Executive Order, the Office of Management and Budget issued a memorandum, *COVID-19 Safe Federal Workplace: Agency Model Safety Principles (M-21-15)*, on January 24, 2021.

The Office of Inspector General developed a survey to collect employee input on safety measures and other actions implemented in response to COVID-19. In total, 225 FCA employees completed the survey, which equates to about 72 percent of the FCA workforce.

Overall, the survey results showed that employees believed the Agency took positive actions to implement safety measures and other actions in response to COVID-19. Survey results showed that employees were working remotely with 72 percent reporting that they had not worked at their assigned worksite since the COVID-19 operating changes in March 2020. In addition, employees felt they had been able to fully perform all work responsibilities in the remote environment and that they had appropriate resources to telework. For employees that had been to their assigned worksite, approximately 87 percent of respondents reported that they had not observed incorrect mask-wearing, a lack of social distancing, occupancy that was not limited, or other sanitation issues. Survey results also identified opportunities to provide additional communication on safety measures and other actions related to COVID-19.

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ACRONYMS

Agency	Farm Credit Administration
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
Farmer Mac	Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation
FCA	Farm Credit Administration
FCS	Farm Credit System
FCSBA	Farm Credit System Building Association
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
System	Farm Credit System

BACKGROUND

The Farm Credit Administration (FCA or Agency) is an independent federal agency responsible for regulating, examining, and supervising the Farm Credit System (FCS or System) and the Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (Farmer Mac). The Agency's mission is to ensure that System institutions and Farmer Mac are safe, sound, and dependable sources of credit and related services for all creditworthy and eligible persons in agriculture and rural America. FCA's people are a strategic priority and critical for the Agency to achieve its mission.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic. FCA initiated measures to protect employees and began a mandatory telework status for most employees beginning March 16, 2020. Since then, the Agency has generally remained in full telework status, with limited exceptions for essential staff. In July 2020, the Agency began providing employees with the option to work from their office with approval from their supervisor and assurances that they have not been diagnosed, had symptoms, or been exposed to others with COVID-19.

FCA headquarters and one field office are located in McLean, Virginia. FCA also has field offices in Denver, Colorado; Dallas, Texas; Bloomington, Minnesota; and Sacramento, California. In fiscal year 2020, employees were generally assigned across FCA offices as follows:

- 53 percent in Virginia,
- 16 percent in Colorado,

- 12 percent in Minnesota,
- 11 percent in Texas,
- 6 percent in California, and
- 2 percent in other locations.

The Farm Credit System Building Association (FCSBA) is owned by the FCS banks and was established to provide the facilities and related services for FCA and its field offices. The FCSBA owns and operates FCA's headquarters building and holds the leases for FCA field offices. These facilities are not federal buildings and house both FCA personnel and commercial tenants.

In order to halt the spread of COVID-19 and protect the federal workforce, the President signed Executive Order 13991, *Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing*, on January 20, 2021. The Executive Order requires executive departments and agencies to immediately take action to require compliance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines with respect to wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, and other public health measures by on-duty or on-site federal employees, on-site federal contractors, and all other individuals in federal buildings and on federal lands. To support implementation of the Executive Order, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a memorandum, *COVID-19 Safe Federal Workplace: Agency Model Safety Principles* (M-21-15), on January 24, 2021. The model principles are intended to assist agencies as they build tailored COVID-19 workplace safety plans.

FCA has implemented various actions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the Agency:

- holds Emergency Response Team meetings to assess the evolving COVID-19 pandemic and appropriate actions;
- issues internal communications on protocols, operating status decisions, and other information related to COVID-19 safety;
- maintains a dashboard to analyze COVID-19 data and evaluate remote work extensions,
- provides a dedicated email account to field questions or concerns about steps or protocols put in place related to COVID-19;
- offers leave flexibilities for COVID-19 related reasons;
- encourages vaccinations and provides information on making vaccination appointments;
- issued an equipment and supplies reimbursement for telework-related expenses during the pandemic; and
- announced air filtration and purification enhancements in each FCA office to improve air quality.

In April 2021, after we conducted our survey, FCA distributed its draft Plan for Returning to the Workplace to all employees. The plan states that it will support FCA leaders with guidelines and planning considerations for evaluating the needs of employees as FCA transitions its operating status during the pandemic. In addition, because FCA has five different office locations with different occupancy levels, the draft plan states that leadership may implement guidance on a location-by-location basis with decisions based on data at the local level. On May 20, 2021, FCA announced that it updated its draft plan based on updates to CDC guidance on mask-wearing and social distancing for fully vaccinated people. The revised plan states that masks and physical

distancing are not required in certain FCA offices for fully vaccinated personnel during the phase two operating status.

INSPECTION RESULTS

The objective of this inspection was to conduct a survey on safety measures and other actions implemented by FCA in response to COVID-19. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) developed a survey that included 17 multiple-choice¹ and fill-in-the-blank questions to collect employee input. The survey questions were designed based on guidance set forth in Executive Order 13991 and OMB memorandum M-21-15. In total, 225 FCA employees completed the survey, which equates to a 72 percent response rate.² The margin of error³ for our survey was 3 percent, with a 95 percent confidence level.⁴ The survey was administered using a web-based platform that allowed the OIG to collect responses without collecting participants' names or email addresses. The survey was open from March 3-10, 2021.

Survey Results

Overall, the survey results showed that employees believed the Agency took positive actions to implement safety measures and other actions in response to COVID-19. Survey results showed that employees were working remotely with 72 percent reporting that they had not worked at their assigned worksite since the COVID-19 operating changes in March 2020. In addition, employees felt they have been able to fully perform all work responsibilities in the remote environment and that they had appropriate resources to telework. For employees that had been to their assigned worksite, approximately 87 percent of respondents reported that they had not observed incorrect mask-wearing, a lack of social distancing, occupancy that was not limited, or other sanitation issues. Survey results also identified certain opportunities to provide additional communication on procedures related to COVID-19. The following information identifies each question asked on the survey and the corresponding responses.

¹ The survey included questions that allowed respondents to select multiple responses. Specifically, questions 8 and 17 allowed respondents to select all answers that applied.

² Five additional employees started, but did not finish, the survey. We excluded incomplete responses to only include the 225 employees who completed the survey. OIG employees did not participate in the survey. Removing the OIG left 311 employees eligible to participate in the survey.

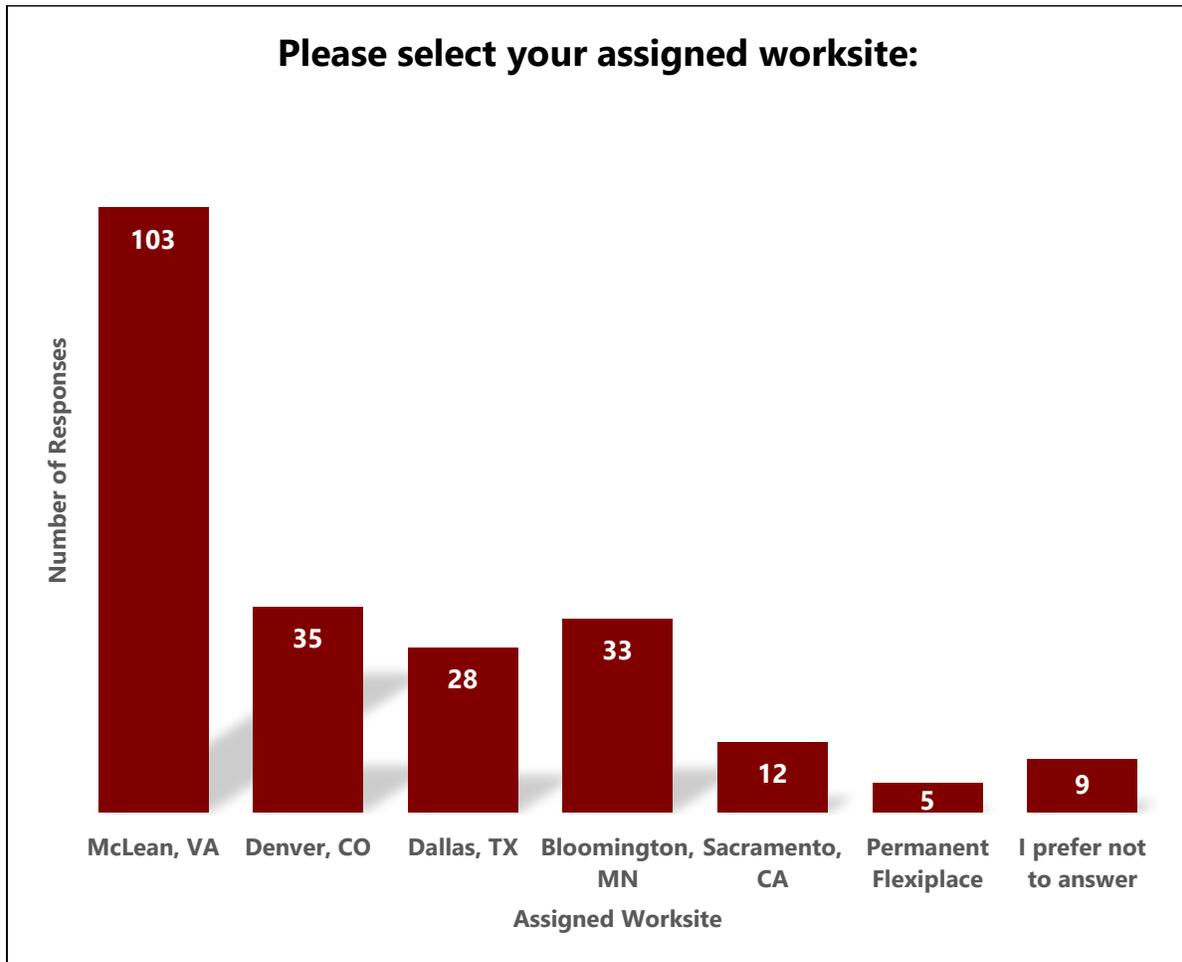
³ The margin of error provides the likelihood that the survey results reflect the views of the overall population.

⁴ The confidence level expresses the level of certainty that the sample accurately reflects the total population.

Question 1

Please select your assigned worksite:

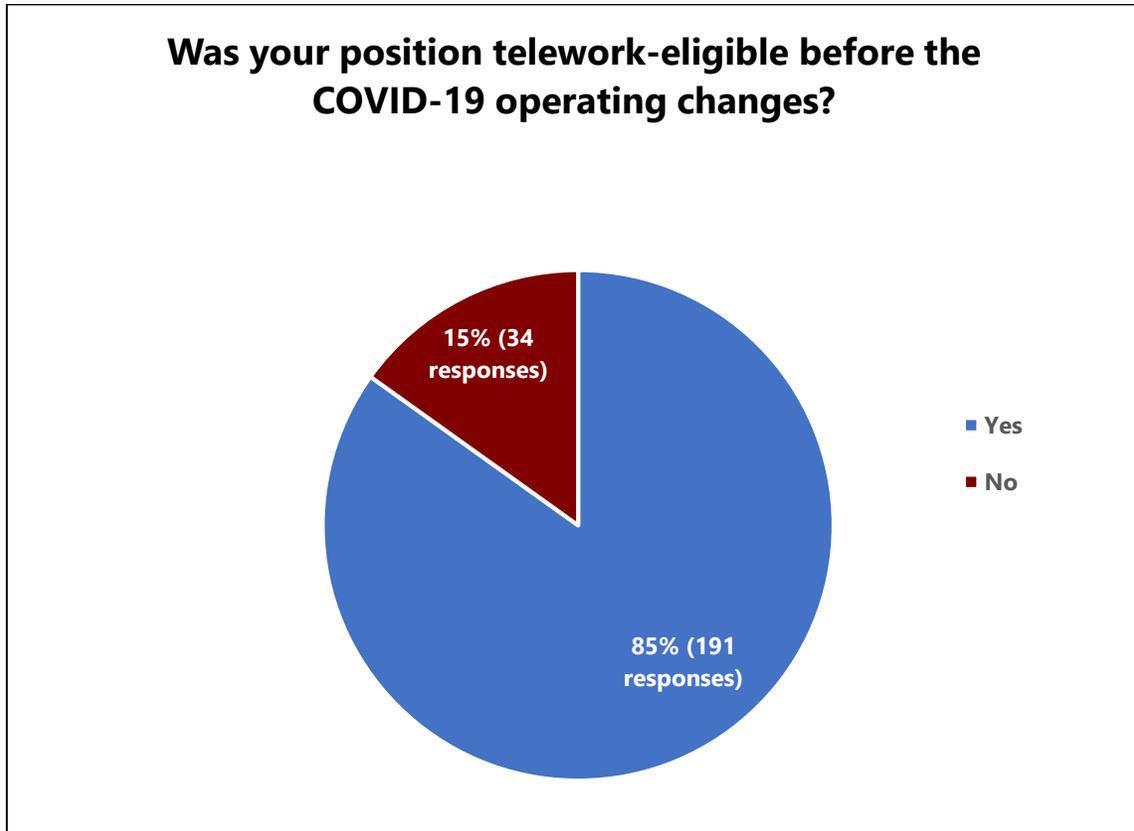
The largest number of respondents selected McLean, Virginia, where FCA's headquarters is located, as their assigned worksite. Remaining respondents selected FCA field offices or permanent flexiplace. Nine respondents preferred not to provide their assigned worksite.



Question 2

Was your position telework-eligible before the COVID-19 operating changes?

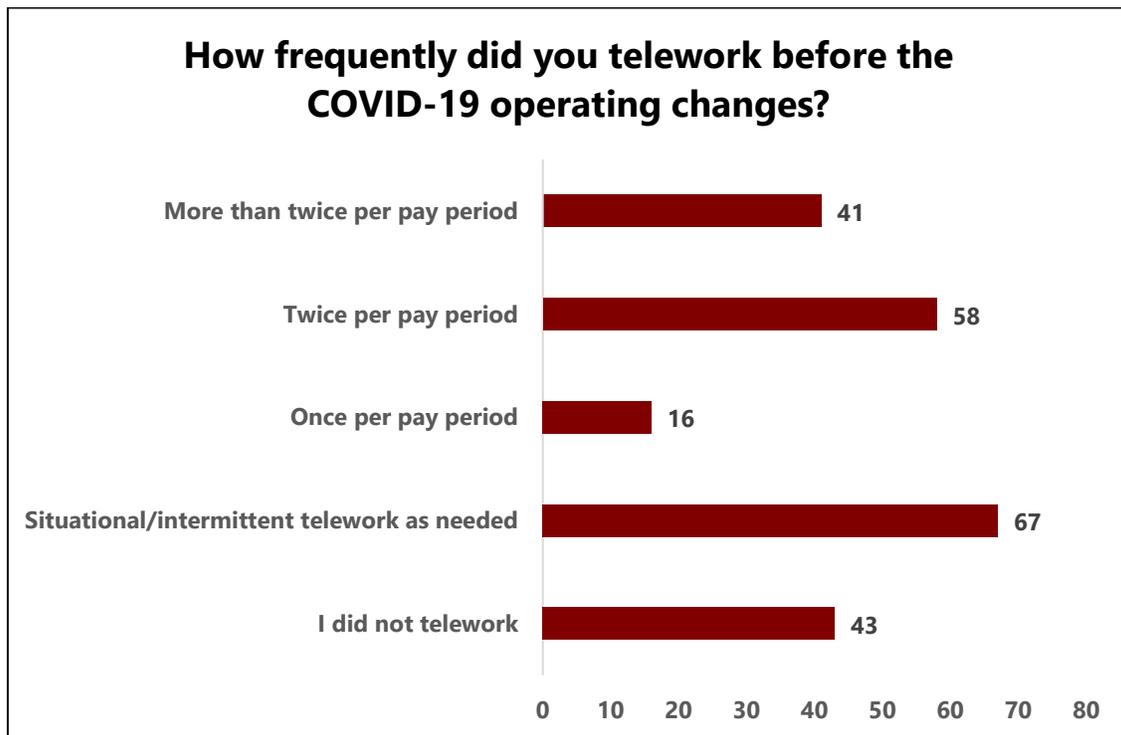
Survey results indicated that FCA positions were well-suited for the transition to remote work as part of the COVID-19 operating changes. 85 percent of respondents reported that their positions were telework eligible before the COVID-19 operating changes. 15 percent of respondents reported that their positions were not eligible for telework.



Question 3

How frequently did you telework before the COVID-19 operating changes?

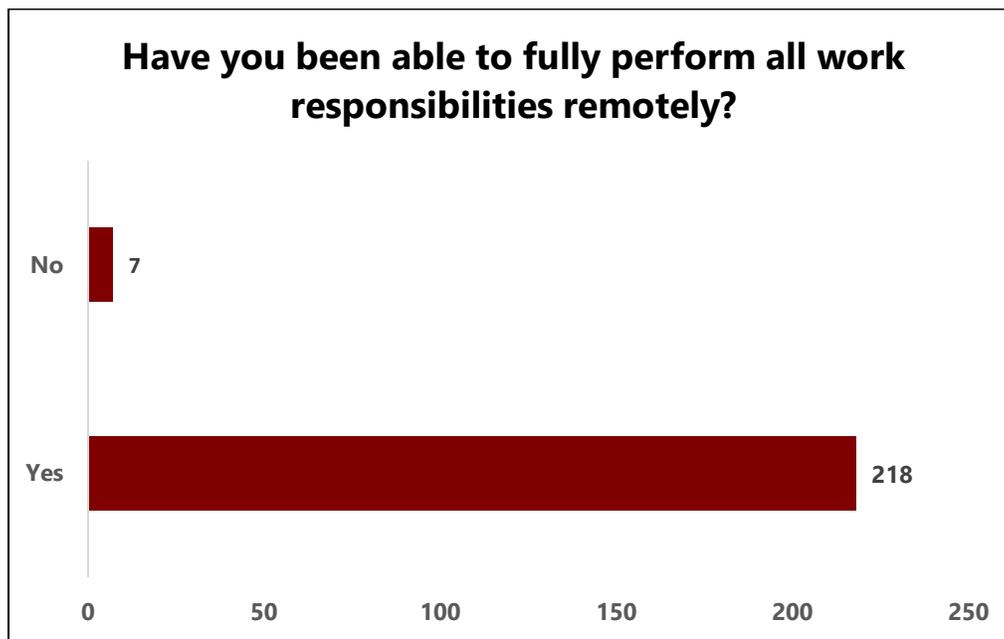
Most survey respondents reported that their position was telework-eligible prior to COVID-19 operating changes. However, employees stated they teleworked pre-COVID-19 with varying frequency. Almost half of respondents stated they did not telework or only teleworked on a situational or intermittent basis prior to COVID-19 operating changes. Remaining respondents teleworked on a regular basis: 7 percent selected that they teleworked once per pay period, 26 percent selected that they teleworked twice per pay period, and 18 percent selected that they teleworked more than twice per pay period.



Question 4

Have you been able to fully perform all work responsibilities remotely? If no, explain:

Survey results indicated that employees feel they have been able to fully perform all work responsibilities in the remote environment. The transition to telework in March 2020 was immediate and required many employees to perform all work remotely. This shift required employees to fulfill certain responsibilities in different ways in order for the Agency to continue accomplishing its mission. Nearly all survey respondents reported that they have been able to fully perform all work responsibilities remotely.



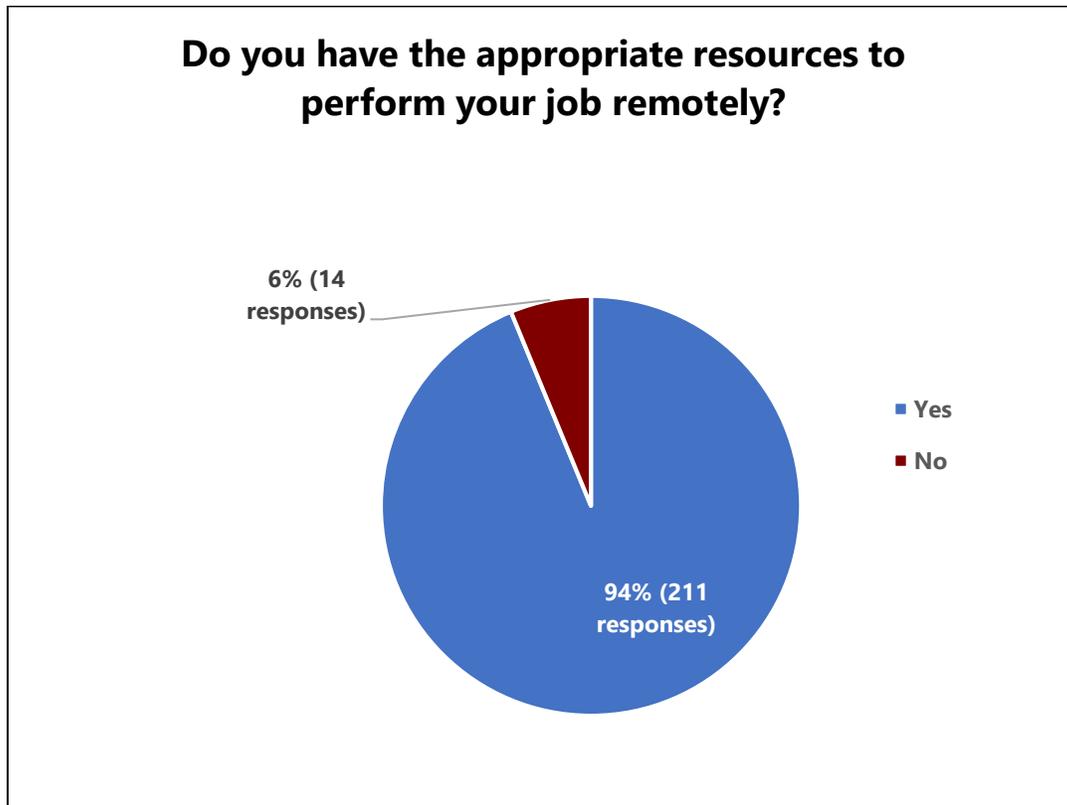
This survey question included a comment field where any respondent could provide additional feedback. Themes addressed in the comments were specific responsibilities that could not be performed remotely and remote work challenges. Examples of duties that could not be performed remotely included work related to government credentials; information technology troubleshooting, updates, and equipment services; and mail services. Respondents noted the following challenges with remote work in the comments:

- experiencing occasional connectivity problems, which impacted productivity;
- maintaining effective supervisory relationships and communicating effectively with all staff; and
- missing in-office camaraderie.

Question 5

Do you have the appropriate resources to perform your job remotely? If no, explain:

Survey results indicated that employees feel they have the resources they need for remote work. The transition to fully remote work created different resource needs for FCA employees. Fully remote work required employees to develop home office arrangements, including information technology equipment and office supplies. 94 percent of survey respondents reported that they had appropriate resources to perform their job remotely.



This survey question included a comment field where any respondent could provide additional feedback. The most common theme in the comments pertained to information technology equipment, specifically a lack of printers and desktop monitors. Respondents noted the following challenges related to these resources:

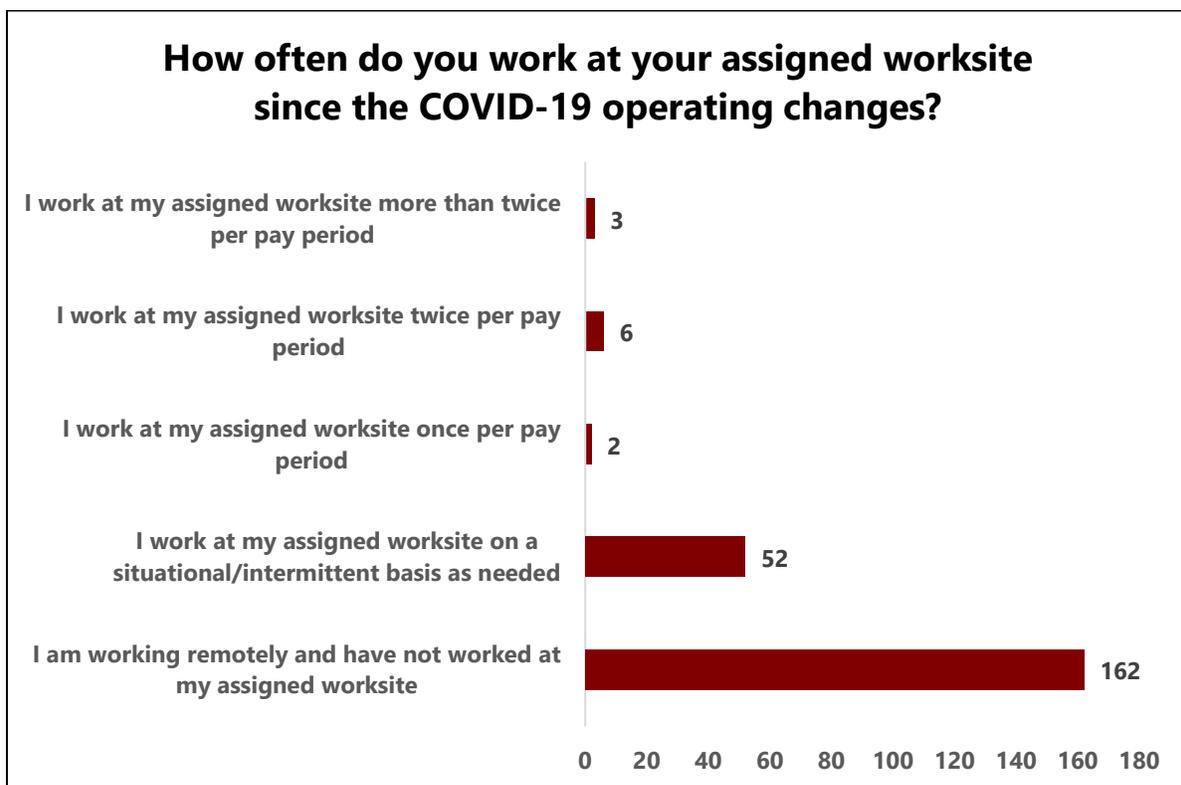
- difficulty handling lengthy and comprehensive documents without a high-capacity printer;
- home printers and portable agency-provided monitors do not equate to what is available in the office;
- not having access to hard copies of data and analysis;
- portable monitors provided to employees were not designed for frequent use and often do not connect properly; and
- not being able to reduce screen time by printing materials.

Another issue addressed in respondents' comments was the need to personally purchase work resources. Employees noted they personally purchased items such as headsets, monitors, docking stations, internet service enhancements, office furniture, and office supplies to work from home effectively and efficiently. Comments stated that a stipend or reimbursement for remote work equipment would have been helpful, especially given the length of time employees have been working remotely, and that some do not have the financial resources for a home office. On March 16, 2021, FCA announced several COVID-19 benefits for employees, including a plan to issue funds to employees to cover telework-related expenses during the pandemic; payments were processed in April 2021.

Question 6

How often do you work at your assigned worksite since the COVID-19 operating changes?

Survey results indicated that FCA continues to implement maximum telework. Despite providing employees with the option to work at their assigned worksite in July 2020, with appropriate approval, most respondents indicated that they have remained fully remote. Since the COVID-19 operating changes, 72 percent of respondents selected that they have not worked at their assigned worksite. 23 percent of respondents selected that they are working at their assigned worksite on a situational or intermittent basis, as needed. Remaining respondents selected that they work at their assigned worksite once per pay period, twice per pay period, or more than twice per pay period.⁵



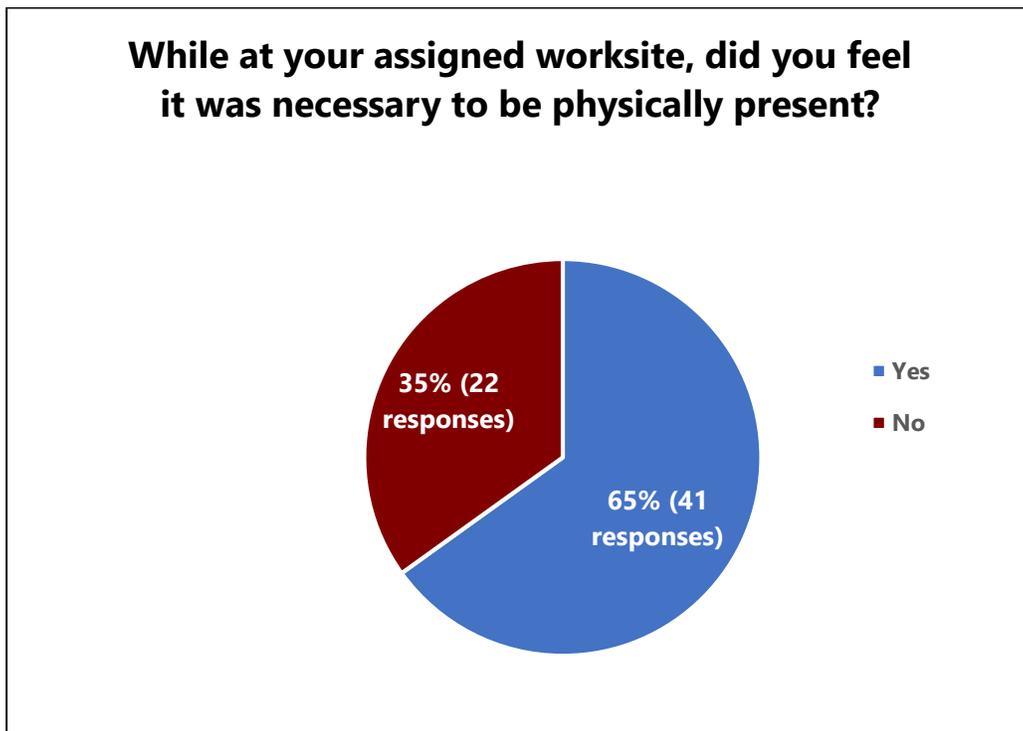
The next three survey questions (questions 7, 8 and 9) are specific to onsite work in FCA offices during COVID-19 operating changes. Employees were directed to these questions based on their response to question 6. The 162 employees that selected “I am working remotely and have not worked at my assigned worksite” did not have the option to answer questions 7, 8 and 9. For this reason, these questions were not answered by all 225 survey respondents.

⁵ A pay period is a two-week period.

Question 7

While at your assigned worksite, did you feel it was necessary to be physically present?

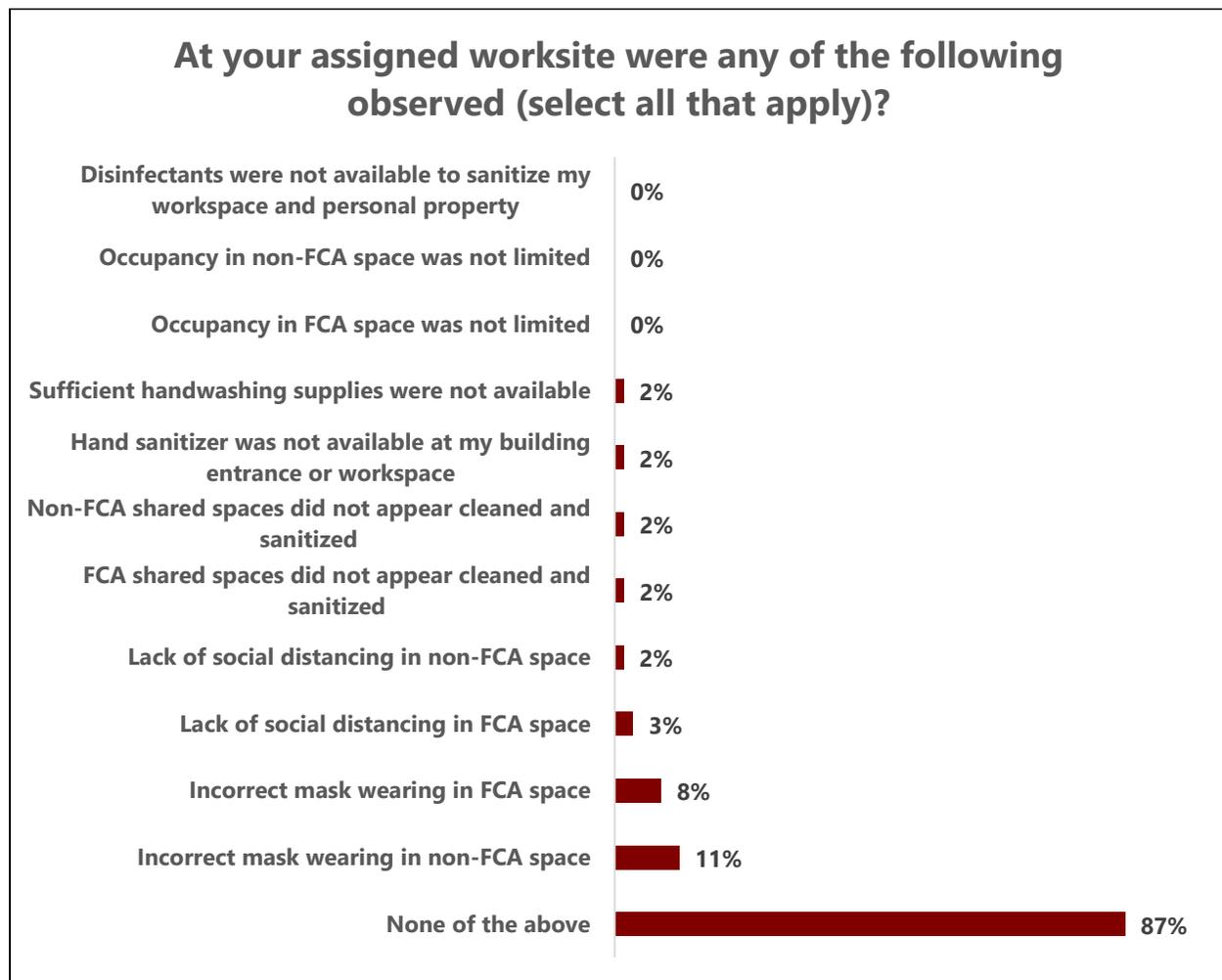
Survey results indicated some employees who performed work at their assigned worksite did not feel it was necessary to be physically present. Supervisors may have required certain staff serving in positions with mission essential functions to perform their work physically at their worksite. FCA has offered employees the option to work at their assigned worksite, with appropriate approval, but remains in remote status to prevent the spread of COVID-19. 65 percent of respondents selected that they felt it was necessary to be physically present while at their assigned worksite and 35 percent selected that it was not.



Question 8

At your assigned worksite were any of the following observed (select all that apply)?

Survey responses indicated that COVID-19 safety measures are generally being implemented in FCA offices. The majority of survey respondents selected that they did not observe improper measures listed by selecting "none of the above." 11 percent of respondents noted that incorrect mask-wearing was observed in non-FCA space, and 8 percent noted that incorrect mask-wearing was observed in FCA space.⁶ The remaining observations accounted for three percent or less of total respondents.



⁶ FCA and non-FCA space were distinguished in available responses because FCA offices are not in federal buildings and include non-FCA tenants.

Question 9

Please provide any additional information about your assigned worksite during the COVID-19 operating changes that you feel is important:

Question 9 provided a comment field where respondents could provide additional feedback about their assigned worksite during COVID-19 operating changes.⁷ The most common theme in the comments was positive feedback about the current office environment. Positive comments included:

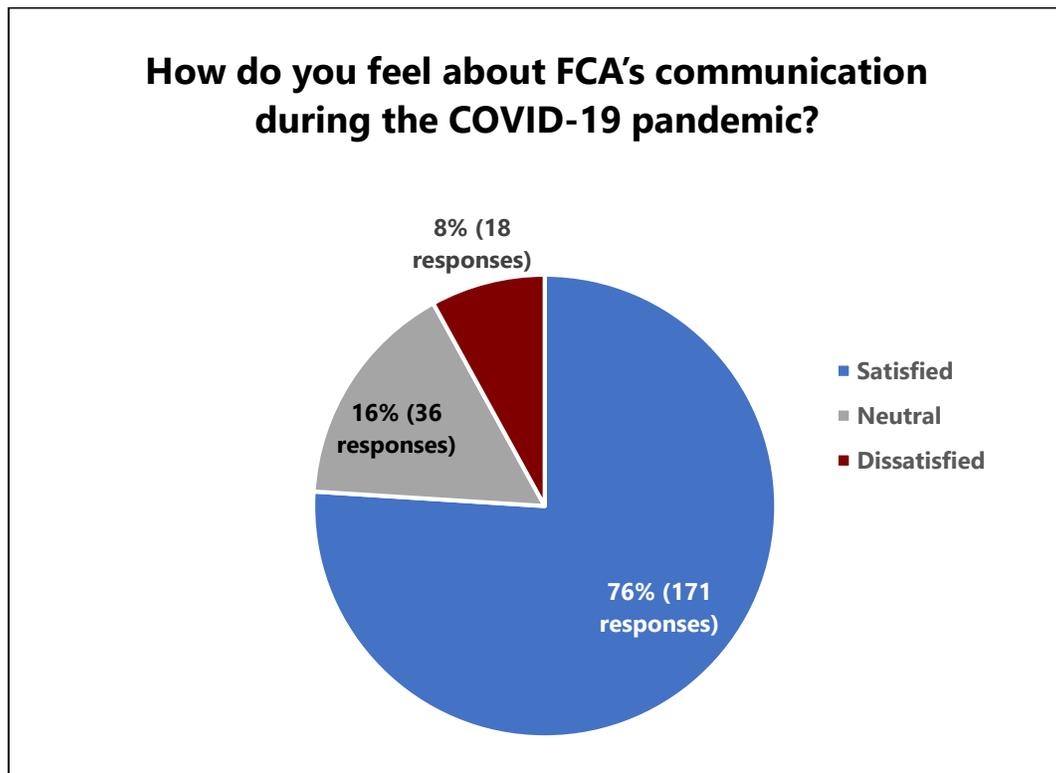
- Onsite work has been very limited, for example, important meetings or specific projects that are easier to complete in the office.
- Onsite work has been completely voluntary or elected by the employee.
- Very few people have been in the office and offices have done a very good job limiting the number of employees in the office at one time, which supports distancing and makes onsite work feel low-risk.
- FCSBA and leadership have taken steps to ensure sanitation on a regular basis, and office space has been clean with adequate cleaning supplies.
- Occupants have always worn masks in hallways and common areas.
- COVID-19 protocols have been followed.

⁷ 63 respondents were directed to questions 7, 8, and 9, but question 9 did not require a response.

Question 10

How do you feel about FCA's communication during the COVID-19 pandemic? If dissatisfied, explain:

Survey results indicated employees were generally satisfied or neutral regarding communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. FCA communicates with employees through internal newsletters and other media to provide current information related to COVID-19 and the Agency's operating status. 76 percent of respondents selected that they were satisfied, and 8 percent selected that they were dissatisfied. The remaining 16 percent selected that they felt neutral about FCA's communication.



This survey question included a comment field where any respondent could provide additional feedback. The most common theme in the comments pertained to short-term extensions for telework operating statuses and a lack of information about the metrics used to determine these extensions. Respondents felt these issues created confusion and uncertainty and made it difficult to plan. More specifically, comments stated:

- FCA should give more warning and provide a potential return to office date that is further out rather than changing the date on a month-to-month basis.
- Other federal regulators extended mandatory telework until summer or fall of 2021.
- Longer-term dates give employees clear expectations rather than moving the date month-by-month when it seems clear employees will not be returning in a month.

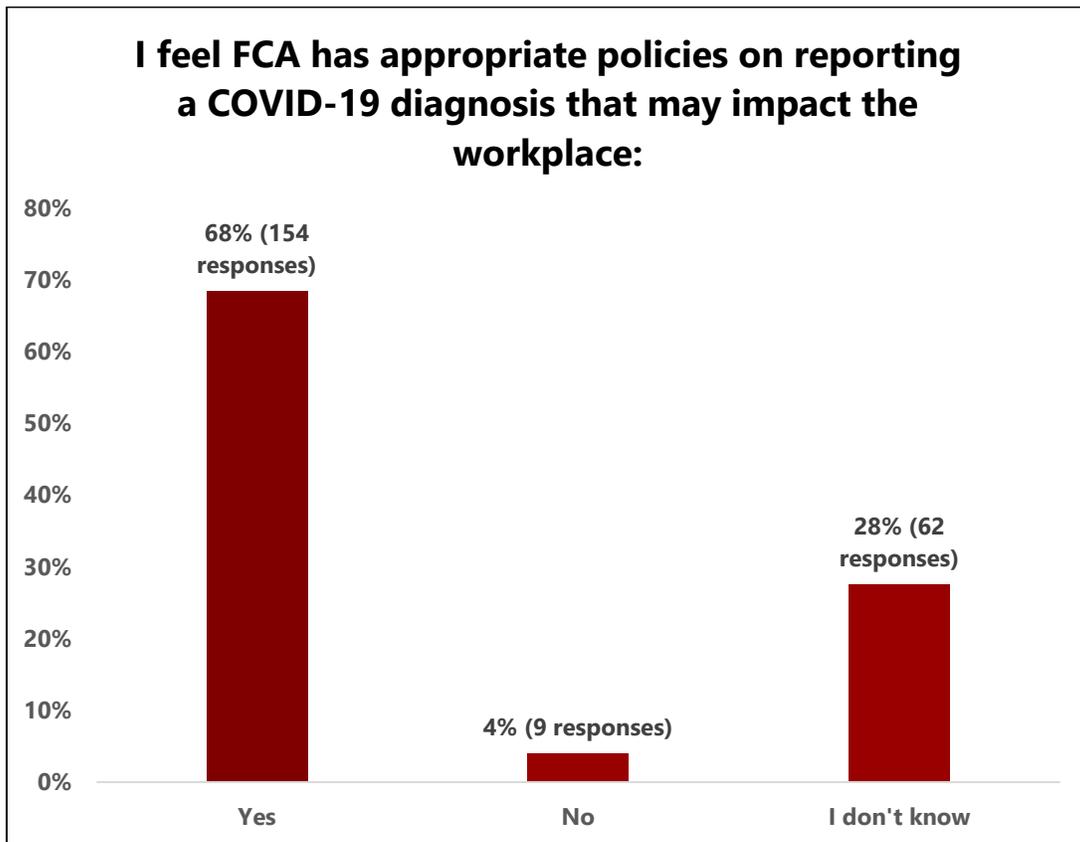
- The short-term planning horizon for the potential return to work is difficult for individuals with caregiving responsibilities to plan.
- The data and criteria being used to make the decision whether to extend telework is not shared with staff, which is not transparent and creates more confusion.

Another issue addressed in respondents' comments was future expectations about telework arrangements. Comments stated that it would be helpful to hear from management or the FCA Board on future teleworking arrangements and whether there are anticipated changes, such as expanded telework. A comment stated that because employees have worked from home successfully for over a year and it has provided work/life benefits, there should be discussions and communication on what work arrangements are expected going forward. Another comment noted mixed messaging regarding remote work. It stated that employees are being told they need to be back in the office and traveling as soon as possible, yet they are commended for doing their jobs effectively in a fully remote environment.

Question 11

I feel FCA has appropriate policies on reporting a COVID-19 diagnosis that may impact the workplace:

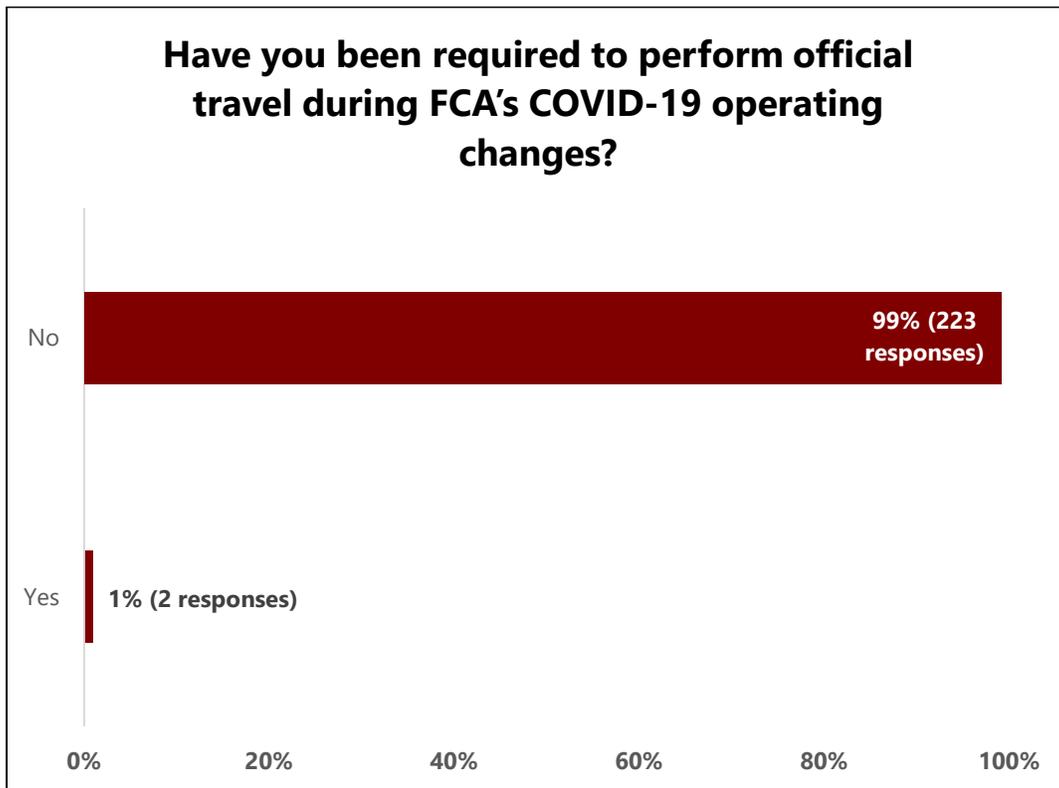
Survey results indicated an opportunity to increase awareness of COVID-19 safety measures at FCA. Reporting and contact tracing are important safety measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. 68 percent of respondents selected that they felt FCA policies on reporting a COVID-19 diagnosis were appropriate. 28 percent of respondents selected that they did not know, and 4 percent selected the reporting policies were not appropriate.



Question 12

Have you been required to perform official travel during FCA's COVID-19 operating changes?

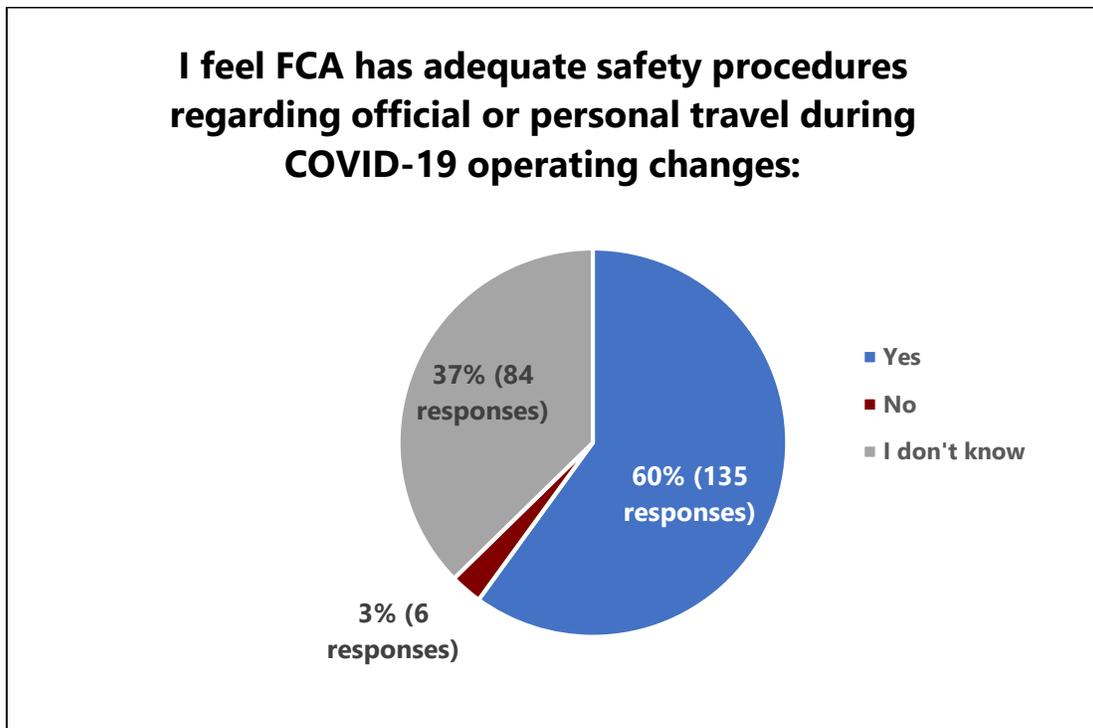
Survey results reflect FCA's effective implementation of safety measures to minimize official travel. Prior to the COVID-19 operating changes, FCA examiners conducted significant travel for examinations. Official travel was suspended in March 2020 as part of the Agency's COVID-19 operating changes. 99 percent of survey respondents selected that they have not been required to perform official travel during COVID-19 operating changes.



Question 13

I feel FCA has adequate safety procedures regarding official or personal travel during COVID-19 operating changes:

Survey results indicated an opportunity to increase awareness of COVID-19 safety measures at FCA. OMB memorandum M-21-15 states federal employees should adhere strictly to CDC guidelines before, during, and after travel, regardless of whether the travel is personal or for official business. Precautions may include assessing travel risk prior to travel, always wearing a mask, or getting tested before returning to the workplace. While 60 percent of respondents selected that FCA had adequate safety procedures regarding official or personal travel during COVID-19 operating changes, the remaining 40 percent selected they did not know or did not feel procedures were adequate.

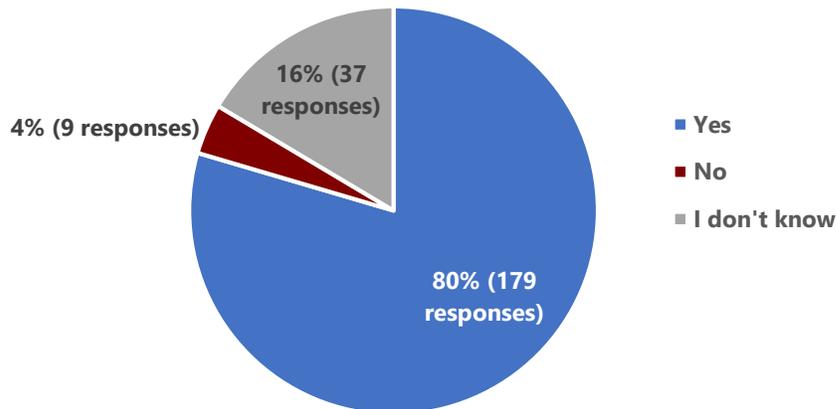


Question 14

I feel FCA has adequate symptom monitoring procedures at my assigned worksite (for example, a symptom questionnaire, exposure history questionnaire, temperature check):

Survey results indicated that employees are generally confident in symptom monitoring procedures at FCA offices; however, there are opportunities to increase communication and employees' awareness. Symptom monitoring is an important tool to prevent those who do not feel well from entering the federal workplace. Due to the ever-changing nature of COVID-19 exposures, the most effective symptom monitoring occurs on a daily basis or upon entry to the workplace. OMB memorandum M-21-15 states that symptom monitoring allows federal agencies to assess an individual's risk level and determine whether they should enter the workplace. 80 percent of respondents selected that they felt symptom monitoring procedures were adequate. 16 percent selected that they did not know, and the remaining 4 percent selected they did not feel procedures were adequate. Responses to this question may be affected by the large number of employees who selected that they had not returned to their assigned worksite since the COVID-19 operating changes.

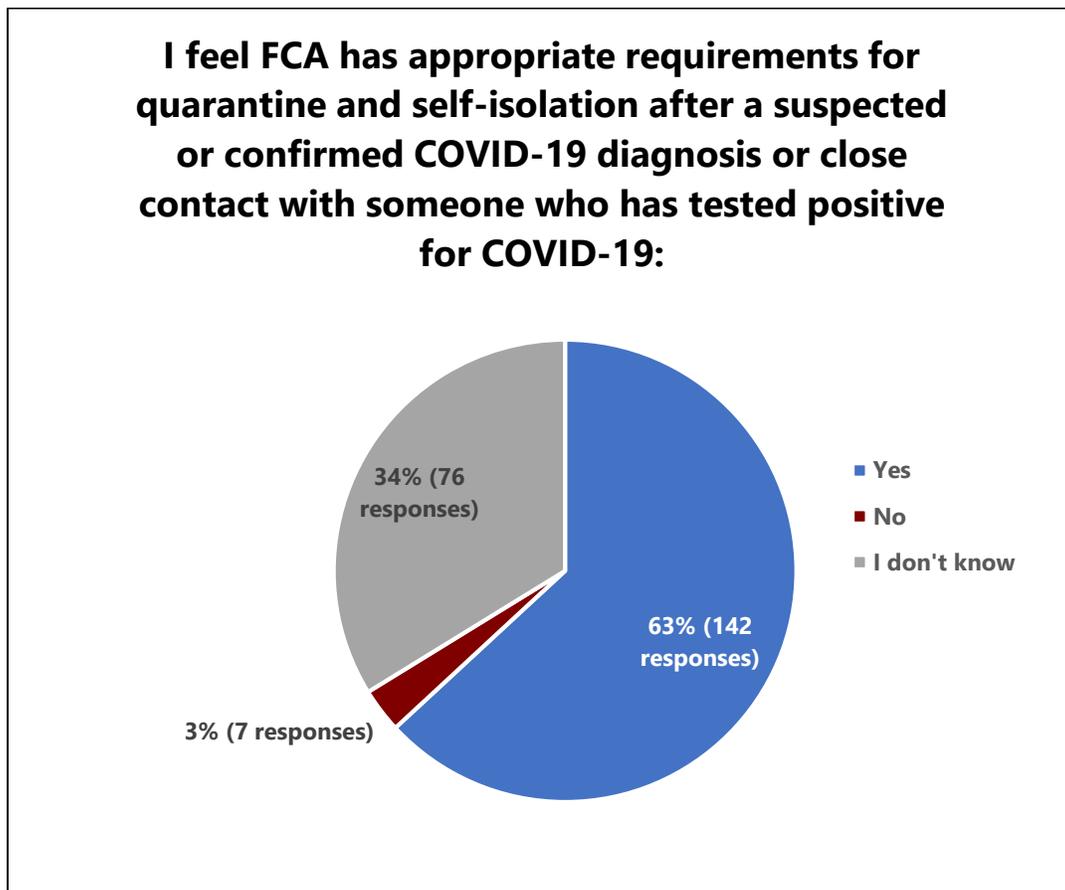
I feel FCA has adequate symptom monitoring procedures at my assigned worksite (for example, a symptom questionnaire, exposure history questionnaire, temperature check):



Question 15

I feel FCA has appropriate requirements for quarantine and self-isolation after a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis or close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19:

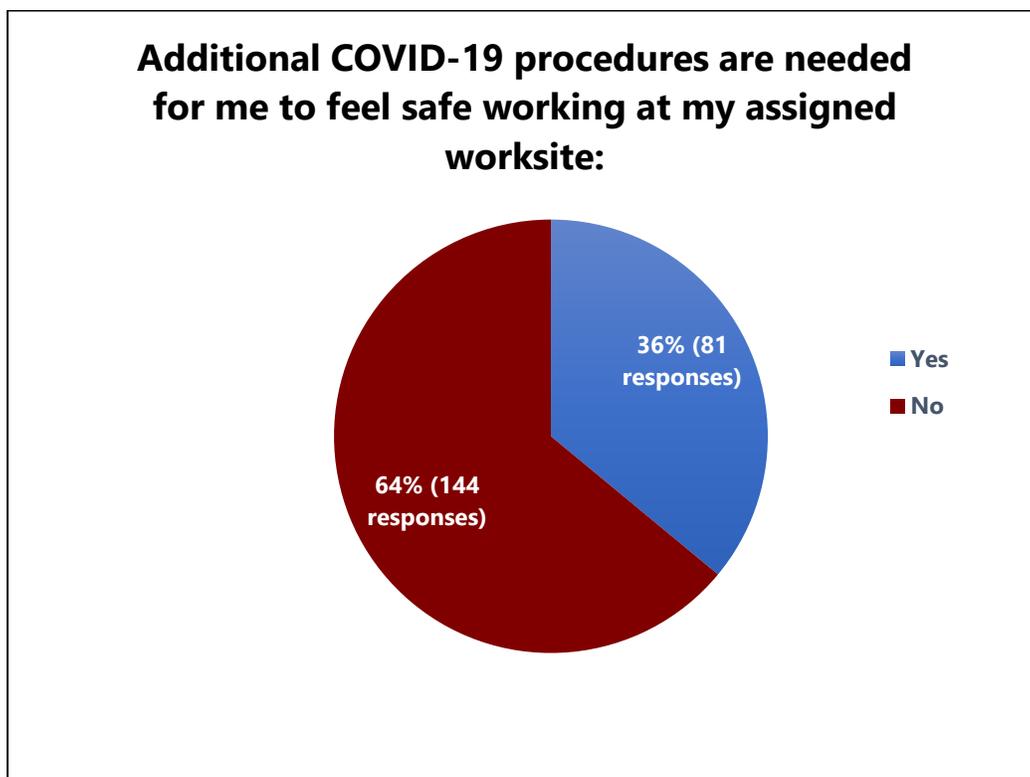
Survey results indicated an opportunity to increase awareness of COVID-19 safety measures at FCA. OMB memorandum M-21-15 states individuals with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 will be advised to isolate and those who have had close contact with someone who has tested positive should quarantine in accordance with CDC guidelines. Consistent implementation of quarantine and isolation procedures helps protect federal employees from exposure. 63 percent of survey respondents selected that they feel FCA's quarantine and self-isolation requirements were appropriate. 34 percent of respondents selected that they did not know, and the remaining 3 percent selected that they felt these requirements were not appropriate.



Question 16

Additional COVID-19 procedures are needed for me to feel safe working at my assigned worksite. If yes, explain:

Survey results indicated that additional procedures may be needed for FCA employees to feel safe at their assigned worksite. In March 2020, FCA directed most of its workforce to telework and restricted business travel. Since that time, the Agency has continued to extend telework status, and most employees selected that they have been fully remote. Safety procedures are important as the Agency evaluates changes to its remote work status. 64 percent of respondents selected that they did not feel additional procedures are needed for them to feel safe at their assigned worksite. However, the remaining 36 percent felt additional procedures are needed.



This survey question included a comment field where any respondent could provide additional feedback. The most common theme in the comments was a lack of clarity on safety procedures and requirements in the workplace. More specifically, comments addressed a lack of awareness or understanding for procedures at their assigned worksite related to:

- following CDC guidelines, including mask-wearing, and social distancing;
- reporting a possible COVID-19 exposure and notification of employees about a potential workplace exposure;
- developing symptoms in the office;
- quarantine and self-isolation after close contact or potential exposure;

- office gathering and entering other employees' offices;
- shared spaces such as conference rooms and kitchens;
- official and personal travel, including testing and quarantine for required travel;
- symptom monitoring at FCA offices, including exposure questionnaires and requirements not to enter the workplace if feeling sick;
- cleaning and sanitation for surfaces and commonly used areas;
- visitors;
- ventilation;⁸
- field office procedures;
- occupancy limits;
- whether procedures differ for vaccinated and unvaccinated employees; and
- safety procedures while at system institutions.

Another issue addressed in respondents' comments was vaccination. Comments stated that employees would like to be vaccinated before they return to the office. In addition, respondents commented that the overall vaccination status of their offices and communities are important for them to feel safe working at their assigned worksite. Respondents stated that they would like more transparency and communication on the Agency's expectations regarding vaccination. Comments also expressed concern that vaccinations should not be the sole basis for returning to offices and commencing official travel. A comment stated that because it is not possible to know others' vaccination status and one can still contract COVID-19 if vaccinated, the workplace still may not be safe.

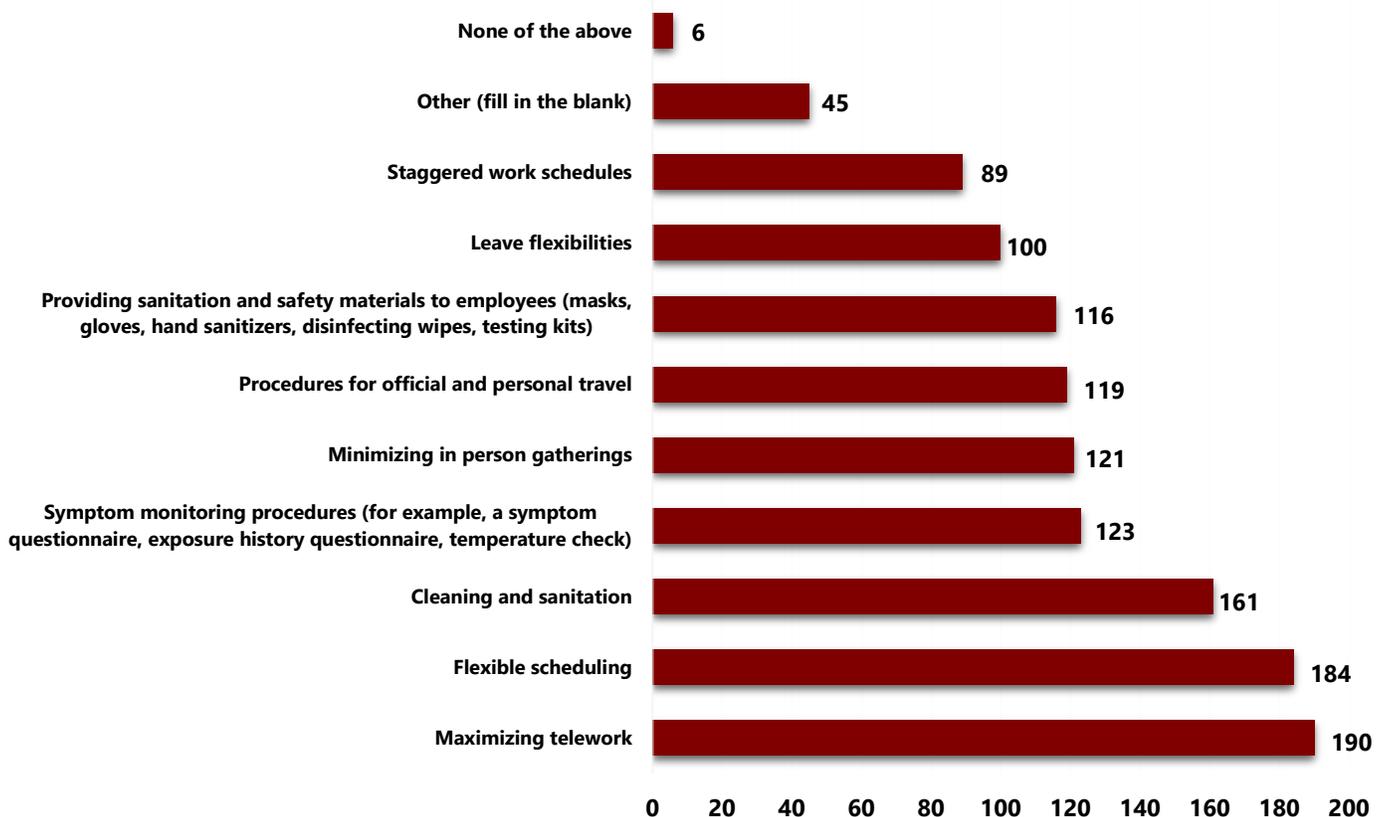
⁸ On April 23, 2021, the Agency announced that in preparation for the return of more employees to the office, FCSBA was taking steps to improve air quality. The announcement stated that the FCSBA would ship portable air filtration units to each FCA field office, and it had signed a contract to provide a central air purification system in McLean, Virginia.

Question 17

Which of the following are important to you once the Agency begins to reopen offices (select all that apply):

As FCA evaluates reopening offices and returning to assigned worksites, survey results indicated several key areas for consideration. 84 and 82 percent of respondents, respectively, selected maximizing telework and flexible scheduling as important factors. In addition, 72 percent of respondents selected that cleaning and sanitation are important for returning to offices. This question included an "Other (fill in the blank)" option with a comment field where respondents could provide additional feedback. The most common themes in the responses addressed remote work and vaccinations. With regard to remote work, respondents commented that there should be more telework going forward to protect high-risk individuals, promote work/life balance, and support flexibility and productivity. Respondents also reiterated the importance of vaccinations in evaluating returning to offices. Comments expressed concerns about not knowing others' vaccination status and Agency expectations for those who are not vaccinated. In addition, the comments stated that vaccinations, time for them to be fully effective, and achieving herd immunity are important benchmarks.

Which of the following are important to you once the Agency begins to reopen offices (select all that apply):



Clear and Continuous Communication

Proper implementation of safety measures is essential for their effectiveness. Documenting and communicating safety requirements and procedures helps improve awareness, standardize implementation, and support enforcement across FCA. Specific safety procedures and clear communication are also important given FCA's geographically dispersed office locations and space in non-federal buildings. Because COVID-19 mandates differ by state, it is important for employees to understand how safety measures are being implemented across their office. Furthermore, because FCA does not determine safety measures for commercial tenants co-located in its office locations, it is important to establish clear barriers and educate employees on how requirements differ within FCA and non-FCA space.

On April 8, 2021, the Agency distributed its draft Plan for Returning to the Workplace agencywide. The draft plan provides employees with clearer communications on safety protocols as employees return to assigned worksites. In addition, the Agency maintains an email address where employees can send questions or concerns about workplace health and safety. However, additional information and communication will help employees better understand the Agency's COVID-19 decision-making. Supervisors should make sure employees understand specific tasks that need to be performed onsite during telework operating statuses to minimize unnecessary risks. Employees will also benefit from greater transparency on metrics used for operating status decisions and future remote work options and arrangements. Although the draft plan states that cases, testing, hospitalizations, vaccine availability, and vaccination data points will be reviewed to make operating status decisions, citing to specific metrics or trends and how they have changed will help employees understand conclusions.

FCA's draft Plan for Returning to the Workplace describes four operating status phases and safety measures in different categories, but providing additional details and procedures would address concerns identified in survey responses. The draft plan addresses requirements in each phase for:

- telework and maximum occupancy limits
- COVID-19 vaccinations following state/local vaccination plans⁹
- travel
- in-person training
- COVID-19 testing
- face masks/coverings¹⁰
- physical distancing
- temperature checks
- sick employees

⁹ On April 12, 2021, the Agency provided senior management with a question and answer document related to vaccinations and COVID-19. The guidance explains answers to potential questions and where to direct employees for additional information.

¹⁰ In May 2021, the CDC updated its guidance for fully vaccinated people with respect to masking and physical distancing. As a result, on May 20, 2021, FCA updated its phase two operating status requirements in these areas.

- reporting COVID-19 incidents and contact tracing
- encouraging telework for employees that lack dependent care or transportation due to COVID-19
- reasonable accommodation requests
- building cleaning and sanitation
- personal protective equipment supplies
- sanitation of shared equipment
- meetings and gatherings
- restrictions of common areas
- workspace redesign to allow distancing
- signage on COVID-19 safety practices
- re-exit strategy if conditions worsen

However, the plan does not provide detailed information about whom to contact for a confirmed or suspected COVID-19 diagnoses, how travel decisions will be evaluated, how symptoms will be monitored at FCA offices beyond temperature checks, and quarantine and self-isolation after a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis or exposure. Specific procedures and communication with employees will make safety measures more effective, instill confidence in workplace safety, and support proper implementation of CDC guidelines across the Agency.

Recommendation

To increase employee awareness and understanding of COVID-19 safety measures, we made the following recommendation:

1. The Office of Inspector General recommends the Office of the Chief Operating Officer distribute further communications to employees to explain:
 - when it is necessary to be physically present during telework operating statuses;
 - how mask-wearing and other required workplace safety measures differ in Farm Credit Administration space and non-Farm Credit Administration space;
 - trends used in considering the Agency's operating status;
 - future remote work arrangements and expectations;
 - specific procedures for when and whom to contact regarding a suspected or confirmed coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) diagnoses that affects the workplace;
 - specific procedures for official travel decisions and following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines after personal travel;
 - symptom monitoring procedures; and
 - specific procedures for quarantine and self-isolation after a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis or close contact.

FCA Response

The Agency agreed with the recommendation (see additional responses in the management comments section of this report). The Chief Operating Officer stated the Agency will distribute additional communication to employees on the topics identified in the report and will work within

federal and local guidelines to continue refining its Return to the Workplace Plan. The estimated completion date for the planned corrective actions is September 30, 2021.

OIG Response

The OIG finds the actions responsive to our recommendation. Management comments can be found in the subsequent section of the report. The Agency waived an exit conference.

MANAGEMENT COMMENTS

Memorandum

Farm Credit Administration
1501 Farm Credit Drive
McLean, VA 22102-5090
(703) 883-4000



June 1, 2021

To: Tori Kaufmann

From: Samuel R. Coleman

Subject: Management Response to the Inspector General's Draft Inspection Report: Survey of Farm Credit Administration Employees on COVID-19

This memorandum responds to the OIG Draft Inspection Report: *Survey of Farm Credit Administration Employees on COVID-19*. The FCA appreciates the Office of Inspector General's (OIG's) efforts to survey employees regarding our safety measures and other actions implemented by FCA in response to COVID-19. It is important to recognize that prior to the OIG's survey, the FCA workforce completed two different surveys on the agency's response to the pandemic. On the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), 99% of the respondents felt protected from health and safety hazards on the job. In September 2020, a one-question pulse survey revealed that 86% of the respondents were very satisfied with FCA's response to the pandemic. In an effort to avoid "survey fatigue", the agency will continue to utilize the useful data gleaned from the aforementioned surveys. The Board and the Emergency Response Team (ERT) continues to communicate effectively and consistently with staff. Our response to the pandemic has, and will continue to take a conservative approach which avoids putting employees at risk.

In our communications to staff, we provide monthly updates on our operating status, along with ad-hoc updates as needed. With our ongoing vaccination campaign, we continue to encourage staff to get vaccinated and have helped to facilitate their doing so by providing paid leave for the purpose of receiving the vaccination. We shared with staff some of the information that is reviewed in determining our operating status. Lastly, we shared information on what to do if an employee has a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis or exposure to someone with a suspected or confirmed diagnosis and have been recently in an FCA office. As we continue to keep employees informed, we concur with your recommendation to distribute further communications on the topics identified in your draft report, and will continue to do so as information becomes available.

In May 2020, the FCA created a draft Return-to-the-Workplace Plan (RTWP). It is a living document and continuously updated based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Federal and local guidelines. Recognizing that many of the subpoints listed in the OIG recommendation are addressed in our draft RTWP, the FCA strives to continue improving our response to the pandemic. Based on your recommendation, we will distribute additional communications to employees, as information becomes available, to further explain the following:

- When it is necessary to be physically present during telework operating statuses
- How mask-wearing and other required workplace safety measures differ in Farm Credit Administration space and non-Farm Credit Administration space;
- Trends used in considering the Agency's operating status;
- Decisions on future remote work arrangements and expectations; (Note: No across-the-board decisions will be made prior to returning to the physical office.)
- Specific procedures for when and whom to contact regarding a suspected or confirmed coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) diagnoses that affect the workplace;
- Specific procedures for official travel decisions and following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines after personal travel;
- Symptom monitoring procedures; and
- Specific procedures for quarantine and self-isolation after a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis or close contact.

As vaccination rates increase and COVID-19 cases decrease across the country, we remain optimistic about the possibility of returning to the physical office and resuming more normal operations. We will avoid taking steps that will either create unrealistic expectations or limit our options. We remain focused on gathering up-to-date information and keeping employees informed.

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this inspection was to conduct a survey on safety measures and other actions implemented by FCA in response to COVID-19. We conducted the inspection at FCA remotely from February 2021 through May 2021. The scope of this inspection included responses to a survey provided to FCA employees.

We took the following steps to accomplish the objective:

- Identified and reviewed applicable laws, regulations, executive orders, and guidance related to the objective;
- Identified and reviewed applicable internal FCA policies and procedures;
- Reviewed prior reviews related to the inspection objective;
- Interviewed the Chief Operating Officer;
- Developed a survey on safety measures and other actions implemented at FCA in response to COVID-19. The survey was created using a web-based platform and a link to the survey was emailed to all FCA employees. Survey data was collected anonymously to exclude employees' names and email addresses. The survey was open for employees from March 3-10, 2021;
- Collected survey responses from 225 employees, which equates to a 72 percent response rate. Given the high response rate to our survey, we concluded that the data was significant. The margin of error for our survey was 3 percent with a 95 percent confidence level; and
- Analyzed survey data and results, including comments provided by respondents.

This inspection was performed in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation. These standards require that we plan and perform the inspection to obtain sufficient, competent, and relevant evidence that provides a reasonable basis for our findings, conclusions, and recommendations. We assessed internal controls and compliance with laws and regulations to the extent necessary to satisfy the objective. Because our review was limited, it would not necessarily have disclosed all internal control deficiencies that may have existed at the time of our inspection. We assessed the information and data collected during the inspection and determined it was sufficiently reliable and valid for use in meeting the inspection objective. We assessed the risk of fraud related to our inspection objective while evaluating evidence. Overall, we believe the evidence obtained is sufficient to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on the inspection objective.



Farm Credit Administration
Office of Inspector General

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To learn more about reporting wrongdoing to the OIG, please visit our website at <https://www.fca.gov/about/inspector-general>.