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TO ALL HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS AND PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATIONS

Circular No 18 of 2020

STATE OF DISASTER COVID-19: PUBLIC SERVICE RETURN TO WORK GUIDELINES AFTER THE EASING OF THE NATIONAL LOCKDOWN

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19 government declared a national state of disaster and subsequent thereto also declared a national lockdown which will be eased on 1 May 2020. On the 23rd of April 2020 the President announced that a risk adjusted strategy will be implemented through which government will take a deliberate and cautious approach to the easing of the current lockdown restrictions and reiterated that the action we take now must be measured and incremental. This strategy is premised on the need to balance the resumption of economic activity with the imperative to contain the virus and save lives. The easing of the lockdown does not negate the need to contain the spreading of COVID-19 and is meant to counter a rushed reopening that may be followed by a resurgence of the virus and another hard lockdown.
- 1.2. The public service has an obligation to assist government in limiting the spread of COVID-19 and as such the establishment of guidelines on the measured and incremental manner government services will return to normality and the manner in which employees will return to work, are required. These guidelines must take into consideration the service delivery obligations of departments and the needs of service recipients.
- 1.3. To facilitate the ramping up of government services to service recipients there will be a need for employees to return to the workplace. The following guidelines have been developed to assist departments in managing the easing of the lockdown restrictions. The guidelines take into account the requirements of departments to comply with their legal obligations in accordance with the Regulations issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act, 2002, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, 1993, and the Directive issued by the Minister of Employment and Labour in respect of COVID-19 Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Workplaces, 2020 .
- 1.4. It must be noted that the provisions as contained in Circular 7 of 2020, Circular 11 of 2020 as well as Circular 15 of 2020 remain in effect and should be read together with these guidelines as outlined.

- 1.5. Attention is drawn to the fact that government did not shut down. Essential and critical services and jobs were identified to ensure service and business continuity during the lockdown. However not all employees and associated services were fully operational and available. All government and relevant entities are expected to be functional and continue to provide critical and essential services during level 4.
- 1.6. As the identified sectors come on line and the alert levels decrease, the demands for operational functionality and the number of employees at the workplaces of government departments will begin to increase. To be responsive to these increasing demands, departments should plan to supplement the current operational levels by ensuring that adequate resources are available at the workplace.
- 1.7. Departments' return to service and work normality strategies during the easing of the lockdown, must take into account Regulations and Directions issued by Government, the levels of alert applicable at a national, provincial and district level and their own unique circumstances.
- 1.8. With the implementation of the different alert levels it is clear that not all staff in all departments will be able to return to work immediately after 30 April 2020.
- 1.9. As the identified sectors of the economy are allowed to come online in terms of the different levels of alert, government departments responsible for providing regulatory, support and administrative services to these sectors should ensure sufficient capacity to provide these services, is available in conjunction with the necessary precautionary health and safety measures.

2. GUIDELINES TO DEPARTMENTS FOR RETURN TO SERVICES AND FOR EMPLOYEES' RETURN TO WORK DURING THE EASING OF THE LOCKDOWN

2.1. GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

- 2.1.1. In addressing the COVID-19 responsiveness, departments should consider assigning the functions of the departmental steering committee, established in terms of Circular 7 of 2020, to the health and safety committee established in terms of section 19 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act. The committee must prepare for and monitor the return to work process and report directly to the Head of Department.
- 2.1.2. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic the department must review and update its risk assessment to give effect to the minimum measures required by the relevant prescripts such as the Directive issued by the Minister of Employment and Labour on 28 April 2020. The health and safety policy of a department must be amended to include measures for the protection of employees against COVID-19. The risk assessment and health and safety policy must be submitted to the Provincial Chief Inspector of the Department of Employment and Labour at:
<http://www.labour.gov.za/About-Us/Ministry/Pages/IES0320-7398.aspx>
- 2.1.3. Every Head of Department must assign, in writing, an employee, as the compliance officer as contemplated in the Regulations issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act who must be a member of the committee referred to above.
- 2.1.4. It is incumbent on the compliance officer to:
 - 2.1.4.1. determine the area of floor space in square metres;
 - 2.1.4.2. based on the information contemplated in paragraph 2.1.4.1, determine the number of service recipients and employees that may be inside the premises at any time with adequate space available;

- 2.1.4.3. take steps to ensure that persons queuing inside or outside the premises are able to maintain a distance of one and a half metres from each other;
- 2.1.4.4. provide hand sanitizers for use by the public and employees at the entrance to the premises; and
- 2.1.4.5. ensure that all directions in respect of hygienic conditions and limitation of exposure to persons with COVID-19 are adhered to.
- 2.1.5. Prior to employees returning to the workplace, the designated compliance officer must develop a plan for the phased increase of employees returning to the workplace, which plan must correspond with Annexure E of the Regulations issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act and be retained for inspection and contain the following information:
 - 2.1.5.1. which employees are permitted to work;
 - 2.1.5.2. what are the plans for the phased in return of their employees to the workplace;
 - 2.1.5.3. what health protocols are in place to protect employees from COVID-19; and
 - 2.1.5.4. details of the COVID-19 compliance officer.
- 2.1.6. The designated COVID-19 compliance officer must oversee the implementation of the plan referred to above and develop a checklist to ensure that all requirements as listed as well as best practices that may apply, are adhered to.

2.2. PREPARATION OF THE WORKPLACE IN RESPONSE TO THE EASING OF THE LOCKDOWN

- 2.2.1. Departments must undertake a thorough cleaning of the workplace to ensure it is clean and hygienic. This includes:
 - 2.2.1.1. The disinfecting of all work surfaces and equipment before work begins; and
 - 2.2.1.2. Cleaning of all toilets, common areas, door handles and shared electronic equipment.
- 2.2.2. Departments must disable biometric systems or make them COVID-19 proof.
- 2.2.3. Departments must ensure that there are hand sanitizers, soap and paper towels for employees and service recipients.
- 2.2.4. Departments must arrange the work space of employees to adhere to the one and a half metres physical distancing guidelines to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19. Where not practicable to arrange workstations at least one and a half metres apart, physical barriers, such as panels/shields must be installed to form a solid barrier between employees or employees may be provided with face shields or visors.
- 2.2.5. Every Head of Department must determine the number of service recipients and employees that may be inside the department/office/premises at any given time with adequate space available.
- 2.2.6. Entrance and reception areas must be configured to contain the transmission of COVID-19 and employees working in these areas should be provided with the requisite personal protective equipment.
- 2.2.7. Physical distance markers should be installed in entrance and reception areas, as well as areas where queuing is envisaged. Where possible an appointment system for service recipients should be implemented. A queue management system should be implemented and steps must be taken to ensure that persons queuing inside or outside the premises are able to maintain an adequate distance from each other.

- 2.2.8. Hand sanitizers should be strategically placed at entrances, common areas, doorways, lifts/elevators, escalators, handrails, where office equipment is shared, etc.
- 2.2.9. Protocols as they pertain to the use of shared office equipment and common areas should be displayed in prominent places.
- 2.2.10. In minimising the risk associated with the transmission of COVID-19 via documents, departments could consider alternative approaches to reduce the dependency on paper. In instances where a paper based system is continued, protocols must be implemented on how documents are handled, conveyed, disposed and stored.
- 2.2.11. Where possible, departments should provide services through online platforms and encourage citizens to utilize such platforms rather than visiting physical service points.
- 2.2.12. A “clean desk” policy should be advocated to reduce the risk of surface transmission of COVID-19 and to enable thorough cleaning.
- 2.2.13. Every Head of Department must ensure that the department has a protocol which includes, but is not limited to, standards of hygiene, adequate space and distancing measures that service providers must adhere to on each visit to the workplace. Compliance to the observance of the departmental protocol and the regulations issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act by service providers must be strictly monitored.
- 2.2.14. Departments must ensure that the workplace is well ventilated and ensure that the ventilation systems are cleaned and maintained.

2.3. SYMPTOM SCREENING, MASKS AND PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

- 2.3.1. Departments must take measures to screen all employees and any other persons entering the workplace for any observable symptoms associated with COVID-19. As a minimum, each person entering the workplace must be temperature screened.
- 2.3.2. As it is incumbent on every person to wear a face mask when they leave home, it is similarly required from the employee to wear his/her face mask at work.
- 2.3.3. Departments must provide every employee who is required at the workplace with two cloth masks which comply with the guidelines issued by the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition, for the employee to wear while at work and while commuting to and from work. Employees who come into direct contact with members of the public as part of their duties must wear a face mask.
- 2.3.4. The wearing of cloth masks at all times in the workplace by non-medical personnel is mandatory.
- 2.3.5. Personal protective equipment must be provided to employees where operational requirements dictate such.

2.4. STAGGERED RETURN TO WORK

- 2.4.1. The ultimate defence in containing the spread of COVID-19 is the adherence to social distancing. The issues of proximity and social distancing must be managed upon the return of employees to the workplace.

- 2.4.2. During the initial Alert Level 5 lockdown period, departments had already identified the critical services which remained operational. These services were either staffed physically, adapted for online services or were supported remotely by employees. It is advised that with the increasing demands of the easing of the lockdown, departments identify other employees responsible for such additional critical services and recall them to the workplace, to supplement capacity.
- 2.4.3. Departments must develop a schedule for a staggered return of the workforce which will assist in managing the number of employees, at the same time, at the workplace to maintain service and business continuity. The return to work schedule in support of the restart of the economy and the relevant sectors must be disseminated to all employees.
- 2.4.4. Heads of Department must ensure that employees who are required to be at the workplace be issued with the requisite documentation authorising travel for work purposes.
- 2.4.5. To limit the number of employees arriving, leaving or working at the same time, the Head of Department should consider amending working times to minimise the risk associated with the simultaneous arrival and departure of employees. To reduce the number of employees at the same time in common areas, such as kitchens and canteens, the staggering of employees' meal intervals should be considered.

2.5. REMOTE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

- 2.5.1. All public sector employees are expected to be working in line with established working hours and norms. Informed by the imperative to contain the spread of Covid-19 and keeping all employees safe, Heads of Departments are expected to implement remote work arrangements, therefore some employees will work remotely, some physically in office, and in some instances a hybrid model of remote working and physically coming to office for employees.
- 2.5.2. Where employees do not have to be at work, they should work remotely and departments are encouraged to continue with this strategy taking into consideration the requirements as outlined in circular 15 of 2020. Furthermore departments are urged to strengthen such capabilities.
- 2.5.3. Although employees may be working remotely, they may also be required from time to time to attend the workplace, to among others, receive instructions, documentation, access office infrastructure and to submit completed tasks.
- 2.5.4. In deciding an employee's appropriateness to work remotely, heads of department should consider the higher risk COVID-19 poses to vulnerable employees, including those over the age of 60 and those that present with co-morbidities. The decision must be made with due consideration of business continuity and the service delivery needs of the department. Vulnerable employees must submit relevant documentation in this regard as evidence to their human resource management components.

2.6. EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 2.6.1. The focus of communication on COVID-19 should be on prevention and containment. The prevention of fake news should be a priority. All relevant information on COVID-19 must be from official sources and packaged in a format that is easily understood and disseminated to employees and service recipients.


- 2.6.2. All available communication platforms should be used to ensure information is disseminated quickly, accurately and cost effectively.
- 2.6.3. Departments must communicate the “do’s and dont’s” on social distancing, work safety and COVID-19 protocols that employees must observe once they return to the workplace.
- 2.6.4. Departments must communicate social distancing rules, the correct use of a cloth mask/shield and hand washing and sanitizing.
- 2.6.5. Departments should, through communication, inform employees of requisite steps that have been taken to ensure that the work environment is safe.
- 2.6.6. Departments must ensure that employees are afforded sufficient time to prepare for their return to work.
- 2.6.7. Departments must implement a mechanism to encourage employees to interact with the department on the impact of its measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. Departments must respond to employees’ concerns raised through these established mechanisms and address any shortcomings.
- 2.6.8. The nature of the pandemic may give rise to stigma which may lead to potential bias, discrimination and harassment. Departments must ensure that there is frequent communication which address such issues. Where complaints are received such must be investigated and addressed quickly and effectively.

2.7. EMPLOYEES RETURN TO WORK

- 2.7.1. The guidelines outlined in Circular 7 of 2020 as it pertains to the preparation for the containment/management of COVID-19 as well as the precautionary measures remain in effect and must be fully observed.
- 2.7.2. Employees must familiarize themselves with, and adhere to the new health and safety protocols in relation to COVID-19 implemented in their workplace. Employees who do not comply with the relevant protocols and prescripts should be disciplined. Where employees notice a breach/shortcoming in the implementation of the COVID-19 measures, this should be brought to the immediate attention of their supervisor or the compliance officer.
- 2.7.3. Where employees have been diagnosed with COVID-19, isolated, quarantined and recovered, the Department must apply the procedures as prescribed in the Directive issued by the Minister of Employment and Labour.
- 2.7.4. Gatherings, other than official meetings, are prohibited.
- 2.7.5. Meetings, as far as possible, must be conducted through electronic means. Where face-to-face meetings are unavoidable such meetings should be held subject to hygiene, physical and social distancing and adequate space parameters as prescribed for containment of COVID -19.
- 2.7.6. Where absolutely necessary, visits to the workplace by non-employees must be by prior arrangement. This excludes service recipients at service delivery points
- 2.7.7. In assisting employees who need support in relation to the impact of COVID-19, departments should ensure that the requisite Employee Assistance Programmes are available.

2.8. CONTACT TRACING

- 2.8.1. Every Head of Department has an obligation to assist in enabling contact tracing in the workplace. These obligations include:
- 2.8.1.1. A register containing the details of all employees, visitors and service providers that enter the workplace on a particular day;
 - 2.8.1.2. The following details should be contained in the register: date, time (of entry and departure), name, surname, identity number, residential address and cellular number of all employees, service recipients, visitors and service providers; and
 - 2.8.1.3. All employees, service recipients, visitors and service providers must sign the register with the above details on entering the workplace.
- 2.9. All employees are called upon to observe the guidelines during this period to ensure that the public service contribute to containing the spread of COVID-19.
- 2.10. Heads of Department must, in dealing with the return to work of employees after the easing of the national lockdown, use their discretion in dealing with matters not covered in this circular.



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