

Mayor Ends Remote Work for 80,000 in Signal to Rest of New York City

Office workers will return starting May 3 in a move that is intended to broadcast a message that New York is reopening for business.

By Dana Rubinstein

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For the last year, New York City has been running in the shadow of a deadly pandemic, with many city and private sector employees forced to work from home, stripping New York of its lifeblood and devastating its economy.

But with virus cases seeming to stabilize and vaccinations becoming more widespread, city officials intend to send a message that New York is close to returning to normal: On May 3, the city will compel its municipal office employees to begin to report to work in person.

Mayor Bill de Blasio's decision to bring the nation's largest municipal work force back to the office represents a significant turnabout for a city that served as the national epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, coming to symbolize the perils of living in densely packed global capitals.

The move is meant to broadcast that New York City will soon be open for business, and to encourage private companies to follow suit — lifting the hopes of landlords whose skyscrapers have largely sat empty as office workers stayed home.

“We’re going to make it safe, but we need our city workers back in their offices where they can do the most to help their fellow New Yorkers,” Mr. de Blasio said Tuesday. “And it’s also going to send a powerful message about this city moving forward.”

Yet the move by the city has sparked concern among some workers and union leaders who fear the return to the office is premature. New York City has among the highest coronavirus case rates in the nation. Many workers will have to commute an hour or more on mass transit. Others will have to juggle their children’s episodic in-person school schedules with their new in-person work requirements.

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Across the globe, government and business leaders have grappled with the question of how and when to safely reopen, as the worst of the pandemic seems to have passed.

In the private sector, commercial real estate landlords like SL Green and RXR Realty have made a point of bringing their own employees to the office during the pandemic. In London, JPMorgan Chase is planning to bring back some workers starting March 29, and it is hoping to bring interns back in June.

In Texas, municipal workers in the city of Houston are working both in person and remotely at the discretion of their department director, though the mayor has encouraged the remote option. Masks are strongly advised, even though the state has lifted its overall mask mandate.

In Philadelphia, city office employees are still working from home when possible.

The new policy in New York, which will be rolled out in phases over several weeks, will affect about 80,000 employees who have been working remotely, including caseworkers, computer specialists and clerical associates. The rest of the city’s roughly 300,000-person work force, many of them uniformed personnel including police

officers, firefighters and sanitation workers, have already been reporting to work sites.


Vaccination will not be mandatory for those returning to the office because of legal concerns, according to a City Hall spokesman. City officials are strongly encouraging their workers to get vaccinated and are trying to facilitate that process. Even so, a survey of the city work force in January suggested that vaccine hesitancy varied significantly by agency, and City Hall was unable to provide an estimate of how many municipal workers had already received vaccines.

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Facial masks will also be strongly encouraged but not required in all workplace situations: A March 18 presentation from the city’s Department of Citywide Administrative Services said agency leaders should “encourage face coverings to be worn at all times even if six-foot distancing can be maintained.” On Tuesday, deputy mayor Laura Anglin clarified the policy, saying that if employees cannot socially distance, they must wear masks.

Henry Garrido, executive director of the city’s largest municipal labor union, District Council 37, expressed particular concern about his members who work in densely packed call centers as well as those in social services offices, where interactions with maskless clients can be common. All city workers who deal directly with the public are currently eligible for vaccination, regardless of age.

About 200 D.C. 37 members have died from the coronavirus, a result of what Mr. Garrido described as “foggy, unclear” public health guidelines early in the pandemic, a lack of protective equipment and inconsistent city and state policies.

“We don’t want to repeat those mistakes,” Mr. Garrido said. “I want to make sure that those offices are absolutely ready for workers to come back.”

He said the union believes at least 20 percent of its 100,000 city workers have gotten at least one dose of the vaccine.



A Covid-19 vaccination line extends outside the Jacob Javits Convention Center earlier this month. City workers with public-facing jobs are eligible for the vaccine. Timothy A. Clary/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The return to municipal office spaces will come with a raft of safety requirements. The total number of occupants of a space may not exceed 50 percent of the space's maximum occupancy limit, as defined by the building code, according to presentations reviewed by The Times.

Ventilation systems will have to be adjusted to maximize air flow. Six-foot markers will have to be placed at all entrances and elevators. Agencies will have to incorporate one-directional traffic flow through their offices wherever possible. There will be limits on elevator occupancy, and offices will have to adhere to strict cleaning standards.

The task is likely to be a heavier lift for agencies that have offices spread throughout the city and serve clients, as compared with those that are concentrated in one office building.

Real estate and business leaders have for months been arguing that a return to the office is key to the city's economic recovery. Many of the city's hardest-hit small businesses are in Manhattan's commercial core, and New York City's budget is heavily reliant on real estate taxes.

The Partnership for New York City, a business group, recently said it expected nearly half of Manhattan's one million office workers to return to the office by September, though "most will continue to work remotely at least part time." As of early March, only 10 percent of those workers were back in the office.

"Above all else, this is a major momentum builder," said Reggie Thomas, a senior vice president with the Real Estate Board of New York.

Yet some health experts are less certain that now is the time. "It certainly may be that May is a good time to think about starting to bring people back," but thanks to the coronavirus variants, there is no guarantee, said Dr. Ronald Scott Braithwaite, a professor of medicine and population health at N.Y.U. Grossman School of Medicine. "It is a tough call."

Dr. Braithwaite noted that cases were not "on a steep decline in New York," suggesting that the plateau in case numbers is a function of the tension between the new variants of the disease circulating in the city and the growing numbers of New Yorkers who have been vaccinated or acquired antibodies after infection.

A spokesman for the mayor said that if cases surge again, the return will be delayed.