

An Intramural Plan to Minimize COVID-19 Risks for NIH Staff and the Community, by Shifting to Minimal Maintenance of Non-Mission Critical Laboratory Operations

Action: Effective Monday, March 23, the NIH intramural research program will shift into a mode that minimizes the physical presence of staff, in order to promote social distancing and diminished transmission risk of COVID-19. Staff supporting non-critical-mission functions should strictly limit their presence in the laboratory to serve only minimal maintenance functions. To ensure this plan is implemented, **no more than one person per PI** should be present in the lab at any given time, unless there is a defined safety issue that the SD has approved. In most cases, laboratory personnel should **not be in the labs at all**.

Goal: To enhance the safety of NIH personnel, and our responsibility to reduce transmission of COVID-19 to the public, while protecting the public's investment in research and carrying out mission critical functions.

Exempted Mission-Critical Functions:

1. Care and laboratory work related to the care of non-elective research subjects on NIH clinical protocols
2. Research directly on COVID-19
3. Urgent Public Health Research, recommended by the CD/SD/IC Director and approved by a research subcommittee of the NIH COVID-19 Response Team*
4. *Significant*[#] research investments that could be lost if research is not continued, also recommended by CD/SD/IC Director and approved by a research subcommittee of the COVID-19 Response Team*
5. Protection of life/property/resources (e.g., safety, security, animal care, property management)[†]

Staff undertaking these critical functions should be present at minimum density to assure social distancing and minimize opportunities for transmission of SARS-CoV-2.

Shifting Non-Mission-Critical Research into a Minimal Maintenance Phase:

For laboratories undertaking non-mission-critical research that involves specialized supplies and equipment, social/physical distancing principles will be rigorously applied. Ideally, most of the time no personnel should be in these labs at all. But when essential maintenance functions are required, **no more than one person per PI** (i.e., one person for each lab; this is inclusive of the PI) should be present in the laboratory at one time, and this should be on a voluntary basis. Ideally, this single person would only be present for a short time to maintain important resources and lab functions. Schedules should be arranged to allow no more than one lab member to be present during the allotted lab time, though that need not always be the same lab member. Labs should consider establishing a rotation, when possible. Anyone who volunteers for this role should register with the SD to assure that such assignments are purely voluntary.

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Safety is our primary concern. Given that only one person will be in the lab at a time, care should be taken to choose experienced and reliable personnel, and only in exceptional circumstances should a postbac be asked to shoulder this responsibility. SDs and PIs should work to ensure the safety of single individuals coming into the lab, and set realistic expectations as to what the individual can safely accomplish during a minimal, limited time period. SDs and PIs should also be readily available in the case of an untoward event. Rarely and with the agreement of the SD, a second person may have to be in the laboratory during any truly essential maintenance procedures judged to be a safety concern. Additionally, in circumstances where more than one PI occupies a shared laboratory space, a collaborative plan must be worked out between PIs that honors the rigorous social distancing intentions of this plan. This “skeleton crew” approach is intended solely to maintain certain critical functions and to avoid loss of resources – but **not to initiate new experimental programs**.

For ongoing animal experiments, staff will continue to care for animals, but no new animals should be ordered.

All administrative functions that can be conducted by telework should follow the previously distributed guidance. Likewise, all research functions that can be conducted at home, such as data analysis, literature reviews, drafting and review of manuscripts, etc., should be done remotely.

If this minimal maintenance plan proves to be unworkable or is not implemented effectively across NIH in a fashion that reflects the urgency of minimizing staff presence in NIH laboratories (both on and off campus), then a full shutdown of non-critical research will be required. In short, this is not business as usual.

*The review team will include: Steve Holland (chair), Michael Gottesman, Alfred Johnson, Hilary Marston, Tara Schwetz, Larry Tabak, and Carrie Wolinetz

#While each situation will be unique, as a rule of thumb, exceptions are likely to be investments that have taken years, as opposed to months, or involve truly unique resources that are not replaceable

†The intent is to stabilize research environments and protect significant investments – NOT begin new studies.