

COVID-19

As COVID case rate climbs, county and city workers are back in the office full time



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Allegheeny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. (Photo by Ryan Loew/PublicSource)

Update (8/6/2021): Both the county and city this week announced new COVID-19 policies for their workers. County employees must either be vaccinated or wear a mask at work and face weekly virus tests. City employees received the same policy, but all employees must wear masks in common areas. Both entities are requiring new hires to be vaccinated, with no alternative.



Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald made it clear at a Wednesday press conference that he doesn't think workplace reopenings should be derailed by resurging COVID-19 infection rates and concerns over a more transmissible Delta variant.

He put words into action this week, too, when all county employees were required to be back in the office as of July 26.

"At this point, people should be back to the workplace," Fitzgerald said Wednesday. "You've got CDC recommendations that can make that safe. Certainly the biggest thing to make it safe is vaccines."

As case rates climb, some companies are beginning to rethink return-to-office plans laid before the Delta variant emerged.

Fitzgerald suggested that employers encourage or mandate their employees to get vaccinated and praised universities and the NFL for doing so. Earlier in the same news conference, he nodded to the reality facing the region and the country: "We know cases are going up," he said. County health director Deborah Bogen said the county is averaging more than 70 cases per day now, up from fewer than 15 per day in late June.

County spokesperson Amie Downs told PublicSource that 80% of the county government's employees never worked from home because their jobs don't allow for it. She said that of the other 20%, a "large segment" had returned to in-person work before the July 26 deadline.

She said many county workers have worked in person throughout the pandemic by necessity. "An autopsy can't be done via Zoom; a patient isn't cared for remotely; roads can't be paved working from home," she said. "Thousands of our employees have dealt with these very issues for months."

Downs said the return to full in-person presence has been communicated with department leaders for months and the county was consistently clear that work-from-home accommodations would not be permanent. Handwashing and physical distancing are recommended, but there is no recommendation or mandate for mask-wearing in county workplaces. Fitzgerald said the county is not currently considering a broad mask mandate but could in the future depending on data.

Downs cited ample time for employees to get vaccinated before the end of work-from-home accommodations, though neither vaccines nor regular testing are required. Fitzgerald praised [President Joe Biden's move](#) to require federal employees to either vaccinate or receive regular virus testing, though the county has not announced such a plan.

The CDC this week updated its masking guidance, saying that in counties with substantial or high transmission rates, people should wear masks in indoor public places. By the CDC metrics, Allegheny County currently has moderate transmission — not up to the level of the new mask guidance.

The City of Pittsburgh also brought all of its employees back to the office recently, and City Council announced plans to resume in-person council meetings on Sept. 1. A city spokesperson said employees can get exemptions to work from home for medical reasons.

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