Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
Re-entry, Post Re-entry
and the Future of Work
June 14, 2021

Revised on August 30, 2021

The President’s Management Council is asking all Federal Departments to begin the planning process for re-entry and post-reentry personnel policies and work environment. As you consider the information below and, in an effort to use common terminology, please keep the following definitions in mind:

- **Re-entry**: USDA’s plan for a safe, increased return of federal employees to the workplace. USDA has also been using “return to the physical workplace.”
- **Post re-entry**: The work environment and policies USDA will implement once we complete the re-entry process.
- **Future of work**: The longer-term impact and trends of decisions being made during the re-entry period and beyond.

All of our work related to re-entry, post-reentry and future of work is guided by the following key values: trust, respect, equity, service, and inclusion. Through this process – which will actively engage our workforce and their labor unions – we aim to enhance employee engagement and morale while delivering our mission effectively, equitably, and efficiently. Here is a summary of the ways we have and continue to engage the workforce and center the employee voice across our mission areas and staff offices:

- Gathered feedback from employees, unions, supervisors, and leaders from across its eight mission areas and staff offices representing its 90,000 employees via the following ways:
  - Conducted 10 townhalls (one department-wide and 9 in individual mission areas, including one focused on our forest service front-line workers);
  - Engaging with our labor unions (including the establishment of a Labor Management Forum which met for the first time on July 6);
  - Conducted our first ever all-employee wide survey on telework to listen to employee and supervisor needs and perspectives on telework and equipment needs, the future of work and wellbeing (to which over 50k employees responded, approximately 54% of our workforce). To fulfill our commitment to transparency, results were shared on June 29;
- Examining return to work policies and approaches in various councils (i.e. CHCO, CIO, COO, CAO, CFO, etc.) and from a variety of perspectives;
- Creating a workplace safety plan and coordinating via a group of pandemic coordinators who meet on a regular basis; and
- Institutionalizing employee feedback as a regular agenda item for the Subcabinet, Agency Administrators, Staff Office Directors, COO and Chiefs of Staff meetings.

Starting with today and in the coming weeks the internal future of work task force will be circulating FAQs to address key questions. This task force is led by the Deputy Secretary and
the Assistant Secretary for Administration. Other key members are: Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Senior Advisors for COVID-19 in the Office of the Secretary, USDA’s mission area Chief Operating Officers (COO), and CXOs (Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Human Capital Officer (CHCO), Acting Chief Employee Experience Officer (CEEO), Chief Acquisition Officer (CAO), as well as representatives from the Office of the General Counsel, Office of Communications, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, White House Liaison, Office of Budget and Program Analysis, and the Office of Congressional Relations.

This FAQ document will continue to evolve based on questions we receive from employees and supervisors, as well as input from our labor unions. If you have questions you would like answered, which do not appear below, please send those to futureofwork@usda.gov. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a helpful resource as you are navigating re-entry, post re-entry and the future of work. EAP services are open to all USDA employees.

Finally, here are some links you may find useful:

- [Safer Federal Workforce Task Force](#)
- [Office of Personnel Management](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
Returning to the physical workplace

1. **When are employees required to return to the physical workplace?**

   **October 1, 2021.** USDA employees will not be expected to begin returning to work in-person any earlier than October 1, 2021. Returning to the workplace will be a process—and one that will start no earlier than October 1. Once the return to the workplace process begins, we expect it will be a phased approach that is dependent on satisfaction of any labor relations obligations.

2. **How much notice will employees receive before having to return to the physical workplace?**

   **Employees will receive at least 45 days.** Based on union feedback and in reviewing our collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) across agencies, we are defining ample notice to be at least 45 days and up to 90 days.

3. **Will the return to the physical workplace be flexible?**

   **Yes.** Our agency-specific mission needs and our commitment to civil rights, equity, inclusion and belonging will drive our planning, as will strategies for ensuring we are able to attract, recruit, retain, and galvanize top talent from across the country. Our planning will leave room for flexibility, responsiveness, and decision making at appropriate levels across the Department. Our planning includes consideration of the support that employees and supervisors will need to thrive in our new future together, such as training, technology, tools, engagement with each other, and consideration for the many real-world needs facing our workforce and their families, from child care, to elder care, to transportation, and more. While agency-specific mission needs drive our planning, USDA is taking an enterprise-approach to mission support functions such as information technology, human resources, and financial management. This is to ensure that employees performing similar functions across USDA mission areas are treated in a fair and equitable manner.

4. **Are there any exceptions to the 25% occupancy limit?**

   **Yes.** Mission Areas and agencies with authority from the Secretary’s office may exceed the 25% occupancy limit to meet mission critical work. The Mission Area or agency’s tailored...
safety plan outlines the exceptions to the 25% occupancy limit and required safety protocols.

5. How is USDA reviewing space needs as the federal government transitions from re-entry to post re-entry?

On July 12, a nationwide space survey was distributed to Chief Operating Officers to ensure better space utilization when we begin to return to the workplace this fall. The results were shared with COOs and Staff Office Heads in mid-August.

6. If States, localities, Tribal areas, or privately-owned buildings maintain stricter mask mandates than the Federal standards, do Federal employees have to follow those standards?

Yes. Federal employees that work in areas that have stricter State, local, Tribal, or mask mandates should follow those masking requirements.

7. If States, localities, Tribal areas, or privately-owned buildings maintain stricter vaccination requirements than the Federal standards, do Federal employees have to follow those standards?

USDA will not disclose the vaccination status of its employees because of applicable laws that require the Agency to maintain the confidentiality of Federal employee medical information, including the confirmation of COVID-19 vaccination. While USDA cannot divulge vaccination status, USDA has implemented a robust workplace safety program to limit the spread of COVID-19. Employees are expected to comply with USDA’s established safety protocols for vaccinated and unvaccinated employees.

8. Do USDA employees working in foreign countries have to follow the COVID safety standards established by the Chief of Mission for that country?

Yes. USDA staff in foreign countries should follow all requirements established by the Chief of Mission for that country.

9. What resources will be available to USDA employees as they return to the office and transition to a more flexible workplace (re-entry and post re-entry)?

USDA is working on identifying existing training resources and best practices, while also partnering across government to develop new tools for employees and managers. The intent is to equip managers and employees with what they may need to transition to this more flexible work environment. Additionally, several workgroups across USDA are actively identifying resource needs and working to address any gaps.

Workplace safety

10. Does the review process for the 50 in-person limit apply to all events, meetings, and conferences?
No. The review process for events/meetings/conferences with more than 50 people in-person (from USDA or elsewhere) only applies to agency hosted events. It does not apply to third party hosted events/meetings/conferences.

11. Who approves an agency hosting an in-person event/meeting/conference with more than 50 attendees?

The Mission Area Head approves in-person events/meetings/conferences with more than 50 attendees in consultation with Dr. Sara Bleich and Dr. Gregory Parham. For purposes of this request for permission, Agency Head does not refer to the Secretary.

Administrative leave for vaccinations or testing

12. Can an employee receive retroactive administrative leave for sick leave related to receiving a vaccine?

Yes. USDA is following the Safer Federal Workforce guidelines. USDA began authorizing administrative leave related to employee vaccinations on February 10, 2021. Administrative leave of up to two days is authorized if any employee has an adverse reaction to a COVID-19 vaccination dose (i.e., no more than 2 workdays for reactions associated with a single dose.) Employees should work with their supervisor and HR organization to change timesheets in accordance with the guidance and answer any specific questions you might have.

13. Can an employee receive retroactive administrative leave for taking a family member to receive a vaccine?

Per the Safer Federal Workforce FAQs, administrative leave for family members receiving vaccinations applies from July 29, 2021 and forward.

Vaccination Self-Certification Process for USDA Employees

Please refer to the Safer Federal Workforce Taskforce for additional FAQs on this topic.

14. How does a USDA employee access the self-certification form?

The self-certification form may be found online by clicking here. Agencies will also make the forms available in hard copy for those employees with limited access to a government computer. Employees should contact their Pandemic Coordinator with questions on accessing the self-certification form.

15. What if an employee declines to answer certain questions or indicates that they will not fill out a form at all?

Employees are not required to provide vaccination status. However, employees who decline to provide an answer or refuse to fill out a form are permitted entry but will be treated as an unvaccinated employee and will be required to follow all of USDA’s established COVID-19 safety protocols for employees who are not fully vaccinated. Currently, this
means wearing a mask and social distancing when in a federal facility. Eventually, it will also mean being tested (once or twice) per week – guidance is forthcoming.

16. What if a visitor or onsite contractor declines to follow USDA’s safety protocols for entry?

Visitors and onsite contractors who decline to submit a certification of vaccination form or fail to follow established safety protocols for entry are not permitted entry. This includes unvaccinated, or presumed to be unvaccinated, contractors and visitors who fail to comply with the testing requirements.

17. Should teleworking employees fill out the online self-certification form? What if a telework employee returns to the office without reporting vaccination status on the online form? What about employees in a maximized telework status (5 days a week)?

Yes. Employees with a telework agreement should fill out the online form before going back into the office. If teleworking employees do not complete the online form in advance, the supervisor should reach out to the employee and provide them with the link or hard copy of the form to complete upon arrival at the office. Employees who decline to provide an answer will be treated as an unvaccinated employee and will be required to follow all of USDA’s established COVID-19 safety protocols for employees who are not fully vaccinated. Currently, this means wearing a mask and social distancing when in a federal facility and observing restrictions on official travel. Eventually, it will also mean being tested (once or twice) per week - guidance is forthcoming.

18. Do employees who visit a non-USDA Federal facility for meetings, interviews, or training need to fill out any forms?

Yes. Employees visiting a non-USDA Federal facility for meetings, interviews, or training are to fill out the Visitor Certification of Vaccination when they enter the Federal facility and keep the form on their person.

19. What if an employee or supervisor is having technical difficulties in accessing the online form?

Please contact Shweta Maheshwari (shweta.maheshwari@usda.gov) from OCIO-CEC for help with technical difficulties. Supervisors may also provide employees with a fillable PDF copy of the form to complete.

20. What if the wrong supervisor is listed on an employee’s self-certification form?

The employee should list the correct supervisor or acting supervisor in the Certification of Vaccination Form. When a new supervisor is assigned, please either go back to the form
21. If an employee prints out a paper copy in PDF, where do they sign the form and where is the paper copy stored?

If an employee signs and submits a paper form, then this form, like all medical information, must be kept confidential and stored separately from the employee’s personnel files.

22. Who will have access to employee’s vaccine information?

Only persons with a "need to know" will have access to an employee’s completed Certification of Vaccination form. This form will be held in accordance with all applicable laws, including the Privacy Act.

23. For what purpose is the information being collected?

The identification of vaccinated and unvaccinated employees. The primary purpose is to allow front-line supervisors to identify those employees who are vaccinated and unvaccinated to ensure effective implementation of the safety protocols. Additionally, this information will provide agencies with an overview of the geographical distribution of vaccination status.

Vaccination Self-Certification and Safety Requirements for On-Site Personnel (Contractors, Volunteers, Cooperators, Delivery Persons, and Other On-Site Federal and Non-Federal Personnel)

24. How should USDA confirm that all visitors are complying with certification requirements?

It is the responsibility of the host agency (including in multi-tenant buildings) to ensure that a visitor has completed the vaccine certification form and is following the appropriate COVID safety protocols. Agencies should do this in a way that makes most sense for them, including providing guidance for staff. In co-located facilities, agencies are required to harmonize on how they are checking the information and ensuring compliance with the appropriate COVID safety protocols. Implementation guidance has been circulated to the Pandemic Coordinators.

25. Who is considered “on-site” for purposes of complying with this guidance?

“On-site” means contractor personnel, cooperators, volunteers, visiting guests of USDA employees, USDA remote employees, visiting employees of other non-USDA Federal agencies, and elected USDA county committee members who share USDA facilities (which includes vehicles and aircraft) or work at an outdoor site together with Federal employees on a regular basis on activities that make social distancing impractical or is contraindicated by operational needs to complete work to be performed (e.g., FS firefighting crews; county committee meetings and executive sessions). All on-site personnel should complete the non-employee contractor/visitor vaccine certification form.
For delivery services in a large building (such as the South Building in DC), where a delivery driver may spend more than 30 minutes delivering packages to various offices, the non-employee contractor/visitor vaccine certification form should be completed. For one off short drop-offs in small buildings (approximately 30 minutes or less), the vaccine certification form is not required but these individuals do need to follow the masking requirements.

26. Which form should an “on-site contractor” use? Does USDA need to collect and keep a copy of the form?

All on-site contractors need to complete this form. After the on-site contractor shows USDA staff the completed form, the on-site contractor should retain it on their person while on Federal premises. On-site contractor can use a previously used form if there is no change in vaccination status. If on-site contractor is not fully vaccinated, they will have to provide new documentation of a negative COVID test in the past 3 days (guidance is forthcoming on this requirement).

27. What is the difference between USDA employees, on-site contractors, visitors, and customers? How can I tell?

You should first determine whether an individual is performing work on-site or is merely a customer entering a Federal building or Federal land to obtain a public service or benefit. You may also check if the individual has a USDA employee PIV badge. Contractors and visitors (to the extent issued) should have different looking badges or stickers that they must wear indicating that they are non-Federal employees in a Federal facility. USDA county office employees should be considered employees for this purpose and should complete the online USDA employee vaccine certification form.

28. Does this requirement apply to other federal personnel (e.g., Department of the Interior, Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security officials) who visit our offices or other facilities?

Yes. Other Federal personnel should fill out the visitor certification form and maintain it on their person while in or on USDA Federal buildings or lands.

29. Does this form need to be filled out by all cleaning personnel, custodians, landlords, and maintenance staff at all Federal facilities?

Yes. Building staff should fill out the non-employee contractor form and maintain it on their person while in or on Federal buildings or lands. Additional guidance about this implementation has been shared with the Pandemic Coordinators.

Vaccination Self-Certification and Safety Requirements for Customers
Please refer to the Safer Federal Workforce Taskforce for additional FAQs on this topic.

30. Does the vaccination self-certification guidance apply to members of the public seeking a public benefit or service?
The requirements related to asking customers about their vaccination status and providing proof of a recent negative COVID-19 test does not apply to members of the public entering a Federal building or Federal land to obtain a public service or benefit. If customers are not fully vaccinated, these visitors must comply with all relevant CDC guidance, including wearing a mask and physically distancing from other people. USDA defines a public benefit or service as applying to all customers at service centers or field offices, recreation areas, food and nutrition direct service centers, and grain offices.

31. What should a USDA employee do if a member of the public seeking a public benefit or service refuses to wear a mask and maintain physical distancing?

If a customer refuses to comply with USDA’s safety protocols, USDA employees can considerately make customers aware of the masking requirement. Customers who will not honor USDA’s requirement should be asked, politely, to do so. If the customer refuses, that is the individual’s right, but they must be directed to conduct business off-site (over the phone or online) and to please depart the premises. USDA employees should remain respectful yet safe and call for assistance from local authorities if the situation cannot be resolved.

COVID Testing Requirements and Procedures for Unvaccinated USDA Employees

We are currently reviewing new policy guidance on testing. We will not be implementing a testing program until additional policy guidance is available and we engage appropriately with agency leadership, unions, and stakeholders.

Telework and remote work

32. Will the interim telework policy apply when employees return to the physical workplace?

Yes. The Secretary’s memo establishes interim guidance regarding telework and allows telework up to four days per week based on the duties of a position. The memo will be used while the Departmental Directive on Telework is reviewed and revised. A new telework directive is a substantive change in conditions of employment. To the extent these matters are not covered by a collective bargaining agreement, agencies and staff offices will be obligated to fulfill any impact and implementation bargaining requested by their respective union. More information will be provided as it becomes available, and these FAQs will be updated.

33. Are all positions now eligible to telework?

No. Not all positions are eligible for telework beyond the current operational posture of maximum telework due to the pandemic because the duties of some positions may require employees to be in a Federal facility, in the field, or other office location. We recognize some positions will be required to work on-site and we appreciate your dedication to the USDA mission, particularly during the last year due to impact of COVID-19. We are committed to providing a better work experience for all employees.
34. What if our agency collective bargaining agreement does not allow 4 days a week of telework, can an employee still telework up to 4 days under the interim telework policy?

No. Agencies are obligated to notify their unions and engage in impact and implementation bargaining. It is recommended agencies consult with their Office of Human Resources and Labor Relations staff to determine appropriate labor relations obligations and compliance with collective bargaining agreements.

35. How are current Reasonable Accommodation agreements for full-time telework impacted by the Secretary’s telework memo?

The Secretary’s telework memorandum does not impact current reasonable accommodation agreements. While telework can be a form of reasonable accommodation under appropriate circumstances, reasonable accommodation, and personal assistance service (PAS) are governed by a different USDA policy, Departmental Regulation 4300-008, not the USDA telework policy. Information on USDA’s Reasonable Accommodation and Personal Assistance Services, contacts for requesting an accommodation or personal assistance services, training and FAQ’s can be found at: https://www.usda.gov/ra.

36. Will USDA have positions that can be performed remotely/virtually?

Yes. The Secretary’s memo directed Mission Areas and Staff Offices to perform a review of duty stations of positions to identify positions that can be effectively performed remotely. The duty station review is currently underway. Additional information will be shared as results are available. In anticipation of additional remote positions, USDA’s Telework directive will also be revised and re-issued to address our permanent telework policy and remote/virtual positions. To the extent these matters are not covered by a collective bargaining agreement, agencies and staff offices will be obligated to fulfill any impact and implementation bargaining requested by their respective union.

37. Will employees working remotely receive equipment for use at home and IT support?

Yes. USDA employees should expect support for any USDA-furnished device and service while working outside the office. DR-3170-001, Section 5b allows for one machine and one phone per-person, and support services follow the remote-first Enterprise support practice. Exceptions for special circumstances require approval and must use OCIO-approved devices. Reasonable Accommodation requests will continue to follow Departmental Regulation 4300-008. OCIO continues to review and improve services, practices, and policies related to remote work, and will update these FAQ accordingly.

38. Can new positions be advertised as Telework-Eligible or Location Negotiable after Selection?

Currently, all Mission Areas have been instructed to list any new applicable positions as telework-eligible or location negotiable after selection if the position is deemed eligible.
Travel

Please refer to the Safer Federal Workforce Taskforce for additional FAQs on this topic.

39. Are there restrictions on official travel for fully vaccinated Federal employees?

Yes. At this time, official domestic travel for all Federal employees, regardless of vaccination status, is limited to mission critical trips as determined by the Agency. International travel should also be avoided if at all possible, unless it is mission critical (e.g., military deployments, COVID-19 response deployments/activities, diplomats traveling, high-level international negotiations that cannot occur remotely). Mission critical refers to activities necessary for the ongoing operation of the Department and its programs which cannot be performed remotely. Until further notice, employees should continue to limit official travel to mission critical activities, as determined by each Agency, and follow CDC guidance, as appropriate. This decision to limit official travel to mission critical activities is made with the health and safety of our employees in mind. In limited circumstances where official travel is involved, Agencies may assign work based on an employee’s vaccination status where the quarantine requirements for unvaccinated individuals in the destination locale would negatively impact the unvaccinated employee’s ability to perform the assignment. Official travel can include distinct opportunities that uniquely advance USDA’s diversity, equity, inclusion and workforce strategy and culture goals.

40. While traveling, what health and safety guidelines must federal employees who are fully vaccinated follow?

All travelers, including fully vaccinated Federal employees, should continue to take health and safety precautions. CDC COVID-19 prevention measures continue to apply to all travelers, including those who are vaccinated. All travelers are required to wear a mask over nose and mouth on all planes, buses, trains, and other forms of public transportation traveling into, within, or out of the United States and in U.S. transportation hubs such as airports and stations.

Employee wellbeing

41. What programs and services are available to help employees?

The USDA Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to all USDA employees. Through EAP, USDA employees and their family members, who reside in their households have access to licensed/certified counselors, licensed attorneys, and qualified financial consultants. EAP can assist you with emotional, family, marital, alcohol or drug use/abuse, relationship problems, and other issues related to employee’s wellbeing. In addition EAP provides monthly live Webinars (see the 2021 calendar), and on-demand access to pre-recorded webinars for staff on topics that range from parenting young children, understanding family dynamics, dealing with holiday stress, managing personal financing, and leadership strategies just to name a few. Some USDA offices have a Workplace Wellness Office which is available to assist employees. Employees can contact their agency
representative or visit USDA Employee Assistance Program for more information on the program and all that it has to offer you.

**Information technology**

42. **Will I be notified when my new Linc Pass card is available?**

   **Yes.** You will receive an email from HSPD12Admin@usaccess.gsa.gov that your LincPass is ready for pick up and Activation. Additional information about credentialing can be found [here](#).

43. **I received an email that my Linc Pass card has been delivered to a location that is too far for me to drive. How do I go about getting the card sent to a closer Activation station?**

   Please contact the USDA HSPD-12 helpdesk in order to assist with a card reroute. Additional information about credentialing can be found [here](#).

44. **My current card has physically expired. Can I still go through the card renewal process to receive a new card?**

   **No.** A renewal request cannot be created after card expiration (Requests must be made 1 day prior to expiration). The applicant will need to re-enroll.

   NOTE: An expired badge cannot be used for enrollment, however if it is a reprint the expired badge will be turned in and a new one will be ordered by the sponsor. In the interim after verification of employee status, a site badge can be issued after the sponsor completes a AD1197 form. The site badge will be valid until the new badge arrives.

   Please contact the USDA HSPD-12 Helpdesk for further instructions and guidance on the renewal process. Additional information about credentialing can be found [here](#).

   Facility Protection Division Helpdesk contact (202) 815-7474.

**Building a Best-In-Class Workforce**

45. **How will agencies and offices address staffing needs to increase capacity to execute USDA’s missions?**

   We know that staffing has been a challenge for many agencies and offices operating under capacity for some time. USDA’s FY2022 budget request includes a substantial staffing increase, of more than 12,500 employees over FY2020 levels, across USDA. Each Mission Area, agency, and office’s request varies, and the Department’s Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) will be working with Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs) across USDA to develop aggressive hiring plans that are focused on bringing in a diverse applicant pool and hiring the best and brightest talent to our agency.
46. Will USDA evaluate the current annual performance review practices and the current rating system?

We are evaluating USDA’s recent change from a five-tier performance review system to a two-level, “meets/does not meet” performance review system. FY2021 performance close-out will be done under the two-level system following agency Collective Bargaining Agreements. USDA is developing a comprehensive engagement plan with supervisors, unions, and employees to identify lessons learned and assess whether USDA should continue with the two-level system.

47. How does USDA plan to recruit and retain a best-in-class workforce?

We are recommitting ourselves to the values of equity, inclusion, and equal opportunity for each other. Starting with embracing telework to the fullest extent possible to hire a diverse staff, USDA is also leveraging several available authorities to recruit recent graduates: Pathways Programs, 1890 Scholars and 1994 National Scholars Programs, as well as partnerships with organizations such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and more.

The Racial Equity Workgroup and Internal Stakeholder Subcommittees ensure implementation of the Executive Order on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce. The Office of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) is re-examining USDA’s outreach and recruitment policies and activities to ensure they “endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society” and that “all employees and applicants for employment …receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management.” In addition, OASCR will collaborate with Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) to ensure a civil rights professional sits on recruitment panels for many GS-15 and Senior Executive Service positions advertised within the Department.

We are also formalizing the role of the Chief Employee Experience Officer (CEXO) who will be responsible for developing and executing employee engagement programs and events including administering key employee recognition programs. In addition, the CEXO is designated responsibility to develop new employee and leadership development programs, including training, coaching, and mentorship models which will enable USDA to recruit and retain a diverse, engaged, and empowered workforce.

48. Will USDA provide more training and advancement opportunities for employees?

As part of recruiting and retaining a best-in-class workforce, USDA will be assessing usage of career-ladder positions to support advancement opportunities. USDA will offer multiple leadership development programs – from Emerging Leader to Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Programs. Currently, over 16,000 E-Learning courses are available via AgLearn including LinkedIn Learning and Skillsoft courses. USDA will be assessing training needs for employees and whether existing training can meet those needs or if additional training is needed. USDA agencies are also in the process of evaluating agency training courses and programs to determine which trainings can be delivered remotely.
49. What steps is USDA taking to continue improving diversity and inclusion?

We are committed to ensuring diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility across the Department, removing barriers to access, and building a workforce that is more representative of America. USDA Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Monica Rainge has set a vision and goal to build trust and respect in the Office of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) and throughout the Department. OASCR will promptly address unlawful discrimination in the workforce and ensure bad actors are held accountable. Civil rights as a core value undergirds all aspects of USDA’s operations. In addition, OASCR, as the USDA lead enforcer for civil rights, will proactively eliminate barriers to an inclusive and diverse workforce. Training, targeted compliance reviews, and adherence to the six elements of a model employer as outlined in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Management Directive 715 will ensure USDA’s workforce reflects the nation we serve.

Senior Advisor for Racial Equity to the Secretary of Agriculture Dr. Dewayne Goldmon is committed to ensuring equity across the Department, including removing barriers to access and rooting out systemic discrimination, and building a workforce that reflects all of America.

Improving Employee Engagement

50. How does leadership plan to improve union engagement?

At the Department level, senior leadership is engaging with USDA national labor unions. We have held several labor management forums with the USDA national labor unions, the most recent on August 3, 2021. The national labor unions have already provided valuable insights that are informing our future planning policies across USDA.

At the individual USDA agency/staff office level, agency administrators have been encouraged to re-establish labor-management forums, to the extent they have not already done so.
Overall, the Secretary has made it clear that the USDA is resetting and transforming its relationships with its labor unions from an adversarial relationship to a collaborative relationship.

51. What are the plans to increase employee engagement at USDA?

USDA is committed to engaging with employees by not just talking to employees but also listening and receiving feedback. Our goal is to develop a workforce environment and culture where everyone feels seen, heard, appreciated, and valued. USDA is beginning to facilitate listening sessions, which allow leadership to hear directly from employees to understand the opportunities and challenges they face. The new USDA Chief Employee Experience Officer (CCEO) role will provide department-wide policy, strategy, leadership, and independent accountability of the employee experience at USDA (beginning at recruitment, through onboarding, continual development, and retention, until offboarding). This role is also responsible for facilitating and planning clear and consistent two-way internal communications across USDA, conducting data-driven assessments, supporting improvements to employee experiences and USDA’s culture, and providing leadership and
employee development opportunities to increase organizational effectiveness to create an engaged, empowered, and supported workforce.