

## **RETURN TO RESEARCH – POLICY AND PLAN FOR PHASE ONE REOPENING OF BENCH LABORATORY RESEARCH AT OUHSC**

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to faculty, trainees, and other researchers/lab staff on the phased reopening of laboratory research at OUHSC.

### ***General Principles***

In reopening research at OUHSC, the top priority must be public health: not just the health of OUHSC employees, but also the health of Oklahomans. Repopulation of our buildings and research sites must be done in a manner that minimizes risk of a rebound in SAR-CoV-2 infection rates that threatens our state.

Our plans must align with the advice and direction of public health authorities, applicable city and state 'shelter-in-place' orders, and the [OUHSC's COVID-19 Return Plan](#). OUHSC leaders will consider these issues in approving any re-start date.

A return to normal activity generally is unlikely for many months. We must understand that the practice of laboratory research specifically will not be the same as it was in 2019, and OUHSC must develop ways to reduce physical interactions in the labs until this pandemic has receded. New waves of infection may occur in the coming months, and we must be prepared for the possibility of returning to lower levels of lab activity.

This Return to Research Plan is focused on keeping as low a population density in research laboratories and buildings as possible, while still allowing research to continue. Telecommuting should continue to occur to the maximum extent amount possible and in accordance with HR policy to reduce population density in research laboratories and buildings.

All researchers must read and be familiar with the [OUHSC COVID-19 Return Plan](#) and this Return to Research Plan.

### ***Phased Reopening***

Currently, limited research at OUHSC is ongoing. Several labs are operating at a minimal level to complete long-term research projects or to perform research directly connected to COVID-19. **The following directives apply to both laboratories operating at a minimal level and laboratories where research activities have been halted.**

Core Facilities continue to operate at a reduced level to support current research activities. The Division of Comparative Medicine is fully functional to support animal care and use as needed. The Office of Research Administration, the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, the Institutional Biosafety Committee, and the Institutional Review Board continue to provide services and oversight.

Following are Phase One Directives. A second phase of increased density will be considered later.

### ***Phase One Reopening Directives***

***Population Density – Social Distancing.*** Each Faculty Researcher with an independent research program and each core laboratory will be allowed the equivalent of no more than one

person per 400 sq ft of laboratory space; i.e., 1-400 sq ft: 1 researcher, 401-800 sq ft – 2 researchers, 801-1200 sq ft – 3 researchers, etc. The goal is to provide as much physical distancing as possible while still providing opportunity for research to continue. Each Faculty Researcher and Core Director must complete the ***Research Request Worksheet*** and indicate the maximum number of individuals who are permitted to be in the laboratory at one time. As described below, shifts can be scheduled to allow multiple people to work in sequence.

Faculty researchers are encouraged to keep the minimum number of individuals for the least amount of time in the laboratory and in the buildings as possible, using telecommuting as much as possible.

Many of our research laboratories are organized in neighborhoods or floors that have common equipment rooms, break areas, and entryways. Since one plan does not fit all, neighboring faculty researchers are strongly encouraged to discuss together their re-start plans to allow the best use of space and to consider plans for minimizing social interactions in common areas and hallways.

**We understand that these directives do not fit all circumstances – but we ask that Faculty Researchers carefully consider the spirit of the policy and keep the health of everyone in their laboratories as their top priority. Try to resist the natural tendency to stretch the rules to squeeze in one more person: think instead about the health of that person and the health of the community.**

Additional Phase One Directives:

- This directive also applies to labs already performing long-term research or COVID-19 research. These labs must complete the ***Research Request Worksheet*** and abide by this policy.
- Faculty Researchers and laboratory members who have been absent from campus for 7 consecutive calendar days or more must complete the COVID-19 self-screening questionnaire: <https://covidreporting.ouhsc.edu/> and submit it before returning to work on campus. They will be notified via email of their screening results. This return to work email should be forwarded to the employee's direct supervisor upon receipt.
- All individuals in campus facilities, including research laboratories, must wear disposable or fabric [surgical-style facemask](#) masks; provided, however, that when individuals are in their own enclosed private workspace and are not interacting with others, they may remove their masks. Masks must also be worn in outdoor campus spaces where social distancing cannot be maintained. Scarves, bandanas, and the like are not adequate.
- The University will make available to researchers a surgical-style mask. Instructions on how to obtain this surgical-style mask will be provided by the researchers' college/department.
  - Disposable filtration surgical-style masks worn in non-clinical/non-surgical areas should be worn on campus for up to five consecutive days, or until soiled/broken, whichever occurs first.
  - Fabric masks should be washed and fully dried, as needed, but at least once per work week. [Appropriate cleaning of the mask](#) is the responsibility of the wearer.

- Gloves and lab coats should be worn when necessitated by research being conducted; i.e., BLS-2 research. Gloves worn while in the laboratory must be removed and properly disposed before going outside of the lab for any reason. Hand washing must occur on a regular basis.
- Disinfection of research laboratory space is the responsibility of each Faculty Researcher. To reduce viral transmission during and between shifts, all labs must maintain and lab personnel must use spray disinfectant containing 70% ethanol to disinfect bench surfaces, doorknobs, light switches, and equipment surfaces frequently, plus at the beginning and end of a shift. Common equipment in shared areas should be disinfected with 70% ethanol prior to and after each use. Refer to the [OUHSC COVID-19 Return Plan](#) for complete sanitization procedures.
- Faculty Researchers who have more space than researchers to fill the space may work with their departmental chair to negotiate with neighboring labs a space sharing and shift work agreement.
- Some lab staff work in space that does not have conventional benches or research space (e.g., older labs composed of a labyrinth of small rooms). One person is permitted in the laboratory space equivalent to approximately 400 square feet. Accessory space where experiments are generally not performed (equipment rooms, etc.) does not count toward this space.
- In some cases, researchers from multiple labs in a neighborhood might use the same equipment room or cell culture space. These researchers should avoid unnecessary interactions by coordinating or rescheduling activities.
- Some lab staff spend all of their time in animal facilities, cell culture rooms, or other space away from a central lab. Those staff do not count toward the density of the central lab, but the density of staff in those locations must be minimized. For example, cell culture rooms with multiple hoods may have no more than one person working in them.
- Complex experiments, as well as the training of new lab members, require teamwork between at least two people. These interactions are permitted when necessary, but should be minimized whenever possible, consistent with the [OUHSC COVID-19 Return Plan](#).
- Laboratory safety must also be considered during times of low staff density. Those working with hazardous chemicals or materials are encouraged not to work alone and not to work after hours when fewer people are present. Researchers should establish a buddy system with someone in a neighboring space or lab, or use check in/check out by phone or text with the PI or another laboratory member.
- Restricted access to the animal facility will be lifted on May 11. As of May 11, those individuals on IACUC-approved protocols will have key card access to the animal facilities as occurred prior to the initial restrictions.
- For guidance on travel, see the [OUHSC COVID-19 Return Plan](#).

*Scheduling and Coordination of Work Hours.* To allow multiple people to occupy sequentially the allotted space, Faculty Researchers should develop a calendar or similar system to schedule day, evening, and weekend work shifts. The structure of these schedules and the length of shifts can be flexible, depending on the type of experiment and the needs of the lab. Faculty Researchers should consider having shifts ranging from 3 to 12 hours in length. Another option is for specific people to reserve certain days of the week. Lab staff should be advised that their time in the lab is limited and they must make the most of it. Furthermore:

- Telecommuting should be encouraged as much as possible. Lab members should plan to maximize the use of their limited bench time, and they should do their notebook updating and other desktop activities when they return home.
- Lab members should communicate openly and often (by text or other messaging systems) to coordinate and adjust schedules as necessary to comply with these social distancing requirements. Everyone should leave the lab when their shift ends.
- Lab members should be encouraged to help their fellow lab members by doing minor tasks and experiments for each other that will reduce the need for others to come in to the lab.

*Prioritizing Return to Work.* Each PI must think carefully about which lab members will be allowed to return to work initially:

- Trainees (PhD students and postdocs) should be given top priority in return scheduling due to their need to complete their research projects in a timely fashion.
- Undergraduates, high school students, and other non-OUHSC volunteers will not be allowed in research laboratories during Phase One.

*Monitoring Compliance.* We are confident that Faculty Researchers, trainees, and staff understand the importance of these policies and will operate accordingly and that Faculty Researchers will require their staff to do so. However, as an additional precaution, Environmental Health and Safety Office staff will be performing spot checks to identify laboratories and individuals where there is inappropriate density or lack of distancing and inappropriate protective measures. In these cases, Faculty Researchers will be required to modify staff schedules or take other measures to minimize risk of transmission. Repeat offenders could be disciplined in accordance with University policy and research-related privileges reduced or removed.

### ***Building Access and Common Areas***

- Entrances to all research buildings will continue to be restricted to key or card access.
- Elevators - No more than two individuals may be in an elevator at one time; individuals must wear masks on elevators
- Seating Areas - Seating at tables and benches is limited to one person per 6 feet.

- The University will provide increased cleaning and sanitizing of frequently used facilities and common areas, including elevators, restrooms, classrooms/lecture halls, and other high traffic spaces with the use of BPA-approved cleaners that meet CDC guidelines for disinfecting COVID-19.

### ***Testing, Isolation, and Contact Tracing***

- If an employee or student tests positive for COVID-19, the University will cooperate with the appropriate health department in its contact tracing efforts.
- Faculty Researchers who are made aware that an individual in their area has tested positive must immediately contact the Associate Dean for Research of their college. The Associate Dean for Research will follow the guidelines described in the [OUHSC COVID-19 Return Plan](#).
- All employees and students who have received a positive COVID-19 laboratory test must obtain clearance from the Student/Employee Health Clinic (OKC 405-271-9675; Tulsa 918-660-3102) before returning to on-campus University responsibilities.
- Employees and students who were exposed to a laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 positive individual are expected to notify the Student/Employee Health Clinic (OKC 405-271-9675; Tulsa 918-660-3102) and to follow the direction provided by the Clinic and by the health department involved (if any). That direction may require certain actions, such as to remain away from University property and from on- and off-campus events until approved for return by Student/Employee Health.
- Employees or students who are experiencing symptoms (e.g., cough, loss of smell or taste, chills, headache, muscle pain, fever, shortness of breath) should contact Student/Employee Health on their campus and follow the instructions provided.