# **Coronavirus (COVID-19) Group Gathering Guidance**

**Audience: All Users**

**Updates 2/2/2022**

All employees participating in a prolonged gathering or who unmask during a gathering must obtain Binax testing within 1 calendar day prior to event; vaccination status does not preclude the need for testing.

**Updates 9/22/2021**

Group gathering guidance does not apply to standard clinical operations and/or patient care activities.

**Updates 8/12/2021**

Participation in Indoor/Outdoor Events

* Events that will be attended by more than **50** participants, regardless of whether participants include members of the public, must seek approval from the Secretary of the VA.
* Regardless of group size, participants of any indoor gatherings must be asked to provide information about vaccination status.
* Participants who are not fully vaccinated or fail to disclose their vaccination status must provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test, which must be completed no later than the previous three days.
* All meeting organizers are required to review this guidance in its entirety and submit an attestation using the [following form.](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=Ixtf6a-r7kWCHberJRqzv6dtR2lzgVdApawKTkJl3-JURjJKOE4xQjVGMjc3ME1MTUs5U04zVzFFOS4u)

**Updates 7/28/21**

Masking is now required in all areas of the Medical Center regardless of employee vaccination status including offices and all other areas where 2 or more employees are congregated

**Updates 6/22/21 (see text that follows for additional information):**

Social distancing/masking in all indoor areas:

* Masking is required and distancing is no longer required. This includes public areas such as waiting rooms, common and clinical areas.

Indoor Exceptions:

* Distancing not required. This does not apply to clinical offices when patients are present.
* In areas where masking cannot be maintained and vaccination status unknown (break and lunchrooms), continue to distance 6 feet

**Purpose:** In accordance with guidance from the CDC and the Massachusetts DPH, the following outlines the limitations for indoor and outdoor gatherings at VA Boston. This guidance applies to employee gatherings and employee/Veteran gatherings that are outside the scope of normal clinical care/standard clinical operations. Examples include but are not limited to conferences, day-long trainings, celebrations, and retirement gatherings. This guidance is subject to change to remain in line with updates to the state issued guidance, CDC recommendations, or as deemed appropriate by VABHS Infectious Disease.

**Guidance:**

Per the CDC, virtual-only activities, events, and gatherings are the safest method to prevent the risk of spreading COVID-19. VA Boston recommends all teams explore virtual-only meetings with the use of VA approved software such as, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, or Adobe Connect. In-person meetings that are not in compliance with this guidance pose a risk to the safety and well-being of our staff.

## **SECTION A: INDOOR AND OUTDOOR GATHERINGS**

**Indoor Gathering Limits:**

* Events or gatherings with 50 or more participants must seek approval by the Secretary of the VA.
* Masking is required and distancing as much as possible; this applies to all areas of the Medical Center
* In areas where masking cannot be maintained (break and lunchrooms), continue to distance 6 feet
* The above requirements apply to ***all buildings* on VA Boston HCS campuses and clinics**.

Gatherings:

* Indoor gatherings for employees must adhere to masking.
* For gatherings of Veterans, time should be limited to 90 minutes unless otherwise approved
* The meeting organizer is to ensure appropriate masking and social distancing.
  + For extended indoor gatherings of employees, the following guidance is recommended:
    - Binax testing prior to start of first day of gathering (or within 1 calendar day)
      * Required if gathering>4 hours and/or combines employees from different work locations.
      * Meeting organizer must contact the Binax testing team in advance for approval
        + Email: VHABHSCOVIDExposuresTesting@va.gov
        + Must include requested location/date/time
        + Must also include names/phone numbers of employees
        + Employees who test positive will be contacted by Occupational Health as per local guidance
        + Employees will not be contacted with a negative result
    - Social distancing plan
      * + Maintain masking of employees.
        + Distancing no longer required but recommended if meeting prolonged.
        + Plan for safe social distancing for meals and unmasked break times. If unmasking is anticipated (i.e. break rooms), distance should remain at 6 feet.

**Outdoor gathering limits:**

* Events that will be attended by more than 50 participants, must seek approval from the Secretary of the VA.
* Masks need no longer be worn outside of VA Boston HCS campus and clinic buildings.
  + Exceptions include the following:
    - **Events** combining Veterans/employees and the public – these events will still require masking (examples include promotion events, car shows) unless distancing is able to be observed
    - If distancing observed, this could substitute for masking
* Anyone should feel comfortable continuing to wear a mask in any setting.

**Requirements during the Event:**

* Participants must follow required masking and social distancing guidelines
* Participants to conduct proper hand hygiene upon entry and before leaving the gathering.
* Food should not be shared between participants unless served as per the guidance in section C: Celebrations below.
* The meeting organizer must maintain a record of the sign-in sheet for at least 8 weeks post the event.
* Common touch items should be cleaned between users and hand hygiene should be performed before and after use of such items
* Brockton CLC and Brockton Building 8 gatherings may be subject to additional requirements as per VACO guidance for CLCs
* The meeting organizer is required to consult with Infectious Prevention if they have concerns about their gathering not meeting the above gathering limits. Please email [VHABHSInfectionControl@va.gov](mailto:VHABHSInfectionControl@va.gov) for consultation.

## **SECTION B: CHAPLAIN SERVICE**

Chaplain Services are to adhere to the CDC Guidance for Places of Worship in accordance with the Massachusetts State guidance or as deemed appropriate by VABHS Infectious Disease. This guidance is subject to change to meet the recommendations and guidance from the VHA National Offices.

**Gathering Limits:**

For indoor services, places of worship must monitor member entries and exits.

**Requirements During the Event:**

* Events that will be attended by more than 50 participants, regardless of whether participants include members of the public, must seek approval from the Secretary of the VA
* Attendees are encouraged to sit together with members of the same immediate household.
* All attendees and staff must wear face coverings at all times in accordance with the VHA guidelines
* All participants to conduct proper hand hygiene upon entry and before leaving the gathering.
* Common touch items should be cleaned between users and hand hygiene should be performed before and after use of such items

## **SECTION C:  CELEBRATIONS**

Services may host celebrations that are in compliance with the guidance outlined in Section A in addition to the following parameters regarding meals and shared food items.

If meals/food is served, staff should adhere to the outlined guidance below regarding food preparation and distribution. **Once the food/ meals are distributed, staff should return to their workstation and participate in a MS Teams video call to eat and socialize. Staff should not congregate in a shared location while eating if indoors. The exception to this guidance would be an outdoor event; all participants are encouraged to socially distance while eating. The requirement for social distancing can be waived if all participants are known to be vaccinated.**

* While preparing meals, staff should mask, [wash their hands](https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fhandwashing%2Fwhen-how-handwashing.html&data=04%7C01%7C%7C354c1d4e8feb4c53785a08d89d15c35e%7Ce95f1b23abaf45ee821db7ab251ab3bf%7C0%7C0%7C637432064075542155%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=sDKAQlEdng82bq07Mj6Kya4H3Yb2AaqY9k50HKVWuDI%3D&reserved=0) with soap and water for 20 seconds before and after preparing, serving, and eating food and after taking trash out. Use [hand sanitizer](https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fhandwashing%2Fhand-sanitizer-use.html&data=04%7C01%7C%7C354c1d4e8feb4c53785a08d89d15c35e%7Ce95f1b23abaf45ee821db7ab251ab3bf%7C0%7C0%7C637432064075552111%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=hg3nz6uaKr926IFf1rmtCcAcIr6Ubes9WH8wTYEnX4I%3D&reserved=0) that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
* Serve meals in individually wrapped containers -OR-
* Order out individual meals -OR-
* Host a modified pot-luck buffet:
  + If serving foods from multiple containers have one person who is wearing a mask and is gloved serve all the food so that multiple people are not handling the serving utensils.
* Use single-use options or identify one person to serve sharable items, like salad dressings, food containers, plates and utensils, and condiments.
  + If individually wrapped utensils are not available, place utensils handle-side UP in a clean container and place hand sanitizer next to the container. Staff should use hand sanitizer prior to selecting their utensils.
* While waiting in line for meal distribution, staff should encourage physical distancing.

Other types of celebrations:

* White elephant:

[https://teambuilding.com/blog/virtual-white-elephant](https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fteambuilding.com%2Fblog%2Fvirtual-white-elephant&data=04%7C01%7C%7C354c1d4e8feb4c53785a08d89d15c35e%7Ce95f1b23abaf45ee821db7ab251ab3bf%7C0%7C0%7C637432064075552111%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=AT6BL2bkiVwPMABdgD7fROOCU8rlgzhI%2FuuK3gPl7XM%3D&reserved=0)

* Cookie swap:

[https://www.today.com/food/it-still-ok-do-cookie-swap-during-pandemic-t202772](https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.today.com%2Ffood%2Fit-still-ok-do-cookie-swap-during-pandemic-t202772&data=04%7C01%7C%7C354c1d4e8feb4c53785a08d89d15c35e%7Ce95f1b23abaf45ee821db7ab251ab3bf%7C0%7C0%7C637432064075562066%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=mabszwbG%2Fe%2BPUPyYpuLyWPDtdEDjq1Jiz6vUN%2Fca00c%3D&reserved=0)

References:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/revised-gatherings-order-august-7-2020/download>

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/safety-standards-and-checklist-places-of-worship>

Memo\_ Update: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Mask Use in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Facilities