

PLACES OF WORSHIP OVERVIEW:

The framework below represents the City of Boston's operational recommendations for Places of Worship and Religious Services. These operational recommendations incorporate the Commonwealth's Sector Specific Safety Standards for Places of Worship and Religious Services to address COVID-19 and supplement them with additional recommendations based on CDC guidance, conversations with local faith leaders, and other organizations.

These operational recommendations apply to operations during Phase 1 of the Commonwealth's phased Reopening Plan, and are subject to revision and modification during subsequent phases or as necessitated by public health considerations. In crafting these operational recommendations, the City makes the following Public Health Recovery Plan assumptions:

- Reopening services will increase the risk of COVID-19 spread; thus, the goal is to know, communicate and manage transmission risk.
- Programs/Services/Industries must be altered, some significantly, for several months or longer, until a vaccine or effective treatment is developed.
- All plans must include mechanisms for how programs and services can be quickly scaled back if COVID-19 cases and deaths begin to spike.
- Linguistically and culturally appropriate public messaging and communications are critical.
- The experiences and needs of those disproportionately impacted should be explicitly considered in all plans.

The City's operational recommendations should be used as an addition to any Federal and State mandates. At a minimum, Places of Worship must follow state-issued Standards for Places of Worship and Religious Services to address COVID-19. All actions undertaken to comply with the Commonwealth's standards and the City of Boston recommendations must also comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act regulations and Massachusetts Architectural Access Board regulations as applicable to your institution.

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Standards: Standards for Places of Worship in Massachusetts

These sector specific COVID-19 safety standards for Places of Worship and Religious Services are issued to provide Places of Worship with instructions to help protect against the spread of COVID-19 as in-person services resume. These standards are minimum requirements only and are not exclusive or exhaustive. The public health data and matrix for disease prevention upon which these guidelines are based can and does change frequently, and the operator of a Place of Worship is responsible for adhering to all Federal, State, and Local mandates.

- [Massachusetts Sector Specific Workplace Standards for Places of Worship and Religious Services](#)
- [Places of Worship Checklist](#)
- [Places of Worship Protocol Summary](#)

These standards apply to all Places of Worship and Religious Services, and all services and activities including regular and holiday services, weddings, funerals, and wakes.

Places of Worship shall communicate to members and staff that if they are feeling sick, are exhibiting any of the following symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, chills, muscle pain, headache, sore throat, or new loss of taste or smell), or have potentially been exposed to someone with confirmed or suspected COVID-19, then they cannot attend services in person. A potential exposure means having household contact or having close contact (within 6 feet) with an individual with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 for a prolonged period of time (over 10 minutes) while the person is symptomatic or 48 hours before symptoms develop.

Persons who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 according to the Centers for Disease Control (e.g., due to age or underlying conditions) are encouraged to stay home.

Places of Worship are encouraged, to the extent feasible, to hold services virtually or outdoors and to ensure that attendees who are not from the same immediate household are spaced at least 6 feet apart. If outdoor services are not possible, places of worship must abide by the following requirements.

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The following Places of Worship specific safety standards are organized around seven distinct categories covering Occupancy Limitations, Social Distancing, Face Coverings, Contributions and Communal Food, Drink and Sacraments, Nurseries and Childcare, Cleaning and Disinfecting and Hygiene Protocols, and Staff and Operations.

I. Occupancy Limitations

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Minimum Standards:

- All Places of Worship shall limit occupancy to 40 percent of the building's maximum permitted occupancy level, as documented in its occupancy permit on record with the municipal building department or other municipal record holder. The occupant count shall include all persons inside the Place of Worship, including attendees, volunteers and staff.
- Staff or volunteers shall monitor the number of attendees entering the Place of Worship to ensure compliance with the maximum occupancy level.
- If feasible, Places of Worship are encouraged to arrange online sign-up for services in advance, in order to monitor and limit the number of attendees.

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The City of Boston encourages staff and volunteers to consider the following points when developing and implementing occupancy protocols:

- Increase and/or space out the number of worship services to ensure better social distancing of attendees and sufficient time for cleaning and disinfecting of prayer areas.

- Due to staff capacity and resources, particularly for those faith leaders leading worship services in multiple locations, a faith leader should consider limiting worship services to one location, in order to increase attention to safety.
- Places of worship are advised to use a single point of entry and a separate, single point of exit. The single point of entry allows staff and volunteers to maintain a consistent count of attendees.

II. Social Distancing

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Minimum Standards:

Seating

- Attendees who are not part of the same immediate household must be seated at least 6 feet apart. Members of the same immediate household are permitted to sit together and less than 6 feet apart.
- If there is fixed seating, certain rows should be blocked off and kept empty to allow for sufficient distancing between rows.
- Places of Worship are encouraged to place tape or other visual distancing markings to delineate 6-foot separations and to post signage indicating the maximum number of persons permitted per row.
- Promote ventilation for enclosed spaces where possible. For example, consider opening windows and doors to allow airflow.

Entrances and Exits

- Places of Worship are encouraged to take steps to encourage orderly entering and exiting of services in a manner that encourages social distancing. For example:
 - Signage or floor markings should be posted to have one-way aisles or otherwise direct attendees to follow certain pathways for entering and exiting the service.
 - If a line forms outside of the service, those waiting should be directed to maintain social distancing. Tape or other markings on the ground outside of Places of Worship should be placed to encourage attendees to maintain social distancing of at least 6 feet.
 - Staff should direct people in high traffic areas to help maintain social distancing.
 - Officiants should direct successive, row-by-row exiting through a single exit.

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The City of Boston encourages staff and volunteers to consider the following points when implementing social distancing protocols for location-specific areas inside Places of Worship:

Seating and Praying

- Display clear signage to help direct people to sit in the right places.
- If there is fixed seating or standing, at minimum every other row should be blocked off and kept empty, to allow for sufficient distancing between rows. If possible, consider blocking off two rows between every occupied row, instead of every other.

- Where moveable seating is used, it should be set up to provide a minimum of 6 feet of separation. Floor markings can be used to discourage attendees from rearranging such seating.
- We appreciate that for certain faith traditions, the State's guidance on social distancing can make certain practices nearly impossible (e.g. holding the five daily congregational prayers or the Friday *Jumua* prayer in the Islamic tradition). However, we advise against such practices for the time being in the interest of public safety.

Entrances and Exits

- Doors should be left open where possible to limit contact with door knobs and handles.

III. Face Coverings

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Minimum Standards:

- All attendees and staff must wear face coverings or masks in accordance with COVID-19 Order No. 31 and the Department of Public Health's Guidance while inside and while entering and exiting Places of Worship or otherwise participating in in-person services, except where a person is unable to wear a face covering or mask because of a medical or disabling condition.
- For children between age 2 and 5, the wearing of a face covering or mask is at the discretion of the child's parent or guardian. Children under the age of 2 should not wear a face covering or mask.
- A person who declines to wear a face covering or mask because of a medical or disabling condition shall not be required to produce documentation verifying the condition.
- Places of Worship may refuse entry to a person who refuses to wear a face covering or mask for non-medical reasons.

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The City of Boston encourages staff and volunteers to consider the following points when developing and implementing face covering protocols:

- Signs should be placed inside and outside of the Place of Worship reminding people of the need to wear a face covering and to maintain social and physical distancing. The Boston Public Health Commission can provide language for such signage if places of worship need it. Email reopening@boston.gov to request.

IV. Contributions and Communal Food, Drink and Sacraments

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Minimum Standards:

- Places of Worship are encouraged to modify the means to collect any financial contributions from attendees so as to eliminate shared contribution trays and baskets and to minimize contact. Consider setting up a no-touch method to collect contributions, and encouraging contributions through mail or electronic means.
- Places of Worship are encouraged to modify communal rituals, like taking communion or passing of the peace, so as to limit contact with others. Consider distributing, where applicable, prepackaged communion or sacraments.

- If applicable, signage or floor markings should be posted to have one-way aisles or otherwise direct attendees to receive communal rituals.
- Places of Worship running food pantries or other prepackaged food distribution may continue to do so.

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The City of Boston encourages staff and volunteers to consider the following points when developing and implementing contributions and communal food, drink and sacramental protocols:

- Consider temporarily limiting the sharing of frequently touched objects, such as worship aids, prayer rugs, prayer books, hymnals, religious texts and other bulletins, books, or other items passed or shared among attendees. Consider encouraging attendees to bring their own such items, if possible, or photocopying or projecting prayers, songs, and texts using electronic means.
- If possible, during services use projected screens or single use, disposable orders of service.
- If no-touch methods to collect contributions aren't possible at the moment, consider leaving a basket near the single point of exit for attendees to leave offering envelopes.

V. Nurseries and Childcare

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Minimum Standards:

- Any childcare services shall remain closed until such time that there is additional guidance.

VI. Cleaning and Disinfecting and Hygiene Protocols

Commonwealth of Massachusetts Minimum Standards:

- Places of Worship shall be cleaned and disinfected between each service, including disinfection of heavy transit areas and high-touch surfaces (e.g., doorknobs, bathrooms, microphones, shared instruments).
- If a Place of Worship learns that an individual with COVID-19 attended a service or otherwise entered the Place of Worship, it shall conduct a deep cleaning and disinfecting consistent with the [Centers for Disease Control guidance](#).
- Places of Worship shall ensure that attendees and workers have access to handwashing facilities, including soap and running water, and allow workers sufficient break time to wash hands, as necessary. They are also encouraged to make alcohol-based hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol available, if possible.

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The City of Boston encourages staff and volunteers to consider the following points when developing and implementing cleaning, disinfecting, and hygiene protocols:

- Post visible signage to remind staff and attendees of hygiene and safety protocols.
- Consider cleaning and disinfecting all high touch areas with an [EPA-approved disinfectant](#) **after every service**. Examples of high touch areas include:
 - Seating used by attendees, including pew backs and railings

- Doorknobs, handles and bars at entrances/exits and bathrooms
- Light switches and elevator buttons, if applicable
- Sink faucets and knobs
- Toilet seats and handles
- Stall door handles in bathrooms
- Reception desks, counter tops and similar surfaces
- Microphones and lecterns
- Wudu areas (ablution facilities)
- Prayer mats/carpets
- Area where clergy lead the service
- Consider having paper towels available outside and inside bathrooms so they can be used to open and close doors. Place a bin outside the bathroom for paper waste.
- A daily log of cleaning and disinfection should be kept on site.

Response Action Protocol

- Establish a Response Action protocol to clean spaces where there were confirmed cases of infection/exposure, and notify the congregation.
 - In the event staff is notified of a positive case in a staff member, volunteer or an attendee, close the Place of Worship for a deep cleaning and disinfection, in accordance with current [CDC guidance](#).
 - A deep cleaning should include all the seating and pews, floors, carpets, altar, sacred rooms, bathrooms, wudu areas, reception areas, etc.
- Places of Worship should consider keeping a log of attendance at each service in order to notify attendees, in the event of a positive case.
- In the event of a notification of exposure, the Place of Worship must notify the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) by calling 617-534-5050, and assist BPHC as reasonably requested to trace likely contacts and advise contacts to isolate and self-quarantine.

Maintaining Pews

- Frequent disinfecting of pews may result in damage to the finish. Avoid using harsh chemicals such as bleach and alcohol-based products. Mild detergent and water are best.

VII. Staffing and Operations

City of Boston Operational Recommendations:

The City of Boston encourages staff and volunteers to consider the following points when developing and implementing staffing and operations protocols. Please note that capacity limitations apply to all these religious events.

- Prior to the return of services, staff should do a walk through the Place of Worship and consider what may have fallen into disuse or disrepair during the time of closure. Test water, lights, electricity, HVAC, wifi. Prior to the return to the building, remove all hymnals, prayer books, sacred texts from chairs and pews. After the first service, staff should consider debriefing on what areas were shown to be particularly problematic for high touch or congregating.

- Places of worship should consider screening attendees before they enter the Place of Worship including temperature checks, asking about coughs, shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, body aches and new loss of taste and smell. Continue to frequently check the CDC's updates on symptoms, as these may change. If a high temperature registers, the Place of Worship should follow the guidelines established in the Place of Worship's Response Action Plan, mentioned above.

Religious Services

- Places of Worship should consider shorter services to limit inherent risk of infection from longer gatherings.
- Fully respectful of the very important role that music, incantation, chant, and scriptural recitation play in religious services, and respectful of the public health concerns, attendees should be instructed not to sing or recite, either by announcement or by signs. There can be a cantor and an instrumentalist, who may provide music during the service, or recorded music can be used. Choirs or other group-singing should not be part of the service.
- If religious vestments are worn, consider having the set of vestments be worn only by that religious leader, stored separately and laundered frequently.
- Any religious leader, volunteer or staff person who has symptoms of an acute respiratory illness of any kind should be asked to not attend the religious service.
- Customary and cultural expressions of greetings should exclude kisses, hugs, hand shakes, holding of hands or contact of any type.
- There should be no social gatherings or communal eating in the Place of Worship before or after the service.

Funerals

- At this time, we advise against viewings, wakes, and Muslim funeral prayers (Janaza prayer) in Places of Worship.
- The 40 percent occupancy maximum limit must be maintained.
- Attendees should continue to maintain social distancing guidelines and wear face coverings at all times. Attendees should be encouraged to not touch the coffin and/or the body of someone who has died.
- Activities, such as kissing, washing and shrouding should be avoided before, during, and after the body has been prepared, if possible. Customary and cultural expressions of consolation of family members should exclude hugs, hand shakes, holding of hands or contact of any type.
- If washing the body or shrouding are important religious or cultural practices, families are encouraged to work with their community cultural and religious leaders and funeral home staff to reduce their exposure as much as possible. At a minimum, people conducting these activities should wear face coverings and disposable gloves. Cleaning should be conducted after each service.
- We advise against a repast or any gathering after the funeral. To avoid spreading the virus, families should limit the size of any home gathering or shiva minyan, and should consider postponing a memorial meal or service to a time when the crisis has passed.

Weddings

- The 40 percent occupancy limit must be maintained.

- Attendees should continue to maintain social distancing guidelines and wear face coverings at all times.
- Customary and cultural expressions of greetings should exclude hugs, hand shakes, holding of hands or contact of any type.
- There should be no social gatherings in the Place of Worship before or after the service.

Outdoor Services

If your Place of Worship decides to hold services outdoors, please ensure that all attendees wear a face covering or mask and that attendees who are not from the same immediate household are spaced at least 6 feet apart.

- Consider marking off clear spaces with cones, chalk, rope, etc. to indicate appropriate social distancing and to direct individuals from the same family as to where to stand or sit.
- If seating is used, space seats 6 feet apart.
- Proposals for outdoor services on City property will be considered by the appropriate City department upon submission of a safety plan and a permit request. Email reopening@boston.gov to be directed to the right department.

Social Services

- Phase 1 currently does not allow in-person social services such as religious classes, recovery services, and counseling.

*If you have any questions about the City of Boston's operational recommendations for staff, volunteers and attendees for reopening strategies for Places of Worship, please email **reopening@boston.gov**.*