



INTERIM GUIDANCE FOR RELIGIOUS & FUNERAL SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

When you have read this document, you can affirm at the bottom.

As of June 9, 2021

Purpose

This Interim Guidance for Religious and Funeral Services and Operations of Faith-Based institutions during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (“Interim COVID-19 Guidance for Religious and Funeral Services and Operations of Faith-Based Institutions”) was created to provide faith leaders and officiants of religious and funeral services and their employees, contractors, volunteers, and attendees with precautions to help protect against the spread of COVID-19 as religious and funeral services reopen or increase activity. This guidance applies to all religious and funeral gatherings, including burial and committal services.

Operators of religious and funeral services are authorized to require masks and six feet of social distancing for employees, volunteers and congregants/attendees within their establishments or adhere to the State’s guidance, which is consistent with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) “Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People.” If choosing to adhere to CDC guidance, religious and funeral services may operate either above or below the State’s social gathering limit and must follow applicable guidelines for masks, distancing, and capacity, as outlined in New York State’s guidelines on Implementing CDC Guidance.

These guidelines are minimum requirements only, and additional precautions or increased restrictions may be required by the institution or operator. These guidelines are based on the best-known public health practices at the time of publication, and the documentation upon which these guidelines are based can and does change frequently. The Responsible Parties – as defined below – are accountable for adhering to all local, state and federal requirements relative to religious and funeral services. The Responsible Parties should consult relevant CDC guidance, such as “Guidance for Organizing Large Events and Gatherings.” The Responsible Parties are also accountable for staying current with any updates to these requirements, as well as incorporating same into any religious and funeral services and/or Site Safety Plan.

Background

On March 7, 2020, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo issued Executive Order 202, declaring a state disaster in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Since May 15, 2020, New York State has developed and deployed a phased economic reopening strategy based on science and data, which has allowed specific industries to safely resume or increase activities and operations while protecting public health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the following standards, Responsible Parties must continue to comply with the guidance and directives for maintaining clean and safe work environments issued by the New York State Department of Health (DOH).

Please note that where guidance in this document differs from other guidance documents issued by New York State, the more recent guidance shall apply.

Standards for Responsible Religious and Funeral Services in New York State

No religious and funeral services activity can occur without meeting the following minimum State standards, as well as applicable federal requirements, including but not limited to such minimum standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), CDC, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and United States Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

The State standards contained within this guidance apply to all religious and funeral services in operation during the COVID-19 public health emergency until rescinded or amended by the State. The operator of the religious or funeral service, or another party as may be designated by the operator (in either case, "the Responsible Parties"), shall be responsible for meeting these standards. As announced by Governor Cuomo on June 7, 2021, most of the remaining COVID-19 restrictions will be lifted once 70 percent of New Yorkers aged 18 or older have received the first dose of their COVID-19 vaccination series. The State's *New York Forward* industry specific guidelines — including capacity restrictions, social distancing, cleaning and disinfection, health screening, and contact information for tracing — will become optional. However, unvaccinated individuals will still be responsible for maintaining proper social distancing of six feet and wearing a mask as per federal CDC guidance referenced above. Consistent with the State's implementation of the recent CDC guidance, masks will still be required for unvaccinated individuals. Large-scale event venues — defined as indoor venues of greater than 1,500 attendees and outdoor venues of greater than 2,500 attendees — as well as Pre-K to 12 schools, public transit, homeless shelters, correctional facilities, nursing homes and health care settings will be exempt from the restriction lift. In those settings, New York State's existing COVID-19 health protocols will remain in effect.

The following guidance is organized around three distinct categories: people, places, and processes.

I. PEOPLE

A. Physical Distancing

- Responsible Parties must ensure that capacity is limited by the space available for employees, volunteers and congregants/attendees to maintain the required social distance as set forth by the State's guidance, consistent with the CDC's guidelines for fully vaccinated individuals.
 - Full vaccination status is defined as having completed the COVID-19 vaccination series of an FDA or DOH authorized vaccine at least 14 days prior to the date of the event.
 - In accordance with the State's guidance, Responsible Parties may allow for fully vaccinated employees, volunteers and congregants/attendees to be spaced at full capacity without six feet distancing within either the entire establishment or a separate, designated part of the establishment, provided that all individuals are fully vaccinated.

- Responsible Parties should ensure that a distance of at least six feet is maintained amongst all individuals, with the exception of congregants/attendees who are members of the same immediate party/household/family, at all times, unless safety of the core activity requires a shorter distance (e.g. pallbearing), or individuals are fully vaccinated as set forth by the State's guidance, consistent with CDC's guidelines. However, any singing activity must provide for a distance between individuals of at least twelve feet, subject to additional protective measures, unless the congregants/attendees and singers within twelve feet of one another are fully vaccinated.
- Responsible Parties must abide by the face covering requirements set forth by the State's guidance, consistent with the CDC's guidelines for fully vaccinated individuals.
 - Responsible Parties must ensure that all individuals, including employees, volunteers, and congregants/attendees, in unvaccinated sections are only permitted entry into the venue if they wear an acceptable face covering at all times unless seated and eating or drinking, provided that they are over the age of two and able to medically tolerate such a covering.
 - Any face covering requirement must be applied in a manner consistent with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and New York State and City Human Rights Laws, as applicable.
- Responsible Parties may accept proof of vaccination status through paper form, digital application, or the State's Excelsior Pass, which provides secure, digital proof of vaccination status, as well as recent negative diagnostic COVID-19 test results.
- Responsible Parties may modify the use and/or restrict the number of stations (e.g. podiums) and seating areas, so that unvaccinated or unknown vaccination status staff members, volunteers, and attendees are at least six feet apart in all directions (e.g. side-to-side, in rows, and when facing one another) and are not sharing stations or seats without routine cleaning and disinfection, unless all individuals are members of the same household (e.g. seating allows household members to sit together, so long as six feet of distance from non-household members). When distancing is not feasible between stations (e.g. sound booths), Responsible Parties may install physical barriers, such as plastic shielding walls, in areas where they would not affect air flow, heating, cooling, or ventilation.
 - If used, physical barriers should be put in place in accordance with OSHA guidelines.
 - Physical barrier options may include strip curtains, plexiglass or similar materials, or other impermeable dividers or partitions.
- Responsible Parties should ensure occupancy of small spaces (e.g. vehicles, elevators) never exceeds capacity required to maintain social distancing, unless all individuals in such space at the same time are wearing acceptable face coverings or are fully vaccinated. Responsible Parties should increase ventilation with outdoor air to the greatest extent possible (e.g. opening windows and doors), while maintaining safety protocols. Responsible Parties should take additional measures to prevent congregation in elevator waiting areas and limit density in elevators, such as enabling the use of stairs.
- At services or within sections/areas where social distancing is required, Responsible Parties must put in place measures to reduce bi-directional foot traffic using tape or signs with arrows in narrow

aisles, hallways, pews, or spaces, and post signage and distance markers denoting spaces of six feet in all commonly used areas and any areas in which lines are commonly formed or people may congregate (e.g. restrooms, entrances, health screening stations, etc.).

- Responsible Parties must post signs throughout the facility, consistent with DOH COVID-19 signage. Responsible Parties can develop their own customized signage specific to their workplace or setting, provided that such signage is consistent with the Department's signage. Signage should be used to remind individuals to:
 - Stay home if sick.
 - Cover their nose and mouth with a face covering, as set forth by the State's guidance, consistent with the CDC's guidelines for fully vaccinated individuals.
 - Properly store and, when necessary, discard PPE.
 - Adhere to physical distancing instructions, as set forth by the State's guidance, consistent with the CDC's guidelines for fully vaccinated individuals.
 - Report symptoms of or exposure to COVID-19, and how they should do so.
 - Follow hand hygiene and cleaning and disinfection guidelines.
 - Follow appropriate respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.
 - Prohibit holding or shaking hands of members of different households during services or prayers.

B. Gatherings in Enclosed Spaces

- Responsible Parties should put in place practices for adequate social distancing in small areas, such as restrooms and breakrooms, and should develop signage and systems (e.g. flagging when occupied) to restrict occupancy when social distancing cannot be maintained in such areas; and
- Responsible Parties should stagger schedules for staff members and volunteers to observe social distancing (e.g. six feet of space) for any gathering (e.g. coffee breaks, and shift starts/stops).

C. Gathering Activity

- Responsible Parties should take measures to reduce interpersonal contact and congregation, through methods such as:
 - holding services outdoors, when possible (e.g. outdoor service for religious gatherings, or graveside-only service for funerals);
 - reducing on-site attendees to accommodate social distancing guidelines;
 - providing remote service options (e.g. live streaming, AM/FM broadcast);

- allowing drive-in services:
 - Ensure attendees remain in the vehicle in which they arrived.
 - Attendees should not interact physically with clergy, employees, or attendees in other vehicles.
 - Vehicles should contain only members of a single household;
 - Cars must be at least 6 feet apart, or use alternate parking spaces.
- offering multiple service times, including separate times for vulnerable populations (e.g. those over 70, who have underlying health condition, or those how are immunocompromised);
- encouraging advanced sign-ups to manage capacity;
- prioritizing activities that allow for social distancing over those that do not;
- avoiding multiple people and/or teams working in one area by staggering scheduled activities and using signs to indicate occupied areas;
- changing or removing practices that involve close or proximate contact or sharing things among members of different households, such as:
 - sharing a car or limousine ride between locations;
 - providing food and beverages for attendees before, during, or after the event or service.
- Responsible Parties must limit activities involving singing, e.g., a choir, soloist, cantor, or musical ensemble, unless at least 12 feet of separation can be provided between individuals, or additional distancing or physical barriers can reduce transmission of respiratory droplets, unless individuals are fully vaccinated.

D. Movement and Operations

- Responsible Parties must establish designated areas for pickups and deliveries, limiting contact to the extent possible.
- Responsible Parties should limit on-site interactions (e.g. designate an egress for individuals leaving the premises and a separate ingress for individuals entering) and movements (e.g. individuals should remain near their stations or seats as often as possible).

II. PLACES

A. Protective Equipment

- Responsible Parties must abide by the face covering requirements set forth by the State's guidance, consistent with the CDC's guidelines for fully vaccinated individuals.

- Per Executive Order 202.34, as extended, Responsible Parties may deny admittance to individuals who fail to wear face coverings.
- Any face covering requirement must be applied in a manner consistent with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and New York State and City Human Rights Laws, as applicable.
- Responsible Parties must procure, fashion, or otherwise obtain acceptable face coverings and provide such coverings to their employees while at work at no cost to the employee. Responsible Parties should have an adequate supply of face coverings, masks and other required personal protective equipment (PPE) on hand should an employee need a replacement, or should a visitor or attendee be in need.
 - Where face coverings are required, acceptable face coverings shall include but are not limited to cloth masks, surgical masks, and N-95 respirators.
- Responsible Parties must ensure when attendees are required to wear face coverings that they completely cover the nose and mouth unless doing so would be contrary to the individual's health or safety due to medical a condition, or if the attendee is under two years old.
 - Face coverings are required for unvaccinated individuals at all times except while seated, provided all individuals are six feet apart except for immediate household members. Faith leaders, officiants, volunteers, and/or attendees must be prepared to don a face covering if another person unexpectedly comes within six feet (e.g. when walking to seats).
- Face coverings must be cleaned or replaced after use and may not be shared. Please consult the CDC [guidance](#) for additional information on cloth face coverings and other types of PPE, as well as instructions on use and cleaning.
- Responsible Parties must allow those performing the religious service or ceremony to use their own acceptable face coverings but cannot require such participants to supply their own face coverings. Further, this guidance shall not prevent employees, officiants, volunteers or attendees from wearing their personally owned additional protective coverings (e.g., cloth masks, surgical masks, and N-95 respirators).
- Responsible Parties should consider putting in place measures to limit the sharing of objects, such as religious texts, collection plates, and other materials, as well as the touching of shared surfaces, such as pews, instruments, doors, and railings; or, require employees and volunteers to wear gloves when in contact with shared objects or frequently touched surfaces; or, require employees, volunteers, and attendees to sanitize or wash their hands before and after contact.
- If providing gowns or other garments, Responsible Parties must ensure they are clean and laundered between uses.
- Responsible Parties may implement the following practices to limit the sharing of materials:
 - Place donation plates/boxes in central location with proper distancing protocols in place;
 - Remove religious texts from pews or benches, and encourage congregation to bring their own;

- If choir/musical ensemble meets enhanced distancing measures, encourage members to launder their own gowns at home, and bring their own instruments, where possible;
- Adapt certain religious practices that traditionally require close or proximate contact in order to minimize contact between individuals; and/or
- Empty fonts or other shared water-related service or ceremonial activities.
- Responsible Parties must train employees on how to adequately don, doff, clean (as applicable), and discard PPE, including but not limited to, appropriate face coverings.

B. Hygiene, Cleaning, and Disinfection

- Responsible Parties must ensure adherence to hygiene, cleaning and disinfection requirements as advised by the CDC and DOH, including "Guidance for Organizing Large Events and Gatherings," "Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection of Public and Private Facilities for COVID-19," and the "STOP THE SPREAD" poster, as applicable. Responsible Parties must maintain logs that include the date, time, and scope of cleaning and disinfection.
- Responsible Parties must provide and maintain hand hygiene stations on site, as follows:
 - For handwashing: soap, running warm water, and disposable paper towels.
 - For sanitizer: an alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol for areas where handwashing facilities may not be available or practical.
 - Hand sanitizer must be placed throughout the location for use by all attending or working. It should be placed in convenient locations such as points of entrance/exit.
- Responsible Parties should place signage near hand sanitizer stations indicating that visibly soiled hands should be washed with soap and water; hand sanitizer is not effective on visibly soiled hands.
- Responsible Parties should place receptacles around the facility for disposal of soiled items, including PPE.
- Responsible Parties must provide appropriate cleaning and disinfection supplies for shared and frequently touched surfaces and encourage participants to use these supplies, following manufacturers' instructions, before and after use of these surfaces, followed by hand hygiene.
- Responsible Parties must conduct regular cleaning and disinfection of the location or facility and more frequent cleaning and disinfection for high risk areas used by many individuals and for frequently touched surfaces. Cleaning and disinfection must be rigorous and ongoing and must occur at least after each service. Please refer to DOH's "Interim Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection of Public and Private Facilities for COVID-19" for detailed instructions on how to clean and disinfect facilities.
 - Responsible Parties must ensure regular cleaning and disinfection of restrooms. Restrooms should be cleaned and disinfected more often depending on frequency of use.

- Responsible Parties must ensure distancing rules are adhered to by reducing restroom capacity where feasible and applicable.
- Responsible Parties must ensure that shared objects are regularly disinfected using registered disinfectants, including at least between services. Refer to the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) [list of products](#) registered in New York State and identified by the EPA as effective against COVID-19.
- If cleaning or disinfection products or the act of cleaning and disinfection causes safety hazards or degrades the material (e.g. religious artifact), Responsible Parties must put in place hand hygiene stations between use and/or supply disposable gloves and/or limitations on the number of individuals touching such material.
- Responsible Parties must provide for the cleaning and disinfection of exposed areas in the event of a positive case of COVID-19, with such cleaning and disinfection to include, at a minimum, all heavy transit areas and high-touch surfaces (e.g. pews, religious texts, collection plates, railings, doors and other objects).
- CDC guidelines on [“Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility”](#) if someone is suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 are as follows:
 - Close off areas used by the person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19.
 - Responsible Parties do not necessarily need to close operations, if they can close off the affected areas.
 - Open outside doors and windows to increase air circulation in the area.
 - Wait 24 hours before you clean or disinfect. If 24 hours is not feasible, wait as long as possible.
 - Clean and disinfect all areas used by the person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19, such as offices, bathrooms, common areas, and shared equipment.
 - Once the area has been appropriately disinfected, it can be opened for use.
 - Anyone without close or proximate contact with the person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 can return to the area immediately after disinfection.
 - Refer to DOH’s [“Interim Guidance for Public and Private Employees Returning to Work Following COVID-19 Infection or Exposure”](#) for information on “close or proximate” contacts.
 - If more than seven days have passed since the person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 visited or used the facility, additional cleaning and disinfection is not necessary, but routine cleaning and disinfection should continue.
- For funeral related services, Responsible Parties must prohibit touching, hugging, or kissing the body of a deceased person who had confirmed or suspected COVID-19 per CDC guidance, [“Funeral Guidance for Individuals and Families.”](#)

- Responsible Parties must prohibit shared food and beverages (e.g. self-serve meals and beverages).

C. Communications Plan

- Responsible Parties must affirm that they have reviewed and understand the state-issued industry guidelines, and that they will implement them.
- Responsible Parties should develop a communications plan for employees, volunteers, or congregants, that includes applicable instructions, training, signage, and a consistent means to provide staff members with information. Responsible Parties may consider developing webpages, text and email groups, and social media.

III. PROCESSES

A. Screening and Testing

- Responsible Parties must implement health screening for employees, volunteers and congregants/attendees. Health screenings may be performed via signage, at point of admission, by e-mail/website, by telephone, or by electronic survey before individuals enter the establishment.
 - Screening practices may be performed via signage or remotely (e.g. by telephone or electronic survey), before the person arrives to the building, to the extent possible; or may be performed on site.
 - Screening should be coordinated to prevent person from intermingling in close or proximate contact with each other prior to completion of the screening.
- At a minimum, screening must be completed using a questionnaire or signage that determines whether the person has:
 - COVID-19 Symptoms: Is currently experiencing, or has recently (within the past 48 hours) experienced, any symptoms of COVID-19;
 - CDC advises that COVID-19 symptoms may include fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea; however, a few of these symptoms may occur with pre-existing medical conditions, such as allergies or migraines, that have been diagnosed by a health care practitioner. In those cases, individuals should only answer "yes" if symptoms are new or worsening.
 - Refer to CDC guidance on "[Symptoms of Coronavirus](#)" for the most up to date information on symptoms associated with COVID-19. COVID-19 Contacts: Has had close contact (or proximate contact as determined by health authorities) in the past 10 days with any person confirmed by diagnostic test, or suspected based on symptoms, to have COVID-19;
 - DOH advises that close contact is being within six feet of an individual for 10 minutes or more within a 24-hour period, starting from 2 days before their symptoms developed or if

asymptomatic, 2 days before they were tested. (Close contact does not include individuals who work in a health care setting wearing appropriate, required PPE.)

- This exclusion shall not apply for individuals who (1) have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 with an FDA or DOH authorized COVID-19 vaccine – defined as 14 days after completion of the vaccine series or (2) fully recovered from a lab-confirmed COVID-19 case within the past 3 months. (In lieu of quarantine following close contact, such individuals will need to monitor for COVID-19 symptoms for 14 days following an exposure.)
- COVID-19 Positive Test: Has tested positive for COVID-19 through a diagnostic test in the past 10 days.
- Responsible Parties must require a person to immediately disclose if and when their responses to any of the aforementioned questions changes, such as if they begin to experience symptoms, including during or outside of work hours.
- In addition to the screening questionnaire, temperature checks of employees may also be conducted per U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or DOH guidelines. Responsible Parties are prohibited from keeping records of individuals' health data (e.g. the specific temperature data of an individual), but are permitted to maintain records that confirm individuals were screened and the result of such screening (e.g., pass/fail, cleared/not cleared).
 - Temperature checks are optional and not required for activities and operations conducted pursuant to this guidance.
- Responsible Parties must ensure that any personnel performing screening activities, including temperature checks, are appropriately protected from exposure to potentially infectious employees or visitors entering the site. Personnel performing screening activities must be trained by individuals who are familiar with CDC, DOH, and OSHA protocols.
- Screeners must be provided and use PPE, including at a minimum, a face mask, and may include gloves, a gown, and/or a face shield.
- An individual who screens positive for COVID-19 symptoms must not be allowed to enter the gathering place and must be sent home with instructions to contact their healthcare provider for assessment and testing.
 - Responsible Parties should provide such individuals with information on healthcare and testing resources.
 - Responsible Parties must immediately notify the state and local health department about the case if test results are positive for COVID-19 and they are so informed by the affected person or persons.
- Responsible Parties should refer to DOH's "Interim Guidance for Public and Private Employees Returning to Work Following COVID-19 Infection or Exposure" regarding protocols and policies for employees seeking to return to work after a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 or after the employee had close or proximate contact with a person with COVID-19.

- Responsible Parties must designate a central point of contact, which may vary by activity, location, shift or day, responsible for receiving and attesting to having reviewed all questionnaires, with such contact also identified as the party for individuals to inform if they later are experiencing COVID-19-related symptoms, as noted on the questionnaire.
- Responsible Parties must designate a site safety monitor whose responsibilities include continuous compliance with all aspects of the site safety plan.
- To the extent possible, Responsible Parties should maintain a log of every person, including employees and visitors, who may have close or proximate contact with other individuals at the gathering site or area; excluding deliveries that are performed with appropriate PPE or through contactless means. The log should contain contact information, such that all contacts may be identified, traced and notified in the event an employee, volunteer, or attendee is diagnosed with COVID-19. Responsible Parties must cooperate with state and local health department contact tracing efforts. The log is not required to maintain a list of attendees.
- Responsible Parties cannot mandate that attendees complete a health screen or provide contact information but may encourage attendees to do so. Responsible Parties may provide an option for attendees to provide contact information so they can be logged and contacted for contact tracing, if necessary.

B. Tracing and Tracking

- Responsible Parties must notify the state and local health department immediately upon being informed of any positive COVID-19 test result by an employee or faith leader at their site.
- In the case of an employee or faith leader testing positive, the Responsible Parties must cooperate with the state and local health department to trace all contacts in the workplace and notify the state and local health department of all employees and visitors who entered the site dating back to 48 hours before the employee began experiencing COVID-19 symptoms or tested positive, whichever is earlier, but maintain confidentiality as required by federal and state law and regulations.
- State and local health departments will implement monitoring and movement restrictions of infected or exposed persons including home isolation or quarantine.
- Individuals who are alerted that they have come into close or proximate contact with a person with COVID-19, and have been alerted via tracing, tracking or other mechanism, are required to self-report to their employer at the time of alert and shall follow the protocol referenced above.

IV. OPERATOR PLANS

Responsible Parties must conspicuously post completed safety plans on site. The State has made available a safety plan template to guide in developing plans to protect against the spread of COVID-19, and such plans are adaptable for faith-based institutions to use.

Additional safety information, guidelines, and resources are available at:

New York State Department of Health Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Website
<https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Coronavirus (COVID-19) Website
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

Occupational Safety and Health Administration COVID-19 Website
<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/>

At the link below, affirm that you have read and understand your obligation to operate in accordance with this guidance:

<https://forms.ny.gov/s3/ny-forward-affirmation>