

Frequently Asked Questions Related COVID-19

General Questions

What is KSRE's current COVID-19 protocol?

Please see messages from the Director for Extension that have been posted on the [COVID-19 Resource](#) site.

Continuity of Operations

What do we do if the county commissioners closes the courthouse/county offices?

The extension office should close. Operations can continue to the extent possible through electronic means. If possible, phones should be forwarded.

Can an employee work at a closed location?

Social distancing and isolation should be practiced as much as possible. Staff should communicate to ensure that only one person is in the office at any one time.

Can the extension office close if the county commission does not close other county buildings?

If the county commission has not closed other county offices, the extension office should remain open. Staff should take all possible precautions for social distancing.

Can a district office that is not located in a county building close?

Any decision to close district offices not located in county facilities should be made by the district governing body.

If the local office is closed, what type of leave should we use?

If telecommuting is not an option, we recommend boards grant administrative leave to local extension council employees. When administrative leave is given, employees are paid as they would under normal circumstances.

What options do I have if I am concerned about reporting to work due to COVID-19?

If you have a medical condition impacting your ability to report to work, contact your supervisor to follow approved leave procedures including the use of sick leave or other leave available. If extended leave is needed for FMLA, follow the normal KSRE procedure. If an employee needs to use FMLA, email Mary Gatza at marygatza@ksu.edu for information and instructions.

I need to stay home because my child's school is closed. What type of leave should I use?

Vacation leave or leave without pay should be used.

Are there alternatives to using leave?

With the approval of the local unit director and the board, staff may request to telecommute from home or an alternate location. Regional Directors should be involved in the approval process for agents. The Local Unit Director should be involved in the approval process for program assistants and office professionals. Board members should be notified of all request and approvals.

Will local unit office professionals and program assistants still get paid if the local office closes?

The local extension board should make that decision. KSRE administration strongly encourages local boards to provide telecommuting options and consider administrative leave for any local staff who cannot telecommute.

Are there specific protocols we should use when closing our office?

First, remember that although the office is closed, agents are expected to continue working as best as the situation allows.

Best practices include:

- If possible, forward phones to someone's cell phone so that constituents can still get in touch by phone.
- If it is not possible to forward phones, leave a voice recording. An example would be — *"You have reached the XXXX office of K-State Research and Extension. Due to the COVID-19 situation, our physical office location is closed, but we are still available to serve you. Staff email addresses and other helpful resources can be found on our website — www.localunit.com. You can also reach XXX by cell phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX."*
- Unless an agent is taking annual leave or sick leave, the use of out of office memos is discouraged, as email should be returned as usual in a timely manner.
- Use media releases and social media to let the public know that the extension office is still available to assist them. It is important to communicate that our programming will continue.

Telecommuting

Am I required to have a dedicated office for telecommuting?

Employees can work from any approved alternative work site that allows them to fully perform the duties of their position.

What considerations are there for telecommuting?

- Any confidential files should remain in the office.
- All work of a sensitive nature should be done on a secure network.
- Necessary files should be backed up on a thumb drive or transferred to One Drive.
- Email and phone messages should be checked regularly.
- Document work done and time.

What if the responsibilities of my position cannot be performed outside the office environment?

It is recommended that local boards authorize the use of administrative leave for office professionals and program assistants who cannot telecommute.

My job functions can be accomplished by telecommuting, but I do not have a computer and/or internet at home.

Extension boards should consider authorizing the use of local unit computers from home. Cellular phones can be used as mobile hot spots, or MiFi devices could be obtained. It is appropriate for the local unit to provide a cellular stipend for employees.

What is a continuity of operations plan?

All local offices should consider their essential functions and how they can be carried out if a long-term office closure is necessary. An example from Reno County is available on the [COVID-19 Resource](#) site.

An agent from our office is a member of the local emergency planning team. Are we allowed to continue this type of work?

This type of work would be exempted from the telecommuting protocol, but staff should continue to practice social distancing as much as possible.

Communicating with Local Unit Boards and Volunteers

What needs to be communicated to my board?

KSRE communications regarding COVID-19 should be shared. The board should be consulted on all decisions affecting local office operations including office closures, telecommuting and continuity of operations plans.

How should we plan for meeting local unit financial obligations?

Invoices should be processed as usual. The treasurer has the authority and responsibility under Kansas Extension Statute to pay the bills and authorize EFTs and direct deposits. [See further explanation](#). The chair and secretary's signatures can be added by facsimile by following the [facsimile signature policy](#). Local extension units have the option and are encouraged to scan and email images of the financial statement and supporting documents to the KSRE Business office. This will be helpful in the review of local unit financial operations under situations where telecommuting by the KSRE Business office may be required.

Can our extension board meet by phone or Zoom?

Yes, as long as all board members are given an opportunity to participate. Also, as per Kansas Open Meetings Law requirements, if any member of the media, county commission or member of the public has requested notice of meetings, they must be notified and given the opportunity to be included in the

meeting. Boards are not required to allow them to participate in discussion, but they can observe (listen).

What guidance should be given to local 4-H clubs or other affiliated groups?

Follow guidance from Gregg's latest message (March 14, 2020) that all local, district, regional and state 4-H activities conducted by employees and volunteers are to be cancelled, postponed, or conducted via distance technology until April 4.

How should we communicate to our volunteers and the public about the cancellation of ongoing extension programs?

An example communication:

Extension Friends,

In alignment with K-State Research and Extension recommendations, local and district programs, meetings, events, and activities regardless of group size cannot meet face-to-face between now and April 4, 2020. This includes but is not limited to 4-H club meetings, council meetings, and committee correspondence. This also includes project-based learning, shows, events, and activities directed toward 4-H youth development and other extension audiences.

Our team is committed to help you determine how to effectively conduct business through technology-based platforms or to reschedule programs to future dates. Please do not hesitate to contact our team if you have questions.

We appreciate your help with protecting the health, wellness and safety of our communities and families. I will provide updates as recommendations change. Please stay informed at the (LOCAL UNIT) website at (WEBSITE)

Thanks,
(LOCAL UNIT DIRECTOR &/or Board Chair)

Programming

Are there suggestions for how to handle plant identifications, soil tests and/or field, lawn or garden visits?

These situations should be handled from a distance as much as possible. Consider a drop box for items that need to be brought to the extension office. For field, lawn and garden visits suggest that the producer/homeowner flag the area of concern so the agent can stop by to see the issue. Respond to these types of questions via email, phone or video conference. Interactions with the people we serve should be done in a non-face-to-face manner.

Can employees ride in the same vehicle?

If the size of the vehicle allows for proper social distancing (6 feet) rides can be shared. Otherwise, separate vehicles should be used.

Will 4-H camps and Discovery Days go on as expected?

As of 3/19/2020, Discovery Days and 4-H camping at Rock Springs are planned to be held as planned. Any changes in these plans will be communicated to the system.

What about county fairs, plot tours and other summer events?

We have no way of knowing how long the COVID-19 situation will last. Local units are advised to continue with county fair planning, but also think through contingency plans. Educational learning opportunities should continue during this period. Innovation and creativity will be paramount to success.

Hiring Freeze

How does the KSU hiring freeze affect our open agent positions?

KSU administration enacted a hiring freeze effective March 18. If an offer was made and accepted for an agent position prior to March 18, they can be onboarded as usual. All other positions will be frozen, no matter what state of the hiring process they are in. Local units should stop actively advertising for open agent positions. Grant funded positions **may** be exempt from the freeze.

Can we still hire local unit office professionals and program assistants?

The local extension board should make that decision. The university will not freeze these positions.

University Resources

How can I combat anxiety associated with COVID-19?

We understand that members of the KSRE community may be experiencing heightened levels of anxiety during this time. KSU Human Capital Services encourages employees who feel anxious or worried about friends and family because of COVID-19 to contact our Employee Assistance Plan, or EAP, who is available to help. THE EAP is available 24/7 at 888-275-1205, press option 1.