Resolution No.: 47/15
Special Meeting No.: 47/04
Date: 14 December 2021

Resolution on “Response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in New York”

The 47th Staff Council,

Recalling its resolution 47/06, adopted on 19 August 2021 and resolution 47/10, adopted on 9 September 2021;

Noting with great concern that there has been a significant increase in the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 and deaths in the United States since 2 August 2021, based on data from the World Health Organization¹;

Noting with great concern also that there has been a significant increase of confirmed COVID-19 cases, deaths and hospitalization in the states of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut since 1 August 2021, including a high level of community transmission in the counties of New York (Manhattan), Bronx, Kings (Brooklyn), Queens, and Richmond (Staten Island), based on data from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as of 7 December 2021²;

Emphasizing that the safety and health of all United Nations Secretariat personnel should and must remain a paramount consideration for the determination of any work-related arrangements by the Organization;

Strongly emphasizing that under Staff Regulation 1.2.(c), “the Secretary-General shall seek to ensure, having regard to the circumstances, that all necessary safety and security arrangements are made for staff carrying out the responsibilities entrusted to them”;

Noting the updated version of the human resources policy guidance “Transition from Phase 2 to Next Normal – Gradual return to the workplace at United Nations Headquarters, New York” circulated via broadcast on 9 November 2021, which places, inter alia, “the safety and health of United Nations personnel/delegates as the number one priority”³;

Noting with regret that the above-mentioned updated version of the human resources policy guidance was issued without any consultations with the United Nations Staff Union;

Noting also the existing partial mandatory vaccination requirement for some “UN personnel performing certain tasks and in certain occupational groups at UNHQ whose functions do not

¹ See https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us.
³ Para. 3 a).
allow sufficient management of exposure” under the above-mentioned human resources policy guidance4;

Noting with regret that most individuals are not required to provide any proof of vaccination for COVID-19 or any recent negative COVID-19 test to access buildings owned or rented by the United Nations, a situation that substantially increases the possibility of COVID-19 outbreaks in those facilities;

Noting the results of a survey conducted by the United Nations Staff Union from 28 October to 4 November 2021 in which 82 per cent of respondents believed that the Organization should extend the vaccination mandate to all personnel in New York; 79 per cent believed that only exemptions on medical grounds should be granted; 73 per cent believed that only individuals who are able to produce evidence of vaccination should be granted access to buildings owned or rented by the United Nations in New York; and 56 per cent supported testing within the prior 72 hours for unvaccinated individuals to access such buildings5;

Noting that promotion of the vaccine and being vaccinated, save for medical exceptions, and global vaccination initiatives against other diseases more broadly, are at the core of United Nations ideals, values and achievements, along with the fight against climate change or racism, among others;

Noting the Secretary-General’s message of 29 October 2021 announcing his decision to discontinue the prior exception allowing staff to telecommute for up to four days per week, and the resulting increase in office space occupancy in building owned or rented by the United Nations in New York;

Concerned by reports of staff suffering the effects of “long COVID”;

Underlining that acceptable risk thresholds of exposure to COVID-19 vary from individual to individual and for the same individual at different times, based on their own underlying vulnerabilities or those of their relatives, prior experience of COVID-19, upcoming professional or personal commitments, and other factors; and that perceptions of risk are inherently personal, subjective and should not be subjected to public scrutiny in the workplace;

Reiterating the Staff Union’s longstanding opposition to hotdesking and open flexible workspaces at the United Nations Secretariat as a cost-saving measure that has reduced workplace satisfaction, increased stress levels and mental health challenges of staff, impeded focused concentration, severely limited tasks that can be performed at the desk, such as phone calls, and has now demonstrated its facilitation of health risks for staff in the context of an airborne pandemic disease;

Noting with concern the irregularities reported by staff in the design and application of contact tracing protocols, including: selective notification to some staff and not others on a floor where a case is identified; notification through managers and not by medical personnel directly to each staff member; lack of follow-up after the initial notification; lack of follow-up on cleaning and disinfection after a case is identified; inconsistent advice that exposed staff continue to come in to work between the time they are notified of a potential exposure and the day they are able to be tested; lack of clarity on whether colleagues who were in contact with a COVID case should in turn alert other people in United Nations circles of their potential exposure;

4 Para. 6a.
5 The survey was sent to approximately 6,500 staff with 2,503 responses received, with a response rate of approximately 38.5 per cent.
Recalling paragraph 2 of ST/SGB/2009/4, of 18 December 2009, on “Procedures for the promulgation of administrative issuances” whereby “rules, policies or procedures intended for general application may only be established by duly promulgated Secretary-General’s bulletins and administrative instructions”;

Regretting that, 21 months into the pandemic, the Organization has not kept staff regularly and comprehensively informed of developments regarding COVID-19, including the sharing of relevant data, and acknowledging the 46th Staff Council’s exceptional efforts to keep staff informed during the height of the pandemic;

Emphasizing that transparency and access to information are essential in fostering confidence among staff, as well as guaranteeing their support and adherence to the Organization’s measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic;

The Staff Council hereby,

1. Recommends that the existing vaccination mandate in the New York duty station be extended to all personnel and contractors by 1 January 2022, with exemptions strictly limited to certified medical grounds;

2. Requests that access to buildings owned or rented by the United Nations in New York be strictly limited during the COVID-19 pandemic to persons who present a valid proof of COVID-19 vaccination in accordance with the above-mentioned human resources policy guidance;

3. Requests also that the Organization establish a credible, consistent and standardized capacity for vaccine verification;

4. Calls on the Secretary-General to put in place and strictly enforce a mask mandate for all individuals in all indoor spaces owned or rented by the United Nations in line with the Host Country mandate in the state of New York, and further requests that failure to comply with such policy be considered as an act of misconduct for personnel or contractors of the United Nations;

5. Further requests that with immediate effect, only persons who are vaccinated, save for medical exceptions, be offered a contract to work on-site with the United Nations in any capacity, or do business with the United Nations;

6. Additionally requests that until paragraph 2 above is complied with, reasonable accommodation be made for staff who are unwilling to enter such buildings due to low risk tolerance level (e.g., because they live with vulnerable individuals or are soon travelling), while noting that any case of a staff member apparently infected by the virus in the buildings, as well any transmission of such virus to their dependents, could present an administrative, financial, reputational or moral liability for the Organization;

7. Additionally requests that, as a further measure to decrease risk, rapid antigen self-test kits be made available to staff, with staff encouraged to use them before entering the buildings if they perceive a risk that they may have become infected; and that until this is implemented, that the Organization ensure that local purchase of rapid self-test kits shall be reimbursed under existing medical plans;
8. Requests the Organization to ensure that alcohol-based hand sanitizer dispensers be installed and regularly replenished on each floor of buildings owned or rented by the United Nations;

9. Additionally requests that adequate human and financial resources be immediately made available for the strict implementation of the above-mentioned requirements, including through the use of contractors as needed;

10. Requests that the Administration share with the Staff Union copies of any study, assessment or equivalent on air quality in buildings owned or rented by the United Nations in New York, including possible risks of COVID-19 infections notably in open-space flexible, hot-desking working areas; and that devices measuring the level of carbon dioxide be installed and regularly monitored in all such buildings;

11. Recommends that prompt adjustments be made to existing working arrangements, including allowing personnel to telework up to five days per week should there be a substantive increase in the transmission rate of COVID-19 cases in the City of New York, or evidence of transmission within the workplace;

12. Calls for occupancy limits to be established for each floor, along with flexible online mapping and scheduling tools that provide for appropriate social distancing and the maximum degree of distancing in open flexible workspaces;

13. Also calls for a fundamental rethink of the open flexible workspace scheme under the New Normal, in a participatory manner and in consultation with staff and their representatives and, in the interim, to urgently install plexiglass or similar protection devices between and around desks;

14. Calls on the Division of Healthcare Management and Occupational Safety and Health (DHMOSH) to share weekly figures on reported cases of COVID-19 in the workplace;

15. Calls also on DHMOSH to strengthen its contact tracing protocols to include, at a minimum, individual notification by medical personnel directly (not through the mediation of managers) to all staff present on a floor where a case is identified; to make those protocols public to all staff and to ensure strict adherence;

16. Forcefully objects to the instruction issued to potentially exposed staff to continue to come to work in the window period; and recalls the critical importance of strictly enforcing contact tracing protocols;

17. Calls for any comment belittling or minimizing or otherwise not fully respecting a staff member’s levels of concern and caution, however higher than the average levels of concern and caution, whether by managers or other colleagues, to be considered a form of discrimination;

18. Decides to resume the publication of regular information updates on the COVID-19 pandemic for staff;

19. Decides also to establish a support group for staff affected by long COVID;

20. Reminds the Administration, as mentioned in paragraph 11 of Staff Council resolution 47/10, dated 9 September 2021, of the need to continuously engage and consult staff associations before the promulgation of any policy, including – but not limited to – any future
policy guidance from the Office of Human Resources on COVID-19, as per staff regulation 8.1 in ST/SGB/2018/1/Rev.1;

21. *Instructs* the Leadership to share this resolution with the members of the Occupational Safety and Health Committee at Headquarters, as well as with the Chef de Cabinet, the Under-Secretaries-Generals of the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance; the Department of Operational Support; the Department for Safety and Security, as well as the Assistant-Secretary-General of the Office of Human Resources and all heads of offices/departments represented in the Staff Council; and

22. *Further instructs* the Leadership to circulate this resolution via an email broadcast to all members of the United Nations Staff Union.

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Adopted: YES

For: 14

Against: 1

Abstention: 2