

April 6, 2020

# **Overcoming Challenges amid COVID-19**

with a focus on Civil Service Personnel Management in the Republic of Korea



Ministry of Personnel  
Management

# COVID-19 Situation and Countermeasures

## 1. COVID-19 Situation in Korea

After the first confirmed case of the coronavirus in the country on January 20, 2020, the Republic of Korea began to see a surge in late February. At the peak of the spread of the virus, the Korean government elevated the COVID-19 alert level to the highest of 'serious (red)' on February 23 while making endeavors to counteract the virus. Nevertheless, the figure for new cases per day hit the record high of 909 on February 29. In the meantime, the City of Sejong, an administrative capital, also had the first state public official in the city confirmed positive with COVID-19. Furthermore, daily operations of one ministry were clogged by group infection of its staff. Inter-ministry meetings and business trips also led to growing concerns over the potential spread of the virus within the civil service community.

While effectively responding to COVID-19 and stabilizing the livelihood of the public, preventing the spread among public officials to maintain continuity of operations has become a key element of civil service personnel management. Accordingly, the Ministry of Personnel Management (MPM), in charge of public personnel management within the government, is now promoting a variety of public human resources management policies aimed at preventing the spread of the infection within the public service community.

## 2. Countermeasures against COVID-19

In order to operate an emergency response system aimed at supporting the government-wide efforts to tackle COVID-19, the Ministry, on March 5, established its own taskforce that is capable of swiftly responding to emergency circumstances. The MPM COVID-19 Emergency Response Headquarters, headed by the Minister, consists of five sections, including general coordination, recruitment, service code, human resources development and occupational accident compensation. With the establishment of the HQ, a 24-hour response system has been set up to tackle COVID-19 with various measures and the status of operations is reviewed regularly twice a week.



Minister Hwang Seo-chong chairs a video conference on responding to COVID-19

Adjusting to changes in the COVID-19 situation, nine sets of guidelines and guidance have been issued and implemented. With the first one on January 28, the MPM enforced the Guidelines for Civil Service Management Code which set out basic measures for the prevention of the spread of the infection and for working from home. After the seventh and the latest version of the Guidelines on March 10, the Ministry also enforced the Guidelines for Implementing Flexible Work Arrangements on March 12, outlining expanded telework and social distancing. The Special Guidelines for Civil Service Management Code aimed at stronger social distancing were also established and enforced on March 22.

From February and onwards, the MPM also streamlined recruitment of specialists and experts, including epidemiological investigators and medical personnel, to promptly meet the growing demands. With the first one on January 29, the Ministry also issued to concerned institutes four sets of the Guidelines for Education and Training Operations. Since February 2020, civil servants performing COVID-19-related work have had more and easier access to telephone counseling provided by psychological counseling centers run by the MPM across the country. In addition, priority has been given to the decision-making process for COVID-19-related occupational accident claims.

## Highlights of Countermeasures against COVID-19

### 1. Enhanced Service Management Code to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19

Adjusting to changes in the COVID-19 situation, tailored guidelines and guidance have been implemented to counter the influx and spread of COVID-19 within the public service community and to enhance the continuity of operations of the administrative system.

#### Guidance in connection with confirmed, or suspected and quarantined cases

Following concerned rules and regulations, a member of the civil service confirmed positive with COVID-19 is quarantined and cured until full recovery and **sick leave** is granted during the quarantine and treatment. Self-quarantined patients should comply with the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) Guideline.

A public official suspected and quarantined receives '**official leave**' until the last day of the quarantine. A civil servant whose family member has been confirmed with COVID-19 also receives **official leave** until the last day of the quarantine. If a family member is being quarantined, **official leave** is granted for 14 days from the day quarantine was decided. If the head of an administrative agency recognizes a possibility of infection at work, the concerned official, who shows symptoms of fever or respiratory illness, should stay at home and either **telework** or receive **official leave**.

Cases	Types of Leave
A Public Official Confirmed with COVID-19	<b>Sick leave</b> during quarantine and treatment until full recovery
A Public Official Suspected and Quarantine	<b>Official leave</b> until the last day of quarantine
A Public Official with a Confirmed Family Member	<b>Official leave</b> until the last day of quarantine
A Public Official with a Suspected and Quarantined Family Member	<b>Official leave</b> from the day quarantine was decided

### Guidance in connection with public officials who have recently traveled overseas

Even if asymptomatic, a public official, who recently visited a country or region the Central Accident Investigation Headquarters under the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) has advised to refrain from traveling to, should stay at home for 14 days from the day of arrival in Korea, and either **work from home** or receive **official leave**. If a public official who works at a mass facility or performs caregiving work visited the aforementioned country or region, he or she should stay at home for 14 days from the day of return, and either **telework** or receive **official leave**.

### Guidance in connection with public officials who are either expectant mothers or parents

As part of support for pregnant public officials at work, working from home is first considered in order to protect them from contracting the virus. An expectant mother whose assignment and work cannot be delivered at home may also use pregnancy check-up leave, which is granted for a maximum of 10 days during pregnancy. Public officials who are to take care of their children during the day due to temporary closure or delayed commencement of daycare facilities and schools are able to work from home or use child care leave or annual leave. If the number of annual leave days is not enough, they may receive official leave.

### Guidance in connection with flexible work arrangements

It is now compulsory for public officials to telework at home or another approved location (i.e. a Smart Work Center<sup>1</sup>) on a rotating basis. Aimed at minimizing the population density in the office, each ministerial division has a specific proportion (ex. 1/3) of its staff assigned to telework. The proportion is decided by the head of each organization, ensuring that the delivery of COVID-19-related work and civil service is not disrupted due to lack of staff on duty. Avoiding uneven distribution of roles and responsibilities, public officials also work rotational shifts.

Those in leadership positions, including directors and directors-general, are designated as “essential members” and work as per normal in the office. At the end of

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<sup>1</sup> A telework facility which allows long-distance commuters (public officials) to work closer from home

the day, a teleworker reports the work performed during the day and the plan for the next day to the division head who will then give a feedback and appropriate work direction.

Ensuring no disruption to work, a teleworker is to establish an appropriate working environment at home by setting up call forwarding on his/her mobile phone and the Government Virtual Private Network (GVPN) on a personal computer. A teleworker without a personal computer at home is provided with an organization-owned laptop.

Priority is also given to long-distance commuters to be considered for telework. In addition, flex work is used by having different start and end time of commuting and lunch hours in an effort to minimize face-to-face contacts.

### **Guidance in connection with social distancing**

Social distancing is practiced while performing work. In principle, meetings are replaced with video conferencing or delivered in writing. Reports are also made in writing. To minimize face-to-face contacts, business consultation is done via other means of communication, such as telephone, email, memorandum and online messenger. On unavoidable occasions of face-to-face reporting, a distance of about two meters is maintained. When having a meeting with a visitor, a designated area, which has hand sanitizer in place and is regularly disinfected, is used as the meeting venue. Commonly-used areas, such as offices and meeting rooms, are regularly ventilated. Non-essential social gatherings, travels and dining-outs are to be postponed or cancelled.

### **Guidance in connection with health and safety management**

Health and safety management at work has also been enhanced. Each division has a designated Health and Safety Manager who conducts a check-up and monitor fever or respiratory symptoms. Reporting to the division head is compulsory. A public official, even with small symptoms, should not come to work and stay at home. If necessary, he/she will be tested by the health authorities. In the meantime, the division head conducts monitoring of teleworkers' health and safety.

## **Guidance in connection with minimizing international and domestic business trips**

Domestic business trips are postponed or cancelled after considering the destination, urgency and the COVID-19 situation. Under unavoidable circumstances, the number of persons going on the trip is minimized. International business trips are approved after looking into the trip's urgency and the COVID-19 situation in the destination. If unavoidable, the number is kept to the minimum and persons going on the trip are informed of the guidelines from the Central Discharge Countermeasures Headquarters under the MOHW. Preventive measures and actions are communicated in advance and returnees are under seamless management and monitoring after the trip.

## **2. Streamlined Recruitment Process and Postponement of Public Service Examinations**

### **Support for Prompt Hiring of Epidemiological Investigator**

The MPM streamlined recruitment of specialists and experts, including epidemiological investigators and medical personnel, responding to COVID-19 at the frontline. The process was simplified with a shorter notice period and application submission period as well as a combined screening process.

### **Recruitment via video interviews**

Another effort to minimize face-to-face contacts to prevent infection is to conduct video interviews for all open positions within the government until the COVID-19 alert level at 'serious' is lowered and eventually lifted. In principle, candidates are video-interviewed at home, but also in a separate area provided by the Central Selection Examination Committee under exceptional circumstances, including unavoidable technical issues.



### Postponement of public service examinations

With the elevation of the COVID-19 alert level to the highest, the Ministry provisionally postponed the 5th and 9th grade public service written examinations (nationwide) initially scheduled for February and March, respectively. This was part of the health and safety measures for test-takers and an effort to prevent the spread of the virus.

Type of Exams	Changes in Dates	No. of Applicants	Note
5th Grade / Foreign Service Officer Candidates	Feb. 29 → after April	12,595	Daegu <sup>2</sup> : 577 applicants (4.6%)
9th Grade	Mar. 28 → after May	185,203	Daegu: 16,608 applicants (9%)

### 3. Expanded online education and training and enhanced management of secondees

Sets of the Guidelines for Education and Training Operations were issued to 38 institutes with information on the postponement of scheduled courses and replacement of on-going programs with e-learning and self-driven learning. The National Human Resources Development Institute (NHI) under the MPM now offers

<sup>2</sup> The most affected Korean city by COVID-19



real-time online training, utilizing the video conferencing system. In principle, training precedes appointment. However, 15 anti-epidemic and disinfection staff were first appointed by the KCDC in advance of training, as it was necessary to have them swiftly sent to the frontline. The working environment for public officials who are currently on overseas training and secondment is under tighter monitoring, and permission has been given to trainees in health-threatening regions to temporarily return home.

#### **4. Better Compensation for On-site Officials and Streamlined Occupational Accident Compensation Process**

February 2020 saw exceptions made to overtime pay limits. When COVID-19 emergency response work is performed, overtime hours are now recognized up to 70 hours per month. Usually, alternative holidays (days in lieu) are to be used within one week from the day of receipt. As for anti-epidemic staff performing emergency work, however, the use period has been extended to six weeks and also the number of days off, from a maximum of five to 30 days.

Telephone counseling provided by the psychological counseling centers across the nation is now more accessible and a special focus is placed on groups and regions with mental fatigue accumulated from performing COVID-19-related work. If necessary or upon request, on-field officials, who may need treatment to prevent post-event psychological trauma, will be provided with counseling and consultation at one of the psychological counseling centers.

Assistance has been offered to public officials injured while performing COVID-19 related work, regarding the occupational accident compensation system and the claims process, and has also facilitated prompt decision-making.

## Next Steps

As of early April, the spread of the pandemic in Korea is said to be showing a downward trend. In accordance with the changes in the COVID-19 situation, the Ministry will establish adjusted policies and measures, and eventually return to normal business operations, still keeping up with business continuity and flexibility. The delayed public service examinations will be conducted with the confirmation of new dates and preparations for venues.

The MPM staff will return from compulsory telework to usual work arrangements. In the mid and long term, issues and challenges related to telework will also be looked into and measures will be devised to innovate and establish ways of delivering the public service. The postponed and replaced training and education programs at home and abroad will also consecutively return to normal. Streamlined decision-making will be in place for public officials injured while performing COVID-19 related work, and policy reviews on special service allowances for anti-epidemic staff are underway.

Detailed policies and measures are also to be rolled out soon while all-out efforts are being made to respond to and eradicate COVID-19. Upon the forthcoming, government-wide transition from 'social distancing' to 'daily prevention', the Ministry of Personnel Management will also issue a new set of the Guidelines for Civil Service Management Code.

## References

Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en>

Korea Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [http://www.cdc.go.kr/cdc\\_eng/](http://www.cdc.go.kr/cdc_eng/)

Ministry of Health and Welfare <http://www.mohw.go.kr/eng>