

“Reopening Cultural Institutions: Security and Operational Priorities”

By Darrell Utt

As Cultural Institutions across the country struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic and closures, the [White House and CDC has issued guidelines](#) for a three-phased approach to “Opening up American Again.” The approach is based on current data, mitigation of resurgence, protection of the most vulnerable, and implementable on a statewide or county-by-county basis at each Governor’s discretion. What do the guidelines mean for our cultural institutions? What are the operational considerations and challenges for cultural institution leadership?

Due to the limitations in Phase One (maximize physical distance and avoid social settings of more than 10 people), cultural Institutions should strongly consider remaining closed and continue operating with mission-essential staff only (i.e., select leadership, security, essential facility maintenance personnel etc.).

While in Phase One, leadership should maximize the time available to begin planning for a scalable opening, potentially in Phase Two, and a full opening in Phase Three. Although this will certainly be a challenging period, it should be viewed optimistically as an opportunity to “get it right” when the doors are opened to employees and guests for the first time post-quarantine. The duty of care requires judiciousness and ensures the institution complies with necessary procedures and restrictions. Consultation with the institution’s legal and insurance advisors is strongly recommended.

To comply with the moderate physical distancing protocols of Phase Two and the limited physical distancing guidelines of Phase Three, here are some security and operational recommendations that may assist during the planning process for your cultural institution.

Start with Your Staff and Employees

The #1 goal should be to protect your staff and look after their health and safety. Follow the [guidelines](#) of all phases for employers from the White House and CDC, which include developing and implementing appropriate policies regarding social distancing, protective equipment, temperature checks, sanitation, disinfection of common and high-traffic areas and business travel.

Leadership may consider requesting their employees to submit a health questionnaire and temperature check before starting their shift. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has stated that temperature checks during this period are valid and appropriate. Gloves, masks and hand sanitizer should be made available. There should also be a consideration for an increase in cleaning and disinfection of common areas and touch-points throughout the workplace. Due to the high demand for these services, this may be a tough logistical issue. How much do you need to do and for how long? These are questions that need to be addressed, planned for and ultimately paid for. As Benjamin Franklin said, “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.”

What if an employee develops COVID-19 indicative symptoms? The current guidance is to not allow symptomatic employees to physically return to work until cleared by a medical provider. This must be planned for and employees must be aware of the process and how this will affect them (i.e., will the Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Employee Paid Leave Rights apply for your employees for paid

sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19?). Is this policy in place?

As one can see, some of these considerations have the potential for legal ramifications. This is why it's *critical* to consult with legal and insurance advisors during the planning process. Preferably, they should be active members and participants of the COVID-19 planning team.

Cultural Institution Infrastructure

Cultural institution operators know their unique environment the best and this is where their expertise will pay huge dividends. In preparation for guests to enter your facility, ask yourself "What are the COVID-19 vulnerable areas that require special attention *before* guests arrive?" These will include queuing lines, entrances and exits, restrooms, elevators, security screening areas, Guest Services (i.e., information desk, coat check, Lost & Found etc.), atriums, ticket counters, gift shops, restaurants, ATMs, doors to galleries, theaters, lobbies, maps and brochures, and many others.

What can your staff do now to prepare? Start identifying all the COVID-19 vulnerable areas (i.e., touchpoints) at your facility and develop a plan for each. Don't forget the "security" infrastructure of your facility (i.e., the physical, technical and operational security measures) utilized to keep the facility safe and secure.

There is a lot of panic and fear right now and the security professionals can have a positive impact on all employees and guests. For public internal doors that open and exit to galleries, you may consider propping those doors open so your guests won't have to manually open them. For the ticket counter, cash-register locations in restaurant, gift and coffee shops, and security officer posts, you may consider installing relatively inexpensive Plexiglas sneeze guards. For elevators, in addition to robust cleaning and disinfection, you may consider stationing a Guest Services employee inside each car equipped with gloves and mask to push the buttons for guests.

Operators should also identify locations in and around the facility to place hand sanitizing standalone stations or individual sanitizing hand wipes dispensers. If utilizing wipes, you may consider increasing trash receptacles. You also may consider eliminating hand-out brochures and maps of your facility and increase signage.

It is extremely important to capitalize on your internet and social media sites as well. Spread a positive message to your guests before they arrive that you are prepared for them and have taken all precautions. Inform potential guests what security and safety measures are in place and how serious your institution is about protecting them. Encourage behavior that makes sense for everyone, such as paying online for tickets or using a credit card instead of exchanging cash, perhaps offering a slight discount to encourage these practices.

Guests

If you protect and treat your guests right, they won't forget. People will most likely talk about this COVID-19 period for the rest of their lives. If they are visiting your institution it means you will be a part of their post-quarantine story and they most certainly will capture these moments via social media. In addition to all the precautions that you've taken with your employees and infrastructure, you may

consider offering your guests masks and gloves when they enter so that once they enter your facility, it will be evident that your institution “planned for success and safety.”

In closing, remember that with every challenge, there is an opportunity. Embrace it. Seize the moment. Control your destiny.

About the Author:

Darrell Utt is the Operational Security Lead of Protective Design and Security in the Washington, D.C. office of Thornton Tomasetti, Inc. He is responsible for planning, coordinating, resourcing and building operational/technical security services across a range of project types. He previously served as the Director of Security and Director of Operations at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. and is a retired U.S. Army Special Forces Operator (Green Beret).