To: Noorjean Hassam, Chief Operating Officer, BC Centre for Disease Control
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Date: October 14, 2020
Subject: Proposal for Alternative Return-to-Work Policy

**Introduction**

On March 17, 2020, the province of British Columbia (BC) declared a public health emergency related to the ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 – especially physical distancing measures requiring individuals to keep two metres distance from one another at all times – have been implemented in workplaces across the province, including at the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC). As one of the primary government agencies responsible for coordinating provincial public health efforts related to COVID-19, the BCCDC must both oblige to COVID-19 measures while ensuring the workflow and outputs are unaffected. In early April, the BCCDC sent all non-frontline staff (those not working in a clinical setting) to work from home. In August, they introduced a restricted return-to-work policy to allow some employees to work from the office when necessary.

**Statement of Problem**

Work-from-home has a number of potential advantages, including offering families more flexibility and requiring less time commuting to and from work. Work-from-home policies have also been some of the most effective interventions to stop the spread of COVID-19 disease, as fewer people must take public transit and otherwise come in close contact with individuals outside of those with whom they live. Nevertheless, as employees working to track and stop the spread of COVID-19 disease, strict work-from-home policies may also impact many employees’ ability to do their work in a timely and efficient way. Current return-to-work policy at the BCCDC requires employees to request office time two weeks in advance of when they plan to come into the office space. Due to this policy, many employees are still not properly set up to work from home and the current return-to-work policy may be too restrictive, affecting employees’ ability to do their work.

**Proposed Solution**

There are several possible alternatives to the current return-to-work policy. Instead of centralizing the return-to-work requests centre-wide, the BCCDC could allow individual teams to decide an arrangement that best suits them. One of the largest issues which precludes the BCCDC from returning employees to the workplace is that the building is already over-capacity. Other solutions to explore would be to rotate workers into the workspace, or to find increased office capacity in a nearby building.

**Scope**

To assess the impact of the BCCDC’s current return-to-work policy and the feasibility of alternate solutions, I plan to explore these five avenues of inquiry:

1. Whose work is being impacted by current return-to-work policies, and what specifics aspects of work must be done from the office?
2. Would increasing office capacity be a feasible and sustainable solution, or a temporary solution for the period of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Would employees be open to choosing rotating days to come into the office, and what barriers would this strategy present?
4. Do smaller teams and their managers have the capacity to decide an arrangement that suits them
5. Are there technical or other solutions that would facilitate work to be done from home more efficiently?

**Methods**

As my primary data source, I plan to use a survey of management and employees at the BC Centre for Disease Control that employs both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component will involve asking employees for values and preferences related to return-to-work policies; collecting data, from their responses, to inform policy. The qualitative component will involve free-form questions about feasibility and capacity to implement different solution options. To protect the identity of participants, no identifying information will be recorded. Secondary data will also be used, including published data and statistics related to mental health impacts and impacts of productivity associated to COVID-19 measures.

**My Qualifications**

As an employee affected by the return-to-work policy implemented at the BCCDC, I am well situated to explore the impacts and potential solutions to the issues that have arisen. I have previously led a number of research projects, including program evaluations and policy analyses, and have experience conducting primary research using highly sensitive and confidential data.

**Conclusion**

A work environment which facilitates essential tasks is necessary; not only for the employees of the BCCDC, but for the employers and employees across the province that depend on the BCCDC’s work in order to maintain a sense of normalcy and productivity in their own lives. Current BCCDC return-to-work policies may not be best suited to offer the flexibility needed to work in the highly stressful context of COVID-19, and other solutions should be explored. This project will allow me to explore the feasibility and desire for such alternative policies. With your approval, I look forward to beginning the research process.