



LENDERS

[Updated] Reverse Mortgage Offices Take Steps to Begin Reopening

By **Chris Clow** | June 10, 2020

The economic impact of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has universally affected the operations of virtually every business in America, with many non-essential operations shuttered for months following the spread of the virus into global pandemic status as people and organizations grappled with ways to continue operating. The reverse mortgage business is no exception, particularly since many of the longstanding elements of interaction between professionals and clients relied on in-person meetings.

While the industry has found ways to adapt during this period – whether through embracing technology or taking advantage of a favorable rate environment – many in the industry are understandably ready to return to work in an office environment. The pandemic, though, is not over, and health authorities continue to recommend additional safety measures despite the fact that stay-at-home orders and closures of non-essential businesses are starting to lift.

Reopening remains 'fluid'

Because there are still a lot of shifting factors in terms of the way certain localities are responding to the continued presence of the coronavirus, some reverse mortgage-centric offices are taking a more measured tact in the way they're approaching the prospect of reopening. Such as the case with Roseville, Calif.-based title and settlement company Allegiant Reverse Services, according to its VP Megan Hafenstein.

"It is definitely a fluid [process] right now," Hafenstein tells RMD in an interview. "We have started bringing some people back based on certain tasks that can only be done physically in the office. Getting people in and training them on our new safety procedures, and making sure that they knew what our protocol is in the office has been a priority to protect everyone's health."

As more restrictions on office-based work continue to ease, ARS employees are advised to let someone in the office know when they plan on returning to work so that the returning employee can be adequately briefed on the safety measures in place. However, when it comes to the idea of bringing everyone back full-time, that is still an endpoint that is very much up in the air, Hafenstein says.

"We do not know the time frame concerning when we'll have everyone fully back in our offices," she says. "Having people work remotely isn't affecting our day-to-day business right now. If we start to feel that it is having an impact on our productivity or our environment, then we'll speed it up. But as of now, we don't have a set date. Everyone is extremely busy right now due to the high volume, the focus has been on supporting our staff and making sure they know to ask for help if they think they need it since we can't physically see them."

Remaining health-conscious, staying prepared

As more and more businesses continue to open across the country, the primary factor that must remain at the forefront of any reopening decision is the health of the people involved. This is according to Rebecca Pacillas, SVP of human resources at American Advisors Group (AAG).

"As we enter post-pandemic life, our number one goal is the health and well-being of our employees," she tells RMD. "We're not concerned with being the first ones back in the gate, instead we will take a phased approach based on the needs of our employees, the business requirements and the guidelines set forth by the CDC."

Also important to the final decisions on top of the broader health concerns are the specific situations of individual employees, Pacillas says. The different circumstances surrounding specific people need to be appropriately weighed in order to make sure that problems don't arise later, she says.

"We have many employees with children at home and we have to make sure that returning to the office doesn't cause hardships," Pacillas says. "In the coming weeks, we'll continue to focus on clear and consistent communication with all our employees and develop policies that will help us transition back while maintaining our productivity and preserving our company culture."

In AAG's case, preparedness is the name of the game when it comes to more fully opening its offices. That served the company well at the onset of the pandemic, and will continue to serve it well as these circumstances continue.

"Being prepared helped us through this situation and we're determined to make sure that AAG is fully equipped before returning to normalcy," she says.

Technology lessens the immediacy of returning to the office

Safety is understandably a primary concern for many, and for Steven Sless, reverse mortgage division manager with Primary Residential Mortgage, Inc. (PRMI) and branch manager with the Steven J. Sless Group in Owings Mills, Md., moving the process along just for the sake of it is not something he or his employees are interested in doing. Part of that is because the shift to remote work in the office has been so successful, Sless says.

"Although we're not really sure when we're going to be back in the [office], I think for right now, there's really no reason to rush it," Sless tells RMD in an interview. "We're not skipping a beat, which has just been amazing. The whole team has just been very comfortable working from home. We've equipped everybody to work from home, and the borrowers have really been phenomenal. They've adapted to all the technology that we're throwing at them. So for me, there's really no rush."

Making plans, how meeting with clients will change

If things are going well under the current circumstances, expediting the process of returning to the office just for the sake of being there does not make an abundance of sense at this time, Sless shares. In terms of making preparations for the return, however, it is something that he and the landlord for their space has been discussing. Something that could end up helping Sless and his team is the fact that when the pandemic hit, they were already making a transition to a new physical space and now the design for it can be revised.

“In the past, I’ve always been a big believer in an open office concept for sales, because I believe in the energy, the camaraderie and guidance that comes with it. I just think that works in a sales environment,” Sless explains. “Now we have to rethink things. We’re getting rid of cubicles, and we’re going to offices. Midway through this, I restructured the way that the office designs can be laid out and we went from more of an open concept to a closed concept, so everybody is going to have their own individual office.”

Some of the natural reticence to reopening the office to employees and as a venue to meet clients also comes from the strained supply chain across the country related to cleaning and sanitizing products, Sless shares. If the office can’t be adequately sanitized, then that could lead to discomfort at all levels of the organization. Still, everyone from fellow employees to clients have stepped up in ways that are surprising and beneficial, Sless says.

“I’ve been really blown away, surprised and impressed by everybody,” he says. “And that allows me to kind of take a step back and realize that if we don’t get back into the office until July, that’s okay. If it’s not until the end of summer, that’s okay, too. And worst case scenario, if we don’t get back in the office until the end of the year, that doesn’t mean the business doesn’t get done as effectively and as efficiently as it otherwise would.”

Still, even as restrictive measures begin to lift across the country, leading health authorities including the United States’ top infectious disease expert continue to warn companies and the general public that the threat of the pandemic is not yet over. Erring on the side of caution when it comes to safety is still being advised, especially as recent estimates have indicated a spike in infections in certain parts of the country.