

# Bacteria that causes Legionnaires' disease detected in two large federal offices in Baltimore County

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Legionella sp. colonies growing on an agar plate and illuminated using ultraviolet light to increase contrast. Obtained from the CDC Public Health Image Library. Credit: CDC/James Gathany (PHIL #: 7925)

Legionella bacteria—a pathogen that can cause Legionnaires' disease and the less serious Pontiac fever—has been detected in the water fixtures of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and Social Security Administration facilities in Woodlawn.

Out of an "abundance of caution," most employees and contractors at the CMS headquarters are working remotely, but the agency isn't aware of any [health problems](#) affecting its workforce, a CMS spokesperson said.

A spokesperson for the SSA also said there have been no confirmed cases of Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever at its Woodlawn facility, which remains open.

This year, the U.S. General Services Administration, which supports the basic functioning of federal agencies, including providing them with office space, is conducting baseline water testing in many federal buildings. It was through this routine testing that elevated levels of Legionella were found in some water fixtures in the SSA facility, the agency spokesperson said in an email.

That's not unusual, the spokesperson said. Testing experts have told the GSA that roughly half of the water samples they take come back positive for the bacteria. And as more testing is conducted, it's likely that Legionella will be detected in more federal buildings, said Courtney Springer, the GSA's assistant commissioner for facilities management, in an interview on the agency's website.

After the results came back, the SSA followed remediation protocol from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a spokesperson said. The agency removed the affected fixtures from service, flushed them out and retested them.

"The test results indicate elevated levels only in a small subset of water

sources in our main campus buildings, and we are following appropriate health and safety protocols," the SSA spokesperson said in an email.

"Our employees and [labor unions](#) are notified about these tests, including when elevated results are found, and the remedial actions taken."

Last year, the GSA sent a memo to [federal agencies](#), urging "immediate action" to address the risk of Legionella contamination in [water systems](#) after the bacteria was detected in six buildings owned or leased by the agency, according to a Federal Times story.

Many federal buildings have reduced capacity following the coronavirus pandemic, which can lead to more stagnant water—an ideal environment for the growth and spread of Legionella, according to the memo.

While Legionnaires' disease remains relatively rare, reported cases have been increasing since the early 2000s, according to the CDC. People can develop the disease after breathing in water droplets contaminated by Legionella bacteria, or if contaminated water enters their lungs while drinking. Those 50 years or older, current or former smokers, and people with a chronic disease or weakened immune systems are most at risk of developing the disease.

The bacteria was detected at the CMS facility in Woodlawn in June, during testing conducted in new plumbing fixtures during the final phases of several renovation projects. Later in June, elevated levels of the bacteria were also detected in nonconstruction areas of the facility. The agency has since remediated the entire complex and is waiting for results from new testing, according to information provided by a spokesperson over email.

"The health and safety of the CMS workforce is our top priority," a spokesperson said. "We will resume normal campus operations when remediation of the Baltimore campus is complete, and we are confident

that the issues have been resolved."

About 3,500 employees report to the agency's Baltimore location, but the disruption in campus activities hasn't significantly affected CMS functioning, since employees can work remotely, the spokesperson said.

Even before the facility's temporary closure, a limited number of employees reported to the office every day, said Anita Marcel Autrey, president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 1923.

The union, which represents more than 30,000 federal workers in the Washington metro area, negotiated a return-to-work agreement with CMS that required employees to come into the office only twice per pay period, or about once per week. Otherwise, they're permitted to work remotely.

Since both agencies shared the test results with their employees, Autrey said she's heard from some workers who are nervous about how being exposed to the bacteria will affect their health. However, she said she is confident that the two agencies are taking the safety of their employees seriously and are following steps recommended by the CDC to address the bacteria levels.

When it comes to workplace health and safety, she said, "we don't play around."

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