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Take Your Leave: Time Away from Work Offers Mental and Physical Health Benefits

June 16, 2021 | Lou Cortina

Vacations, staycations, long weekend getaways, day trips: UMB encourages employees to use accrued leave time.

Take a breather. Take a break. Take your leave ... and relax.

That's the message for University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) employees who've accrued hours upon hours of leave time over the past 15 months during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many vacation plans were scuttled because of travel restrictions or health concerns and the line between home and workplace became blurred because of telework.

Now there seems to be a light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, with COVID-19 vaccines being distributed and restrictions on gatherings and face coverings relaxed or rescinded in the city, the state, and around the nation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says if you are fully vaccinated — two weeks after your single-shot vaccine or two weeks after your second dose of a two-shot vaccine — you can travel safely within the United States.

UMB's leaders are encouraging employees to use their accrued leave — and what better time than now during the summer? Whether it's a vacation, a staycation, a long weekend getaway, or a simple day off, taking time away from work to refresh and recharge is seen as a critical way to improve your physical and mental health.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has been overwhelming in many aspects," says UMB President Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS. "One that we can't ignore is the difficulty in creating a division between work and personal time, especially when working from home. I want UMB employees to know that it's not only OK to take time off, but that I also expect our workforce to do so."

"UMB's leadership understands that taking your earned time off is critically important to your mental, emotional, and physical health, and it is important for the health and safety of our entire community."

UMB's Human Resource Services (HRS) is promoting Jarrell's charge with a "Take Your Leave" campaign. The message: Using your leave time is good for you and aligns with the University's efforts to foster a healthy work-life balance.

"I appreciate the tremendous efforts of UMB employees during the pandemic, but please remember that work-life balance is extremely important, too," Jarrell said. "Part of that balance is knowing when to put work aside and take a break."

"Please make sure that you are taking the time you need — that you have earned — and that you are being respectful of others' time off," he added. "Vacation time doesn't have to include travel, but it does need to include time to unplug and recharge."

Time Away Is Vital

Michelle Pearce, PhD, a professor at the University of Maryland Graduate School and a clinical psychologist, applauds the University for advocating a workplace culture that supports employees taking time away from work.

"Our brains and bodies were not designed to be 'on' all the time," Pearce says. "I liken vacations to recharging our phone batteries. We all know that our phone has to be charged regularly in order to function. If we don't take time to charge it, we won't have a phone to use. What we forget is that we need to treat ourselves the same way. Vacations allow us the time to disconnect from work and recharge our batteries."

Estee Gubbay, a travel advisor and author, agrees that vacations are vital, telling the website [VeryWellMind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com) that a vacation should provide a break from normal daily life, a boost to mental and/or physical wellness, or an enriching adventure — or a combination of all three.

"Everyone's due for the vacation where you just want to get away," Gubbay told the website. "Since we've all been cooped up, literally, we're dying to get out there and experience something new. There's a reason why phrases like 'Get out of Dodge' and 'Get a change of scenery' are important to our mental health."



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Even taking one day off — if it includes enjoyable or relaxing activities — can provide mental health relief, she says. “You just have to be really intentional about that day,” Gubbay told the website. “Have a real plan.”

Leave Time Logjam

According to UMB policy, a maximum of 400 hours (50 work days) of annual leave can be carried into a new calendar year by all regular, full-time employees. Because of the pandemic, that number was lifted to 480 hours (60 work days) under a University System of Maryland exception. Staff members have until the final pay period of the 2022 calendar year to use any leave over 400 hours, or else it will be forfeited; faculty members have until the final pay period of the 2021 calendar year.

The increase in unused leave at UMB has been dramatic. For example, between the 24th pay period of 2020 and the 24th pay period of 2021, there was a 19.1 percent increase in the amount of unused leave time, according to Susan McKechnie, CPA, assistant vice president and University controller. By comparison, the increase in unused leave time over the same time period in the previous four years was 1.34 percent, 1.7 percent, 2.97 percent, and 5.61 percent.

The large amount of unused leave, now nearly 1.8 million hours, is detrimental to the University, because it serves as a debt on UMB’s ledger, McKechnie says.

“These hours represent unused vacation that will be used, paid out, or lost,” she says. “Any hours that have been earned but not paid out must be treated as a debt to our employees that UMB records as an expense. So the higher the number of unused hours, the larger the debt, and the bigger the expense. This growing balance of unused leave time is a financial issue for the entire University.”

HRS reminds employees to follow their unit’s guidelines on requesting accrued leave, coordinate with their supervisor on vacation requests, and check out UMB’s [Leave Administration webpage](#) for more information on accrued leave. Also, employees can find their current and projected leave balances on the [eUMB Human Resources Management System](#) website (click on the My UMB Employee Self Service tab, then click on the My UM Leave Balances link).

Resources

CDC: [Domestic Travel During COVID-19](#) and [International Travel During COVID-19](#)

U.S. Travel Association: [Vacation Planning Tool](#) and [Let’s Go There Toolkit](#)

AAA: [“Best Mid-Atlantic Road Trip Ideas \(and Where to Go\).”](#)

Harvard Business Review: [“We All Really Need a Vacation. Here’s How to Make the Most of It.”](#)

American Psychological Association: [“Four Reasons to Take a Vacation.”](#)

VeryWellMind.com: [“How to Cope with Travel Anxiety This Summer as COVID Restrictions Loosen.”](#)

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