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To: 'recipients@lists.johnshopkins.edu'
Subject: Religious and Cultural Observances: Winter Holiday Celebrations and Observances in the Workplace

To the Johns Hopkins Medicine community

'Tis the season for Christmas carols, Hanukkah (Chanukah) gelt, Kwanzaa candles and mistletoe. While the winter holiday season can bring a lot of cheer, workplace celebrations may offer confusion, exclusion and stress. In the workplace, you might wonder: "How much should I decorate? Should the decorations be present in public places in the workplace? What about gift giving among co-workers? Should I say 'merry Christmas' or 'happy Kwanzaa' to my co-workers?"

The Johns Hopkins Medicine Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Department of Spiritual Care and Chaplaincy recognize that when planning holiday celebrations, departments may struggle with accommodating employees' religious and spiritual practices and beliefs while also striving to offer a balanced approach of inclusivity, respect and consideration.

We would like to provide some information about winter holidays and offer a few tips to help the Johns Hopkins Medicine community navigate the season.

Select Winter Holidays and Traditions

- **Hanukkah (Chanukah), Dec. 24–Jan. 1:** This is the Jewish Festival of Lights lasting for eight days. The holiday commemorates the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Jewish families light the menorah each of the eight nights. Some festive foods include potato fritters (latkes) and donuts.
- **Christmas, Dec. 24–25:** This annual celebration commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, whose message and disciples began the Christian religion. Many celebrate this holiday by giving gifts, attending church services, decorating Christmas trees and visiting family.
- **Kwanzaa, Dec. 26–Jan. 1:** This holiday was created in the U.S. in 1966 and is patterned after harvest festivities in Africa. The holiday's name literally means "first fruit" ("matunda ya kwanza"). Like Hanukkah, the holiday is celebrated by lighting of the kinra, a seven-candle candelabrum, reflecting the seven principles of Kwanzaa: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibilities, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.
- **New Year's Eve, Dec. 31:** In the Gregorian calendar, New Year's Eve—also known as Old Year's Day or Saint Sylvester's Day in many countries—is on Dec. 31, the last day of the year. In many countries, New Year's Eve is celebrated at evening social gatherings where many people dance, eat, drink, and watch or light fireworks to mark the new year.
- **Orthodox Christmas, Jan. 7 of every year:** Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas Day with activities such as having a family dinner, attending a Christmas liturgy, and visiting relatives and friends. There is a 40-day Lent preceding Christmas Day, when practicing Christians do not eat any meat. The Lent period ends with the first star in the night sky on Jan. 6, a symbol of Jesus Christ's birth. Many Orthodox Christians go to church to attend a Christmas liturgy that evening.
- **Makar Sankranti, Jan. 14:** This holiday is one of the most auspicious days for Hindus and is celebrated in myriad cultural forms. The festival starts with the beginning of the sun's northward journey when it enters the sign of Makar (Capricorn). The holiday is all about prayers, sweets and kites.
- **Lunar New Year, Jan. 28:** The Lunar New Year can be a secular, religious or cultural celebration. It is often associated with East Asian traditions. The Lunar New Year is the first day of the month of

the lunar calendar. It kicks off a 15-day Spring Festival that marks the end of winter. At the end of the Spring Festival is the Lantern Festival, a community time of celebration when children carry lanterns in parades and fireworks are set off.

Suggestions for Holiday Celebrations in the Workplace

- Celebrating the holidays in an inclusive and broad way can increase bonding between employees. Ask your team members for their input and ideas when designing these celebrations, playing music, providing food or decorating.
- Be open to all the ways of giving during the holiday season: Celebrate the holidays by donating to a charity that is chosen together by your office. Invite a co-worker or student who is alone for the holidays into your home. At the same time, be mindful that lavish gift giving can be stressful for those with limited funds.
- In clinical spaces, be mindful that while the intention of decorating is positive and comes from a place of goodwill, some inpatients may see the decorations as sad reminders of not being at home for holiday events. Consider including patient input when designing decorations, and use decorations that do not pose safety risks.
- To embrace all employees, an employer can celebrate nonholiday events and use the month of December to celebrate meaningful company milestones for all employees to share, regardless of what holidays they celebrate. If holiday celebrations do take place in the office, all celebrations and employee practices should be embraced so that diversity can be truly celebrated. This is also an opportunity for team members to learn more about each other's traditions and beliefs.
- Keep in mind that religious observances have varied religious meanings, and allow employees and patients alike to share the special meaning of these winter holidays for them. It is best not to assume how important an observance might be without hearing from individuals.
- Consider the common thread between winter holidays. Many religious practices revolve around seasonal effects. Winter holidays have roots in the winter solstice. Hanukkah is referred to as the Festival of Lights, with candle lighting signaling each of the eight days of the holiday. Seven candles represent the seven principles of Kwanzaa. Bright lights adorn houses, trees and streets in the Christmas celebration. Another common thread to all of the holidays is gatherings of family and friends, and, of course, indulging in festive foods.
- Refrain from assuming that everyone celebrates the same holiday. Ask your co-workers and friends to share what holidays and traditions they follow. Ask them what greeting would be most meaningful for them.

Have a happy and safe holiday season.

Sincerely,

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