



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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Written statement prepared for

**The House Committee on Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on
Government Operations**

Hearing entitled,

“Frontline Feds: Serving the Public During a Pandemic”

June 25, 2020

Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and members of the Subcommittee on Government Operations, thank you for the opportunity for the Partnership for Public Service to submit a written statement for the record to inform the Subcommittee's oversight of the experience of federal employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Partnership for Public Service is a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring public service and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of government. We welcome this chance to help you shine a spotlight on the contributions of the federal workforce during this time of crisis, the issues agency leaders should consider in safely reopening federal workspaces, and lessons learned from this time that can help transform the delivery of government services.

The past few months have shown to the American people the dedication, resiliency and resourcefulness of the federal workforce. The government has not shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic; in fact, talented public servants across the federal government have risen to the challenge, often at risk to their own health. The efforts of the federal workforce demonstrate the critical and valuable role they play in times of national crisis.

Federal employees have responded rapidly and professionally as they work both to protect the health and safety of citizens and to help restore the economy. Whether working on-site or remotely, they are stepping up to meet the moment. Under their own difficult circumstances, they are taking on increased responsibilities. They also are helping to spur innovations that will benefit our nation for years to come and yield better technologies, tools, and techniques for federal employees to do their jobs.

Federal Workers on the Front Lines

Across the government and across the country, tens of thousands of federal civilian employees have continued to report to their work sites, even as COVID-19 infections continued to rise. Veterans Affairs doctors and health care workers continue care for patients at VA facilities. The Department of Agriculture's meat inspectors remain on the job. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) medical officers, scientists and health care specialists are deployed across the country and around the globe. The Environmental Protection Agency's scientists continue to research better cleaning techniques, which have been issued nationwide as part of CDC guidance to all businesses. Members of the intelligence community continue to report to government sites, given their need to access highly classified systems that cannot be used from home. FBI agents continue their surveillance, which now also includes targeting COVID-19 fraud such as fake cures.

Most of the Department of Homeland Security's workers remain on the front lines, including Customs and Border Protection officers who are protecting our nation's borders. The Transportation Security Administration continues to protect air passengers, adapting to the new environment with new approaches to the security process. Both of these DHS

components have seen high rates of infections and multiple deaths.¹ And the United States Postal Service’s employees have diligently sustained deliveries despite having a high rate of positive cases and deaths.² The Partnership for Public Service offers our deepest condolences for the families of these and other front-line federal workers who have fallen victim to COVID-19.

This compilation of stories only scratches the surface of the commitment federal employees have towards keeping this country safe and healthy, even though reporting to their jobs as usual may put them in harm’s way. These workers deserve recognition from federal leaders and appreciation from the American people. And they deserve our full efforts to keep them as safe as possible on the job.

Telework

While many federal employees have continued to work on-site, much of the federal workforce – in just the span of a few weeks – shifted from working on-site to mandatory teleworking. While there undoubtedly have been some bumps in the road, the ability of much of the workforce to quickly and nimbly adapt to full-time remote working has been a testament to more than a decade of planning for and equipping federal workers to do their jobs remotely.

Much of the groundwork for success of the rapid shift to telework lies with the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010,³ which was introduced by Rep. John Sarbanes, with lead cosponsorship from Chairman Connolly, now-retired Rep. Frank Wolf, and many other former and current members of this committee.

This Act required agencies to develop telework agreements with employees and unions and required agencies to think about telework as a key concept for continuity of operations. Ten years later, the preparations this bill set in motion have allowed federal employees to telework in numbers never seen before.

For example, the Small Business Administration is approaching 100% of its workforce teleworking,⁴ while undertaking the task of administering an unprecedented amount of loan aid to small businesses. More than 90% of the State Department is working remotely, as its employees have helped coordinate a global response to the pandemic and also have

¹ CBP, “CBP Coronavirus (COVID-19) Updates and Announcements,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/coronavirus> and TSA, “TSA Confirmed COVID-19 Cases,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.tsa.gov/coronavirus>

² GovExec, “These Federal Agencies Have Seen the Most COVID-19 Deaths,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2020/05/these-federal-agencies-have-seen-most-covid-19-deaths/165578/>

³ “Telework Enhancement Act of 2010,” P.L. 111-292.

⁴ MeriTalk, “What’s Next? Securing the New Age of Government Telework,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.meritalk.com/articles/whats-next-securing-the-new-age-of-government-telework/>

repatriated over 70,000 Americans on 750 flights from over 120 countries since late January.⁵

The Department of Defense has embarked on its largest rollout of telework ever, with 1.1 million users on the remote system.⁶ Nearly all the workers at the General Services Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development are teleworking, and 85% of the Department of Energy's employees are working remotely.⁷

The rapid shift to remote working, overall, appears to have been a resounding success, with many agencies reporting improvements to productivity and services while operating under maximum telework. For example, by early May, the Social Security Administration had seen an 11% decrease in backlogged pending cases compared to the level on March 23, when the agency instituted wide-scale telework.⁸ The Veterans Benefits Administration's eight business lines, working remotely, have exceeded targets set before the pandemic for increasing productivity and reducing the backlog of pending benefit claims. VBA's benefits team exceeded its recent quarterly target by 20%⁹

Federal employees have also worked to help transition their contractors to telework. For example, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) transitioned more than 4,000 customer service representatives in their call centers to telework, and the agency believes this was done without diminishing services to beneficiaries calling for help. This was critical given COVID-19's impact on populations needing to get answers on coverage-related questions.

Even before the pandemic, evidence showed that telework enhances performance, improves morale, and helps with retention.¹⁰ The Partnership urges this committee, the Government Accountability Office and other oversight bodies to take a government-wide look at the experience of agencies with telework during the pandemic. We believe you will find that numerous agencies, ranging from NASA to the National Institutes of Health to the Department of Commerce, have had positive experiences with telework. The experience

⁵ *Id.* and Department of State, "Briefing on COVID-19 Updates on Health Impact and Assistance for American Citizens Abroad," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-dr-william-walters-deputy-chief-medical-officer-for-operations-bureau-of-medical-services-and-principal-deputy-assistant-secretary-ian-brownlee-bureau-of-consular-affairs-on-co/>

⁶ Bloomberg Law, "Pentagon, 44 Million Chats Later, Ponders a Teleworking Future," 2020. Retrieved from <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/pentagon-44-million-chats-later-ponders-a-teleworking-future>

⁷ MeriTalk, "What's Next? Securing the New Age of Government Telework," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.meritalk.com/articles/whats-next-securing-the-new-age-of-government-telework/>

⁸ NPR, "For These Federal Employees, Telework Means Productivity Is Up, Their Backlog Is Down," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/05/850106772/for-these-federal-employees-telework-means-productivity-is-up-their-backlog-is-d>

⁹ GovExec, "Veterans Benefits Administration May Be Having Its Best Year Ever," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.govexec.com/management/2020/05/veterans-benefits-administration-may-be-having-its-best-year-ever/165507/>

¹⁰ See, for example, OPM, "Telework Insights: A Current Look at Telework in The Federal Government and Promising Practices to Support A 21st Century Workforce," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/worklife/federal-work-life-survey/telework-insights.pdf>

during the pandemic has shown us that a remote workforce can be a productive workforce, and that agencies should use the flexibility of telework as a selling point in recruiting and retaining top talent across the country.

Telework, however, has not been without challenges. For example, disparities in access to broadband connectivity, federal employees having to rely on their own devices, gaps in agency preparations for continuity of operations, security concerns and the continuing need for major IT transformations across the government must be addressed. Congress needs to understand why some agencies – the IRS, for example – were less well positioned to shift to remote work, and what investments would better prepare them to support telework, both in times of crisis and as a better way to serve taxpayers.¹¹

Other Innovations

Beyond telework, the need for the government to be agile in responding to COVID-19 is spurring other innovations in ways that could have profound and long-term impacts on the way the government operates.

The pandemic has necessitated a closer focus on management processes, resulting in an array of breakthroughs to long-standing problems, starting with personnel practices. For example, some agencies have reported seeing a reduced time to hire. The Veterans Health Administration hired 12,000 people between March 29 and May 18, and during the pressure of the pandemic, VHA has found ways to make recruiting, hiring, and onboarding more efficient. The agency is now looking to institutionalize many of these efficiencies for post-pandemic times.¹²

Several agencies have also been able to pivot their internship programs to the virtual world. Thanks to the support given by the Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS), run out of the State Department, a number of agencies have avoided canceling scores of internships.¹³

Meanwhile, agencies are turning to new technologies and fostering innovations to respond to COVID-19. A few examples:

¹¹ Federal News Network, "IRS employees reopening sites return to 'tens of millions' of pieces of unopened mail," 2020. Retrieved from <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2020/04/irs-tells-initial-wave-of-10k-employees-to-return-to-office-monday-bring-own-ppe/> and Washington Post, "As the backlogged IRS struggles to open mail and answer the phone, taxpayers face long delays," 2020. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/as-the-backlogged-irs-struggles-to-open-mail-and-answer-the-phone-taxpayers-face-long-delays/2020/05/19/e89910d8-93ce-11ea-82b4-c8db161ff6e5_story.html

¹² Federal News Network, "VA says onboarding changes made during the pandemic will 'change the way we hire forever,'" 2020. Retrieved from <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2020/05/va-says-onboarding-changes-made-during-the-pandemic-will-change-the-way-we-hire-forever/>

¹³ NPR, "There's Still Time To Get A (Remote) Summer Internship," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/21/858598827/theres-still-time-to-get-a-remote-summer-internship>

- The Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) at HHS recently teamed up with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to launch a pilot program to develop an early warning algorithm for COVID-19 and the flu.¹⁴ Another pilot program, with VitalConnect, is aimed at creating wearable monitors that would provide early warnings of COVID-19 symptoms.¹⁵
- Three of the Partnership’s Service to America Medals® Finalists (Sammies) this year are doctors leading the VA’s Office of Connected Care’s efforts to expand telehealth to veterans. Last year the VA provided just under 300,000 video visits to veterans in their homes. In April alone, the VA delivered nearly 400,000 visits.¹⁶
- NASA@WORK, a newly designed website built to foster internal collaboration and problem-solving, resulted in over 250 ideas from employees in under two weeks. Meanwhile NASA engineers have created a new ventilator to treat COVID-19 patients and an oxygen helmet to help COVID-19 patients with minor symptoms.¹⁷
- GSA’s Robotic Process Automation (RPA) team developed a bot that speeds up collection of infection data in counties where it manages federal buildings. The agency owns or leases spaces across the country, totaling about 9,600 buildings in 2,200 communities. Combining county-level infection data with geographic information systems (GIS) will help to visualize the coronavirus threat.¹⁸
- In March, the Office of Science and Technology Policy helped launch an effort to make scientific articles available for scientists to develop artificial intelligence data mining tools that can answer questions on COVID-19.¹⁹

Looking into the future

As government offices start to transition from telework back to their physical workplaces, we first and foremost need to consider the safety of federal employees. The past few months have shown that employees can be highly productive while working remotely. Agencies should not force employees to return to their office buildings if they are

¹⁴ Evidation, “Evidation Health and BARDA Partner on Early Warning System for COVID-19,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://evidation.com/news/evidationhealthandbardapartner/>

¹⁵ Homeland Preparedness News, “BARDA partners with VitalConnect on wearable monitor for COVID-19 patients, nursing homes,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://homelandprepnews.com/stories/49610-barda-partners-with-vitalconnect-on-wearable-monitor-for-covid-19-patients-nursing-homes/>

¹⁶ Partnership for Public Service, “Stories of Service: Trio of VA doctors fights COVID-19 with virtual health tools,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/blog-va-doctors-fight-covid19-virtual-health-tools/>

¹⁷ Partnership for Public Service, “Stories of Service: NASA employees’ partner with local communities to help COVID-19 patients,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/blog-nasa-employees-partner-with-communities-to-help-covid-19-patients/> and NASA, “NASA Contributes Expertise, Ingenuity to COVID-19 Fight,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-contributes-expertise-ingenuity-to-covid-19-fight>

¹⁸ FedScoop, “GSA’s coronavirus bot shows how RPA can supplement pandemic response,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.fedscoop.com/gsa-coronavirus-bot-rpa/>

¹⁹ White House, “Call to Action to the Tech Community on New Machine Readable COVID-19 Dataset,” 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/call-action-tech-community-new-machine-readable-covid-19-dataset/>

successfully getting their work done through telework. Also, agencies should continue to offer work hour flexibilities to help accommodate federal employees who have children or others in their care.

As agencies start to bring more employees back to government workspaces, employees must be able to trust that their agencies' plans are comprehensive, and data driven. Toward that end, the Partnership has developed a "Ready to Return to the Workplace" checklist of considerations that agency leaders should consider as they re-open offices, which we have included as an appendix to this testimony. These considerations include: how agencies use public health data in making reopening decisions; measures needed to protect federal employees; effective means of communicating with and engaging federal employees, unions and contractors; the need to consider adjustments to policies and programs; and risk management strategies and contingency planning to be prepared for future events.

Even as federal employees return to their offices, we need to capture lessons learned, including with the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, which we understand will be going out into the field in mid-July. This survey will yield invaluable insights into the views of federal employees on their experiences during the pandemic, and the Partnership urges that the results be released as soon as possible. We also encourage agencies to do pulse surveys of their employees on how COVID-19 is impacting their work and work environment, to help agencies adjust to rapidly changing circumstances.

More broadly, we need to seize upon this moment in history to help transform the way government works, and to make sure we do not go back to the old ways of doing business when new ways make more sense. Oversight hearings like this one will be essential to identifying what has worked, and what has not worked, as will the work of the Government Accountability Office, the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, and the broader good government community.

The Partnership believes that this moment in time will yield critical insights into new ways to approach well-established, long-standing needs of the federal government, including:

- 1) Developing capable leaders (both career and political) who think strategically for the long term and who understand the unique responsibilities of government stewardship;
- 2) Ensuring the government can attract the talent it needs at all levels;
- 3) Increasing collaboration across agencies, across the legislative and executive branches, between levels of government, and with the private and non-profit sectors;
- 4) Investing in new technologies and creating an environment that fosters innovation; and

- 5) Modernizing the ways that the federal government manages itself, which in many instances are based on legislation and practices that are decades old and out of sync with today's fast-paced, digital economy.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to present these views. We look forward to continuing to work with the Government Operations Subcommittee as you look for the best ways for our government to respond to urgent and unprecedented challenges and effectively serve our nation in the future.