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Ranking Member Kweisi Mfume

Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce

Hearing on “Oversight of Federal Agencies’ Post-Pandemic Telework Policies”

September 14, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of this Subcommittee perform a very important oversight role on behalf of not only federal workers, but the American public in general. With this coveted role comes immense responsibility, as we are positioned in a way that impacts our constituents in the most relevant of ways.

As Members of Congress, we’ve all heard our fair share of complaints, as well as appraisals surrounding agency casework.

In the time that is mine, I want to take this moment to focus on a real story from a real person that my Office interacted with during the height of the pandemic. For the sake of anonymity, I will refer to the constituent my Office assisted only by the name of Jane.

Jane contacted our office during the pandemic regarding FEMA’s COVID-19 funeral assistance application she filed when her brother unfortunately passed away from COVID-related disease complications in December of 2021.

Shortly after my Office connected with FEMA regarding Jane’s application, it only took FEMA a few days to approve Jane’s reimbursement exceeding \$3,000.

Keep in mind, our Office obtained this favorable outcome for Jane in a matter of days during a time when more than half of FEMA’s workforce was telework eligible.

I’ve said it time and time again: the last four letters in telework spell WORK.

I consider constituent services to be some of the most important and rewarding work I do in Congress, and like many of you on this subcommittee I’m proud to serve as a resource to and an advocate for my community. I expect each agency to ensure its employees possess the ability to deliver timely responses to all Americans—whether they are working solely remotely, or teleworking, or in-person.

Over the Summer, this Subcommittee hosted a hearing on addressing post-pandemic backlogs at the agency-level. I asked a significant witness from the Social Security Administration, Deputy Commissioner Chad Poist, whether telework contributed to the agency’s backlog.

Mr. Poist stated, on the record, “I don’t believe there are any contributions due to telework,” and that, “Telework has allowed us to continue our agency’s mission.”

The Office of Personnel Management surveyed over 40 agencies that have achieved cost savings resulting from the increase in teleworking.

As more workers transitioned to at-home work outside of the District, some agencies also out of the District found savings by reducing office space leases and transitioning into smaller office spaces.

As less workers were obligated to commute, some agencies found savings due to the decrease in workers' utilization of the transit subsidy program.

Depending on the agency, cost savings in these areas ranged from thousands, to millions of dollars.

Mr. Chair, I ask for unanimous consent to submit the OPM's December 2022 "Status of Teleworking in the Federal Government Report to Congress," which further details agencies' cost savings resulting from telework.

While there are obvious advantages to telework, I believe that agencies must prioritize in-depth examinations and reviews of their work postures on telework and remote work policies.

Prioritizing data collection on performance is absolutely critical to ensure that their policies lead to mission achievements.

I know how valuable face-to-face interactions are in order to strengthen interpersonal relationships, and also recognize that flexible work environments are one of the many tools that help fill a government-wide skills shortage.

As we are all aware, just last month, President Biden mandated a return to work for most federal employees. To that extent, I encourage certain agencies, who can, to increase in-person work as necessary for the successful delivery of their agency's mission.

I would like to thank our witnesses, who represent different agencies, for testifying before us today and for providing valuable insight on the outcomes and implications of their current policies for work flexibility.

The workforce is the lifeblood of our federal government, and we must promote an environment that attracts and retains the best and brightest in federal service.

I look forward to hearing directly from you all today as we discuss what the implications of a post-pandemic federal workforce are, and how best to address the unique circumstances agencies are faced with in order to increase successful service delivery to the American public.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I yield back.

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