

Testimony

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Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and
the District of Columbia

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Assessing Telework Policies and Initiatives in the Federal Government

Try it and You'll Like It: Support for Teleworking Policies Breeds a Culture of Acceptance

Statement of

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Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich and Members of the Subcommittee on the
Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia:

My name is Tom Davison and on behalf of the nearly 200,000 managers and supervisors in the federal government whose interests are represented by the Federal Managers Association, allow me to thank you for the opportunity to present our perspective on the federal government's telework policies and recommendations on how to encourage the use of telework.

Established in 1913, the Federal Managers Association (FMA) is the largest and oldest association of managers and supervisors in the federal government. FMA was originally organized to represent the interests of civil service managers and supervisors in the Department of Defense and has since branched out to include some 35 different federal departments and agencies. We are a non-profit professional membership-based organization dedicated to advocating excellence in public service and committed to ensuring an efficient and effective federal government.

Currently, I serve as the Human Resources Officer for Region 5 (Chicago) of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a position I have held for over four years. Region 5 is EPA's largest region covering Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. I previously served as the Human Resources Officer for Region 10 (Seattle) for 15 years. I bring with me today 34 years of service in the federal government.

I have experience administering telework policies at both EPA locations. Currently, I provide guidance to managers about the EPA program and represent the Region in dealings with our local union. Over the years, telework has been the subject of labor negotiations, several grievances, and one arbitration (decided in favor of the agency). While several members of my own staff telework, I do not. Teleworking options vary greatly from agency to agency. I am here today to tell you some of the things we are doing to promote telework in the Environmental Protection Agency and offer recommendations to expand the program government-wide.

As managers and supervisors in the federal government, we at FMA are committed to being responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars. Telework has the potential to revolutionize federal agency operations and is a vital resource in meeting the challenges of retaining experienced professionals and enticing talented employees. Creating a flexible and modern workforce to compete with the private sector demands innovative management techniques and supervisory training

Teleworking undoubtedly provides many benefits – not only to those participating, but to the agency and the nation as well. The immediate benefits can be felt by the flexible worker – less time in traffic, less money spent on gas and an all around better quality of life. For managers, the ability to offer

telecommuting options to potential hires serves as a recruitment and retention tool; one the private sector has been offering for years and with which the federal government is forced to compete. For an agency, having teleworking options in place allows for a means to remotely continue operations in the event of a natural disaster or terrorist attack. In addition, it can save the federal government money on things such as office rental space and commuter reimbursement costs. Nation-wide, we all benefit from fewer cars on the road, reduced congestion, less fuel consumption in a time of increasing gas prices and better air quality. In light of the above, it is no surprise that interest in telecommuting is on the rise.

In conjunction with the Federal Managers Association, the Telework Exchange, a public-private partnership focused on telework in the federal government, completed a first-of-its-kind study of federal managers' perceptions of telework, "Face-to-Face with Management Reality – A Telework Research Report." Over 45 federal agencies and departments participated, with 13 percent of the responses coming from the Department of Defense. Here is just a sample of the findings:

- As managers become exposed to or involved in telework, their approval of the practice improves significantly;
- Only 35 percent of managers believe their agencies support telework. In contrast with agency priorities, managers do not perceive Continuity of Operations (COOP) and pandemic planning as telework drivers; and,
- Managers ranked fear of not having control over employees and productivity issues as the top telework inhibitors.

The study further reveals that as managers become more involved in telework, they express more favorable attitudes toward telework. Managers who are teleworkers and managers who supervise teleworkers are more favorable toward telework than managers who do not supervise teleworkers. Sixty-six percent of managers who manage teleworkers find that teleworkers are as productive as their in-office counterparts.

The study also found that federal managers' perceptions of the drivers and benefits of telework are fundamentally out of sync with that of the agencies. We at FMA believe this finding indicates agencies need to embark upon programs to educate managers on the priorities for, and agency mission benefits of, embracing telework as a standard operating procedure. Managers across the board view the balance between work and private life, as well as the impact on employee recruitment and retention as major telework drivers. In contrast with agency priorities, managers do not perceive COOP and pandemic planning as telework drivers. Interestingly, managers do not consider security or funding concerns as significant inhibitors to telework.

The study highlights the disconnect between the perception of telework and the practicality of telework. While funding seems to be the least significant impediment, managers must find a balance between performance output and employee supervision before agencies can fully realize the benefits of telework.

While, by law, 25 percent of the federal workforce should be telecommuting, only 35% of managers surveyed believe their agency supports telework. In 2000, Congress gave agencies the authority to establish policies for employees to “participate in telecommuting to the maximum extent possible without diminished employee performance.” In 2004, Congress further mandated that each agency and department “provide quarterly reports to [Congress] on the status of telecommuting programs, including the number of Federal employees eligible for, and participating in, such programs.” However, 44 percent of respondents to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) 2006 Federal Human Capital Survey said they had no basis on which to judge their agencies’ telework benefits and only 22 percent said they were satisfied with the benefits. In 2005, OPM reported that only 19 percent of eligible employees were telecommuting, while approximately 41 percent of employees were eligible to telework during that same period. A GAO Report from 2006 found that only 9 of 23 reporting agencies had plans in place for workers to telecommute. These are alarming statistics. We at FMA realize that cultural changes will have to take place in order for full implementation of telework programs government-wide.

Managers cite fear of not having control over employees and productivity issues as the top telework inhibitors, and it is likely that this is what is causing low agency participation. Within my workplace, I hear concerns from other supervisors on how to handle underperforming telecommuting employees. Strong policies and procedures in place before teleworking occurs is one way to ensure employees focus on their work. Improved performance management systems would also help alleviate management concerns. As such, managers must find a balance between performance output and employee supervision before agencies will realize the benefits of teleworking. Educating managers and employees alike on the benefits of teleworking would certainly make one more likely to participate. Training is an essential part of helping both employees and the agencies realize the benefits of teleworking. Pilot programs are also an excellent place to start.

It is unfortunate that these survey results highlight that supervisors believe their employees cannot be trusted to get their work done at alternative work stations. We at FMA believe managers should have the flexibility to decide who can participate in teleworking programs. Of course, not all job positions and employees are able to utilize this option; some job functions simply require employees to be physically in the office. In addition, if an employee is underperforming or requires more supervising,

they should not be allowed to telecommute. Establishing clear guidelines and goals before allowing teleworking will help ensure no one takes “advantage” of working from home.

EPA’s Region 9 (San Francisco) recently received high accolades in the 2007 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings compiled by the Partnership for Public Service and American University’s Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation. Overall, the Environmental Protection Agency ranked 9th in the survey, with a score of 65.5 (out of a possible 100). Region 9, however, received a score of 79.7 in part due to their Flexiplace Program. From what we are hearing from our members, both managers and employees alike are pleased with the teleworking guidelines the agency has in place. The score highlights the significance not only current federal employees place on teleworking options, but also that such options allow for higher recruitment and retention.

Currently, the Office of Personnel Management offers two free online training courses for managers, supervisors and employees to teach them how to make the most of telework arrangements and to make them aware of their responsibilities, agency responsibilities, and federal policy on telework. Supervisors in my region, EPA Region 5, must take the OPM courses before applying for the agency’s Flexiplace Program. Additionally, any EPA employee who wants to participate in the program must also complete the telework course for employees prior to applying for the program. We would encourage agencies across the federal government to also utilize these programs as a way to not only dispel myths surrounding teleworking, but also as a way to familiarize employees with the law surrounding teleworking. Without educating managers and employees alike regarding teleworking opportunities available across the government, participation will remain stagnant.

According to the law, all employees must be determined to be eligible to telework before they are allowed to telework. Under S.1000, the Telework Enhancement Act introduced by Senators Stevens and Landrieu, all employees would be considered eligible unless found otherwise. The Telework Enhancement Act is divided into four key sections designed to facilitate implementation: eligibility and participation requirements, training and monitoring responsibilities, the establishment of managing employees, and annual agency ratings. Within one year of the Act’s authorization, each Executive Agency must develop policies which allow eligible employees to participate in telework to the maximum extent possible so long as performance standards are not diminished. Many employees may be deemed ineligible for telework, as their specific work detail requires the handling of sensitive material, involvement in national security or intelligence functions, and/or direct contact with special equipment. At present, security personnel, receptionists and lab employees, among others, are ineligible to telecommute.

Under the bill, implementation of training programs, incorporated into new employee orientation, is the responsibility of the head of each Executive agency, along with employee reviews to determine the effectiveness of telework on a case by case basis. We support these training programs and believe they will be vital to the success of and participation in these programs. However, as federal managers, we are all too aware that training dollars are the first to get cut when budgets are tight. We ask that Congress consider a separate line item in the appropriations process to insure the training programs are properly funded and executed.

The bill also calls for the creation of a Telework Managing Officer, whose duties would include, among others, ensuring telework policy is communicated and implemented effectively, encouraging eligible employees to partake in telework while maintaining performance requirements, develop and direct a performance reporting system, and maintain employer-employee dialogue. The Telework Managing Officer is also responsible, in collaboration with the agency head, for designating employees to telework in the event of a major disaster in order to maintain agency operations. We believe that the mere creation of such a position would be the first step in establishing a teleworking-friendly environment.

The Telework Enhancement Act of 2007 establishes the Comptroller General as the chief body of telework oversight, in charge of evaluating the telework policy of each agency while also evaluating participation in teleworking by their employees. A report published each year by the Comptroller General will include the number of employees in the agency, the number of telework-eligible employees, the number of employees who regularly engage in teleworking, and the number of employees who occasionally engage in teleworking. In agencies where a teleworking culture does not exist or is slowly forming, this may require additional oversight from Congress. Should this bill become law, we would ask that Congress insist on receiving this report from agency heads on their respective agencies' teleworking status.

All of us present here today have an opportunity to promote a program with benefits that far outweigh the costs. This committee has the ability to initiate the cultural changes necessary for successful implementation, carried out by federal managers and supervisors in the field. Managers' fears of not having control over employees and of issues of decreased productivity should not suppress the evolution and expansion of telework. Federal agencies are in constant competition with the private sector to recruit and retain the best possible personnel, and the creation of a flexible workforce may tip the scales in our favor. This requires the help of Congress to ensure federal agencies are doing what the law requires of them. Every day, I am witness to the benefits a flexible work environment provides.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our views and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.