



INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF  
PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL ENGINEERS  
AFL-CIO & CLC

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**Remarks for the Record**  
**From**  
**International Federation of Professional & Technical**  
**Engineers (IFPTE), AFL-CIO & CLC**

*Prepared For:*

**House Committee on Oversight and Accountability**

***Hearing: Oversight of Our Nation's Largest Employer: Reviewing  
the U.S. Office of Personnel Management***

**Thursday, March 9, 2023 - 9:30 am**  
**(2154 Rayburn House Office Building)**

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The International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) submits the following statement for today's hearing regarding the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). IFPTE is a labor union that was founded in 1918 and represents upwards of 85,000 workers, one-third of whom are employed in the federal government.

We thank Chairman Comer and Ranking Member Raskin for allowing our statement to be made a part of the official record.

We are aware that this hearing is intended to investigate and provide oversight for federal workforce policies. The focus of our statement is on the successful implementation and effectiveness of telework policies across government agencies.

Federal employees take an oath of office, the same oath that Members of Congress take, and understand their obligation to perform their duties as civil servants. Over the last three years, federal employees have met that obligation by working in full telework, remote work, and hybrid environments and by working onsite when needed or when telework is unsuitable for the job. Whether teleworking or working onsite, federal employees have shown up for work.

IFPTE can say without reservation that telework in the federal government since the pandemic began has not only been a success that allowed agencies to maintain continuity of operations from March 2020 to the present, but it has also improved efficiency, provided flexibility, and allowed agencies and federal employees to find innovative ways to fulfill agency mission and improve outcomes. In some significant instances, telework and hybrid work environments and the accompanying technology have improved government services and improved access to services.

During the pandemic, IFPTE members across the federal government and throughout the nation – at the Department of Defense (DOD), NASA, Social Security Administration, the Department of Justice's Executive Office of Immigration Review, and elsewhere – teleworked and demonstrated that they were fully able to serve the public and their agency's mission without interruption. In many instances, agencies embraced telework policies, invested in technology or implemented existing tools for telework, and reached innovative solutions with employees and their union representatives to find ways to improve the delivery of services and government operations. The experience of our federal sector members and the federal agencies they work at is not anomalous, but rather reflects the shared lessons and approaches that agencies, federal employees, and unions applied in response to the pandemic.

IFPTE commends Director Ahuja and OPM's commitment, under her leadership, to promoting Future of Work initiatives and leveraging telework, remote work, and hybrid work environments to enhance flexibility, support diversity and accessibility, expand the talent pool, and retain dedicated civil servants. OPM has correctly recognized that federal agencies must embrace telework where possible as it is necessary if agencies are to compete with the private sector to hire the best and brightest workers into the federal civil service and hire high-quality candidates who are geographically dispersed.

As federal agencies are implementing reentry to the work site, it would be an enormous mistake to revert to 2019 levels of telework. Deputy Defense Secretary Dr. Kathleen Hicks noted that, "Throughout the pandemic, we learned a lot about how we can embrace telework and flexible schedules to achieve new efficiencies in the workplace." She further added that DOD "will continue to embrace successful practices to promote a more resilient and productive workforce that can attract new talent and retain our top performers." In light of the positive

impact on productivity, services, and agency mission, efforts to return to pre-pandemic levels of telework would be a setback for the federal government's ability to manage its talent and deliver all manner of essential services for the public and support agency mission that is critical to the economy, public safety, and national security. While we welcome improved data collection on the cost savings, efficiencies, and improved government operations that have resulted from federal telework policies, we strongly oppose proposals to erase improvements to productivity and operations that federal telework, hybrid work, and remote work policies provide.

Below are some specific examples from IFPTE's local union, in their own words, of the benefits of telework:

- NASA Marshall Space Flight Center employees, represented by Marshall Scientists and Engineers Association - IFPTE Local 27 (MESA):

Located in Huntsville, Alabama, Marshall Space Flight Center is NASA's center of excellence for pioneering rocket propulsion technologies, developing science instruments and engineering support for spaceflight missions. Some 1,400 IFPTE-represented employees at Marshall are part of a NASA center that has played and continues to play a central role in historic space launch achievements that carry humans to the moon and beyond. NASA's Economic Impact Report, published in October 2022, ranks the agency's impact in Alabama for FY21 at over \$8 billion, an investment that supports over 41,084 jobs in the state, which is third behind California and Texas.

For engineers at Marshall who work on the heavy lift Space Launch System, part of the Artemis moon exploration program, telework has allowed employees to work additional hours to keep the program moving forward, multitask on several programs and across multiple teams, coordinate with NASA contractors who are also teleworking, and accomplish analysis and day-of support for the November 16, 2022 launch of the Artemis 1 mission, first flight test of the vehicle that will return Americans to the moon. One lead engineer reported, "Working extra hours while teleworking is certainly easier to stomach (for myself and my family) when you start off each day with an extra 1.5 hours from not commuting and getting ready for work, and also from the lesser mental and physical toll of teleworking."

A Marshall employee also confirmed that telework attracts STEM professionals and early career high skilled employees to continue their careers at NASA: "It's well known that NASA already has difficulty obtaining and maintaining top talent. We've seen a lot of people leave across our division over the last couple of years to places like Blue Origin, Amazon, etc. that can offer more pay and wider work experiences. If NASA doesn't embrace the new reality of hybrid technical work, they will just drive more talent to leave NASA. I know as much as I love my job and NASA, I would even consider leaving depending on the rigidity of the new Future of Work."

In addition to the continued work on the Artemis program, with the next launch scheduled for May 2024, NASA employees at Marshall are successfully working on advanced projects through telework and onsite work as needed, including the Demonstration Rocket for Agile Cislunar Operations (DRACO) nuclear space propulsion engine, the NASA-Department of Energy Fission Surface Power project for the lunar and Martian surface, and the NASA-Italian Space Agency's Imaging X-ray Polarimetry Explorer (IXPE) to study polarized X-rays from the Tycho supernova remnant.

- NASA Goddard Space Flight Center employees, represented by Goddard Engineers, Scientists and Technicians Association - IFPTE Local 29 (GESTA):

Based in Greenbelt, Maryland, some 1,600 federal employees represented by Local 29 at Goddard Space Flight Center support more than 50 spacecraft missions and scientific research that includes Earth science, solar science and the sun-Earth environment, planetary studies, and astrophysics. According to the agency's 2022 Economic Impact Report, NASA's activities at Goddard and in the state of Maryland provide significant benefits to the state economy, supporting close to \$8 billion in economic activity and 36,771 jobs throughout the state.

NASA engineers, scientists, and technical specialists at Goddard report significant improvements to work processes that are made possible by telework. Among software systems engineers at Goddard, employees note, "The hybrid environment has made it WAY easier to collaborate across Goddard and other NASA centers. [Through remote work] we have folks at NASA's Wallops Island Flight Facility who are testing software on hardware in Greenbelt. The push to make everything virtual has really modernized our labs, we can connect remotely, even power cycle stuff remotely meaning stuff that you previously needed to sit in the lab all day for you could do from home with no loss in efficiency."

Telework flexibilities and productivity improvements have also allowed improvements to scheduling work so that staff resources can be optimized for efficiency. Another employee in a software systems engineering team remarked: "One example is the SpaceCube Edge Node Intelligent Collaboration (SCENIC) mission. Had we all been onsite, 9-5 every day, while testing on SCENIC, we'd be constantly conflicting with each other. It would reduce our productivity and increase the risk of unsuccessful delivery. With remote/telework and flexible schedules, we were able to achieve a significant improvement in the utilization of the payload. The only alternatives to remote/telework would be (1) increase expenditures to procure/create another payload or (2) inconvenience employees to work onsite beyond the conventional 9-5 schedule. Replace 'SCENIC' with any other congested, unique hardware, and we can often see the same benefit."

Members of Goddard's Equal Accessibility Employee Resource Group highlight the tremendous improvements that telework brings to disability accommodation and to retaining experienced STEM professionals. One Goddard employee related how telework is a key consideration for continuing his federal career despite noncompetitive federal pay: "Eliminating the daily commute time has improved the quality of our life tremendously. I am considerably more productive working remotely. I now have the ability to remain focused on solving a problem for a much longer time without being distracted. I've been a federal employee [for over a decade] and our raises have not kept up with inflation since that time. I have colleagues who recently left federal employment and received very generous raises. I love my job as a NASA aerospace engineer and have not explored external opportunities. If I am no longer able to work remotely, I unfortunately will not be able to continue work as a civil servant."

Another Goddard employee who teleworks as a disability accommodation shared: "Even before the pandemic, my chronic illnesses often rendered me unable to work for parts of the day and teleworking allowed me to make up the time missed when I felt well enough to work, and this is something I continue to do today. It also allowed me to work on days when I was not well enough to leave my house, but was not so ill that I

was completely incapacitated. Even as pandemic restrictions have been lifting, I have been relying on telework full time as an accommodation as a result of my being immunocompromised – becoming acutely ill with COVID, while perhaps mild for others, could leave me with lasting complications. I am only able to work as much as I do today as a result of being able to telework. I know my colleagues and supervisors would agree that that is far preferable to the alternative of me being unable to work far more often and that I am still able to be a productive member of my team while working from home.”

- Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) employees, represented by IFPTE Local 121:

At DPAA, which is charged with the noble mission of recovering our nation’s missing service members, telework has fundamentally benefited the agency’s operations and improved productivity for the agency’s professional workforce. DPAA employees, including forensic anthropologists, archeologists, historians, geographers, and other technical and subject-matter experts, report that the agency’s adoption of telework reduced distractions and disruptions, shortened turnaround times for completing reports and peer review, increased flexibility in work hours, and enhanced collaboration between team members, colleagues, and supervisors. Agency employees note that telework has led to an improved work-life balance, reduced commute times, and allowed employees to create comfortable personalized workspaces that help sustain the focused attention necessary for their work. Telework also provides flexibility for DPAA employees who are required to perform periodic and strenuous physical work in the field by allowing these employees to recover from fieldwork by working productively in home office settings.

Telework also allows DPAA to expand the pool of talent the agency can recruit from so that it can maintain a world-class high skilled workforce that serves to fulfill our nation’s commitment to missing service members and their families.

- Social Security Administration (SSA) administrative law judges (ALJs), represented by the Association of Administrative Law Judges-IFPTE Judicial Council 1 (AALJ):

The SSA’s judiciary forms the largest adjudicative body in the western world, with over 160 hearing offices across the U.S. Each year, the SSA’s administrative law judges hold hundreds of thousands of hearings on appealed determinations involving retirement, survivors, disability insurance, and supplemental security income benefits. More Americans will appear before an SSA administrative law judge than in any other judicial forum.

During the pandemic, SSA hearing offices quickly adapted to expanded telework and managed to efficiently resolve cases and serve the public. At the start of the pandemic, SSA had a hearings pending number of 525,000 cases. Today, that pending number is about 349,000. This is despite the fact that from January 2020 to the present, SSA hearing offices received over 1.1 million new cases in addition to the cases that were pending. Indeed, over the course of the pandemic, SSA ALJs held almost 880,000 hearings in a fully remote environment. What’s more, SSA has seen significant attrition in its ALJ ranks. At the start of the pandemic, SSA had approximately 1,445 ALJs on duty. Today, that number is down to 1,210, despite the recent hiring of 56 new judges.

As hearing offices began reopening for in-person hearings, the ALJ union worked with the Acting Commissioner's staff to ensure that those claimants who want an in-person hearing can get one. ALJs are committed to ensuring that every citizen has a right to an in-person hearing. However, this can be done without the need to jettison telework and the significant advantages it offers.

Telework has proven beneficial not only to Social Security Administration's (SSA) administrative law judges (ALJ) but also to the claimants and representatives who appear before them. The ability to have a remote hearing saves claimants the inconvenience of travel and the cost of transportation. For example, ALJs in hearing offices in Kentucky report that before the availability of remote hearings, claimants frequently traveled two or more hours on dangerous rural roads to get to hearing sites. Claimants in these locations live high up on the mountain or in "hollers", where roads may become inaccessible due to weather conditions. Claimants across the country have realized similar benefits with remote hearings.

The benefits to claimants include:

- Many claimants who appear before SSA ALJs have physical and/or mental impairments that limit their ability to travel. Anecdotally, ALJs have reported that claimants are grateful for the opportunity to appear remotely and have indicated a significant preference for remote hearings (phone or video).
- Agency data indicates that claimants/representatives have requested in-person hearings in less than ¼ of all cases.
- Claimants may not have access to a car or other convenient transportation, but they overwhelmingly have access to phones. In fact, prior to the wide availability of remote hearings, transportation issues were frequently cited by claimants as a reason for missing their in-person hearing date.

With expanded telework and continued improvements in technology, the most disadvantaged claimants have had better access to SSA hearings. ALJs and the agency have experienced the following benefits:

- ALJs can resolve some cases more quickly. In the past, if a claimant was unavailable, including due to transportation issues, ALJ generally granted postponements. With remote options, the hearing can proceed, allowing for quicker disposition of cases.
- Remote hearings allow more scheduling flexibility with how SSA schedules hearings due to a limited number of available hearing rooms on any given day. This is not an issue with remote hearings.
- Telework is a recruitment and retention tool.
- The Agency is able to decrease its physical footprint.
- ALJs work more efficiently in a remote setting. ALJs report being able to focus on work and disposing of more cases in a telework environment.

- Telework offers more opportunities to engage in work activities, such as when an ALJ has a routine illness, such as a cold, on weekends and during poor weather conditions.
  - ALJs save commuting time and transportation costs (cost of public transportation, gas, parking and other such expenses).
- Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) immigration judges, represented by the National Association of Immigration Judges-IFPTE Judicial Council 2 (NAIJ):

EOIR operates 68 immigration courts in 28 states and two territories with over 600 immigration judges who interpret and administer federal immigration laws impartially and expeditiously. From the start of the pandemic to the present day, EOIR has addressed the ballooning immigration court case backlog by a) continuing to hire more judges, b) employing technology advances, and c) leveraging telework to increase output in the face of physical courtroom limitations. The number of judges has increased by over 36 percent since the end of 2019 thanks to the strong support of Congress and record appropriations.

With the nationwide roll-out of an electronic case management system (ECAS) completed in September 2021 and the distribution of more than 100 laptops designed to give judges the ability to conduct remote hearings, immigration judges can now hear cases even when they aren't in the courthouse. The result has been a steady increase in the pace of hearings and case completions.

During the first eleven months of FY 2022, judges closed over 375,000 cases – a historical record. As of the end of November 2022, the court had almost doubled the number of completed cases during just the first two months of FY 2023, as compared with the first two months of FY 2022. The progress reflects completions roughly 50 percent higher than the previous high in FY 2019.

Leveraging technology-enabled telework to tackle the backlog has been well-received in the legal community. The Department of Homeland Security's attorneys regularly appear at hearings via Webex nationwide. While most remote hearings are optional, respondents can generally elect in-person hearings if they so choose. Private counsel are very supportive of remote hearings because they are able to log into multiple hearings around the country, greatly expanding their representation capacity since travel time is reduced or eliminated.

Telework has provided numerous important benefits to the entire immigration court system:

- The immigration court system can adjudicate more cases because rapid judge hiring can outpace slow physical courtroom construction;
- Judges can be hired based on where pending caseloads require additional judicial support rather than where courtroom space is available;
- Judges can continue to hear cases even when a courthouse closes, such as when the downtown Houston Smith Street immigration court was shut in February 2022;
- Courts around the country regularly have to close for weather or security reasons, and telework allows judges to continue hearing cases;

- Hearings conducted by telework alleviate the computer network slowdown at many physical courthouses that do not have sufficient technology infrastructure;
  - DHS trial attorneys can easily support cases at offices outside of their home courthouse because they can attend hearings by Webex;
  - Because private attorneys are better able to attend hearings across the country, it decreases the cost of representation and increases access to representation;
  - Private attorneys are better able to provide representation to respondents in remote areas; and
  - Judges are able to work more efficiently and close more cases because of a reduction in commuting time, access to better technology while on telework, and a better work environment.
- United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) North Atlantic Division employees and New York District employees, represented by IFPTE Local 98:

About 400 federal employees represented by IFPTE Local 98 work at the USACE North Atlantic Division (NAD) and New York District (NAN) offices which are located in New York City, with satellite offices at military bases and regional offices covering much of New York, New Jersey, and Vermont.

Since the start of the pandemic, the USACE workforce has successfully executed historically large programs for national security, economic growth, flood risk mitigation, and emergency response, mainly by way of telework. While the construction management personnel have necessarily remained mostly at project construction sites to assure quality and oversee contractors, the vast majority of Army Corps personnel have executed their architectural and engineering, design, planning, and project management responsibilities from alternate duty locations.

Massive military construction programs such as at the U.S. Military Academy, Watervliet, and Picatinny Arsenals, and more have forged ahead supported by teleworking federal servants. The Army Corps flood risk management missions remain as resilient and productive as ever, thanks to teleworking Army civilians. New studies such as to deepen the NY/NJ Harbor and address long-term coastal flood risk activity in the region have remained on schedule, tackling the nation's economic and climate challenges ahead. Virtual meetings have saved the government money on travel and lodging costs. In addition, the paper reproduction was minimized while meeting project requirements. The utilization of videoconference technology resulted in workers speaking and commuting more frequently than before when in the office. From regulating wetlands to maintaining military recruitment centers, mission after mission has remained on track at the New York District and North Atlantic Division of the Army Corps of Engineers.

- United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Chicago District employees, represented by IFPTE Local 777:

Of the 250 workers represented by Local 777 in the USACE Chicago District, the agency determined 185 positions were eligible for some amount of telework when the workforce started transitioning back to the office in the summer of 2021. Almost all of these positions successfully teleworked full-time through the initial year and a half of the



pandemic. Most have now returned to some hybrid of one or more days at their official duty station per week.

However, the Chicago District employees' experience with full-time remote work proved that the contingency policy was a huge benefit to accomplishing the agency mission for certain positions and workers. The Chicago District performs a cost-benefit analysis before approving full-time remote work, and for one senior economist position, determined that full-time remote work would result in a reduction in day-to-day costs. Further, costs associated with the recruitment and training of a new employee would be avoided by retaining the current worker by offering remote work. The Chicago District was also able to fill long-vacant mission-critical positions, such as accountants, once remote work was offered.

Thank you again for accepting our comments and making them part of the official record. If the committee needs further information from IFPTE or wishes to meet with us, please contact IFPTE Legislative Director Faraz Khan directly at 202-239-4892 or [fkhan@ifpte.org](mailto:fkhan@ifpte.org).