



[Who has Trump picked to serve in his Cabinet?](#)

[\[SPONSORED\] Georgetown and FINRA's Data Analytics Initiative: Empowering Regulatory Leaders With Cutting-Edge Analytical Skills](#)

○○○



Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, speaks to reporters as she walks to a Senate luncheon at the U.S. Capitol on Nov. 19, 2024 in Washington, DC. KEVIN DIETSCH / GETTY IMAGES

Workforce

Ernst's report documenting telework 'abuse' obscures more than it reveals

The Iowa senator and head of a new caucus related to President-elect Trump's planned government efficiency commission misrepresented key statistics regarding telework's usage at federal agencies.

ERICH WAGNER | DECEMBER 9, 2024

TELEWORK

THE PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

UNIONS



Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, last week unveiled the results of her office's investigation into telework at federal agencies, but despite her bluster, the report failed to uncover any systemic abuse of the flexibility or that it made agencies less productive.

Ernst chairs the fledgling Senate DOGE Caucus, named for President-elect Trump's planned government efficiency advisory commission, and delivered her report to co-chairmen Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy. Musk and Ramaswamy have mused in interviews and on social media about [ending telework](#) for federal workers and issuing reductions in force as strategies to shrink the size of the federal government.

"For years, I have been tracking down bureaucrats relaxing in bubble baths, playing golf, getting arrested, and doing just about everything besides their jobs," Ernst said in a statement. "It would almost be funny if it wasn't happening on the taxpayers' dime and at the expense of veterans, seniors, small business owners and Americans in need of competent service from government agencies."

In a press release announcing the delivery of her report, Ernst claimed that "90% of federal employees telework," that only 6% of federal employees work entirely in-person, and that "nearly 33%" of federal workers are entirely remote workers. None of these figures are accurate when compared to the most recent report on federal telework.

As of May 2024, 54% of federal employees spent all of their work hours at traditional work sites because of the nature of their job precludes telework. Though 46% of the federal workforce is eligible for telework, only about 41.4% actually use the workplace flexibility to telework at least situationally. The data comes from the Office of Management and Budget in a nearly 3,000-page report [last August](#), issued in response to language in fiscal 2024 appropriations legislation demanding an up-to-date snapshot of federal telework.

According to OMB, the 1.1 million telework-eligible workers who used telework still spent 61.2% of their work hours in person. And just 10% of the civilian federal workforce, or 228,000 employees, are approved for remote work, in which an employee may work entirely from their home or an agency-approved alternative work site, well below the 1/3 figure Ernst cited.

Ernst did not respond to a request for comment regarding these discrepancies.

Ernst’s [60-page report](#) offers a litany of anecdotes about federal workers allegedly misbehaving while on telework, but in multiple instances appears to misrepresent the findings of an agency inspector general. For example, the report claims that the Architect of the Capitol’s inspector general found that “80% of the teleworkers are receiving incorrect locality pay.”

But according to the [IG’s report](#), that figure referred not to teleworkers but rather to the ratio of remote workers receiving incorrect locality pay and represents 20 employees out of a workforce of more than 2,000. The errors amounted to \$115,500 in wasted taxpayer dollars for an agency whose fiscal 2024 budget was \$947 million.

In response to Ernst’s report, as well as Republicans’ criticism of the Social Security Administration and one of its unions’ recent deal [to extend the agency’s telework policy](#) until 2029, the American Federation of Government Employees issued a [press release](#) fact-checking their claims.

"The truth is that about 80% of all hours worked by federal employees occur at their regular duty station, and more than half of the federal workforce have never and will never engage in telework, including a majority of AFGE’s members," said AFGE National President Everett Kelley in a statement Monday. "Our corrections officers in federal prisons, our border patrol agents, our TSA security screeners, civilians at Department of Defense depots and arsenals who repair and maintain weapons for our troops, and the health care workers in VA hospitals and clinics all hold jobs that are not appropriate for telework, and they all continued to report to their regular duty stations even at the most dangerous periods of the pandemic. The pandemic-era teleworkers allowed continuity of operations at their agencies, and the thanks they’re now getting is lies and disparagement about their commitment to their work." [G](#)

SHARE THIS:



NEXT STORY:

[Politics vs. Policy: Building partnerships with new appointees](#)



[ment](#)

[Workforce](#)

[ning government: Reflections 30 years later](#)[Retiring NTEU President Reflects on 3 Decades in Organized Labor](#)



[ment](#)

[Workforce](#)

[Oversight](#)

[ong Overdue': An Oral History of the GPR](#)[State of the Unions: A New Normal](#)[What I Learned Covering Government for 34](#)



[Content](#)

[usiness value with Red Hat OpenShift Virtualization](#)

SLOWGOGO/GETTY IMAGES

[Workforce](#)

Politics vs. Policy: Building partnerships with new appointees

COMMENTARY | A survival guide for career civil servants from two longtime civil servants.

[RONALD SANDERS](#) and [MIKE MEARS](#) | DECEMBER 9, 2024

THE PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

CIVIL SERVICE



Elections have consequences.

Among other things, they bring new political appointees to leadership positions in an agency or program, and they will supervise or oversee career civil servants. The latter are duty-bound to follow the lawful orders of the former. That's as it should be in a democracy, and despite all the mainstream/social media rhetoric, this election is no different than any other.

So, the two of us, both longtime career civil servants, have put together a "Survival Guide" for our career civil service colleagues to help them weather the transition. Some of those pearls of wisdom are summarized below, but the full text of our guide can be found at the links provided after our bios below. Our secret is to recommend that career civil servants use a little bureaucratic *jujitsu* to leverage the energy and enthusiasm of a new appointee/boss...to get on his or her side of the equation (where public servants belong anyway) and focus on ensuring that the services they provide will continue, and perhaps even improve.

In that regard, we do not advise our colleagues to go underground to thwart the agenda of a new appointee or a new administration, but rather, to take the "high road" and help a new appointee achieve constructive and lawful changes.

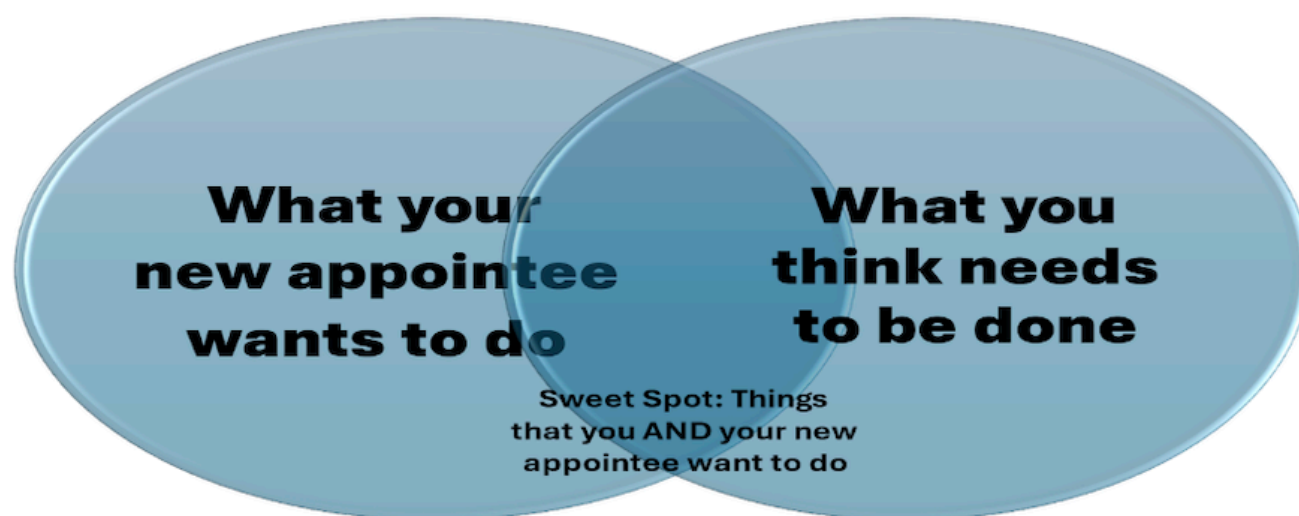
At the same time, we also encourage the new administration to avoid the myth that all civil servants are Democrats and should thus be "cleansed" from civil service ranks. Rather, most civil servants believe that "government is the answer," and these days, there is only one political party that seems to agree with that. That was not always the case—after all, it was Republicans that first came up with the principle of a merit-based civil service—so the current GOP administration should remember that.

In any event, we recommend the following eight survival steps:

- **Rule 1: The Interregnum—what to do before the transition.** Stay calm—career civil servants are still the incumbents, and they should act like it. While changes like reassignments or issuances such as a [Schedule F 2.0](#) may loom, they need to remember that they have some time. So use it. And in that regard, we would avoid "Acting" roles (especially now, unless

established by the new administration), as they come with visibility, and that can make career folks a target when a permanent nominee arrives. And if they're already in such a role, they need to maintain a low profile.

- **Rule 2: Accumulate information only career civil servants.** As career civil servants, their expertise is invaluable. So, they should take charge of the new appointee's "onboarding" process, providing detailed data, metrics, and insights demonstrating their value. And they should control the narrative by ensuring they're involved in developing and presenting key documents and discussions, not to censor or spin them, but to send the message that they're the appointee's partner.
- **Rule 3: Dust off their own agenda.** Like any good civil servant we've ever known, we're betting our colleagues have observed all kinds of inefficiencies that could use correcting, and now's the best time to identify those that, like the Venn Diagram below, correspond to the changes that both they AND their appointee have in mind. In other words, they need to find the common "low-hanging fruit" (even if that fruit is big!) for them to champion, preferably as a political/career team.



- **Rule 4: First impressions matter.** We recommend that career civil servants build rapport and trust early by affirmatively meeting with the new boss on his or her terms. Don't wait for them to ask, and they should make sure they're seen as clearly there to help, not hinder. Show genuine interest in the appointee's vision through open-ended questions such as: "What attracted you to this role?" and "What are your biggest priorities for the next six months?"
- **Rule 5: Look for and pursue common wins.** Career civil servants should showcase projects that demonstrate their ability to execute the new administration's vision. In that regard, they should reframe their proposals to align with the appointee's agenda, even presenting them as new, joint solutions to shared priorities. Use language that reflects their values, such as efficiency, transparency, or impact, to establish themselves as a trusted advisor. And they should jointly celebrate accomplishments through large and small recognition events. Visible wins foster better relationships and trust between career and political appointees.
- **Rule 6: Help the new boss cope with "strategic exhaustion."** We know that change in government is inherently complex and time-consuming. In other words, it's complicated. Career civil servants need to ensure that the new appointee fully understands the numerous bureaucratic checks that make even small changes feel laborious. Highlight the importance of ensuring "due diligence" in that regard, in part to manage the appointee's expectations. In our experience, most appointees don't realize they're already a year or two behind the curve, at least when it comes to budgets, so we'd remind them that substantial changes often take years and emphasize the need for patience and process.
- **Rule 7: Always have a Plan B.** Not every transition will go smoothly. We are not so naïve as to suggest that to be the case. Some career civil servants will face an appointee who refuses to respect legal or ethical boundaries, so they need to be prepared to leave. For those eligible, early or regular retirement may be an option. For others, they should explore career alternatives like consulting or contracting, academia, or private-sector roles. Treat the challenge as an opportunity for growth. But above all, they must start looking early, even if they never have to execute their escape plan.
- **Rule 8: Think about those below.** Finally we've found that during times of high stress and uncertainty, our colleagues need to remember that the need for communication with their employees doubles, yet stress and urgency instinctively cut that communication in half. We hope our colleagues resist this instinct. Even if they don't have all the answers to their employees' concerns, it's OK to say, "I don't know." We also suggest that they where possible, they walk around (even virtually) and "show the flag." These actions can reassure employees far more effectively than formal memos or emails ever can.

appointee expects them to say. Our advice is to get into the details: what the law says, what agency regulations say, and most importantly, if they want to change one or both, how they can best go about it. Make it about "how" and not "what."

Instead, career civil servants need to think seriously about those personal “red lines” that cannot be compromised; for example, (1) staying on the legal side of what the law or regulation currently says about their program or policy area, as well as how to go about legally changing them; and (2) perhaps most importantly, where their own conscience stands in a particular matter. And if either of those "red lines" are crossed, they must be prepared to say so to the new boss. After all, some appointees are zealous and won’t take “This violates the law, but here’s how to change it” as an answer. So, you should ALWAYS have a way out -- another government job, a sabbatical, retirement, a position in the private or nonprofit sector, etc.

Bottom line up front: The survival of an individual career civil servant still comes down to the relationship that he or she develops with their new appointee-boss, even in the headliner agencies like the Education Department and the FDA. Our guide will help them prove their worth to the new administration—and get through those initial difficult days and weeks and beyond without compromising on the law or the essential services they provide to fellow citizens (or their sanity). After all, we are willing to bet that the citizens they serve will still want—indeed, demand—those services, so if career civil servants are there to serve, how can they best work with a new appointee to do that?

There’s a lot more in [our Survival Guide](#), but in all of this, our best advice is just not to panic. We think civil servants ought to take advantage of the time the law and/or custom gives them...they should still get a reasonable “get acquainted” period (if they’re in the SES, the law says it’s as long as 120 days), and we suggest that they use it to prove their “worth” to a new appointee...in other words, to get on the same side as that appointee by focusing on how that appointee can legally achieve what he or she wants to do. And know that career civil servants are in a position to do so because they’ve demonstrated the innate skills to "tame the tornado" during and after transition.

Ron Sanders is a former career senior federal executive of more than 20 years, serving as HR chief for DOD’s civilian workforce, IRS, and the US Intelligence Community, as well as associate director of OPM and Chair of the Federal Salary Council. He is also a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration and a member of the American Society for Public Administration’s National Council.

Mike Mears is a former GE executive and CIA operations officer who graduated from West Point and Harvard Business School; he started and ran the CIA Leadership Academy and retired as CIA’s Chief of HR. His upcoming book is CERTAINTY: How Great Bosses Can Change Minds and Drive Innovation.

The authors’ complete Survival Guide can be found at www.publicavirtu.com. 

SHARE THIS:



NEXT STORY:

[SSA, AFGE reach deal to lock in current telework levels until 2029](#)



[ment](#)

[Workforce](#)

nting government: Reflections 30 years laterRetiring NTEU President Reflects on 3 Decades in Organized Labor



[ment](#)

[Workforce](#)

[Oversight](#)

ong Overdue': An Oral History of the GPRState of the Unions: A New NormalWhat I Learned Covering Government for 34



[Content](#)

[usiness value with Red Hat OpenShift Virtualization](#)