

Chairman Gerald E. Connelly
Post-Hearing Questions for the Record

**Submitted to Mr. J. Christopher Mihm, Managing Director Strategic Issues Team, U.S.
Government and Accountability Office**

**Hearing on “Frontline Feds: Serving the Public during a Pandemic”
June 25, 2020**

1. Please describe the work your agency has continued to do throughout this pandemic. What work is GAO conducting to ensure that agencies are generating and implementing comprehensive coronavirus plans effectively? Was GAO’s workforce able to continue its oversight of federal government remotely?

GAO has continued to support congressional oversight and decision making, utilizing maximum telework by nearly all of our employees, to accomplish our mission and to meet the needs of the Congress. We have initiated new audits, continued to work on ongoing ones, and have issued over 200 products since March 2020.

As of July 20, 2020, we had 67 audits under way related to the pandemic, including reviews of federal agencies’ telework readiness and use of telework and continuity of operations (COOP) and reentry plans in response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Additionally, on June 25, 2020, we issued the first in a series of bimonthly reports based on our ongoing monitoring and oversight efforts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report examined: 1) key actions that the federal government had taken to date, to respond to and recover from COVID-19, recommendations for executive action, and matters for legislative action by the Congress; and 2) evolving lessons learned relevant to the nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yes, GAO’s workforce has been able to continue its oversight of federal operations remotely. GAO had robust telework capabilities prior to the pandemic and was able to smoothly transition to almost all of our workforce working remotely. We have been able to continue to interact with and support our congressional clients, interact with and obtain information from agency officials and external entities, and collaborate with each another as needed to carry out our oversight responsibilities

2. What should federal employees be hearing from their agencies about plans to return employees to physical workstations? What are best practices for agency leaders at these critical moments? And are we seeing any of that?

Agencies should maintain continuous two-way communication with employees and their representatives about their plans to return employees to work locations. For example, agencies should provide employees with information on:

- changes in agency polices and operations taken in response to the pandemic;
- the factors they are considering to make determinations regarding workforce reentry at the local levels;

- the protection measures that have been implemented to protect employees, such as any structural changes to the workplace and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene supplies; and
- the social distancing strategies employees should follow, including policies related to travel, in-person meetings and gatherings, and flexible schedules to reduce the number of employees in the building at the same time.

In addition, agencies should also solicit and address employee concerns and communicate human capital guidance such as pay, leave, staffing, and other human capital flexibilities to employees to help ensure the continuity of agencies' operations and mission essential functions. It is important that employees understand the policies and requirements of their agencies, and the alternatives, such as telework, that may be available to them.

We have not completed work that identifies specific actions taken by agency leaders to communicate to its employees. However, our ongoing work on agencies' COOP and reentry plans, and use of telework, in response to the pandemic may identify leading practices by agencies to inform and update employees.

3. How can the Administration and agencies better prepare federal employees to engage the public directly or work in a more crowded environment?

Our previous work on pandemic preparedness efforts identified seven potential measures to protect workers whose duties required their on-site presence during a pandemic.¹ The measures were among the recommendations for worker protection issued in guidance from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Federal Emergency and Management Agency (FEMA). They included:

- procurement of personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves;
- supplemental cleaning programs for common areas;
- distribution of hygiene supplies (hand sanitizers, trash receptacles with hands-free lids, etc.);
- obtaining antiviral medications;
- arrangements to obtain pandemic vaccines to the extent available;
- prioritization of employees for vaccinations;
- and prioritization of employees for antiviral medications.

The guidance recommended these measures be used according to risk assessments for employees, and therefore, based on the agencies' mission and activities, not all measures may be equally appropriate for all agencies.

4. What analysis should agencies conduct to determine when and what portion of their workforces reenter physical workspaces or continue telework or administrative leave? Who should be provided with this analysis and justification?

¹GAO, *Influenza Pandemic: Increased Agency Accountability Could Help Protect Federal Employees Serving the Public in the Event of a Pandemic*, GAO-09-404 (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 2009).

In determining when and what portion of the workforce should reenter physical workspaces agencies should identify mission essential functions that cannot be performed remotely, as well as the related number of employees who will perform those functions and their risk of exposure. Agencies should consider how they will continue to update their determinations and monitor the associated risks, as these factors could affect decisions on reentry as conditions evolve.

In addition, it is important for federal agencies to factor-in local conditions of the pandemic at the component and facility level in their determinations regarding workforce reentry rather than applying across-the-board decisions based on agencies' headquarters locations. Agencies should consider making decisions about reentry, including precautions and safeguards they will take, based on the local prevalence of the pandemic at each site. For those functions that can be performed remotely, agencies may consider maximizing the use of telework.

As agencies consider local conditions for reentry, they should share information and cooperate with other agencies located in the same area. Equally important, agencies should maintain continuous communication with employees and their representatives regarding reentry considerations as these reentry decisions could change over time as the pandemic progresses, such as if there are recurring waves of outbreaks.

5. Did Administration officials who banned the use of telework across their departments stifle their ability to continue operations during a global pandemic?

We have not conducted the work necessary to answer this question. We have ongoing work looking at agencies' use of telework before and during the pandemic through which we plan to assess (1) the extent to which federal agencies had policies and procedures in place that allowed them to support expanded use of telework in response to Covid-19, and (2) the successes and challenges selected agencies experienced with telework during the current pandemic.

6. In the past, working at home with dependents present was not considered an appropriate telework location for federal employees. If a vast majority of federal employees are teleworking and have demonstrated an increase in productivity, would you agree that working with a dependent at home might not be a significant factor in an employees' performance?

We have not conducted the work necessary to answer this question. However, our ongoing work on agencies' use of telework may identify lessons learned from selected agencies use of telework during the pandemic that could inform this issue.

7. What should employer protocols for testing workers look like, both in the initial stages of reopening and in the long-term, as concerns about the pandemic persist? Who are the public health officials that agencies should be listening to when making these decisions?

We have not conducted the work necessary to answer this question. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *Guide for Businesses Looking to Reopen*, OSHA's *Guidance for Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19*, FEMA's *Planning Considerations for Organizations in Reconstituting Operations during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, and the President's *Guidelines for Opening up America Again* are resources available for employers.

8. Should agencies establish a unique position within their organizations tasked with designing and implementing effective coronavirus plans? And, if so, what skill sets should an individual have to occupy this position?

We have not conducted the work necessary to answer this question.