

Statement of Mika J. Cross
Before The
Subcommittee on Government Operations on the
Future of Federal Work
1 December 2021

Good morning, Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and distinguished members of this committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak about using the current work flexibilities and culture change the federal workforce is experiencing today, to achieve a 21st century workplace of the future, driven by mission and innovation.

I served this nation for two decades, starting as a soldier in the U.S. Army when I was eighteen years old. I created wide-ranging flexible work policies and programs serving in the Intelligence Community, the Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the Department of Labor (DOL). In 2018 I transitioned to industry leading a remote team at FlexJobs, working with global employers from all sectors who recruit and hire top talent using remote and flexible jobs.

My testimony today represents a compilation of my own personal thoughts, experiences, and observations as a fierce advocate of workplace flexibilities that include remote work, telework and other flexible workplace programs. I have seen firsthand the impacts and successes these programs have had for employers who recruit, hire, engage and retain diverse talent by promoting award-winning culture and employer brands with remote and flexible jobs.

In my prepared testimony I will cover how the government can meet three critical goals:

- Hiring, engaging, and retaining diverse talent
- Increasing productivity and performance through innovation
- Modernizing management skills to overcome barriers to change

Benefits of Flexible Recruitment and Hiring

Well before 2020, the federal government faced labor shortages and attrition, especially in critical occupations like cyber, STEM and technology. To successfully attract, hire and retain more geographically diverse and dispersed talent, both the [CIO Council](#) and the [National Science Board](#) specifically highlight the importance of using expanded telework, remote work and other flexibilities in their Future-of-Work plans.¹

Agencies like the State Department have already proven this works to make public service accessible for those who cannot accept onsite positions, due to financial or family constraints. Since 2009, the Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) program has introduced over ten thousand students to opportunities in public service working part-time and remotely with more than seventy federal agencies. Students from community colleges, tribal and minority serving institutions, and other academic programs across the country work up to ten hours a week throughout their internships, on a variety of projects. In 2020 alone, more than eight thousand

students applied to the VSFS – demonstrating the high demand for these opportunities in the federal government.

We also now have a pool of future federal workers who learned to work remotely through distance learning, and they will have vastly different expectations of employers when they enter the workforce.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that **more than 25% of adults in the U.S. have some form of disability and 13.9 have a disability affecting their mobility.** For many of these workers, remote and telework options can be more accessible than traditional office jobs that may require specific accommodations. **Disability is especially common in veterans, older adults, women, and minorities.**²

Agencies that effectively combine direct hire authorities like Schedule A, to fill remote and flexible jobs, internships or apprenticeships can quickly fill critical gaps in their talent pipelines with diverse, qualified workers who otherwise could experience barriers to federal employment.

[Promoting flexible jobs more broadly](#) could also serve as a catalyst for hiring re-employed annuitants or to create returnships to bring seasoned former federal workers back to government. Offering greater access to a variety of flexible work choices can help transform traditional government career paths to meet the preferences of the future workforce.³

Jobs with greater flexibility in location and work hours can also offer military spouses, caregivers and veterans easier access to employment opportunities.

The federal government now offers more flexible hiring options for hiring military spouses, than they did before. The Military Spouse Non-Competitive appointing authority authorizes agencies the flexibility of hiring of eligible candidates, without the usual federal competition or previous geographic requirements. This widens the opportunity for agencies to hire spouses more quickly, especially as more remote and flexible jobs are used in government-wide recruitment efforts.⁴

This summer the [Department of Defense committed to connecting spouses with more access to remote jobs in private industry](#). This is an example of how the federal government could partner with the DoD Spouse Education & Career Opportunities (SECO) service to point qualified spouses into our hiring pool for flexible jobs.⁵

For workers experiencing geographic or mobility challenges to employment like military spouses, veterans, caregivers, older workers, people with disabilities and rural workers – access to federal jobs can be a gamechanger.

Engagement and Retention

The 2020 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) showed that federal workers who teleworked daily, increased from 3% to 59% during the Pandemic.⁶

But not all jobs are suitable to work that way, so agencies rapidly adopted a “hybrid” approach using a mix of onsite, telework and remote work. To keep the health and safety of federal workers at the forefront, **agencies quickly changed their workplace policies to eliminate core hours and offer more choices in flexible schedules and work location.**

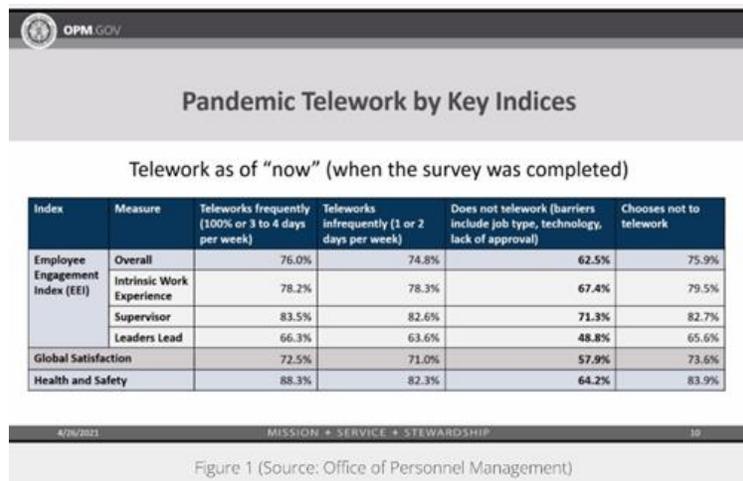
And while millions of parents and caregivers were forced out of work because their jobs could not adapt, federal managers effectively used maximum flexibility to keep the mission going.

This proves agencies CAN overcome management resistance, one of the top barriers to maximizing the benefits of flexible work across the federal government.

What were the most significant impacts on Engagement?

- 2020 FEVS scores were the **highest in 5 years for Leadership and Management Practices that Contribute to Agency Performance, Overall Engagement, and Global Satisfaction**
- 48% said their **work demands increased**
- 73% believe their **agencies will respond effectively to future emergencies**.

The 2020 FEVS also reported a contrast in engagement levels for those who were able to telework (76%) and those who could not (62.5%) – demonstrating the impact that telework has on worker satisfaction and employee engagement. ⁶



Employee engagement and retention has fast-tracked to emerge as a top priority for employers in today's work environment, especially since the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports that availability of workers for open positions are declining](#) and more than half of knowledge workers (57%) who have become accustomed to flexible working, are open to looking for a new job.^{8,9}

As more competitors for government talent [announce their plans for staying remote](#) post-pandemic, it will be increasingly important for agencies to look for more ways to build on the impact maximizing work flexibility can achieve.¹⁰

Productivity And Performance

Despite the challenges the government had tracking telework in the past¹¹, many agencies report significant enhancements in innovation, productivity, and performance now, as a positive result of the pandemic.

Some examples include:

- The Defense Digital Service partnered with the Washington Headquarters Services, to **onboard more than 1,200 new DoD employees from the safety of their homes** using Slack for its built-in voice and video capabilities for swearing in and enhancing the workflows for processing new hire documents.¹²
- SBA quickly **hired thousands²⁰ of remote employees in 30-days shorter than the governmentwide goal**. It successfully converted to a virtual onboarding process and employees hired remotely will continue to be remote.¹³
- DOL **virtually onboarded 740 new employees** between March and November 2020 and **waived internal telework policy limitations** to quickly maximize telework for ensuring employee safety and continuity of operations.¹⁴
- **Customer Experience Officers across the federal government like CDC, IRS, USDA, and the VA have continued to improve customer call center functionality** and modalities, to offer services to citizens from a distance.¹⁵
- The **U.S. Intelligence Community moved analysts to remote work at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), using existing technologies in new and innovative ways** to securely transfer data from unclassified to classified environments using end-to-end cross-domain pipelines.¹⁶
- VBA implemented a framework that prioritizes **improving the customer service experience of veterans during the pandemic by meeting with 3.8 million Veterans and their families** through an ongoing series of local Tele-town hall,¹⁷ tele-counseling, customer experience surveys, social media channels¹⁸ and maintained consistent operations with updated information at its national call centers.¹⁹

In 2016 the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the Agencies they researched for a congressional report, found the greatest benefits to federal telework were:

- **Improved recruitment/retention**
- **Increased productivity**
- **Improved work/life balance**

However, in that same report GAO also highlighted **management resistance, as the consistently most frequently reported barrier to telework** by OPM.²⁰

MODERNIZE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Supervisory training is a requirement of the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010; however, management resistance to telework continues to create barriers for maximizing the projected benefits across the federal government.

Training on telework laws and compliance with agency policy, is much different from equipping managers with the modern skills necessary to engage and lead teams in a multi-generational, mobile, and flexible work environment.

To successfully expand broad access to flexible, remote and hybrid work post-pandemic, agencies should tap into the tools they have in place now to help managers better assess performance and effectively lead from any location.

Here are three specific ways to do that:

1. Leverage the free coaching services available from the [Federal Coaching Network](#) and make coaching a requirement for all new supervisors, as part of their required annual training.
2. Use [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP) counselors more broadly to consult with managers and supervisors to navigate a variety of employee and organizational challenges (performance or otherwise.) EAP services can help with a wide range of personal and work-related challenges, to support and enhance job performance, health, mental and emotional well-being.
3. Create, maintain and fund effective [ombudsman programs](#). Especially in agencies that have significant interaction with the public, effective ombuds programs can help mitigate issues that affect customer service, mission outcomes and productivity. The Ombuds can also confidentially address perceived workplace policy inequities or conflicts that help avoid costly formal investigations or complaints.

CLOSING

Despite positive ways flexible work, telework and remote work can impact cost savings, productivity, continuity, turnover, real- estate, and the environment, **it was not until we HAD to work this way that we proved the federal government COULD.**

The pandemic has caused great loss and hardship on the American people and our global community. But as with any great challenge, we can and MUST learn from it and use what we learned to improve and move forward. This was a key doctrine I learned in the Army and one that I have been trying to practice for my entire career.

An excerpt from my favorite quote inscribed on the Jefferson Memorial reads:

“I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and Constitutions. But laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.”

Building the next generation of public servants means sustaining the way we have adapted our workplaces now, to promote the health and safety of workers, attract and retain diverse talent and ensure that the federal workforce of the future reflects the communities it serves.

Doing so enhances productivity, prosperity, and the future of our great country.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

About Mika J. Cross

Mika J. Cross is a distinguished thought leader and trusted advisor, with expertise in designing and implementing innovative, strategic workplace solutions for enhancing the employee experience and the overall world of work.

Her career began in uniform with the United States Army, having served as both a commissioned officer and enlisted soldier. She is known as a passionate advocate for public service, having served for more than two decades across government. She wrote and implemented precedent-setting, human capital policy and flexible workplace initiatives within the United States Intelligence Community, post 9/11 and for agencies like USDA, OPM, DOL – among others.

Serving as the Vice President of Employer Engagement and Strategic Initiatives at FlexJobs, Mika worked with business executives across private, public, and non-profit sectors to customize their talent management capabilities, establish recruitment/marketing brands and develop workforce planning efforts using flexible and remote jobs to attract, recruit, hire and retain top talent.

Known as a Federal Workplace Expert, Mika is regularly featured on the nationally broadcast show, [Government Matters](#) and has highlighted the federal government's flexible work potential in books like [Workshift: Future-Proof Your Organization for the 21st Century](#) and [The Whole Person Workplace](#).

She also volunteers her time to share next and promising practices in a variety of settings, having worked with organizations like the [Greater Washington Board of Trade Connected DMV](#) Work Group, the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) [Digital Transformation Work Group](#)/Workforce Transformation Team, and as part of the [Ambassador Network](#) for the DoD Military Spouse Employment Partnership, to name a few.

As a native of Maine, Mika is enthusiastic in advocating for ways rural communities can benefit from workforce development and economic development initiatives that bring greater access to remote and flexible jobs.

Footnotes to the “Future of the Federal Workforce” testimony of Mika J. Cross, submitted November 29, 2021

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² CIO Council. Of The Federal It Workforce Update May 2020. (n.d.). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from https://www.cio.gov/assets/resources/Future_of_Federal_IT_Workforce_Update_Public_Version.pdf

³ *15 Government Agencies with Remote and Flexible Jobs*. FlexJobs Job Search Tips and Blog. <https://www.flexjobs.com/post/10-government-agencies-with-remote-jobs-and-flexible-work-v2/>

⁴ *Presidential Documents Title 3- The President Enhancing Noncompetitive Civil Service Appointments of Military Spouses*. (1383). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2018-05-14/pdf/2018-10403.pdf>

⁵ *Military spouse education & career opportunities*. MySECO. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2021, from <https://myseco.militaryonesource.mil/portal/article/remote-and-flexible-jobs-for-millife-get-a-free-flexjobs-members>

^{6,7} *Office of Personnel Management. 2020. Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey*. Retrieved November 27, 2021, from <https://www.opm.gov/fevs/reports/governmentwide-reports/governmentwide-management-report/governmentwide-report/2020/2020-governmentwide-management-report.pdf>

⁸ *Data Shows Worker Availability Sinking Toward Historic Lows*. U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Retrieved November 27, 2021, from <https://www.uschamber.com/employment-law-data-shows-worker-availability-sinking-toward-historic-lows-all-over-again>

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¹⁰ Courtney, E. (2020, June 18). *30 Companies Switching to Long-term Remote Work*. FlexJobs Job Search Tips and Blog. <https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/companies-switching-remote-work-long-term/>

¹¹ *Status of Telework in the federal government: Report to Congress* (n.d.). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.telework.gov/reports-studies/reports-to-congress/2020-report-to-congress.pdf>

¹² Slack. *Customer Stories*. (n.d.). *Video Conferencing*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://slack/customer-stories/defense-digital-service-government-teamwork>

¹³ Bubl , C. (2021, November 4). *SBA’s Elias Hernandez on Telework and distributing relief during the pandemic*. Government Executive. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.govexec.com/management/2021/11/sbas-elias-hernandez-telework-and-distributing-relief-during-pandemic/186552/>

¹⁴ *Home Security & Governmental Affairs*. Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee. (n.d.). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Sydney%20T.%20Rose%20Testimony%20-%20DOL1>

¹⁵ Annapolis, A. S. A. S. writes on technology trends from, Md., IT, military, & Technologies, F.-R. (n.d.). *USDA, VA Update Contact Centers to Give Citizens a Better Connection*. Technology Solutions That Drive Government. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://fedtechmagazine.com/article/2021/11/usda-va-update-contact-centers-give-citizens-better-connection>

¹⁶ *How Intel IT Transitioned to Supporting 100,000 Remote Workers*. Intel Communities. (2020, April 20). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://community.intel.com/t5/Blogs/Products-and-Solutions/Remote-Work/How-Intel-IT-Transitioned-to-Supporting-100-000-Remote-Workers/post/1334962>

¹⁷ Veterans Benefits Administration. (n.d.). [www.benefits.va.gov](https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/teletownhall.asp#schedule). Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/teletownhall.asp#schedule>

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¹⁹ How VBA served Veterans during the pandemic. (2020, December 17). VAntage Point. <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/82511/vba-served-veterans-pandemic/>

²⁰ GAO-16-551, Better Guidance Could Help Agencies Calculate Benefits and Costs, GAO-16-551 (July 2016) [GAO-16-551, Federal Telework: Better Guidance Could Help Agencies Calculate Benefits and Costs](#)