

**OVERSIGHT OF FEDERAL AGENCIES'
POST-PANDEMIC TELEWORK POLICIES
PART II**

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND ACCOUNTABILITY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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PART II**

Wednesday, November 29, 2023

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE FEDERAL
WORKFORCE
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:17 p.m., in room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Pete Sessions [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Sessions, Palmer, Higgins, Biggs, Donalds, Timmons, Boebert, Edwards, Mfume, Norton, Frost, Connolly, Lee, and Crockett.

Also present: Representative Tlaib.

Mr. SESSIONS. The Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce will come to order, and I would like to welcome everyone to this hearing today.

Without objection, the Chair may declare a recess at any time.

And I recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

Without objection, Congresswoman Tlaib from Michigan is being waived on to the Committee for the purpose of questioning the witnesses at today’s Subcommittee hearing.

I would like to welcome everyone to this hearing, a hearing that has been postponed a couple of times, and we finally made it, so thank you for the witnesses for appearing again today.

This is a hearing of the House Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce.

We gather for the second hearing around an issue that is called telework in Federal agencies. The underlying question remains the same: are the telework policies in Federal agencies putting mission accomplishment and the taxpayer first? This is a question that has been asked by my colleagues. It is a constant discussion not only on the Hill, but back in almost every single congressional district in America, and it even resides in the media.

In our first hearing we had the opportunity to hear from four agencies regarding their approach to telework and its impact on Agency mission. These agencies were selected because their responses to our Committee inquiries, where we were seeking real

data about telework, appeared to reflect a good-faith effort to answer our questions. But honestly, we also wanted to use them to find out leading-edge answers to problems that we had seen across government and were hoping they could lend that ear to us with answers, and many times they did. This hearing, however, takes the other end of the spectrum.

I want to be clear, of the 25 agencies we wrote last spring, many responses were, in fact, not responsive. They did not respond or severely delayed their response to this Government Operations request. Eleven of the 25 did not include any figures at all regarding how many of their employees were currently teleworking either in Washington, DC, this area, or nationwide. This lack of transparency or lack of basic knowledge the Administration has about the Federal telework workforce raises concerns that every single member on this Committee on both sides of the aisle should share and be a part of, and I think you will see, by the end of today, we will.

It is our job to conduct oversight of the executive branch on behalf of the American people. And our requests were reasonable, they were not “gotcha” in any way, and I have tried to followup with agencies accordingly to request that they please answer the questions and make themselves available. Bear in mind, all of these agencies are supposedly putting together plans geared toward “improving organizational health and organizational performance,” and the impact of telework for good or bad is supposed to be a part of those plans.

That OMB guidance further states agencies should develop a set of validated indicators that can be routinely measured, tracked, and assessed with an organization’s senior leadership manager, frontline managers, workforce, and stakeholders so that they can monitor the organization’s effectiveness and ability, including resiliency, capacity, and capability to perform and adapt themselves. And finally, according to the timeline set out in the guidance, activities around these plans should be well underway, so it is very difficult for me to understand why so many of the responses we receive look nothing more than like they were simply just phoning it in. This is a serious effort by this Subcommittee. It is and has produced questions across both sides of our aisle, Republicans and Democrats, and that is why I and Mr. Mfume are here today. Either these agencies simply do not know the answers to some or all the questions they were asked, or perhaps they just do not want to share it.

In its guidance, OMB called for an increase in meaningful in-person work. In our first hearing, we discussed the negative impact telework and remote work could have on the new younger workers and new workers. So, it was curious that for months after this guidance was issued, the White House Chief of Staff would need to send an email stressing the need to increase in-person work. I would like to think that that was a reality check by the Chief of Staff of the White House because of congressional pressure and pressure from this Committee and Subcommittee. The obvious answer would be that he sent the email because agencies were not doing what OMB had already directed them to do.

Along with Chairman Jamie Comer and Congresswoman Boebert, I sent a letter to Mr. Zients, who is the chief of staff, asking a number of questions related to this email. On September 19 we received a response but not any answers to our questions. Then yesterday, *The Wall Street Journal* story in which an Administration spokesman admitted only two agencies had reached their goals in adopting and enforcement of new workplace requirements, confirming our suspicion. In our first hearing, we heard that agencies are trying to figure out the right mix of telework and in-person work, but the President himself is telling Federal employees to please get back to work, and they simply are not coming. Perhaps now Mr. Biden is more sympathetic in his concerns that Mr. Trump raised about Federal workforce wintering the policies of the chief executive.

Today is another step in understanding the Federal telework situation, but I cannot say that I am confident that the Biden Administration has a handle or even control over that, but we will see what today yields. And with that, I would like to yield for any time he would choose to take, the Subcommittee Ranking Member, Mr. Mfume, for his opening statement. Mr. Mfume?

Mr. MFUME. Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for your work on helping to get us back to this point. This is part two of a process, and I want it to be on the record by indicating that we on this side of the aisle welcome the opportunity to conclude, if not finish completely, the discussions and the oversight that we have had on this matter.

I want to set the tone of this hearing by focusing on two words, and that is, "efficiency and effectiveness," and I believe that members of this Subcommittee work together to execute that mission to the best of our abilities. And so, on behalf of the people we serve, you will hear me reiterate again those words, "effective and efficient," throughout this hearing. To that extent, I expect each Agency to operate and execute their unique mission effectively and efficiently, whether their employees are working entirely remotely, or working hybrid, or telework schedules that require some in-person working as well.

During the pandemic that we were all so happy to get behind us, government agencies increased their dependence on telework and remote work agreements, finding ways to serve the Nation in the midst of a deadly public health crisis. Earlier this year, as I indicated, we hosted part one of this hearing series. And our agency witnesses made it clear to those of us who were present that prioritizing data collection to gauge and improve their performance was absolutely critical to ensuring that the agencies' workforce policies drive exceptional service. We believe, I know I certainly do, and I think that many of you do also, that the American people deserve the best performance that agencies can provide. This Subcommittee, hence then, we will really not tolerate, nor should we, inexcusable things like absenteeism that is undocumented, or poor productivity with no plan to increase it, or some of the horror stories that we have seen as we follow this issue.

As one who has fought valiantly to make sure that our agencies are protected and supported, I am really pleased to learn that those same agencies that came before us possess, or at least say

they do, the tracking systems necessary and are employing the metrics necessary to gauge employee performance. So, the last thing I want to do is to force agencies to adopt policies that are not conducive to their mission or that fail to attract and retain top talent. As I have said before, I encourage agencies that can increase in-person work, as the President has stated repeatedly, to do so as necessary for the successful delivery of their agencies' mission.

Meanwhile, and concurrently, getting the House of Representatives and the floor of the House moving again by passing a continuing resolution was only half of the battle that we face here in the Congress. We have, as most of you know, roughly 8 weeks before we are faced with another possible government shutdown, and that, my friends, is not efficient or effective. We are now in a permanent state of lurching from one near-government shutdown to another looming one on the horizon. And we know that short-term, temporary spending bills can and often do create unnecessary work and uncertainty for Federal agencies and for our constituents who rely on those agencies for lifesaving programs.

Mr. Chairman, I would ask unanimous consent to insert in the record a recent *Washington Post* article about the massive headaches that successive shutdown threats cause the Federal workers, agencies, and contractors.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you. If Congress cannot pass an appropriations package, agency employees will be rendered hopelessly unproductive because you cannot work when the government is shut down, and you certainly cannot work when you are furloughed. So, I hope that for the sake of our military and civilian workforce, for the sake of our Nation, that we do not get to that point.

So today, we, in part two, are examining whether four Federal agencies, including the Social Security Administration, have, indeed, the right workforce policies in place to serve our communities. SSA has suffered from under-investment over the years. In fact, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities reports that despite a 21-percent increase in Social Security beneficiaries, the Social Security operating budget fell by 13 percent. So an increase in beneficiaries of 21 percent, a decrease in the operating budget by 13 percent, and that is over the last 11 years. That is an increased workload, but obviously with fewer resources.

So, I would encourage my colleagues to keep in mind, hopefully, as we move forward with this funding agreement that hampering agencies like the Social Security Agency and those of you before us today is not something that is a byproduct of the hearing. I hope that we are able to, as I said before, operate and have this hearing to produce efficient and effective answers. Oversight is extremely important, and I would strongly urge those of you who are following up on the part one that took place of this, that the request from Members of Congress for information, specific information that came out of that hearing, is, in fact, delivered to the Committee.

Mr. Chairman, I do not have anything else at this point. I would yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Mr. Mfume, I want to thank you for your comments, and I think effective and

being efficient is important. I would also point to, as we could point to and should point to round one, that we think that the Passport Office and the IRS, which perhaps could be called Exhibit A of issues that Members of Congress had, I think have improved. I think our hearing did help, and I think getting information does help, so it is my hope that we will be equally successful today.

I am now pleased to introduce today's witnesses. First, we have Jeremy Pelter, serves as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration at the U.S. Department of Commerce and is currently also performing the non-exclusive functions and duties of the Department's Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Secretary for Administration. In his role, Mr. Pelter oversees the management administration service functions for the Department. Mr. Pelter, welcome. Pelter, excuse me.

Then we have Bob Leavitt, serves as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Human Resources and Chief Human Capital Officer for the United States Department of Health and Human Services. In his role, Mr. Leavitt is responsible for recruitment, development, and retention of the Health and Human Services workforce. Welcome, Mr. Leavitt.

We have Kathryn Stevens, serves as Acting Chief Human Capital Officer for the United States Agency for International Development. Prior to this, Ms. Stevens was USAID's Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator in the Office of Human Capital and Talent Management, where she led the Agency's promotion, performance management, and staff care efforts, among other areas. We are delighted that you are here, and welcome.

Last, we have Oren Hank McKnelly, serves as Executive Counselor to the Acting Commissioner of Social Security Administration. In this role, Mr. McKnelly works to optimize law, policy, and regulations for SSA in a number of areas, including COVID-19 workplace safety, re-entry, labor relations, and oversight of the Agency's implementation of the various executive order. We are delighted that you are all here.

Pursuant to Committee Rule 9(g), I would ask that the witnesses now rise and raise their right hand, and I will administer the oath.

Do you solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony that you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Mr. SESSIONS. Let the record show that the witnesses, when they say, "I do," all answered in the affirmative, please. Thank you. It is not that I am hard of hearing, I just was not paying attention. Thank you very much. Please let that record show that they all answered in the affirmative, and thank you. You may take your seat.

We appreciate each of you being here today. We look forward to your testimony. And let me remind the witnesses that we have read your written statements, and they will appear in full in the hearing record. Please limit your oral testimony to about 5 minutes, although I am more interested in a correct answer and you responding through. So I tend to be a little bit less, or what I would say, more lenient on trying to make sure that both Member and the witness have a chance to properly answer.

As a reminder, please note that you have a button in front of you on the microphone, and when it is on, Members can hear you. When it is not, we cannot. So, when you speak, the light in front of you will turn green, and after about 4 minutes the light will turn yellow. When the red light comes on, it is about time to wrap up your statements.

I recognize now Mr. Pelter for his opening statement. And if I butchered anyone's name, I apologize, but if you will correct me on the record, you are free to do that. The Chair now recognize the gentleman for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF JEREMY PELTER
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the Department of Commerce's telework and remote work policies.

I am pleased to report that Department of Commerce is hard at work. The Department's nearly 50,000 personnel work across the country and around the world to improve the conditions for economic growth and opportunity for all communities, and to advance the Nation's economic and national security. Over the last 3 years alone, we announced over \$46 billion in funding to expand access to reliable, affordable high speed internet services. We implemented significant export controls in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and built a global export control coalition implementing substantially similar controls.

We implemented export controls on certain advanced computing and semiconductor manufacturing items destined to the People's Republic of China, as well as restricted certain supercomputer and semiconductor end uses as part of the Department's broader effort to counter the PRC's civil military fusion strategy and abuse of human rights. We also completed and transmitted the results of the 2020 Census to the President and Congress. We awarded over \$560 million to coastal and Great Lakes grantees as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law's Climate-Ready Coasts initiative.

We announced two notice of funding opportunities in connection with the bipartisan CHIPS and Science Act, which will help revitalize the U.S. semiconductor industry. We established programs to invest over \$2 billion in American communities through innovative place-based economic development, among many other accomplishments. And we replaced our legacy patent application filing and management system with a significantly modernized patent center for easier public use.

The Department continues to successfully accomplish our mission while finding appropriate balance and incentivizing our workforce. And I would like to just briefly acknowledge our employees for what they do to ensure this Department continues its critical work while maintaining the highest level of professional excellence. From artificial intelligence to tech hubs, supply chain, to weather and economic forecasting, our Agency is leading the way in predicting and shaping the future.

I want to stress at the outset that the Department deeply values the benefits of in-person work. Many employees work in person 5 days a week. Department policy generally requires career employees in the Office of the Secretary to work in the office at least 3 days a week with no more than 2 days of routine telework, while political appointees are expected to work in the office at least 4 days a week with no more than 1 day of routine telework. Department bureaus and offices may not depart from this baseline policy without approval, which may be granted based on specific mission needs and circumstances. I often see and experience the moments that illustrate the value of in-person work. Those moments add up, and we believe that the Department is better positioned to achieve its mission, both in the short term and over the long term when employees spend substantial time together in the office.

At the same time, telework has been a part of the Department's culture across multiple administrations. For example, in 2018, during the Trump Administration, the Department adopted a telework policy that encouraged supervisors to allow telework-ready employees to participate in regular recurring telework at least 2 days per pay period. And in March 2020, as the realities of the COVID-19 global pandemic set in, the Department, like public and private employers across the country, shifted its operations first to a mandatory telework posture and, months later, to a maximum telework posture.

As outlined in detail in my written testimony, the Department now operates in a hybrid posture that is designed to help us retain and motivate our employees by providing flexibility to a workforce changed by the pandemic, but which also embraces the many benefits of in-person engagement and team building. Following the Secretary's return to office announcement in March 2022, the Department's headquarters saw the average daily occupancy increase from 24 percent in the third quarter of Fiscal Year 2022 to now 42 percent, ending the fourth quarter of Fiscal Year 2023, the most recent full quarter. The Department anticipates that this upward trend will continue. Additionally, the preliminary findings from a GAO inquiry placed the Department in the top quartile of CFO Act agencies for utilizing headquarters buildings.

In closing, the Department is committed to thoughtfully and continually evaluating its telework policies in order to inform our strategy of incentivizing and protecting our workforce, on delivering on our mission, and being accountable stewards of Federal property and tax dollars. Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much, Mr. Pelter. Mr. Leavitt, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF BOB LEAVITT
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF HUMAN RESOURCES
AND CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

Mr. LEAVITT. Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you all for what you do, and thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services. My name is Bob

Leavitt. I serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Human Resources and Chief Human Capital Officer. I am responsible for supporting the Department's recruitment, development, and retention of the Department's talented and dedicated workforce.

Prior to joining HHS, I served 25 years supporting foreign assistance programs and national security policy. As a career civil servant, I am proud to support over 90,000 mission-driven employees across HHS who work tirelessly to enhance the health and well-being of all Americans. I appreciate this opportunity to discuss how HHS continues to deliver for the American people while supporting its large and diverse workforce.

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the workplace for many Americans, including many HHS employees. At the same time, thousands of our frontline health workers, lab technicians, researchers and other mission-critical employees never left their work onsite, even at the height of the pandemic. And today, regardless of where one works, HHS employees are working full time to deliver programs and services that are essential for promoting the health and well-being of all Americans, and they are delivering results, results that matter. We established the new nationwide 988 suicide prevention and drug crisis lifeline. Over the past year alone, 988 has answered 5 million calls, texts, and chats, providing 24/7 crisis support. We implemented a record-breaking open enrollment period in which over 16 million Americans selected a marketplace health plan, and we oversaw the distribution of over 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses across the country.

This is only a snapshot of the Department's accomplishments. As we continue delivering on our mission, HHS pursues policies that allow for workplace flexibilities that balance in-office time needed to collaborate and build a strong workplace culture with the necessary workplace flexibilities. We are proud that HHS is consistently rated as one of the best places to work in the Federal Government for large agencies, and we strive to create a workplace that works for everyone, one that both prioritizes employee well-being, employee engagement, and one that fulfills our mission. To that end, workplace flexibility has helped us attract, support, and retain a talented, engaged, and diverse workforce. These flexibilities are often especially important for service members, veterans, military spouses, those with disabilities, among others. For example, workplace flexibilities help us retain military spouses regardless of where their families move throughout the country in service to the American people. This year, we increased the number of military spouses hired by 36 percent.

The Department is also strategically planning for our workforce of the future. Like other agencies, workplace flexibilities help us remain competitive with the private sector, and workplace flexibilities matter to the talent that we need to deliver on our mission today and into the future. As we look ahead, we are continually working to optimize our organizational health and organizational performance, and we are committed to continuing to increase our meaningful in-office work.

This fall, we increased in-office presence at headquarters in the National Capital Region, Atlanta, and Baltimore, and that same expectation applies to offices outside of headquarters this winter.

And I would like to assure the Subcommittee that we take organizational health and organizational employee performance seriously, regardless of where one works. The Department manages the employee performance process through clearly established expectations and assessments. We hold supervisors accountable for ensuring the performance of the teams and employees they supervise.

Over the past few years, colleagues across HHS have helped lead the country through the pandemic. They demonstrate unwavering resilience and dedication, while remaining steadfast to the Department's mission. We are proud of the work that they accomplish every day in service to the American people. And I am proud and humbled to work in support of them and in support of our H.R. colleagues across the Department. Thank you.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. Leavitt, thank you very much. Ms. Stevens, we are delighted that you are here. The gentlewoman is recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF KATHRYN STEVENS
ACTING CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Ms. STEVENS. Thank you, Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of—

Mr. SESSIONS. Excuse me, just a moment, please. Does the gentlewoman have her microphone on?

Ms. STEVENS. It sure is on, I think. The light is on.

Mr. SESSIONS. OK. We were having a little bit of trouble up here. So, is that a little better?

Ms. STEVENS. Should I move it? OK. Thank you.

Mr. SESSIONS. That would be of great assistance. Thank you very much. The gentlewoman may continue.

Ms. STEVENS. Right. Thank you. We appreciate the opportunity to share how USAID's dedicated workforce represents the generosity of the American people and addressed unprecedented global challenges both efficiently and effectively. Since our founding in 1961, USAID has extended the reach of peace, prosperity, and human dignity globally. We are immensely grateful to Congress for your continued bipartisan support in that mission. Our work is a demonstration to the world that America cares and delivers like no other country can. It also matters to Americans here at home. It makes us safer and more prosperous, engenders goodwill worldwide, and creates a better shared future for generations to come.

USAID's reach spans 80 countries with over 13,000 staff. We are unique in having a workforce that is passionately connected to our humanitarian and development mission. Eighty-eight percent of our team reported a deep connection to mission on a survey conducted in 2022. Our ability to accomplish our mission depends on our most valuable asset, and that is our people, people who over the past 3 years have responded to 75 crises in more than 70 countries, contributed to a remarkable 58 percent decline in under-5 child mortality worldwide, and providing clean drinking water to nearly 65 million people. Today, our team is delivering lifesaving humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians, helping to shore up conditions for the Ukrainian people and their economy in the midst of

Russia's brutal war, and responding to natural disasters in real time, such as the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and the hurricane in Mexico.

To further strengthen our global workforce, we are reducing our reliance on short-term employment contracts, stepping up recruitment and retention measures, and streamlining bureaucratic processes that undermine our effectiveness. We are also doing more to support and strengthen our locally hired workforce in over 80 countries, given the vital role that they play in achieving our mission as they make up over 70 percent of our overseas workforce. USAID is also modernizing our operations, including reducing our physical space footprint at headquarters and utilizing secure technology platforms to keep our teams connected. We have received eight A grades on GAO's FITARA Scorecard, in part due to our success in moving to a secure government cloud more than a decade ago. All of this is an essential foundation of a flexible hybrid global workplace.

As elsewhere in the USG, our domestic team had the option to telework prior to the pandemic. During the height of the COVID emergency, most of our staff were in maximum telework status. Since then, we have updated our workplace flexibilities to better meet the operational needs of the Agency, allowing for a balance of in-person work and telework. These flexibilities are a vital recruitment and retention tool. We know that the scale of the global challenges that USAID addresses requires increased in-person collaboration. So, we leveraged OMB's directive on workplace presence to increase our domestic in-office footprint to 3 days a week starting in late September.

Retaining this flexibility has positioned USAID to attract, to retain, and invest in a crisis-ready development and humanitarian team. The new policy has helped us to strengthen our One USAID Culture post-pandemic, as well as to support the many new and junior staff hired over the last 3 years. We are very proud of our progress to date, and we are continuing to monitor how it is going through the Organizational Health Index and make adjustments where necessary.

In conclusion, our balanced policy of workplace flexibility is essential to delivering on our ambitious global mission. Thank you, and I would be very happy to answer any questions.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much. Mr. McKnelly, welcome. We are delighted that you are here. The gentleman is recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF OREN "HANK" MCKNELLY
EXECUTIVE COUNSELOR
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**

Mr. MCKNELLY. Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Hank McKnelly, Executive Counselor to the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. Thank you for inviting me to discuss telework in SSA.

For over 20 years we have had telework to some degree at our Agency. Our telework policy is the same now as it was before the pandemic. Our hybrid work approach supports our mission. We are a public-facing organization. Thus, our frontline employees report

onsite to serve the public in person. Each day our dedicated staff serve field office visitors, answer questions by phone, hold hearings, pay benefits, and complete numerous other workloads to provide the public with the benefits and services they have earned and need.

Regardless of where our employees are located, they are working. Still, telework is not one-size-fits-all. Rather, it is based on business needs. Before the pandemic, many employees teleworked regularly and had their laptops at home in anticipation of weather or other emergency-required telework days. During the COVID-19 pandemic, telework allowed us to protect the public and our employees while continuing to provide critical services. We know that many people rely on our in-person services, while others prefer to reach us online and by phone.

For example, we began offering online video hearings, using software that allows hearing participation from any private location using a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Today 80 percent of our claimants continue to voluntarily elect a hearing option that does not require travel to our offices. Meanwhile, we ended Fiscal Year 2023 with the lowest level of pending cases since 2000 and are on track to reduce the average wait for a hearing decision to our goal of 270 days. This is an example of how our service is evolving and how our hybrid work approach continues to support our mission.

Agency leadership determines which positions are telework eligible, and the frequency is based on the nature of the position and business needs. Our telework practices, policies, and bargaining agreements guide management in determining the appropriate workplace flexibilities to accomplish our mission efficiently and effectively. We have longstanding service metrics and management information systems that capture our workloads. Managers use these tools to monitor employee performance and ensure we are serving the public regardless of physical location. To meet the needs for in-person service or other onsite work needs like training, our managers can change, suspend, or recall telework employees. Managers are accountable for ensuring work is accomplished and addressing any performance issues.

We continue to evaluate the right mix of hybrid work that provides responsive public service while also aligning the evolution of work and attracting and retaining talented employees. To capitalize on the benefits of being together in person, the Acting Commissioner has decided to increase the onsite presence in headquarters' offices for managers and supervisors.

The Agency faces service challenges worsened by the pandemic. Our budget drives the level of customer service we can deliver. Our employees are doing their part to restore and improve service while working within our current funding levels. Building the capacity to meet the public's expectations for timely customer service requires sustained and sufficient funding and staffing levels. To provide the best customer service, we must continuously evaluate factors, such as how the public is choosing to engage with us, how to best connect our employees with our mission, and what it will take to recruit and retain top talent, and, above all, how these and other metrics help us serve the public.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and look forward to your questions.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. McKnelly, thank you very much. I want to thank the panel for their forthright presentation to us. And next I like to go to the distinguished gentleman from Alabama, the Chairman of the Republican Policy Committee, Mr. Palmer. Mr. Palmer, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. PALMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want each one of you to just quickly answer this. What percentage of your D.C.-based Federal employees relocated out of state during the COVID pandemic? Do you have an idea of Mr. Pelter?

Mr. PELTER. I do not have a specific account. We know it was—

Mr. PALMER. I am just asking for an estimate, percentage-wise. You do not have to give me a specific account.

Mr. PELTER. It was very low. Very low.

Mr. PALMER. Very low. How about you, Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. I do not have the exact number offhand. I would anticipate a similar low number.

Mr. PALMER. OK. Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. Also, very low for USAID. Three percent of our domestic workforce relocated outside the DMV, but it was a bit of a wash because 2 percent moved into the DMV during that time-frame.

Mr. PALMER. OK. Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Very low as well.

Mr. PALMER. OK. I would like to get an idea of what that is because it also impacts locality pay, but I want to ask something else. And particularly, Mr. Leavitt and Mr. McKnelly, one of the things that concerns me is, I have done a lot of work on inefficiencies in the Federal Government, particularly resulting in improper payments. And one of the main causes for improper payment is that many of our agencies have antiquated data systems. So, we are now probably in the range of \$250 billion, \$300 billion a year in improper payments. Health and Human Services has a lot of that improper payment problem, particularly with Medicare and Medicaid. Social Security is not exempt from it either. I would like to know, have you tracked your Agency's amount of improper payments, and particularly in context of the number of people who are not working in the office that are working remotely. Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. Thank you for your question. We share your commitment to ensure that we are both efficient and effective—

Mr. PALMER. I would rather if you just give me a direct answer.

Mr. LEAVITT. And we do have systems in place to ensure that we are tracking the locality rate of the employees to ensure the—

Mr. PALMER. That is not what I just asked you. I am asking you, are you keeping up with improper payments because your Agency has the biggest share of improper payments, and it is a combination of things. It is antiquated data system, which is a problem if you are working remotely, unless you have upgraded your systems. But it is also administrative errors as failure to verify eligibility, particularly in Medicare and Medicaid. Have you looked at this in the context of not having people in the office working on these things? Has your rate of improper payments gone up or down?

Mr. LEAVITT. I cannot speak to that example—

Mr. PALMER. OK. How about you, Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question.

Mr. PALMER. Turn on your microphone, please.

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. I also cannot speak to the question on the record at this particular point in time.

Mr. PALMER. OK. Mr. Chairman, I think that I would like for these gentlemen to respond in writing to this question. I would like a detailed answer on your improper payments, and I want to kind of deviate on this—

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. Palmer, let me answer your question is that Mr. Mfume and I do intend that the witnesses would, because they have staff available, understand that we would be expecting that in writing back to the Committee within 15 days. And we will state that not only during the hearing at the end, but we will also state it in writing. Thank you.

Mr. PALMER. Reclaiming my time, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Mr. Mfume, as well.

I would like to know, too, about productivity measurements because one of the things that becomes a problem with remote working is you lose productivity. And I have heard some of you in your testimony say that your preference is for people to be in the office because it is a more conducive and productive working environment. So, have you done anything to measure productivity? Mr. Pelter?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. We certainly experience some work that is more productive in person as well as some work that can be produced just as effectively and efficiently.

Mr. PALMER. But have you—

Mr. PELTER. Yes.

Mr. PALMER. Have you done an internal audit to determine whether or not your productivity has been impacted by people not coming into the office? It is a very simple question. Either you have or you have not.

Mr. PELTER. Thank you. I would not use the phrase, sir, “internal audit.” However, I do generally look at three tiers: first, the strategic plan that our Secretary has put in place and whether or not we are meeting those objectives, or—

Mr. PALMER. OK. Then Mr. Chairman, I think we need to get an answer from each one of our witnesses as to whether or not productivity has improved, declined, stayed the same because I think it is important that productivity be a part of this analysis of whether or not it is in the best interest of the American taxpayers to have the people who work for them working remotely. And my time has expired and I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. Palmer, thank you very much. I consider that a fair question, would ask that each of our witnesses understand that that would be a part of a letter that we will be sending, requesting that data and information for you to respond to.

The gentleman now yields back his time. The gentlewoman, Ms. Norton, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I particularly appreciate our witnesses for coming forward today. I do want to note that chronic understaffing and starving agencies of much-needed resources is the cause of service backlogs, not the

telework policies that are so often blamed. As I did at this Subcommittee's last hearing on this subject, I would like to use my time to highlight critical work performed by Federal employees every single day and the increasing efficiency we see. Federal employees deserve praise for their dedication and service, not derision.

I have introduced a resolution praising Federal employees and highlighting their important work. Federal employees should be applauded for their tireless work and extensive efforts on behalf of the American people. Thousands of civilian Federal employees have given their lives in the line of duty for their country. Federal employees have supported, defended, and been indispensable to the progress the United States has achieved through times of war, and peace, and recession, and prosperity. Yet some of my Republican friends have been criticizing Federal employees at a time, yet again, when they are pushing the country toward a government shutdown early next year in order to dramatically cut investments in critical Federal employees and to—and programs rather—and to impose harmful policy riders.

A shutdown would harm the economy, critical employee programs and services, Federal employees and Federal contract workers. Some Republicans have made it clear they want to cut the Civil Service System, which ensures nonpartisan merit pays for professional Federal workforce, and turn it into a patronage system. Instead of attacking Federal employees, we must be marking up my bill to combat Federal pay compression. I yield the remainder of my time.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time. Thank you very much. By the way, just for people's information, Mr. Mfume had something else that he had to go, so Ms. Norton is sitting in as the Ranking Member, and, Ms. Norton, thank you very much.

Ms. NORTON. Pleased to do it.

Mr. SESSIONS. As the Member of Congress from Washington, DC, you have a lot riding on not just the success of people being at work, but the success of many constituents, and we respect that very much. We now move to the distinguished gentleman from Louisiana. Mr. Higgins, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ladies and gentlemen, ma'am, gentlemen, thank you for being here today. Somewhat of a hot seat you are in as we attempt to effectively review the impact of teleworking on the Federal bureaucracies is what we are targeting here, is like your sworn service to the citizenry of America. And as representatives, you know a large part of our work that the ladies and gentlemen on both sides of the aisle are very dedicated to is constituent services. So, when we are referencing failures within bureaucracies, do not take this personally, but it is very personal to our constituents because it is their lives.

And, Mr. McKnelly, you are in the hottest of the hot seats right now because Social Security in our elders, it is some of our most vulnerable, most alone. They generally shy away from, shall we say, cyber skills and online applications. It can be overwhelming to our elders that are dealing with health issues and loneliness, and when their Social Security payments are interrupted, or they have to go through what you would say was reasonable, or this is our process, and it is online, and it is electronic, and it is 21st century,

and it is modern, it is efficient, to them it is like a brick wall they cannot get past, and this is where human contact is incredibly important.

And I would suggest to all of my fellow Americans that serve one of the alphabet bureaucracies of our Nation, let me say that teleworking, although it certainly has its place, you know, we got used to the virtual things. Some of us never liked it. Well, we got good at it during COVID, and there is no doubt it has its place in our evolving society, in the workforce. But as you shift toward teleworking, as we approach the quantum era, you are one step away from being replaced by AI because if there is no requirement for human-to-human contact, why do we need a human at home as we approach AI? Think about that because we are discussing this in Congress.

When a human being working in your office needs to consult with another human being, and they are in the office, Mr. McKnelly, they not walk a few feet to the next desk and say, did you take a look at this, or what is your opinion on that? Doesn't that happen?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Yes, it does.

Mr. HIGGINS. So, with teleworking, wouldn't that human-to-human interaction be interrupted?

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, I agree that this is a people business, and that we need to be connected to your constituents and make sure that they get the services they need.

Mr. HIGGINS. OK. Services they need. Not to interrupt you but this is not the Senate, so they limit us to 5 minutes, which they are pretty smart about, by the way.

In your opening statement, sir, I am quoting you, you quote strong performance management and accountability, say employees have been working a combination of onsite work and telework to meet the evolving needs of the public. You say, "Our ability to move work electronically and provide seamless service allows us to operate more efficiently." But my caseworker is telling me so many of these ladies been on the job for a long time—they have no reason to lie to me—wait times for processing has increased. In some cases, they are waiting a year to get answers.

So, you are telling Congress that you are a rolling man, you are efficient, and teleworking is helping. By the way, we need more money, but wait times are getting longer and longer. So, I give you the remainder of my time to please respond to that. How do you match what you are describing as your efficiency and performance with what we are seeing in the field back home?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for your question. I think the principal contributing factors to what we are experiencing in the field office is a combination of what we saw during the pandemic as well as years and years of understaffing in our field offices. But to your point about the person-to-person contact, what I would offer to you is that our field office employees, 26,000 strong, who see the public in person, those individuals report onsite at least 3 days a week. So, we value the in-person connection that we have with your constituents and want to serve them as effectively as possible.

Mr. HIGGINS. Mr. Chairman, my time has expired, but let me just close by saying 3 days a week is what we used to call a week

off, and that is sort of the mentality that we are combating here, and we are respectfully trying to address. Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Mr. SESSIONS. The distinguished gentleman yields back his time. The distinguished gentleman from Florida, Mr. Frost, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. FROST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SESSIONS. Yes, sir.

Mr. FROST. Federal agencies carry out critical missions of all kinds, protecting us from those who wish to do us harm, keeping our food free from contamination, finding cures for deadly viruses, and getting Americans the checks that they deserve. The Federal Government must remain open, operational, and ready to serve the American people, even in the most turbulent of times. That means not shutting down the government. That means properly funding Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security. That means setting up Federal employees to administer those benefits to our constituents. Every Member of Congress should recognize the damage that is done when the government cannot operate.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Leavitt, what is COOP, or C-O-O-P, and why is it important?

Mr. LEAVITT. Continuity of Operations is absolutely critical for us to be able to move ahead through any type of a crisis, such as the pandemic. And it was thanks to the practice of telework and those flexible opportunities that we were able to sustain operations through the pandemic and even increased outcome. So, with regards to efficiency and effectiveness, 1-800-MEDICARE, we reduced wait times and increased customer satisfaction up to 95 percent compared to prior to the pandemic. Telework readiness, workplace flexibilities matter for the customers we serve.

Mr. FROST. And in 2010, there was a Republican majority in the House of Representatives. They passed a piece of legislation entitled the Telework Enhancement Act. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Mr. LEAVITT. That work recognized the importance of flexibilities in supporting continuity of operations and how workplace flexibility support not just the workplace, but performance overall. And, for example, for us as a Department, Department of Health and Human Services, we are proud to consistently be ranked as one of the best places to serve in the Federal Government for large agencies. And there is a correlation between employee engagement and the attention to employee well-being and their performance and the results that we are able to deliver. Workplace flexibilities matter in delivering well-being, engagement for the workforce, and their ability to perform and be productive in support of all Americans.

Mr. FROST. And in that piece of legislation passed by the Republican majority, correct me if I am wrong, but it required telework to be a part of the continuity of operations plan. Is that correct?

Mr. LEAVITT. Yes, it is.

Mr. FROST. To all of our witnesses, briefly, I would like to know how the Telework Enhancement Act helped your agencies continue operations when the pandemic hit. We can start with Mr. McKnelly.

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. The telework regime that we put in place in the Telework Enhancement Act allowed us

to continue operations, you know, seamlessly to provide the Social Security Administration beneficiaries with the services they needed throughout the course of the pandemic. It was invaluable.

Mr. FROST. Thank you.

Ms. STEVENS. Thank you for the question. For USAID, telework was important prior to the pandemic, and it continued to be important, in fact, vital to during the pandemic and beyond.

Mr. FROST. Of course. Thank you.

Mr. LEAVITT. And telework remains absolutely fundamental in workplace flexibilities overall for our ability to serve.

Mr. FROST. Thank you.

Mr. PELTER. I think similar to my colleagues, it allowed us to quickly deploy our workforce to maintain our operations and avoid any significant disruptions to our mission-essential functions.

Mr. FROST. Thank you. So, telework has been a fact of government for decades, and it has been implemented with bipartisan support. Access to telework helps us keep our government open. Mr. McKnelly, at the Social Security Administration, does telework mean that you can reduce office space?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. I believe the hybrid work environment does allow us to optimize space and, in certain cases, we can redirect those savings into serving more people.

Mr. FROST. And just this one Agency on property alone, how much would you say that you all have saved?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Over the last 10 years, \$60 million in co-lease cost avoidance, and we anticipate another \$35 million a year in the next 4 years.

Mr. FROST. And according to the GSA, because of telework, on property alone, more than \$1 billion in taxpayer money has been saved over just 2 years because of telework. We need to ensure that Federal workers can get the job done, particularly during a crisis like a pandemic, whether it is local, regional, or global. Telework is one tool in the toolbox, one tool to maintain continuity and attract cutting edge talent. And, you know, many of my colleagues believe that the country should be run like a business. Another question: do top businesses and tech companies utilize telework to boost efficiency and attract talent? Anybody?

Mr. LEAVITT. Yes, and that is one reason why workplace flexibilities are very important for us to compete and participate in what is a very competitive labor market today and well into the future.

Mr. FROST. Yes. I remember speaking with NASA about this, the fact that SpaceX has one of the most robust telework policies in that industry, and Elon is their boy, so you know, I mean, I would like to see us continue to support that. To equate telework to laziness is both disrespectful to Federal employees who are doing their jobs every day to ensure that our constituents can get what they need, and shows an inability to actually solve the real problems that our Federal agencies face. There are problems and we need to fix them, but this is not the way. Thank you so much. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. The gentleman from South Carolina, Mr. Timmons, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for being here today.

Earlier this year, an employee at the CFPB forwarded over a quarter million pieces of confidential information containing sensitive data on consumers and financial firms to a personal email account. This was a severe blow to public trust and raised many concerns regarding how Federal agencies are handling sensitive data in this world of flex remote working. What are your agencies doing to prevent similar data breaches, and can you point to specific mechanisms to prevent the use of private emails or the sharing of data outside of the network? We will start with Mr. Pelter.

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. I do not want to propose myself as an expert in the technology that our Department has available to combat these types of activities. So, I would be happy to take that back to the team for a response.

Mr. TIMMONS. Sure.

Mr. PELTER. I would share that an activity like that would be impermissible and could receive an adverse action of a variety of types, whether it was done in the office or from a home work.

Mr. TIMMONS. So, my question, in 2023 we should be able to actually preclude the action. I mean, you should not be able to do it on your government-issued device. Would you agree that that is something that we could possibly do?

Mr. PELTER. I understand that we have a variety of technological controls in place. I would be happy to take that back to the team for a strong—

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. Does anybody else have any specific thoughts on this? Are you taking steps to make sure that similar data breaches cannot occur in the future? Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. From a training perspective, the entire workforce is required to understand how to prevent any type of breach of personally identifiable information. So, there are serious training requirements. However, with regards to the technology-specific requirements, I would take that question back.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. Thank you for the question. Like our fellow agencies, we do hold employees accountable for breaches of conduct, like the one that you are describing, and that is agnostic, whether they work at home or are working in the office. We have measures in place to monitor their use of government systems, and we take disciplinary action when required.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK.

Ms. STEVENS. In looking at the disciplinary actions that we have taken over the past 3 years, there has not been one specific to telework. It has been about the conduct, again, whether that is in the office or working from an alternate location.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. Sensitive programmatic data at the Social Security Administration and protecting that is an absolute priority. And I would like to take the rest of the question back for the record to provide the specific measures we have taken over the course.

Mr. TIMMONS. I would imagine a lot of your information is siloed, so it would not even be possible to do something similar. I would

hope that at least. I mean, the failures of the CFPB breach are pretty remarkable, so I would appreciate any additional information you can get. I want to talk about remote working in public places using public internet. Do you all have policies surrounding that? Let us start with whoever wants. Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. We do have policies in place. You have to have a secure setup at home, and there are expectations about keeping data—

Mr. TIMMONS. So, you could not go to Starbucks and log in through a VPN?

Ms. STEVENS. You could, but we have policies that say—

Mr. TIMMONS. Say no.

Ms. STEVENS. Say no.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK.

Ms. STEVENS. Yes, exactly.

Mr. TIMMONS. Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. We have the similar policies. The employees are required to enter into a telework agreement, for example.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK.

Mr. LEAVITT. And in those agreements, we must have the capacity to work in an effective operating environment, whether it is at our home or another designated location.

Mr. TIMMONS. So, you could go to a co-workspace, but, Ms. Stevens, your people could not go to co-workspaces. They have to be at home?

Ms. STEVENS. The expectation is that they will be at home, yes.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. But, Mr. Leavitt, that is not the case for you. You could go somewhere as long as it is secure?

Mr. LEAVITT. As long as it is a designated official workstation.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. Mr. Pelter, any similar rules?

Mr. PELTER. Yes. Thank you, Congressman. Our telework agreements require that your work be conducted in an appropriate place using secure technology, and our professionalism and performance standards do not change whether you are teleworking or working at a traditional worksite.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. Great.

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. We have similar controls in place concerning the secure work environment when employing the technologies in support of a remote work environment.

Mr. TIMMONS. And are you all able to track whether the employees are following these rules? I mean, you can see their IP address, you can see the location. If they are at a Starbucks, is that going to get flagged? Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. We have the ability to monitor badge swipes, so we know when they are in the office.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. All right. I am running out of time. Thank you all so much. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much. The gentlewoman, Ms. Crockett, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you so much for the work that you do on behalf of the American people. I really do mean that.

There are a couple of things that I want to go over with you because we continue to beat down telework in this Committee, and I do not feel as if we have really offered very many solutions. So, one of the things that people continually complain about when it comes to D.C. is that we are broken, and guess what? I would have to agree. And so, therefore, because we cannot get ourselves together, it is hard to support your work, which means that it is hard for us to support the American people.

I think that it was Mr. McKnelly that brought it up earlier about the budget. You did not say that exactly, but that is where you were going with it, and that is what I picked up. So, I want to talk about something that is on topic, but a little off topic. How many of you are familiar with a program as it relates to military spouses and working remotely? Can everyone raise your hand if you are aware?

[Hands raised.]

Ms. CROCKETT. All right Perfect. Right now, the majority of the conversations that are taking place in our country have to do with a war, or a couple of wars. But definitely what has dominated most recently is the war in the Middle East. And we know that American troops, while they may not be on the frontlines of this war, American troops are participating in various ways in support capacities. And what is troubling to me from a national security standpoint, especially since we not only have the war that is brewing in Ukraine, and we need to support Ukraine because if Putin is able to go into Ukraine and take it over, then he may move on to Poland, and if Poland becomes the subject of his ire, then we know that American troops will then be moving in. But when we look at recruitment in this country, we have three agencies that are down and not meeting their recruitment numbers. And one of the reasons that they are not meeting those numbers is because military spouses are struggling right now when it comes to remote work.

In fact, when it comes to SSA specifically, I have a letter that I would like to introduce into the record, and my team is going to be mad at me because I am doing all of this.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you so much. This letter is actually from a military spouse that works for or did work for Social Security, but was unable to do so overseas. Is that the current policy?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. We currently do not have an implemented domestic employees telework overseas, or DETO policy. However, I would like to assure you we are currently in consultation with the Department of State and other likeminded agencies such as the Veteran Affairs, and we are developing our policy right now. In fact, it is in the stages of being finally staffed and will be reviewed here in the next few weeks.

Ms. CROCKETT. Well, I absolutely applaud that and appreciate that because one thing we have not talked about is the beauty of telework and how we can actually help when it comes to national security, when it comes to spouses, and Representative Bacon and I introduced the Readiness Act to achieve just this goal. We did that last week, and it was co-sponsored by six Republicans and six Democrats, so the definition of bipartisan, which is very hard to

find nowadays. And the Readiness Act will improve Federal employment retention and also help increase military retention and recruitment in the armed forces and foreign services. The bill has been referred to this Committee, and I hope to work with the Chairman to turn these hearings into action by holding a markup on this measure.

And given the shortcomings we are currently seeing, I would like to ask all the witnesses to respond to the following. Is your agency in compliance with the military spouse hiring reporting requirements laid out under 5 U.S.C. Section 3330d? And as a followup, does your Agency track military spouse retention, and if so, are you willing to provide that information to the Oversight Committee? We got 33 seconds, so if you all just want to give me a “yes” or “no,” that would be great.

Mr. MCKNELLY. Yes on your first question, and then I would have to get back to you on the tracking of the retention.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you.

Ms. STEVENS. Yes. And we will be happy to get back to you with exact numbers.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you.

Mr. LEAVITT. I believe so, and we will be happy to get back to you with the exact numbers, and we also have a career fair for military spouses early next year. We would love to have participate—

Ms. CROCKETT. I love this—

Mr. LEAVITT [continuing]. A bipartisan participation to kick that off.

Ms. CROCKETT. Awesome.

Mr. PELTER. To the best of my knowledge, yes, and I will have to respond to you on the retention numbers.

Ms. CROCKETT. Again, I just want to say thank you so much for the work that you do on behalf of American people. Right now, it feels as if we are starving you and we are wanting you to punch above your weight class, but I am going to do everything that I can to make sure that you have the resources that you need and that we continue to support your work. Thank you so much, and with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time. The distinguished gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Biggs, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BIGGS. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I do get a kick out of the fact that you guys are being starved. This body just passed out a CR that kept you at the same levels that Biden, Schumer, and Pelosi did just not even a year ago. That is pretty certain—

Ms. CROCKETT. Will the gentleman yield for just a few seconds?

Mr. BIGGS. No, I will not.

Ms. CROCKETT. OK. I was going to help you out with what I was alleging.

Mr. BIGGS. So here is the deal. I want to admit into the record this right here, that Preliminary Results Show Federal Buildings Remain Underutilized Due to Longstanding Challenges and Increased Telework. That is a GAO study and from a testimony given in the Congress just a few months ago.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection, be entered into the record.

Mr. BIGGS. Are you all familiar with the report? If you are, please raise your hand.

[No response.]

Mr. BIGGS. You are not familiar with this report? This is astounding. I hope that maybe we get better answers going forward, but, I mean, I was disappointed in your answers or failure to answer Mr. Palmer's questions, but here we go. This report outlines GAO's finding in their review of Federal headquarters buildings earlier this year, and the results were actually startling.

Commerce was one of the better-performing agencies. It was in the top quartile of buildings surveyed. No agency of the Federal Government was utilizing more than 50 percent of their headquarters office space. The top quartile average utilization was 35 percent. USAID and HHS fell into the second quartile, each with about a 23 percent utilization rate. SSA was in the bottom quartile of agencies surveyed along with HUD, GSA, OPM, USD, and SBA. Each of those agencies averaged 9-percent building utilization. That is 9 percent. Nine percent. Federal agencies spent \$2 billion annually of taxpayer money to operate and maintain Federal buildings and spent \$5 billion more on leases, and this in our Nation's Capital, the offices are sitting empty.

Additionally, well, before I get there, let me just ask you, do each of you know what your current building utilization rate is? Mr. McKnelly, do you?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. I do not know the exact utilization rate.

Mr. BIGGS. Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. We will get back to you on that.

Mr. BIGGS. Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. We have approximately 4,000 facilities across the country. I do not know the aggregate overall utilization rate.

Mr. BIGGS. So, the answer would be no. Mr. Pelter?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. For our headquarters building, the Herbert C. Hoover Building, our most recent full quarter was at 42 percent daily average. I would have to take back to the team for any additional information.

Mr. BIGGS. OK.

Mr. BIGGS. That would be different than the GAO report indicated, so I would be interested in knowing. And what plans do your agencies have to reduce your physical footprint since there seems to be so much vacancy certainly in the headquarters level? Mr. Pelter?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. We have been actively working to reduce the footprint of our Federal facilities over the long haul, and very recently, our USPTO campus in Alexandria was reduced by approximately 760,000 square feet.

Mr. BIGGS. How recently?

Mr. PELTER. And our Census building out at the Suitland Federal Center is reducing by 300,000 square feet.

Mr. BIGGS. And how recently was that? That is over a million square feet.

Mr. PELTER. The Census Bureau is more recent as we are anticipating the Bureau of Labor Statistics to join that facility. The USPTO program has been ongoing over last few years.

Mr. BIGGS. How much money did you save on that, on those programs, and—

Mr. PELTER. I would have to take that question back to the team to get you a dollar figure response.

Mr. BIGGS. OK.

Mr. BIGGS. So, let us just go to something maybe a little easier to answer. Last April, SSA announced return of in-person services, but my constituents, like somebody else was testifying about, Mr. Higgins, I believe, my constituents continue to face challenges reaching service representatives over the phone just to schedule meetings. I have a very large senior population. While SSA pushes people to access services online, my office, routinely hears that constituents need access to forms that can only be accessed by going to a local SSA office. What steps is Social Security taking to ensure that seniors are able to access the services they need in person?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. So first, it is a priority for the Social Security Administration to have our field offices manned in a way that can serve your constituents. We also take tremendous pride in our ability to provide them with the information that they need specific to the forums. Again, I can look into that for you for the record, but we are constantly looking for ways to improve the dissemination of that information to your constituents, whether that happens to be in the field office or, you know, publicly available from a digital perspective as well.

Mr. BIGGS. I particularly think of the Apache Junction office which has some really good people in it, but it is also hard to get in to see them sometimes, and so that is what I am talking about. That is what the seniors face. That is why they are calling my office because they need to get in, they need to see somebody to resolve these. And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much. The gentlewoman from Pennsylvania, Ms. Lee, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I find it very odd that my Republican colleagues made the choice to hold a second hearing on telework and concerns over our Agency's productivity while teleworking when this has been one of the least productive sessions of Congress. Votes on appropriation bills have been pulled at the last second, we were without a Speaker for weeks, and we barely avoided a shutdown thanks primarily to Democrats. The dysfunction is unprecedented. Regardless, the claims against telework are unfounded and directly contradict what we have seen in our Federal workforce.

In the last hearing, we heard how easily NASA, the National Space Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the Department of Homeland Security were able to maintain operations by transitioning to telework during the pandemic and reduce costs, saving the government billions of dollars of taxpayers' money. We further heard how telework expanded work opportunities for military spouses, people with disabilities, and working parents and caregivers. So, to all of our panelists at this particular hearing, have you seen similar benefits of telework in your respective agencies? This is for anybody.

Ms. STEVENS. For USAID, one key benefit of telework, both before and after the pandemic, is that we work across time zones, so it really facilitates our ability to connect with one another across 80 countries.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. Has anyone else seen benefits? Please, Mr. Leavitt.

Mr. LEAVITT. And just to give a very local example with my own office of just over 200 H.R. professionals, this team, thanks to telework and increased workplace flexibilities, has decreased the time that it takes to hire by 22 percent just over the last 12 months alone and almost at times up to almost cutting it in half. So that is just an example of the extraordinary efficiencies we can gain with the use of telework and workplace flexibilities.

Ms. LEE. So, thank you.

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. The other obvious impact from a hiring and retention perspective is we get broad and diverse applicant pools, and greater selection among applicants ultimately results in the best possible selection for the positions we are trying to fill.

Ms. LEE. Thank you.

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congresswoman. In addition to what my colleagues mentioned, I would also add that we have seen savings in transit costs, and we have also gained great confidence in our continuity of operations plans and the readiness of our workforce to telework, en masse.

Ms. LEE. Thank you so much for sharing. This summer, Social Security Administration reached an agreement with the largest Federal labor union, the American Federation of Government Employees, to preserve telework eligibility through 2029. The union was pushing for teleworking opportunities to improve work conditions for their members, which would, in turn, result in better customer service for Social Security beneficiaries. Mr. McKnelly, what improvements have you seen at Social Security Administration due to telework? We already said that, but looking forward, what kind of policies and guidelines in Social Security Administration planning for remote workers?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question, and we are, of course, very pleased with our ability to work effectively with our unions to preserve telework as a tool in the workplace. What I will tell you is that our collective bargaining agreement actually was largely unchanged. I think it was the utilization of that current collective bargaining agreement in making sure that the flexibilities were exercised as ultimately what benefited the union membership as well as the broader organization.

Ms. LEE. So, your Agency often faces criticism for work conditions and backlogs. My Republican colleagues would like to point the finger at remote work, but would you agree that the larger culprit is a lack of sufficient funding?

Mr. MCKNELLY. I would concur that the principal service delivery challenges that we are facing are chronic understaffing and a lack of budget to do what we need to do to serve the American people.

Ms. LEE. Would the Republican proposed cut of \$183 million to the Agency proposed in this year's appropriations bill make the backlog better or worse?

Mr. MCKNELLY. It would make the backlogs worse.

Ms. LEE. We all want to see our agencies doing their jobs efficiently to better serve the American people, and telework opportunities have only forwarded that goal. In the Department of Commerce response to our Committee's requests regarding their telework policies, Commerce officials stated that significantly increasing telework increased their Agency's productivity. Specifically in 2022, the Agency met or exceeded 87 percent of its key performance indicators which measure the Department's progress toward achieving the five goals and 23 objectives.

In two hearings now, we have heard about the benefits of telework. For the workforce, it attracts individuals regardless of race, location, religion, and can offer opportunities to those with disabilities, live overseas as military spouses, or simply need to be near their family. Even from an environmental perspective, a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that switching from working onsite to working from home full time may reduce a person's carbon footprint by more than 50 percent. Hybrid schedules where people work remotely for 2 to 4 days a week could also cut emissions by 11 to 29 percent according to the study.

I would like to see this Committee stop blaming convenient scapegoats for our problems and instead focus on keeping the government funded and operating. I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much. The gentlewoman yields back her time. The distinguished gentleman from Florida, Mr. Donalds, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. DONALDS. Thank you, Chairman. I would actually argue that last Congress was a very unproductive Congress. We did not even do oversight last Congress. I was too busy waiting to get your number to go vote by proxy, and the Committee hearings, we barely met. So be that as it may, this has actually been a pretty productive Congress.

OK, couple things. Mr. McKnelly, I would say my district's congressional liaison advised that the COVID-19 vaccine mandate by SSA was a huge factor in the backlog of what is going on in my congressional district. We have a couple of statistics. According to the Code of Federal Regulations, Section 20, 404.1642, max processing time should be 49.5 days for Social Security Disability Insurance. Currently, according to the Florida Division of Disability, it is determined that the average processing time was 225 days, nearly a 200 percent increase from 77 days in 2019.

And so, my district has seen this in particular. The staff said that there is currently an average of 8-year tenure of these workers. They have about a 30 years' worth of overall knowledge in the office, but their response times are significantly higher post-pandemic than pre-pandemic. What has been done since the pandemic to build the workforce ensure quality of service to Americans?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. We are currently in the process of rebuilding our workforce and increasing staffing levels. Most recently, in Fiscal Year 2023, an anomaly of close to \$800

million resulted in our ability to hire a number of individuals, again, a sum total of 3,000, and that rebuilding of the workforce and those additional personnel—

Mr. DONALDS. Let me ask you this question. How many employees did you lose during the pandemic because your processing times basically went up 200 percent from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic. I would assume you lost employees, so what happened? How many employees did you lose?

Mr. MCKNELLY. I cannot speak to the exact number, but I know that our attrition levels—

Mr. DONALDS. Mr. McKnelly, this is an oversight hearing dealing with Federal workforce. Obviously, telework is the focus, but you guys just do not even have basic understanding of what your workforces are and what the trajectory of workforce losses pre-pandemic to post-pandemic are?

Mr. MCKNELLY. We do have those numbers, and I can provide those to you for the record.

Mr. DONALDS. But why aren't they here now?

Mr. MCKNELLY. All I have available are some general numbers concerning the attrition rates during that particular period in time.

Mr. DONALDS. Generally speaking, what were the attrition rates during that particular period of time?

Mr. MCKNELLY. To answer your question, attrition levels reached historic levels, and it limited our ability to address those growing—

Mr. DONALDS. Define "historic".

Mr. MCKNELLY. Huh?

Mr. DONALDS. Define "historic."

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, for many years, the Agency averaged 5 to 7 percent attrition rates, but in Fiscal Year 2022, it was 10 percent with telephone agents being the highest at about 20 percent. And then DDS attrition was at about 10 percent historically, and then that became nearly 18 percent in Fiscal Year 2022. The highest percentage of those DDS workers were the disability examiners, and that was close to 25 percent.

Mr. DONALDS. Why?

Mr. MCKNELLY. I believe that there was some significant challenges with those particular workloads. It is challenging, it is complex, it is very, very hard, and—

Mr. DONALDS. Work is typically hard, Mr. McKnelly. That is why people get paid to do it. Why?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Like I said, it is a complicated workload, and I think there were difficulties in recruiting and retaining those individuals because of the complexity of the work.

Mr. DONALDS. So, you said in your call center, your attrition rate was what again for the telephone call workers? What was that?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Telephone agents, about 20 percent.

Mr. DONALDS. Twenty percent. Are these telephone agents, were they remote in their own home or were they in a call center?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Some were in the call center and then some were also actually working telework as well.

Mr. DONALDS. What percentage of the telework employees actually left the profession under Social Security Administration?

Mr. MCKNELLY. The total number?

Mr. DONALDS. The percentage of those telework, how many of them left? Do you know?

Mr. MCKNELLY. I do not have—

Mr. DONALDS. How many left?

Mr. MCKNELLY. No, I do not have that answer.

Mr. DONALDS. OK. A couple things. First and foremost, Mr. Pelter, you said earlier that for people who sign up to do telework that there are codes of conduct and other things in your Agency. Everybody attested to that. You said that if people did not comply, there were “adverse actions,” your words. What are adverse actions?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. An adverse action would be very case-by-case dependent.

Mr. DONALDS. What is the response of your Agency for somebody who does not comply with the code of conduct for telework?

Mr. PELTER. Congressman, it would depend on the severity of the conduct.

Mr. DONALDS. Give me the least severe and the most severe. What are the adverse actions for an employee?

Mr. PELTER. Least severe would be counseling. Most severe would likely be separation from the Federal workforce.

Mr. DONALDS. What is the processing time for separation from the Federal workforce?

Mr. PELTER. I do not have that figure. I would have to get back to you, sir.

Mr. DONALDS. You do not have the figure of what the time is to separate an employee from the Federal workforce.

Mr. PELTER. I do not have that figure with me.

Mr. DONALDS. Mr. Chairman, I would move that everyone on this panel should be providing the information to this body about what it actually means to separate an employee from the Federal workforce and other adverse actions for employees that do not comply with the code of conduct with respect to telework. With that, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time, but I would like to engage the gentleman for just a moment. If you could please, Mr. Donalds, make sure that as we send the letter, which will be a followup to each of them that we had spoken about earlier, if you could help us delineate those questions that you would like specifically asked, it would be a benefit to myself, Mr. Mfume, and this Subcommittee to make sure that we get back an answer within 15 days. And I want to thank the gentleman for his detailed information, and as we had stated, the gentleman yield back his time.

Ms. LEE. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to insert into the record this GAO report which shows that preliminary evidence that telework generally had a positive impact on worker productivity and firm performance in certain sectors.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection, we will enter that into the record. Thank you very much.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman, Ms. Tlaib, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. TLAIB. Thank you so much. This is, you know, a hard question, and I apologize. If you do not know what it is, the answer to

it, it is fine because everybody is talking about productivity. It is almost incredibly, I think, dehumanizing the way they are just expecting you all for so little amount of funding and during a pandemic where we are literally losing loved ones and people were dying and getting sick and some still experiencing long COVID. Had any of you experienced any of your employees dying because of COVID?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for that question. We are aware of fatalities for employees that are associated with COVID.

Ms. TLAIB. Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. Thank you for the question. Yes.

Mr. LEAVITT. It, of course, affects the entire workforce, families affected by this, and loved ones.

Mr. PELTER. Yes.

Ms. TLAIB. Yes. You know, I was here. It will just be just the unknown, and, I mean, I saw one of my neighbors, just young, very young man, get COVID and not survive. And I just think that this was not, like, intentional on the part of us making these decisions around telework. But even then, I found out even in the medical field how incredibly effective it was to have some sort of telework component to providing care for many of my residents.

But I want to talk about this because it is about so-called productivity in the cases of my colleagues. One of the things that gives me anxiety, and I am not even you all, is when there is a possibility of a shutdown. I have been here, and I first came in to office, and the first vote I ever had to take in 2019 was to open back government after 35 days of a shutdown. What does it take for each of you because we literally kept government open that day, but you all had to start way before we did to prepare for a shutdown. What does that take? Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. So, shutdown preparation diverts critical agency resources needed to serve the public. So, for example, if we spend just 1 hour on shutdown preparations with each SSA employee, that translates into almost 62,000 hours of time or about 30—

Ms. TLAIB. That is right.

Mr. MCKNELLY [continuing]. Work years of lost productivity.

Ms. TLAIB. Yes. You had to do it even though we kept covering them up, but they do not understand that. How about you, Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. Well, it affects us as well. It takes weeks of planning.

Ms. TLAIB. Yes. I mean, it is unbelievable. It takes you away from actually providing services to our residents.

Ms. STEVENS. Disrupts our mission, yes.

Ms. TLAIB. Absolutely.

Mr. LEAVITT. As we get closer to a potential shutdown, our teams increasingly working—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Could you please speak into the mic? It is hard to hear you.

Mr. LEAVITT. Sorry, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you.

Mr. LEAVITT. As we approach a potential shutdown, we work increasingly around the clock to ensure that we are prepared to support the entire workforce.

Mr. PELTER. Any potential lapse in funding has a negative impact on the Department's ability to deliver on its mission. The shutdown preparations are not, in my view, an effective or efficient use of our time—

Ms. TLAIB. It creates instability. They want to talk about telework when, honestly, telework actually created some stability in some ways because it is another tool for our residents to be able to continue to get care. You guys call it services or I call it care because I just hear this kind of vilification, kind of dismissing the incredible role that Federal employees have. I cannot even imagine working in HHS. I cannot. Social Security, I mean, unbelievable, complex cases where people have to appeal. You have to provide all this.

And for a lot of our residents, honestly, it is such a rigorous process because we keep passing all these bills that make it harder for them to apply for services. I mean, it is unbelievable. I actually walk through the process, and I am like, why do they have to submit this, what is this, all because we have, you know, a Congress that continues to think that people are constantly out there trying to scheme the system when it is actually, no, there are seasoned residents that need to be able to retire with human dignity. It is folks that are actually losing their job because of a disability. I mean, it is just layers after layers.

And so, you know, when I look at this, I mean, I have the same questions about productivity. We can show them all kinds of studies over and over again, but at the end, it is our residents that literally come to us because they do not come to me and say, Rashida, oh my god, it is because of telework. No. It is because of the other layers of bureaucracy that we make them go through to actually get something they paid us into a system for so long that when they are sick and when they are unemployed or where they are struggling, that they can actually get services.

The other really important question I have, you know, when I think about telework is the fact that it actually does help you diversify the number of people you can bring in to your departments. I noticed that. And I see my friends and others that now because of broken systems, let us be honest, childcare maybe, whatever it is, that they are able to have a lot more flexibility when it comes to be able to work for the Federal Government. Can you talk a little bit about that? Oh, I am sorry, am I running out of time? I think I ran out of time. I am so sorry.

I just want to appreciate all of you because it is not perfect, I know this. But I just want you all to know productivity and so forth, when I am in a Congress that feels unproductive right now and constantly threatening the shutdown, that is something I wish we would focus on because that is what is going to impact whether or not our residents get quality services. Thank you so much. I yield.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time. I would say to the gentlewoman, most unemployment disability is handled

by the states. The distinguished gentlewoman, Mrs. Boebert, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. McKnelly, are you aware that in April 2023 OMB issued guidance that called for increased “meaningful in-person work?”

Mr. MCKNELLY. I am.

Mrs. BOEBERT. So, why has the Social Security Administration failed to provide any timeline for employees to return to the office?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. So, from a timeline perspective, our political leadership was back in the office in December 2021. I think it is also important to note that in April 2022, 75 percent of our workforce, our frontline workforce, which takes care of hearings, takes care of the field offices, they were also in on April 2022. And right now, we are in the process of increasing headquarters and support staff in our headquarters offices.

Mrs. BOEBERT. So, your response to the Committee on September 14th failed to provide a response on how the Agency plans to return to in-person work, and, in fact, the only substantive answer was regarding the Social Security Administration’s plans to adjust its real estate footprint. So, I think it is very important. If you are going to have a call for increased meaningful in-person work, then we need to understand that timeline and actually be able to fulfill it.

So, the Social Security Administration made an agreement that allows probationary employees, employees with minor disciplinary actions, and trainees to telework. Hold on, not done. Think about that, employees who are on probation, who have minor disciplinary actions and trainees, are allowed to telework. So, wouldn’t it make more sense for these workers under probation or who have had these disciplinary actions or trainees to work in the office to ensure improvement or to monitor their behavior?

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, there is the authority to grant telework in those particular cases. What I would tell you is what we learned coming out of the pandemic is that our front office workers, specifically the trainees that you are talking about, they did not feel connected to the mission, and they did not feel connected to the teams that they were working with. So—

Mrs. BOEBERT. It took a pandemic to realize that you cannot train someone from home, that they need to be in person and connected to the team to actually learn how to do their job?

Mr. MCKNELLY. No, that was the feedback that we got from them. And so, when we had the opportunity to participate in an approach to get those individuals into the office so that they can work together, that is something that we do on a regular basis.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Well, it is unfortunate that you even had to experiment with that and receive that feedback to understand that someone is not going to train well from home for a brand-new position. So anyway, getting back to the Social Security Administration, do you know how many applications are currently on backlog?

Mr. MCKNELLY. What types of applications are you referring to?

Mrs. BOEBERT. So, all sorts of applications that you have here in the Administration. For instance, at the beginning of this year, the Social Security Administration reported that there were approximately 107,000 applications in the backlog. For reference, in Janu-

ary 2020, there were only 41,000. Now, this has resulted in several of my constituents receiving unsatisfactory customer service to receive the benefits that they have worked for their entire lives.

In fact, 3 out of 5 applicants who are applying for their Social Security benefits, three out of five applicants will be denied benefits after waiting for approximately 7 months. About 8,000 people filed for bankruptcy and approximately 10,000 people die each year while awaiting a decision from your Agency. All the while you all are allowing delinquent employees to sit on their sofas at home instead of actually getting to work and doing their jobs. This is absolutely unacceptable.

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, our employees are working, whether they are in the office or at home, and they are——

Mrs. BOEBERT. Are you monitoring the work that they are doing from home on a regular basis?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Yes, we are.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Every employee. Do you have the numbers of the hours that are submitted? Are you counting how many times they are logging into their computers and responding to casework?

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, our employees are subject to the same performance management processes and oversight whether they are teleworking or working in the office. And we have systems in place that our managers use to schedule, assign, and track workloads, and that includes individual employee workloads in many cases. So real-time understanding of what actions are being processed at any particular given time. Additionally, our employees are required to be accessible to their supervisors, clients, colleagues, and external parties during work hours, through a variety of means, including instant messaging, video platforms, and telephone. They are connected to the workplace whether they are in the office or at the home.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Then why have the backlogs for Social Security applicants increased from 41,000 to 107,000?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Because we have been historically underfunded for a number of years now.

Mrs. BOEBERT. I do not think you are underfunded. You are funded at the Nancy Pelosi levels, at the Democrat levels. We just continued that same funding.

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, I would say——

Mrs. BOEBERT. At pandemic-level spending.

Mr. MCKNELLY. So, I would say we have an increase of over 8 million beneficiaries over the last 10 years. At the same time, we experienced our lowest work staffing levels at the end of Fiscal Year 2022. That is a math problem. I mean, that is a problem. If you have those workloads, you know, increasing, and you do not have the staff to take care of those workloads, you are going to have the backlogs that you are talking about, Representative.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Well, I would love to hear more reports of your staff actually working in person and increase the meaningful in-person work that is done in your offices. I am out of time, and I yield.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time. The gentleman, my friend from Virginia, Mr. Connolly, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. That is correct. Thank you.

Mr. CONNOLLY. We had an unprecedented pandemic, first in 100 years. Do you remember how many American died in this pandemic?

Mr. MCKNELLY. I know it was over a million.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Anyone know? Well, I will give you that: 1.2 million. All kinds of people died: poor, rich, educated, not so educated, Federal workers, private sector workers, healthy people, sick people. The virus knew no distinction, and in the beginning, we had no protections and not much knowledge. We were frightened to death about that virus and how you could get it, and except for telework protocols, we did not have any protocols in the Federal Government. What do you do? What instructions do you give to protect people?

I had a constituent, Chai Sudemon. He worked in Quantico. There were no protocols in place. He got COVID and he died. He was not alone. Postal workers died, social security workers died, IRS workers died. All kinds of Federal employees succumbed to the COVID virus because we did not yet have protocols in place, and thank God for telework, a structured program that protected people because we already had the architecture in place. Now, there is a difference, is there not, between universal remote working in a pandemic and telework? Fair enough? Ms. Stevens, want to elaborate a little bit?

Ms. STEVENS. That is fair. We do have policies for remote work as well. It is based on the duties of the position whether that can be authorized or not.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right. Now, some of my friends on the other side of the aisle love by insinuation to people working on their couches—I am sorry—not working. They are just sitting on their couches apparently doing nothing. So, help me out here. When we adopt a telework program in an agency, is there any kind of screening that goes on who is eligible and who is not for the program? Anyone? Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. Yes. We are all responsible for undertaking training as well as abiding by an agreement that we put into place.

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, there might be some jobs, for example, not eligible.

Mr. LEAVITT. Correct.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And there might be some people whose job might be eligible, but they are not appropriate candidates. Would that be fair?

Mr. LEAVITT. Yes, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And you have a way of discerning that and making that judgment. OK. So, insinuation No. 2, like we took care of that one. There actually is a process. Insinuation No. 2 is, but once we let someone telework, of course they are going to the golf course. They are watching soap operas. They are doing anything but work. Is that fair? Mr. Pelter, why don't you speak up, or do you want the smear on your Federal employees to go unchallenged? Is there data that would, in fact, contradict that assertion because that is the insinuation which I think is pernicious that is being propounded by some on the other side of the aisle.

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. I believe there is data and there is a process in place to hit against that assertion. Our supervisors, our employees work hard to maintain the productivity. Every employee has a performance management plan. Their supervisors are responsible—

Mr. CONNOLLY. So, it is structured.

Mr. PELTER. Yes, sir.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And you have a way of measuring productivity?

Mr. PELTER. We do.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And you have a way of monitoring those who might be goofing off?

Mr. PELTER. We do.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And do you find that all of those procedures in place create more productivity or less productivity from your workforce?

Mr. PELTER. I think having the appropriate structures in place to monitor employee performance and productivity improves the overall productivity and mission delivery for our Department.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you. Mr. Leavitt, you would agree with that or not?

Mr. LEAVITT. Yes, I would. Trust is absolutely fundamental and employee engagement for driving performance, and it is the performance that matters, the results that we deliver for the American people. In our case, for example, it is not just a pandemic, it is responding to the opioid crisis, reaching 4 million people in rural areas with buprenorphine, the medication-assisted treatment for opioid use syndrome, and it is also the increased access to treatment and prevention efforts. It is the results that matter.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right. Thank you. Ms. Stevens, would you agree with that?

Ms. STEVENS. I would absolutely agree with that. We have ways to monitor performance, whether someone is working at home or in the office.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. I would agree. The Social Security Administration has a history of monitoring workloads prior to the pandemic.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I would just say as somebody who was a manager and had big medium-sized workforces, you know, there are jobs where I do not care whether you show up at all. What I care about is the outcome. So, for example, in the private sector, if your job is to write proposals to the Federal Government, and you want a hit rate of X percent, and you exceed, meet or exceed that, I do not care if you are at home watching soap operas in your pajamas, keep doing what you are doing because it is the outcome that matters. Not every job could say that. Not every job lends itself to telework. You know, a cop on the beat cannot just call in. He or she has got to be on the beat.

But there are plenty of jobs where we can actually enhance productivity. And in the middle of a pandemic, thank God we had the structured program you described because it saved lives. And I am not going to be party, and these are my colleagues, to the smearing of the Federal workforce as if they are lazy, incompetent, and avoiding work. They actually continued to do their work in the midst of the worst pandemic in 100 years that cost 1.2 million of

our citizens' lives, and thank God they were there, and thank God these programs are in place. I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. The gentleman from North Carolina, Mr. Edwards, is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. EDWARDS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to shift the conversation just a little bit. I am in no way trying to smear any government worker for sitting on the couch in their pajamas. What I would really like to get down to is to understand how to convince, if possible, the American taxpayer that they are getting a better deal by allowing people to work at home.

Now, I will preface these questions with the fact that through the pandemic, I got to participate in literally hundreds of Zoom calls, and what I witnessed seemed to be, on the other end, often very unproductive people. So given the fact that that might have been a different set of circumstances, I would like to ask you, Mr. Pelter, I will start with you. Help me understand how to convince the American taxpayer and my constituents that they are getting a better deal by allowing more people to work at home. I will begin with this. You made a comment earlier that transit costs were down. Give us some examples of how transit costs would be down, and how do you measure that now that more people seem to be working at home?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. For that specific example, I would look toward locally here in the D.C. area, the SmartBenefits that employees receive as part of their benefit package, and that includes things like subsidized rides on the metro subway system. When less workers are commuting, we are spending less money that type of—

Mr. EDWARDS. OK. Perfect. So how much less are you spending in the last 12 months or the next 12 months in transit costs?

Mr. PELTER. I would have to take that questions back to the team for a specific answer on the dollar difference.

Mr. EDWARDS. Yes. So see, that is the part that makes this very difficult to explain to the American taxpayer. From all four of you, I am hearing a lot of philosophy, but I am a businessman. I want to make the case to the American taxpayer. And so, it is real easy to talk hypothetically and say we will be able to spend less money to get people into D.C., but that really does not mean a whole lot unless we can quantify that. So, I know we are not going to answer that now, but as we proceed with these types of conversations, those are the kinds of answers that I am going to be looking for. And I think those are the kinds of answers that our taxpayers and many members of this committee are going to be looking for.

Mr. Pelter, I do not mean to pick on you. It is just you are closer, and it is easier for me to read your name. What percentage of employees would you say are D.C.-centric before and after the pandemic?

Mr. PELTER. For the Department of Commerce, around half of our workforce is D.C.-centric or the National Capital area region. We experienced very minimal changes to that during and after the pandemic.

Mr. EDWARDS. And so, would you see an opportunity, as you continue to experience attrition and rehire, to decentralize employees

from the D.C. area to other places that might have a lower cost of living and enable you to hire folks at lower salaries than you are required to do in D.C.?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. My interests are in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest we can. Workplace flexibility, such as remote work or telework, are one of the limited opportunities we can offer to our workforce to try to compete with other public sector agencies and the private sector. The Society for Human Resource Management, in fact, has listed workplace flexibilities and work-life balance as one of the key recruitment and retention requirements of the current workforce, and so it is something we are keying in on very closely.

Mr. EDWARDS. So Mr. Leavitt, let me let me ask you. Are you keying in on and how do you recruit outside of the D.C. area? It seems like that if you are really looking for geographic diversity, trying to concentrate your hiring from maybe other areas with other universities or workplaces where there are strong workforces, where folks will come to work at a lower cost than they might be able to do in D.C. How does that play into the equation of remote workforce?

Mr. LEAVITT. Thank you very much for your question, Congressman. Just a few quick answers to that. One is that we are engaging in partnerships with colleges, community colleges, universities across the country, and we are undertaking career fairs, hiring events for people across the country. For example, one specific area mentioned earlier is military spouses. We had approximately 1,200 military spouses participate in our last career fair, and we are having another one early next year.

As a result of that, we increased the hiring of the number of military spouses by 39 percent. And that means that we, in my own office, just as an example, have someone working from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska, Fort Stewart in Georgia, from Pennsylvania. We have folks from across the country that even if their family moves to another duty station, we are able to sustain and retain that employee. That is one way we were helping save military families and also employing and working with folks across the country where talent is.

Mr. EDWARDS. Thank you. Mr. Chair, I know I am out of time, but I would just like to comment because I think that this is important as we continue to have this discussion. We talk in concept about productivity. I would really like to understand more about how we measure productivity and how we make it better. I would like to understand better how we might be able to make reductions in workforce as a result of people working from home. I would like to understand better the dollar amount that we could save with transit costs. I would like to understand better how we can hire an employee someplace else at a lower cost of living than is required in Washington, DC.

Those are the types of things that I think would be important to the American taxpayer to understand in order to feel better about this or to recognize that maybe we ought to be bringing people back into an office. So, I am summarizing that by, I could be convinced, I am not yet, but these are the types of things that I would like to know to be convinced. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much. I will now yield myself 5 minutes.

I want to thank each of you for being here today. I think that some of the discussion that has taken place today has been mismarked. In fact, we began this process 10 months ago. We began this process whereby, on a bipartisan basis, there was a good bit of need to understand not only what this Administration was planning on doing with the workforce that had slowly found itself back to work after COVID, to complaints and questions about not just the effectiveness and efficiency of government, but very much so in several different agencies. We received a great deal of information from Members of this Committee and Subcommittee about the Washington, DC, workforce and when they would come back because there was a great deal of gnashing of teeth about the small businesses that were impacted by Federal Government workers.

We have today discovered, uncovered, again, discussion, debate, about what those darn Republicans did in 2010 when they first passed the first telework sort of legislation that would open up this issue long before we heard about COVID, but actually looked at it in terms of a way to effectively have a workforce, whether a person might be sick or might be taking care of a senior or someone else, perhaps a disabled member of their family, but they could still be participatory in the workforce. It would be looked at on an agency perspective, but the authorization was put in place by the Republican Congress.

Today, Mr. Mfume reinforced what I believe was correct when he said the overwhelming view of effectiveness and efficiency should be how we look at what the agencies are trying to do. There are some people that disagree with that, but I agree with that, that we were trying to look at it from a governmentwide perspective as we asked the question months ago.

Today, we talked about this being the second hearing—not the first, the second—and it focused on those that we felt like we had not received as much information, that would help us gather not only data, but about feedback that you have had. Today, we are hearing about that. Today, we are going to write you back, the four agencies that are here, a little bit more that has developed itself over the past few months as well as today.

I would like to ask each of you a question just to hear what you are going to say. But part of what we have talked about today is moving back on the amount of allocation of workspace that would be necessary in buildings. What happens if there is a change of Administration or a change of a decisionmaking and the next person who might be President has a different idea and offers feedback that employees should come back to work? Do you believe in any way you would cut yourself off from being able to provide that to a new President of the United States? Well, I will just let any of you answer. Mr. McKnelly?

Mr. MCKNELLY. Thank you for the question. I believe any approach to space savings has to be carefully planned and has to understand that there are potential results where we may have to put individuals back into the workplace. So again, careful planning—

Mr. SESSIONS. And you are taking that into account, I gather.

Mr. MCKNELLY. Yes, we are.

Mr. SESSIONS. OK. Ms. Stevens?

Ms. STEVENS. Thank you for the question. We are as well. We have consolidated our domestic workspace here in Washington, but we would have to be mindful of the impact of a transition.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. Leavitt?

Mr. LEAVITT. And we are continuing to assess our space utilization, for example, in the National Capital Region, and looking at risk management, risk mitigation is absolutely critical for us. And also, a part of risk mitigation is ensuring that we have the workforce needed for the future, deliver for the American people, and that will entail some workplace flexibility.

Mr. SESSIONS. Well, that was not the question. The question was whether you would be prepared if the next President of United States said we are coming back to work, that you have not cut yourself off, and I heard you say, no, you have not cut yourself off, you would be prepared for that. Mr. Pelter?

Mr. PELTER. Thank you, Congressman. Reduced footprint efforts have not been done in a hasty way, and I think we are positioned with proper planning and as needed, where needed, creativity to house our workforce over the long term.

Mr. SESSIONS. These would be questions of management that you would look at on a moving-forward basis, and I would like to say that I do not know what the answer will be. What I would say is that this is why we hold hearings. We hold hearings not to beat you up, but to ask questions and get responses. It does deal with effectiveness and efficiency, Mr. Mfume is correct, but it also deals with responses that we look for, a professional workforce that you represent, to give us those leading-edge answers. We do not try and make them up here.

But I would like for it to be stated that I have not heard any, notwithstanding, I have listened to the entire hearing today, someone accuse anyone of having improprieties or doing the wrong thing. And I think that anyone that would take a portion of this to say that one party or the other or one group of people here took advantage of the Federal workforce that is very important would be an incorrect takeaway. I think that you have been treated properly. I think that the questions were all fair, and perhaps more importantly, there is respect. There was respect from the time we asked the question. Mr. Mfume wanted to make sure that the things that we did today, as we always do, are done on a bipartisan basis where both of us not only certify and agree that what we are trying to get done is important, but, in fact, did happen again today.

So, I yield back my time and would come to the gentlewoman for any closing remarks that she has wished to make. The gentlewoman, Ms. Lee, is recognized.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to mark that we have talked a lot about productivity today in this hearing, and I did mention briefly how ironic it is that we would mention productivity as we are in the Congress that has been considered the least productive since the Great Depression. This hearing has been rescheduled twice due to Republicans' dysfunction, not being able to elect a Speaker, and bringing the government to the brink of a shutdown, but yet we are here to indict telework.

I want to reiterate that telework is work. Teleworking is an effective tool that enables continuity of operations and reduces Federal costs without sacrificing productivity or efficiency. We must hold agencies accountable to collecting data that help us gauge and improve performance, as well as adopt policies that align with their respective unique missions. In our call for agencies to optimize efficiency and effectiveness, Congress must also adhere to this call in our own work by spearing the agencies to chaos rendered from a lurching government shutdown. Telework, again, enhances productivity. Shutdowns are the opposite of productive.

I want to thank our witnesses today and all the public servants that keep our government agencies open and serving the public under tremendous challenges. Thank you again for being with us today. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time on her closing statement. I do want to thank her and Mr. Mfume for not only working together to where we have solved this issue together but also trying to work on closing out what might be questions that we would have for you. And so, I would like for you to know that what we will plan to do is to have a letter within the next few days that would provide you an opportunity to provide information for us, and within 15 days after we get that to you, which we will very quickly, we would like for you to respond back.

Mr. SESSIONS. But I want to thank our panelists today for taking time. Their professionalism in the workplace was exhibited again today. The managerial leadership that you provide as perhaps human capital experts for your Agency is important to us, your demeanor and you showing up is, but also your answers would be important also, and I appreciate that.

So, without objection, all Members will have 5 legislative days within which to submit material and submit additional written questions for the witnesses, which will be forwarded to the witnesses very quickly from us.

Mr. SESSIONS. I want to thank each of you for taking time. Ms. Lee, I want you to know that, typically, Mr. Mfume and I will walk down after this and thank each of the witnesses. I would welcome you to join me in doing that. And so, on behalf of this Subcommittee, Oversight and Government Operations, I want to thank each of you for being here, and you are now dismissed. This closes the hearing.

[Whereupon, at 4:21 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

