

**REPORTING FOR DUTY: EXAMINING
THE IMPACTS OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR'S
REMOTE AND TELEWORK POLICIES**

OVERSIGHT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
INVESTIGATIONS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**OVERSIGHT HEARING ON REPORTING FOR
DUTY: EXAMINING THE IMPACTS OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR'S REMOTE
AND TELEWORK POLICIES**

**Thursday, January 18, 2024
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC**

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:17 a.m. in Room 1334, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Paul Gosar [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Gosar, Collins; and Stansbury.

Also present: Representative Kamlager-Dove.

Dr. GOSAR. The Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will come to order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the Subcommittee at any time.

The Subcommittee is meeting today to hear the testimony on the impacts of the Department of the Interior's remote and telework policies.

The gentlewoman from California, Ms. Kamlager-Dove, asks to sit in and, without objection, so ordered.

Under Committee Rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member. I therefore ask unanimous consent that all other Members' statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted in accordance with the Committee Rule 3(o).

Without objection, so ordered.

I now recognize myself for my opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. PAUL GOSAR, A REPRESENTATIVE
IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF ARIZONA**

Dr. GOSAR. Good morning, everyone, and thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

To start out, I want to point out that both the Office of Personnel Management, OPM, and the Office of Management and Budget, OMB, declined to testify today, or even send written testimony, despite their deep level of involvement in crafting the remote and telework policies for the Federal Government and related data collection capabilities for each agency.

Despite their unwillingness to generally speak to the telework policies of the Biden administration, I must say I am not surprised, as it seems to repeat an ongoing pattern of the Biden administration witnesses unwilling to participate in congressional hearings.

With that said, I am excited for the witnesses we do have today. We will examine the Department of the Interior's telework and

remote work policies and their effect on the delivery of services to Americans.

And to be clear, I recognize that telework and remote work can be useful in limited and well-defined circumstances. However, DOI has abused their excessive telework and remote work policies for employees at a time when even President Joe Biden is calling for a return to the office.

The COVID-19 pandemic is long over, and the effects of the pandemic subsided years ago. As a result, last April, the Biden administration made the long-overdue decision to sign my bill into law, H.J. Resolution 7, terminating the COVID National Emergency Act declaration. Shortly thereafter, OPM announced the removal of the COVID-19 nationwide operating status for Federal agencies.

Then, in August, White House Chief of Staff Zients sent an e-mail around to the cabinet member officials urging Federal agencies to return to in-person work in order to “deliver better results for the American people.” Clearly, even the White House is concerned about the excessive current levels of telework and remote work leading to a lack of productivity among Federal agencies, and the inability of agencies like DOI to meet their mission and provide core services to Americans. However, despite the direction to return to in-person work, DOI has only made minimal changes to their telework policy.

The reality remains that DOI allows their telework-eligible employees to only report to the office twice every 2 weeks. DOI has so far been unable to produce any meaningful data for tracking their telework and remote work rates among employees, so it is unclear how much progress the Department of the Interior has made towards returning to in-person work.

Here we are in 2024, and DOI remains mired in irrelevant and ineffective COVID-19 telework policies. The Department of the Interior’s agencies are less productive and continue to fall behind on outstanding work affecting the delivery of services to all Americans. For example, last fall GAO released two reports detailing the numerous delays and deficiencies at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, including their ongoing struggles to process applications on time for providing real estate services to the tribes and tribal citizens, and to close out agreements issued under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. The reports also identified serious health and safety issues at Indian schools and detention facilities, and glaring deficiencies with national data regarding missing Indigenous women.

Additionally, our national parks are in a state of disrepair. Critical deferred maintenance projects are dragging our parks down, as the National Park Service has yet to make any significant progress on their massive backlog of properties and projects, even those that address immediate danger to the life, health, and property, or the infrastructure.

GAO also identified that the National Park Service is currently “unable to effectively identify and manage its deferred maintenance due to inaccurate and unreliable data.”

Now, I expect my friends on the other side of the aisle to argue once again that if only Congress provided more funding, DOI could

solve its many problems. However, I urge my colleagues to break free from this DC swamp mired virus so we can address the larger problems within our Federal agencies. I disagree. After years of additional funding, literally, it seems like funding has grown on trees around here, nothing has changed. In all honesty, things have gotten worse.

Sometimes money isn't the issue. Perhaps it is really poor management. And that often starts at the top, with bad policies. As a result, it is the responsibility of the Interior agencies to find ways to become more productive and efficient in the resources management already at their disposal. It is time for the DOI to return to more appropriate pre-pandemic levels of telework and remote work so that staff will establish a stronger workplace culture for working in person.

House Republicans have put forth a solution to the in-person absenteeism of Federal employees. The Show Up Act, which would return Federal agencies to pre-pandemic levels of telework and require Federal agencies to submit studies to Congress detailing how increased telework levels during the pandemic impacted their missions. I urge the Senate to take up this legislation so we can get back to business here in DC.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I now recognize the Ranking Member, Ms. Kamlager-Dove.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. SYDNEY KAMLAGER-DOVE, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Ms. KAMLAGER-DOVE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let's be clear. Telework and remote work works. Workers want it because it makes them more productive and reduces stress by avoiding commutes. It has been life-changing for parents, military spouses, people with disabilities, and others who have access to more job opportunities and better work-life balance. Employers want it because it helps attract the best talent. New mothers want it because it helps them manage postpartum depression, motherhood, and life, and getting to Congress.

My colleagues have cherry-picked the evidence to support their claim that we need to return to pre-pandemic telework postures. But most of the research shows that telework flexibility is a net positive for employers and employees alike. That is probably why a 2023 survey of House employees shows Republicans use it for their own staff.

COVID opened our eyes to the advantages of telework. We can't and shouldn't ignore those lessons. And it is not so much about government agencies being unproductive; it is about being under-resourced but also overwhelmed by Republican hearing committee gotcha agendas that refocus their energies on showing up and performing here, rather than doing the work for the American people.

So, let's continue to put this into perspective. We know now that 2023 was the hottest year on record by a wide margin, and the rate of warming over the past century has no precedent. We also had record-breaking temperatures in our oceans, with marine heatwaves occurring all over the globe. Concentrations of carbon

dioxide and methane, two major greenhouse gases, also hit new highs, and the consequences are all around us: extreme weather, floods, droughts, wildfires, new disease outbreaks. It is getting worse, and addressing it will require resources, coordination, and commitment on an unprecedented scale.

Seventy-two percent of the American people know that climate change is happening every day, not four times a year. But what are we here to do today? We are micromanaging where people's duty stations are and how often they have to commute.

Luckily, Democrats and the Biden administration are pulling our weight. Under Democratic leadership we passed the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which had historic investments for addressing the climate crisis. Now, the Department of the Interior is working diligently and effectively to implement them both.

In my home state of California, Interior recently awarded about \$295 million to protect the Colorado River Basin, enabling us to conserve up to 643,000 acre-feet of water through next year to better protect constituents against the impacts of historic droughts and the climate crisis. That kind of commitment is what it will take, and this type of action is what my colleagues on the other side oppose. The Biden-Harris administration is getting the work done remotely, hybrid, and in person.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I yield back.

Dr. GOSAR. I thank the gentlelady from California. I am now going to introduce our witnesses.

First, we have Ms. Dawn Locke, Director of Strategic Issues, U.S. Government Accountability Office, and Mr. Mark Green, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Diversity and the Chief Human Capital Officer, U.S. Department of the Interior.

Let me remind you that our lights are very key here. We have 5 minutes for the statement. The light will start off as green. When you start to see the yellow, that means start summing it up, we just have a minute left. And when you see red, wrap it up.

To begin your testimony, please push the "on" button to make sure that the microphone is on so everybody can hear you.

We will start with you, Ms. Dawn Locke.

STATEMENT OF DAWN G. LOCKE, DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC ISSUES, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. LOCKE. Thank you, Chairman Gosar and members of the Subcommittee.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss telework and the Department of the Interior.

GAO's work highlights some of the benefits and challenges of telework, as well as key practices for successful telework programs. As telework continues to evolve, it is important to have a clear understanding of how telework can help or hinder mission performance so agencies can make necessary adjustments.

To start with benefits, they include a reduced need for office space, which can result in cost savings. Telework can also help

agencies' organizational health, such as employee engagement, or resiliency to ensure missions continue during periods of disruption like what we have seen during this week's snowstorm.

In addition, human capital officers have reported that telework can address skills gaps similar to those faced by the Interior because, if used effectively, telework can help recruit and retain the best possible workforce. This issue related to human capital management has remained on GAO's high risk list since 2001 because these skills gaps undermine agencies' abilities to meet their missions. Again, effective telework implementation can help agencies address these gaps.

While there are benefits to telework, it is important that we mitigate the challenges to fully realize these benefits. Challenges we see thus far include managing Federal space, issues with technology and data reliability. Allow me to unpack those a bit.

When it comes to Federal space, agencies have long struggled to determine how much office space they need to fulfill their missions. Retaining excess space is another area that has been on GAO's high-risk list since 2003. And as you are aware, Interior struggles with these very issues. We found that leveraging benchmarks established by OMB could help Federal officials better assess workspace needs and potentially reduce costs.

For telework challenges related to technology, we have identified equipment shortages, lack of training on the technology, and limited network capacity at various agencies. We have also found challenges with telework data, particularly data maintained in OPM's human resource database system. Please note improving the reliability of these data can better help agencies and all of you make informed decisions about telework.

What I want to make very clear regarding these challenges is that they could be mitigated if agencies followed key practices that provide a roadmap for successfully implementing telework programs. These practices consist of steps like having a dedicated telework office to provide oversight, ensuring appropriate technology for those working from home, and having evaluation plans to make course corrections where needed.

Federal telework programs faced an intense stress test beginning in March 2020. This experience enhanced our understanding of what telework can do for the Federal Government. When used effectively, it could be quite beneficial, but only if we address the challenges. That is, only if we implement key practices and have the data needed to make informed decisions to ensure this workforce flexibility is meeting mission and customer needs.

Bottom line, we must continue to provide oversight of telework and hold agencies accountable for meeting their goals whether their employees are sitting in a cubicle, working in the field, or connecting virtually from home.

I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Locke follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAWN G. LOCKE, DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC ISSUES, U.S.
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and Members of the Subcommittee: I am pleased to be here today to discuss telework and the Department of the Interior.

Federal agencies use telework to help accomplish their missions and maintain operations, especially during emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instructed agencies to maximize the use of telework to allow federal employees to remain safe while working from alternative locations and maintaining mission critical workforce needs.

Prior to this abrupt and unprecedented change in agencies' operating postures, Congress had encouraged federal agencies to expand participation in telework, including by passing the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act).¹ The act, among other things, established requirements for executive agencies' telework policies and programs.

Agencies have continued to adapt their operating postures since the onset of the pandemic. These adaptations vary widely in response to the multitude of federal agency mission areas, including Interior's management of America's natural and cultural resources. Federal employees' job functions also vary widely and can include common core office functions such as budget, human capital, and information technology; and, for Interior, the numerous other functions specific to its 11 bureaus.

Interior's personnel must sometimes be present on-site to perform their work. For example, the visitor experience at national parks is shaped, in part, by direct visitor services activities such as ranger interpretive programs, guided tours, and educational programs at visitor centers. National Park Service staff also perform basic custodial duties and provide law enforcement operations.

In August 2023, the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee reported that Interior needs to reopen Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Regional Offices for in-person services because Tribes and their citizens are not getting proper services from BIA teleworkers.² The report stated that in-person access to officials to ask questions is particularly important for elderly members and those without Internet or reliable Internet.

In April 2023, OMB instructed federal agencies, including Interior, to increase meaningful in-person work—particularly at agency headquarters—while still using flexible operational policies such as telework to enhance employee recruitment and retention.³

Interior, similar to other federal agencies, will continue to face challenges in capitalizing on the lessons learned during the pandemic and finding the right balance of telework, remote work, and in-person work to accomplish its mission. As agencies consider their future of work in a rapidly changing environment, it is important that they follow key practices for implementing an effective telework program.

My statement discusses several of our previously issued reports that have highlighted (1) the potential benefits of telework, (2) the challenges of telework, and (3) leading telework practices agencies should follow as they continue to adapt their operating postures. In developing this testimony, we reviewed our previously issued reports and testimony on our body of work on federal telework at Interior and other federal agencies as well as reports on and recommendations to Interior.⁴

¹Pub. L. No. 111-292, 124 Stat. 3165 (2010), codified primarily at chapter 65 of title 5, United States Code. The act defined telework as a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work. Prior to this act, the most significant congressional action related to telework was included in a fiscal year 2001 appropriations provision. This provision required agencies to establish policies under which eligible employees could participate in telework to the maximum extent possible without diminished employee performance. The Office of Personnel Management was tasked with ensuring application of this requirement to an increasing percentage of the federal workforce over time. Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations, 2001, Pub. L. No. 106-346, app., tit. III, § 359, 114 Stat. 1356, 1356A-36 (2000).

²U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee, Policy Recommendations (Washington, D.C. Aug. 2023).

³Office of Management and Budget, Measuring, Monitoring, and Improving Organizational Health and Organizational Performance in the Context of Evolving Agency Work Environments, OMB M-23-15 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2023).

⁴GAO, *Federal Real Property: Agencies Need New Benchmarks to Measure and Shed Underutilized Space*, GAO-24-107006 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 26, 2023); *Tribal Issues: Bureau of Indian Affairs Should Take Additional Steps to Improve Timely Delivery of Real Estate*

We have ongoing work reviewing the implications of telework use at federal agencies. Specifically, we are examining how the use of telework has contributed to ongoing changes among selected agencies' customer service delivery, organizational performance, worker productivity and performance, and operations. This statement reflects some of the recent policies and guidance issued by OMB and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) that we reviewed as part of that work.

We conducted the work on which this testimony is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Potential Benefits

Telework offers potential benefits to federal agencies as well as to the federal workforce. These benefits include improving recruitment and retention of employees, reducing the need for costly office space, and creating an opportunity to better balance work and family demands. In addition, telework is a tool that agencies can use to help accomplish their missions during periods of disruption.

Last July, we reported on the impact of telework, both as it pertains to the workforce and various sectors of the economy. Studies we reviewed found that, while telework generally had a positive impact on worker productivity and firm performance in certain sectors, methodological issues complicate efforts to estimate its long-term impacts.⁵

Federal human capital officers have identified telework as a workforce flexibility that can help address skills gaps by helping to attract, recruit, and retain the best possible workforce. For agencies to leverage telework to recruit and retain employees to close skills gaps in their workforce, they must ensure their telework policies, procedures, and other controls are appropriately implemented. Agencies must also ensure that the technology needed for employees to telework functions as it should.

Since 2001, we have included strategic human capital management in GAO's High-Risk List. This is partially because of the need to address current and emerging skills gaps that are undermining agencies' abilities to meet their missions.⁶ Last April, we reported that any progress to close mission-critical skills gaps will require demonstrated improvements in agencies' capacity to perform workforce planning, foster employee engagement, train staff effectively, and recruit and retain the appropriate number of staff with the necessary skills. We found that agencies face challenges in these areas of human capital management.⁷ Effective implementation of telework policies and procedures could help improve talent management shortfalls, which is often how agencies experience skills gaps.

Services, GAO-24-105875 (Washington D.C.: Oct. 26, 2023, reissued with revisions on Nov. 6, 2023); *Telework: Growth Supported Economic Activity during the Pandemic, but Future Impacts are Uncertain*, GAO-23-105999 (Washington, D.C.: July 26, 2023); *Tribal Programs: Actions Needed to Improve Interior's Management of Trust Services*, GAO-23-105356 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 27, 2023); *COVID-19: Federal Telework Increased during the Pandemic, but More Reliable Data Are Needed to Support Oversight*, GAO-22-104282 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 8, 2022); *Bureau of Land Management: Better Workforce Planning and Data Would Help Mitigate the Effects of Recent Staff Vacancies*, GAO-22-104247 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2021); *COVID-19: Selected Agencies Overcame Technology Challenges to Support Telework but Need to Fully Assess Security Controls*, GAO-21-583 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2021); *Federal Telework: Key Practices That Can Help Ensure the Success of Telework Programs*, GAO-21-238T (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 18, 2020); *Federal Telework: Additional Controls Could Strengthen Telework Program Compliance and Data Reporting*, GAO-17-247 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 17, 2017); *Federal Human Resources Data, OPM Should Improve the Availability and Reliability of Payroll Data to Support Accountability and Workforce Analytics*, GAO-17-127 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 7, 2016); *Federal Telework: Better Guidance Could Help Agencies Calculate Benefits and Costs*, GAO-16-551 (Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2016); *Federal Telework: Program Measurement Continues to Confront Data Reliability Issues*, GAO-12-519 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2012); and *Human Capital: Further Guidance, Assistance, and Coordination Can Improve Federal Telework Efforts*, GAO-03-679 (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2003).

⁵ GAO-23-105999.

⁶ GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-01-263 (Washington, D.C.: January 2001).

⁷ See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, GAO-23-106203 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

We have previously reported areas where Interior faces challenges in meeting its mission due to skills gaps. For example:

- In October 2023, we reported that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) identified staff shortages as a factor affecting its processing times for real estate services.⁸ We recommended, among other things, that BIA develop a plan to address factors affecting its processing times for delivering real estate services, including staff shortages. BIA agreed with these recommendations and stated it would develop a plan for overseeing the entry of real estate data, among other things.
- In April 2023, we found that the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration (BTFA) within BIA lacked a strategic workforce plan that would help Interior better understand the resources it needs to manage trust funds, especially as demand for beneficiary services continues to increase.⁹ We recommended that Interior develop a strategic workforce plan for carrying out trust functions and update agency collaboration guidance for trust operations and services. Interior generally agreed with our recommendations. As of October 2023, BTFA continues to finalize a statement of work to hire a contractor to assist with the development of a workforce plan. BTFA anticipates awarding the contract during the second quarter of fiscal year 2024 and completing the strategic workforce plan during the second quarter of fiscal year 2025.
- In November 2021, we found that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) made substantial changes to its organizational structure without a strategic workforce plan that addressed the two critical needs that define strategic workforce planning: (1) aligning the agency's human capital program with emerging mission goals, and (2) developing long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals.¹⁰ We recommended that BLM (1) track data on vacancies and details for all offices, and (2) develop an agency-wide strategic workforce plan that aligns its human capital program with emerging mission goals and includes long-term staffing strategies. Interior agreed with our recommendations. As of February 2023, BLM said it had hired a contractor to develop a strategic workforce plan and made some progress, but had not yet finalized such a plan. By implementing our priority recommendation in this area, BLM will better ensure it has the workforce it needs to achieve its mission and goals.

Challenges

Our prior work has identified a number of challenges related to telework. These challenges include:

Measuring and shedding underutilized federal space. Federal agencies have long struggled to determine how much office space they need to fulfill their missions. Retaining excess and underutilized space is one of the main reasons that federal real property management has remained on our High-Risk List since 2003. In a report we issued last October, we found that agency officials identified challenges to increasing utilization, including a lack of benchmarks for full utilization that accounts for increased telework.¹¹

Differences in agencies' measures, calculations, and benchmarks can also contribute to differences in capacity and utilization measures across the government. A benchmark for measuring utilization that accounts for higher levels of telework could help the federal government more consistently identify underutilized space within and across agencies. This information could support better alignment of the federal real property portfolio with future needs and cost reductions from releasing unneeded space. We recommended that the Director of OMB should ensure that the Deputy Director of OMB, as Chair of the Federal Real Property Council, leads the development and use of benchmarks for measuring building utilization that account for greater levels of telework. OMB agreed with our recommendation.

In our October 2023 report, we reviewed the agencies' use of their headquarters buildings at 24 federal agencies—including Interior—for three selected weeks during January, February, and March 2023. We found that Interior's headquarters utilization was in the third quartile of the 24 agencies. The six agencies in the quartile used 23 percent of their headquarters buildings' capacity on average over our sample period (see figure 1).

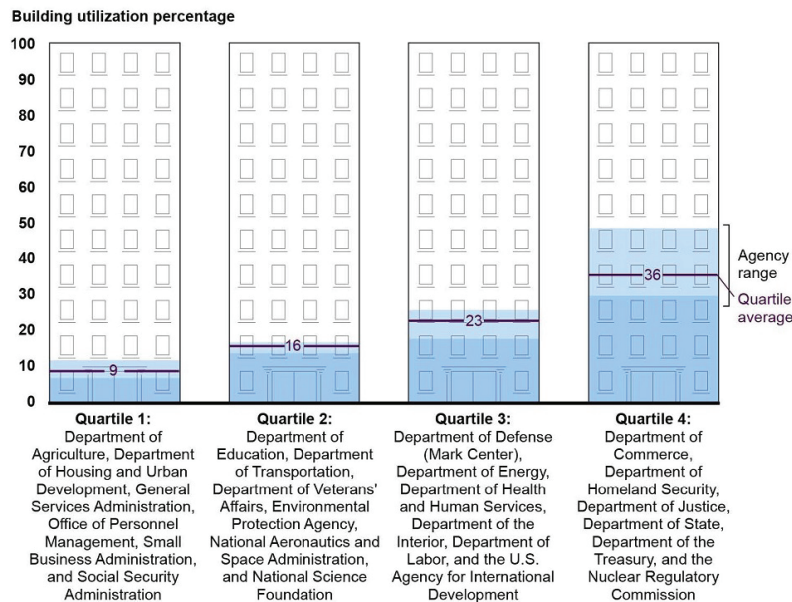
⁸ GAO-24-105875.

⁹ GAO-23-105356.

¹⁰ GAO-22-104247.

¹¹ GAO-24-107006.

Figure 1: Estimated Weekly Averages of Utilization of Federal Headquarters Buildings across a 3-Week Sample (One Week in Each of January, February, and March 2023), by Quartile



Source: GAO analysis of data from 24 federal agencies; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-24-107162

Note: Utilization is a ratio of a building's capacity and the extent to which an agency uses that capacity. Utilization differs from attendance because a building's capacity is based on the size of the building, not the number of people assigned to it. All assigned staff could go to a building, and it could still be underutilized if the building has more space than it needs. The quartile percentage represents a weekly average, but percentage ranges of space utilization vary by federal agency. In addition, daily in-person attendance rates generally varied throughout the work week. The Department of Defense provided us data on attendance in a government facility (Mark Center) located in Alexandria, Virginia, which we had identified as its administrative headquarters. The Office of Personnel Management indicated that additional non-agency staff occupy space in its headquarters building, and its numbers include those workspaces and attendance. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Small Business Administration officials noted that their headquarters buildings were undergoing renovation during the data collection period, contributing to a decrease in attendance. The Department of Energy headquarters includes the Forrestal, Germantown, and Portals locations. See GAO-24-107006 for information on how we calculated the extent to which the agencies are using the buildings.

Reliability of telework data. In 2012, we reported that OPM had been concerned about the reliability of telework data it received from executive agencies through its annual data call over the prior decade.¹² OPM also maintains data on telework use in its Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) system.¹³ In 2016, we found that several issues affected the reliability of the EHRI payroll system, including the telework variables within the database. We made five

¹² GAO-12-519.

¹³ EHRI is OPM's primary warehouse for data about federal employees. OPM designed EHRI to leverage its existing IT infrastructure, staff, and tools to integrate federal personnel, payroll, training, and retirement databases. EHRI was developed following the electronic government initiative in 2001. This initiative was aimed at using IT to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, and employees. It also was designed to improve the internal efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government.

recommendations, including four to improve data reliability.¹⁴ In 2019, OPM implemented one recommendation by updating its EHRI database payroll data standards to include data on the number and instances of telework use by federal employees and the number of hours of telework used.

In 2023, OPM officials told us they implemented another recommendation by developing a process to monitor system generated error reports in EHRI. However, it still needs to close two other recommendations to improve data reliability. Specifically, OPM needs to finish updating control activities to further leverage EHRI datasets and data quality. It also needs to develop a schedule for integrating payroll data into a larger suite of EHRI databases.¹⁵ OPM officials agreed that payroll data in EHRI could eventually be substituted for OPM's current telework data calls but to do so would first require implementation of the above actions.

Until OPM develops a plan to fully implement all our recommendations to improve data reliability issues with its EHRI payroll data, it will continue to be unable to precisely assess telework usage across agencies and provide a full and accurate picture to Congress to support oversight. In February 2022, we recommended that Congress consider requiring OPM to develop an implementation plan to improve the reliability of information in EHRI, including telework information.¹⁶ In doing so, Congress should consider providing OPM a deadline for completing the plan.

IT. Agency officials reported a variety of IT challenges at the onset of the pandemic and took steps to try to mitigate these issues.¹⁷ These challenges included equipment shortages, lack of training, and limited network capacity. Agencies told us they needed to ensure that teleworkers had the right technology to perform their duties successfully. Other areas of importance to agencies included assessing organizational and teleworker technology needs, addressing access and security issues related to telework, and providing technical support when needed.

Work portability and replicating on-site work process. Several agencies reported that some positions and procedures were not portable. They added that they needed additional time at the outset of the pandemic to revise guidance and policies to accommodate full-time telework for eligible employees occupying those positions. Agencies also experienced challenges replicating the office environment and some processes in a remote setting. These included challenges with hiring, security checks and fingerprinting new employees, mail delivery and processing, and accessing office supplies and equipment.

Implementation of Key Practices Can Help Ensure the Success of Federal Agencies' Telework Programs

In our prior work, we have also identified key practices for federal agencies to implement with their telework programs. These key practices can be grouped under seven categories: (1) program planning, (2) telework policies, (3) performance management, (4) managerial support, (5) training and publicizing, (6) technology, and (7) program evaluation.¹⁸ These telework key practices—several of which are required by statute—provide a roadmap for federal agencies to successfully implement their telework program.

¹⁴GAO-17-127. The four recommendations to improve data reliability were for OPM to (1) update EHRI payroll database documentation to be consistent with current field definitions and requirements, including the Guide to Human Resources Reporting and the Guide to Data Standards, Part B; (2) consistently monitor system-generated error and edit check reports and ensure that timely action is taken to address identified issues; (3) develop a schedule for executing plans to integrate the payroll data into the larger suite of EHRI databases; and (4) evaluate existing internal control activities and develop new control activities for EHRI payroll data, such as implementing transactional edit checks that leverage the information in the other EHRI datasets. OPM concurred with our four recommendations and implemented two of them. As of January 2024, one remains open, and one remains open and partially addressed.

¹⁵In addition to the four recommendations to improve data reliability, we also recommended that OMB improve the availability of EHRI payroll data—for example, by preparing the data for analytics, making them available through online tools such as FedScope, and including them among the EHRI data sources on the OPM website and Data.gov. As of January 2024, the recommendation remains open.

¹⁶GAO-22-104282.

¹⁷We previously reported on (1) selected agencies' initial experiences in providing the IT needed to support remote access for maximum telework, and (2) the extent to which selected agencies followed federal information security guidance for their IT systems that provide remote access. See GAO-21-583.

¹⁸GAO-21-238T and GAO-03-679.

Program planning. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act) required agencies to designate a telework managing officer (TMO).¹⁹ Establishing such a leadership position is consistent with the key practices we identified. The TMO is the primary agency official devoted to the development and implementation of the agency's telework program and facilitates its compliance with the act. Agencies may also designate other officials to implement the day-to-day operations of the telework program.

Other key practices we identified related to program planning include establishing a cross-functional project team, establishing measurable telework program goals, developing an implementation plan for the telework program, developing a business case for implementing a telework program, providing funding to meet the needs of the telework program, and establishing a pilot program when initiating telework efforts.

Telework policies. Agencies should establish telework policies and guidance to ensure that their workforce is telework ready.²⁰ Another key practice to facilitate telework is to establish telework agreements for use between teleworkers and managers. Agencies are required to have such agreements. The act requires agencies to ensure an employee enters into a written agreement with an agency manager who outlines the agreed-upon specific work arrangement between the manager and the teleworking employee before the employee participates in telework.²¹ Our previous work found that telework agreements should establish job duties and expectations, performance standards, measurable outcomes and deliverables, and periodic review.

Other key practices related to telework policies include establishing eligibility criteria to ensure that teleworkers are approved on an equitable basis using criteria such as suitability of tasks and employee performance; establishing policies or requirements to facilitate communication among teleworkers, managers, and coworkers; and developing guidelines on workplace health and safety issues to ensure that teleworkers have safe and adequate places to work offsite.

Performance management. Our past review of telework-related literature found that agencies should ensure that the same performance standards are used to evaluate both teleworkers and nonteleworkers. In addition, agencies need to establish guidelines to minimize any adverse impacts that telework could have on nonteleworkers before employees begin to work at alternate worksites. Following these practices can help eliminate any perceived unfairness and reduce potential sources of tension between teleworkers and nonteleworkers.

The act makes performance a criterion for continued program participation and states that telework policies should ensure that telework does not diminish employee performance or agency operations.²² It also requires agencies to ensure that teleworkers and nonteleworkers are treated the same for the purposes of performance appraisals, among other management activities.²³

Managerial support. Our previous review of telework-related literature found that, to establish an effective telework program, it is critical to obtain support from top management and address managerial resistance to telework. Managers may resist telework in part because the change requires them to shift from managing by observation to managing by results. Managers' acceptance of telework is highly dependent on top management's commitment to those changes.

Training and publicizing. Telework involves different ways of working, as well as supervising employees. A key practice we identified from telework-related literature is that both employees and supervisors should receive training to ensure a common understanding of the program. Telework training should include two key components: it should (1) address policy issues and include general information, such as policy updates and an orientation to telework; and (2) focus on telework program activities, including such topics as IT applications, performance

¹⁹ Prior to the act, some agencies designated telework coordinators to be responsible for overseeing the implementation of telework programs and reported on the status of these programs. See, for example, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-199, div. B, tit. VI, § 627, 118 Stat. 3, 99 (2004).

²⁰ The act required agencies to establish a policy under which eligible employees may be authorized to telework within 180 days after enactment. 5 U.S.C. § 6502(a)(1)(A).

²¹ 5 U.S.C. § 6502(b).

²² 5 U.S.C. § 6502(b)(1) and (3).

²³ 5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(3).

management, and time management.²⁴ It is also important to inform the workforce about the telework program.

The act requires agencies to provide an interactive telework training program to telework-eligible employees and to managers of teleworkers.²⁵ The act further requires that employees successfully complete the training before entering into a telework agreement.²⁶ OPM guidance also recommends managers complete telework training prior to approving telework agreements.

Technology. Our prior review of telework-related literature found that agencies should assess teleworker and organization technology needs; develop guidelines about whether the organization or employee will provide necessary technology, equipment, and supplies for telework; provide technical support for teleworkers; address access and security issues related to telework; and establish standards for equipment in the telework environment. Agencies must also have an appropriate IT infrastructure in place that allows large numbers of employees to telework simultaneously.

Program evaluation. Telework-related literature we previously reviewed recommends that agencies develop program evaluation tools and use them from the very inception of the program to identify any problems or issues with the program, and develop an action plan to guide any necessary changes for telework or the organization. The literature also emphasized the need for tracking systems that can help accurately ascertain the status of telework implementation in the agencies and, subsequently, the federal government. Such a tracking system should include a formal head count of regular and episodic teleworkers, as well as nonteleworkers.

The act requires OPM to report annually on an assessment of the progress each agency has made in meeting agency participation rate goals, and other agency goals relating to telework, such as the impact of telework on energy use, performance, and productivity.²⁷ To assist in meeting this requirement, OPM collects data on telework via an annual data call to all executive branch agencies.

Assessments that include information on benefits, net cost savings, and costs can help decision makers determine the overall effects of their telework programs and the progress achieved.

According to OPM, since its 2017 telework data call, agencies have improved in their ability to track cost savings but not all agencies reported information on cost savings.

In conclusion, telework is a tool that allows agencies to provide employees flexibilities on where they work as they fulfill agency missions. The use of telework also allows the government to maintain operations during periods of emergency, as evidenced by large increases in telework during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, agencies such as Interior can take steps to enhance telework implementation and better manage available resources. For example, using benchmarks that account for higher levels of telework can help agency officials better manage federal space and reduce costs. Improving the reliability of telework data can help agencies make more informed management decisions about investing resources, planning for continuity of operations events, assessing compliance with the act, and managing physical space needs. In addition, following telework key practices—several of which are required by statute—provides a roadmap for federal agencies such as Interior to successfully implement their telework programs.

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

This testimony was submitted as an official GAO Report, titled “FEDERAL TELEWORK—Interior Can Benefit from Strategic Workforce Planning and Following Key Practices.” The original document can be found at:

<https://www.gao.gov/assets/d24107162.pdf>

²⁴ GAO-03-679.

²⁵ 5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(1).

²⁶ 5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(2).

²⁷ 5 U.S.C. § 6506(b)(2)(F).

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO DAWN G. LOCKE, DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC
ISSUES, GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Questions Submitted by Representative Gosar

Question 1. A recent GAO report indicated that the Office of Personnel Management does not have sufficient data on teleworking across the Federal Government and that their data collection process is insufficient.

1a) Can you explain the deficiencies that GAO identified, and how the recommendation's issued by GAO will improve OPM's data collection efforts?

Answer. OPM maintains data on telework use in its Enterprise Human Resources Integration (EHRI) system, OPM's primary warehouse for data about federal employees. In October 2016, we found that while OPM internal controls provide some assurance of the reliability of EHRI payroll data, weaknesses in the design or implementation of certain control activities and monitoring controls for the EHRI payroll database increase the risk of reliability issues that may limit OPM's ability to fully leverage the data in support of its mission. Specifically, (1) weaknesses in control activities have resulted in limited quality checks and acceptance of unreliable data into the EHRI payroll database; and (2) weaknesses in monitoring activities have resulted in failure to address these reliability issues and increased risk that these issues may compound over time.

In response, we made four recommendations to OPM to improve data reliability, including (1) updating EHRI payroll database documentation to be consistent with current field definitions and requirements, including the Guide to Human Resources Reporting and the Guide to Data Standards, Part B; (2) consistently monitoring system-generated error and edit check reports and ensure that timely action is taken to address identified issues; (3) developing a schedule for executing plans to integrate the payroll data into the larger suite of EHRI databases; and (4) evaluating existing internal control activities and develop new control activities for EHRI payroll data, such as implementing transactional edit checks that leverage the information in the other EHRI datasets. Taking these steps will allow OPM to correct internal control weaknesses such as risk of data errors, incomplete data fields, and ineffective monitoring of EHRI payroll data. In turn, OPM will be better able to leverage these data to meet its mission and allow others to make full use of these data for their research needs.

In 2019, OPM implemented one recommendation by updating its EHRI database payroll data standards to include data on the number and instances of telework use by federal employees and the number of hours of telework used. In 2023, OPM officials told us they implemented another recommendation by developing a process to monitor system generated error reports in EHRI. However, OPM still needs to close two other recommendations to improve data reliability. Specifically, OPM needs to finish updating control activities to further leverage EHRI datasets and data quality. It also needs to develop a schedule for integrating payroll data into a larger suite of EHRI databases.

In addition, we found there are continued inconsistencies and limitations of agency and government-wide telework data outside of the EHRI payroll system. In February 2017, we found that agencies may report to OPM's annual telework data call using a variety of systems that define and track telework measures differently. We recommended that OPM should strengthen controls for reviewing, validating, and reporting telework data in annual *Status of Telework in the Federal Government* reports. Specifically, OPM should follow up with agency officials on data outliers, including significant changes in year-to-year data. OPM disagreed with our recommendation, saying its processes provide agencies with opportunities to correct their own data. We maintain that OPM should implement these actions.

Question 2. Your testimony stated that "until OPM develops a plan to fully implement all our recommendations to improve data reliability issues . . . it will continue to be unable to precisely assess telework usage across agencies and provide a full and accurate picture to Congress to support oversight."

2a) Can you elaborate on how OPM's failure to implement the GAO's recommendations prevents Congress and the American public from obtaining a more accurate picture of telework and remote work usage across the Federal Government, including the Department of the Interior?

Answer. Without available and reliable payroll data, Congress and the American public must continue to rely on data that are more costly, imprecise, or limited in scope—missing opportunities to leverage centralized, standardized data that is essential for accountability and well-informed policy decision-making.

2b) How do the shortcomings from OPM's data collection efforts impact the GAO, OIG, and Congress from conducting more effective oversight?

Answer. Without reliable telework data from EHRI, GAO, OIG, and Congress must continue to rely on data that are more costly, imprecise, or limited in scope, such as data OPM collects from its annual telework data call. This complicates oversight efforts to ensure agencies comply with the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, are following the Administration's guidance to increase meaningful in-person work, and are following key practices for telework program implementation.

2c) Is there anything Congress should direct OPM to do regarding telework data collection?

Answer. Congress should consider requiring OPM to develop an implementation plan to improve the reliability of information in EHRI, including telework information. In doing so, Congress should consider providing OPM a deadline for completing the plan.

Dr. GOSAR. I thank the gentlelady, Ms. Locke, for her 5 minutes, and now I recognize Mr. Green for his 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MARK D. GREEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, HUMAN CAPITAL AND DIVERSITY, CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, WASHINGTON, DC

Mr. GREEN. Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Kamlager-Dove, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of the Interior's long-standing telework and remote work policies.

I am Mark Green, Chief Human Capital Officer at the Department. After my 24-year career in the United States Army, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service, and I have been in my current position for about a year.

Since Congress enacted the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, the Department has supported the telework program that allows agency employees, with the agreement and approval of their supervisor, to engage in appropriate telework and remote work opportunities.

Telework may be authorized only to the extent that an approved telework agreement does not diminish employee or organizational performance, and any agreement must be reviewed by the employee's supervisor to ensure that it does not impede the Department's mission.

The Department continues to refine our telework program by implementing government-wide best practices, providing training to supervisors and employees, and improving our information technology infrastructure. These refinements and investments in our telework program enabled the Department to quickly move to maximum telework posture while maintaining mission-critical functions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These actions complied with the Office of Management and Budget's guidance related to that emergency.

Throughout the pandemic, the Department's workforce of approximately 70,000 dedicated employees across 2,400 different

geographic locations continued to deliver the Department's mission. Our dedicated employees remained resilient throughout a very difficult time, managing and maintaining over 400 national park units, 550 national wildlife refuges, 475 critical infrastructure dams, and 480 million acres of public lands for the American people. Over 5,600 wildland fire personnel continue to fight fires on our lands and in our parks. The Department's more than 7,000 law enforcement officers and park rangers served and protected over 500 million visitors to the lands and the waters under the Department's stewardship in 2020 and 2021. Our scientists and field technicians continued to gather data and work in their laboratories.

Simply put, the Department's employees continued their important work under very challenging and unprecedented conditions, and for doing so we are very proud of them.

The Department's workforce is made up of employees performing almost every job in the Federal Government, and we have a substantial number of people who work in person, on the ground, or at Department facilities every day. About 55 percent of our workforce consists of customer-facing employees who provide core mission delivery functions within our public lands, recreation areas, parks, and wildlife refuges. Because of the type of work they do, these employees are generally not eligible for regular telework. A smaller portion of our workforce performs mission support roles that are not public facing, and are often able to be performed in a telework and remote posture.

Our enhanced information technology infrastructure has provided the capability for our mission support employees to effectively communicate and interact in a secure environment. These employees and occupations such as information technology, human resources, acquisitions management, financial management, and other similar support jobs possess highly portable skills that are in very high demand in both the public and private sectors. This group of employees is generally eligible for regular telework, and in some cases remote work.

Over the past several months, the Department has been re-evaluating our work environment posture in response to OMB Memo 23-15 and the conclusion of the public health emergency to ensure our decisions regarding work environments continue to improve our organizational health and performance.

In September, we implemented the requirement for teleworking managers and supervisors in the National Capital Region to begin working at least 50 percent of their time in the office. In mid-December, we expanded this requirement and notified all non-bargaining unit employees in the National Capital Region that they will begin reporting to the office at least 50 percent of their time beginning February 11. Taking these steps will ensure that over 70 percent of the employees in the National Capital Region will be working in person at greater rates.

Nationally, according to our latest payroll data, Interior's workforce is performing work in person 65 percent of our work hours. The Department has also partnered with the General Services Administration to work to maximize efficient use of both Department-owned and GSA-provided spaces. In the past year, the

Department developed a future of workspace strategy, and in partnership with GSA chartered multiple implementation teams at high-priority locations that are tasked in identifying space reduction targets in administrative facilities.

As we can continue to work with OMB, the Office of Personnel Management, GSA, and other agencies we continue to seek opportunities to update our policies as appropriate. We expect the Department's future of work policies, along with our use of telework and remote work flexibilities, will continue to evolve over time in response to market trends and mission needs.

Based on our experience before, during, and following the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe the hybrid workforce model that we are operating in now is one that works for the Department. In fact, for the Department to remain competitive for the talent we need in the future, especially in mission support occupations, we believe it is essential that we continue to offer workplace flexibility, such as telework and remote work. We recognize that our current hybrid workforce model may need periodic course adjustments and that Department senior leaders remain committed to finding effective ways to enhance our ability to continually monitor, measure, and evaluate agency performance.

While the Department's mission always comes first, we can't make it happen and deliver for the American people without our amazing and dedicated workforce. It is because of our employees and the passion and commitment they show for their work every day that the Department was recognized in 2022 among the top large agencies in best places to work in the Federal Government.

I look forward to discussing this important matter with this Subcommittee, and I am pleased to answer any questions that you have today.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Green follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARK D. GREEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY, HUMAN
CAPITAL AND DIVERSITY,
AND CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Department of the Interior's long-standing telework and remote work policies. I am Mark Green, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Human Capital and Diversity and Chief Human Capital Officer at the Department. After my 24-year career at the United States Army, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service and have been in my current position for the last year.

Since Congress enacted the Telework Enhancement Act in 2010, the Department has supported a telework program across our bureaus and offices that allows agency employees, with the agreement and approval of their supervisors, to engage in appropriate telework and remote work opportunities. Briefly, telework may be authorized only to the extent that an approved telework arrangement does not diminish employee or organizational performance, and any agreement must be reviewed by the employee's first-line supervisor to determine whether the proposed agreement is in the best interest of the Department's mission.

The Department continues to refine this telework program by implementing government-wide best practices, providing training to supervisors and employees, and improving our information technology infrastructure.

These refinements and investments in our telework programs enabled the Department to quickly move our workforce to a maximum telework posture, while maintaining mission-critical functions, to minimize face-to-face interactions in March 2020, at the outset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. These actions complied with

the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) guidance related to that emergency, including OMB M-20-13, OMB M-20-15, OMB M-20-16 among others.

Throughout the Pandemic, the Department's workforce of approximately 70,000 dedicated employees across 2,400 different geographic locations continued to deliver the Department's mission to protect and manage the Nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provide scientific and other information about those resources; and honor its trust responsibilities or special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and Affiliated Island Communities.

The Department's dedicated employees remained resilient throughout a very difficult time, managing and maintaining more than 400 national park units, 550 national wildlife refuges, 475 critical infrastructure dams providing water to farmers and drought-stricken areas, and 480 million acres of public lands for the American people. Over 5,600 wildland fire personnel continued to fight fires on our lands and in our parks and the Department's more than 7,000 law enforcement officers and park rangers served and protected over 500 million visitors to the lands and waters under the Department's stewardship in 2020 and 2021. Scientists and field technicians also continued to gather data, and work in their laboratories. The Department's employees continued their important work under very challenging and unprecedented conditions, and, for doing so, we are, and should be, very proud of them.

The Department's workforce is made up of employees performing almost every type of job in the Federal government, and we have a substantial number of people who work in-person, on the ground or at Department facilities, every day. About 55 percent of our workforce consists of customer-facing employees who provide core, mission delivery functions within our public lands, recreation areas, parks, and wildlife refuges. These employees are generally not eligible for regular telework and are not eligible for remote work because their jobs require them to be onsite for face-to-face interactions with the public and for work which must be performed on-site by its nature.

A smaller portion of our workforce performs mission support roles that are not public facing and are often able to perform their duties in a telework or remote posture. These mission support employees, in occupations such as information technology, human resources, acquisitions, financial management, and other similar support jobs, possess highly portable skills and are in very high demand in both the public and private sectors. This group of employees is generally eligible for regular telework and in some cases remote work. The enhanced information technology infrastructure of the Department has allowed for us to effectively communicate and interact in a secure environment.

Over the past several months, the Department has been re-evaluating our work environment posture in response to the OMB Memo 23-15 and the conclusion of the public health emergency to ensure that our decisions regarding work environments continue to improve organizational health and organizational performance. In September, we implemented the requirement for all teleworking managers and supervisors in the National Capital Region to work in the office at least 50% of their time. In mid-December, we expanded this requirement and notified all non-bargaining unit employees in the National Capital Region that they will begin reporting to the office at least 50% of their time on February 11, 2024, ensuring that over 70% of employees in the National Capital Region will be working in person at greater rates. Nationally, according to the latest payroll data, Interior's workforce is performing work in-person 65% of their regular work hours.

As the Department looks to the future of work, the Department has also partnered with the General Services Administration (GSA) to work to maximize the efficient use of both Department-owned and GSA-provided spaces by various strategies. In the past year, the Department developed a Future of Workspace Strategy and, in partnership with GSA, chartered multiple implementation teams at high-priority locations that are tasked with identifying space reduction targets in administrative facilities.

As we work with OMB, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), GSA and other agencies, we continue to seek opportunities and to update our policies as appropriate. As noted above, the Department's current telework policy, Personnel Bulletin 21-07 (PB 21-07), establishes criteria and procedures under which eligible employees may be authorized to telework and emphasizes that approved telework arrangements cannot diminish employee or organizational performance or impede mission delivery, consistent with the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 and OPM Guidelines. A copy of this policy is available on the Department's website at https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/elips/documents/pb-21-07-telework-program-final-7.23.2021_0.pdf.

We expect that the Department's future work environment policies, along with our use of telework and remote work flexibilities, will continue to evolve over time in response to job market trends and mission needs. Based on our experience before, during, and following the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe the hybrid workforce model can be one that works for the Department in the appropriate cases. In fact, for the Department to remain competitive for the talent we need in the future, especially in our mission support occupations, we believe it is essential that we continue to offer workforce flexibilities such as telework and remote work.

We recognize that our current hybrid workforce model may need periodic course adjustments and the Department's senior leaders remain committed to finding effective ways to enhance our ability to continually monitor, measure, and evaluate agency performance. While the Department's mission always comes first, we cannot make it happen and deliver for the American people without our amazing and dedicated workforce. It is because of our employees, and the passion and commitment they show for their work every day, that the Department was recognized in 2022 as among the top 10 large agencies in the Best Places to Work in the Federal government.

I look forward to discussing this important matter with this Committee and other stakeholders in Congress and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have today.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO MR. MARK GREEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT
SECRETARY FOR HUMAN CAPITAL AND DIVERSITY,
AND CHIEF HUMAN CAPITAL OFFICER, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Mr. Green did not submit responses to the Committee by the appropriate deadline for inclusion in the printed record.

Questions Submitted by Representative Gosar

Question 1. According to reports from GAO and OPM, DOI has been unable to provide any meaningful data relating to their telework and remote work policies. Please explain why DOI could not provide data to GAO for their report titled, Federal Telework Increased during the Pandemic, but More Reliable Data Are Needed to Support Oversight.

1a) Can you describe the progress that DOI has made since this report on internal data collection on telework and remote work?

Question 2. Last August, the White House Chief of Staff sent an email to President Biden's cabinet officials directing agencies to "aggressively" implement "increases in the amount of in-person work" and that it was a "priority for the President" for federal workers to shift towards more in-person work.

2a) How did DOI comply with this directive from the White House? Specifically, can you please describe how DOI "aggressively" executed the directive from the White House to implement "increases in the amount of in-person work"?

Question 3. Your testimony discussed DOI's requirements to get DOI employees, namely in the North Capital Region, "to work in the office at least 50% of the time" and plans next month to expand that directive to ensure that over 70% of employees in the National Capital Region" work in the office 50% of the time. You also said that "nationally, according to the latest payroll data, Interior's workforce is performing work in-person 65% of their regular work hours."

3a) What percentage of your time do you spend in the office at DOI headquarters?

i. What about your immediate direct reports?

3b) Why was it even necessary to tell DOI's employees that they need to come into the office "at least 50% of their time?" Is in-person absenteeism so bad at DOI that folks who should be in the office don't do so even half the time?

i. How did DOI settle on the requirement that folks need to come into the office "50% of the time"? Why isn't it more?

ii. Are there plans to increase the requirements to ensure that DOI's workforce is performing more work in-person compared to the current requirements and rates?

3c) At this point in time, January 2024, what percentage of total employees at DOI's headquarters (meaning National Capital Region) work in the office at least 90% of the time?

Question 4. Are there any specified "work from the office days" where everyone at DOI has to come into the office? Or can folks pick and choose what days in the office?

4a) If not, wouldn't it be good for everyone to be in the office at the same time on the same days?

Questions Submitted by Representative Stansbury

Question 1. Is there any evidence that the Federal Government's telework and remote work policies that were in place before the SARS-CoV-2-driven pandemic began represented the most efficient and effective use of telework and remote work?

On January 10, 2024, the Committee held an oversight hearing on the National Park Service (NPS) deferred maintenance backlog, during which testimony from the Department of the Interior's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) helped clarify why deferred maintenance has seemingly increased in recent years.

We learned that NPS is using more thorough accounting methods and that many critical projects are lined up for completion in the next couple years thanks to historic funding in the Great American Outdoors Act. However, at no point were remote work or telework mentioned by the OIG or GAO witnesses as factors for increased deferred maintenance, despite claims from Republicans that it's partly to blame. Is there any evidence to support that claim?

Dr. GOSAR. Thank you, Mr. Green. I am now going to recognize the gentleman from Georgia for his 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Green, I appreciate your service. Let's see, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Diversity, Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of the Interior. Man, is your business card like the size of legal paper? That is a title. In your role as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Capital and Diversity, Chief Human Capital Officer, Department of the Interior, you don't only oversee telework, but you also oversee diversity, equity, and inclusion, correct?

Mr. GREEN. My role is really over the telework policies and remote work policies, human capital-related things, but not necessarily the equity.

Mr. COLLINS. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is included in that.

Mr. GREEN. That is included in my title due to the fact of our candidate pools for hiring.

Mr. COLLINS. What I want to get to real quick because 5 minutes flies, in a memo to the Fish and Wildlife Service employees, Martha Williams who is the Director, wrote that diversity, equity, and inclusion work was her No. 1 priority. Mr. Green, can you please explain why the Fish and Wildlife Service is prioritizing DEI initiatives ahead of the Service's stated mission, which is to conserve, protect, enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats?

Mr. GREEN. The Department and the Administration prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion, and it is an important aspect of all we do.

Mr. COLLINS. So, that is their No. 1 priority.

Mr. GREEN. But for Fish and Wildlife, I cannot answer specifically why she—

Mr. COLLINS. Well, let's talk in general terms, then. Do you think the Fish and Wildlife Service should prioritize DEI initiatives over conserving, protecting fish, wildlife, and their habitats?

Mr. GREEN. I think it should be a priority that supports that mission.

Mr. COLLINS. Also in March of last year, the Fish and Wildlife Service, they excluded participation in DEI groups from their service caps, which allows about 2 hours for employees to use during work hours for resources and employee organization-type meetings. So, as a result, Fish and Wildlife Service employees, they can spend as much time as they want on DEI initiatives instead of working in their official on-duty duties. Can you explain why participation in DEI employee organizations are excluded from the service cap?

Mr. GREEN. No, I cannot. I will have to take that question back, and we could get you an answer for that.

Mr. COLLINS. How does unlimited participation in DEI groups serve the American taxpayer who pays Service employees to protect fish, wildlife, and habitats?

Mr. GREEN. Our mission delivery to the American public is the No. 1 priority. And DEI is an Administration priority that fits into all that we do on that mission.

Mr. COLLINS. You give them unlimited on DEI, but it is capped at 2 hours on what their mission is.

Mr. Green, I am sure you would agree with me that since humans are part of the animal kingdom, correct, and you and the Fish and Wildlife Service are focused hard on DEI, so I am going to ask you, have you seen any evidence of lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in other animals in the animal kingdom? Say, like maybe the rainbow trout, horny toad, the red-cockaded woodpecker?

Mr. GREEN. I am not an expert on all of those things, so I wouldn't be able to answer that question.

Mr. COLLINS. That is what I thought.

Mr. Chairman, I would have asked about the common cockchafer, but his Department doesn't have any jurisdiction over them since they live in England. With that, I am going to yield back the balance of my time.

Dr. GOSAR. I thank the gentleman. Now, the gentlelady who just got here from New Mexico, Ms. Stansbury, the Ranking Member, is recognized.

Ms. STANSBURY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Well, I heard today's hearing was about telework, so I thought I would give it a try. Just kidding.

[Laughter.]

Ms. STANSBURY. I appreciate the opportunity to come and speak to our experts and to have the Department of the Interior and GAO here. Thank you all for being here today.

I think it is clear that our entire economy and workforce has been transformed since the pandemic. Millions of people all around the world have changed the ways in which they are working, and we actually see increased productivity and effectiveness in people's jobs when they have more flexibility around how they manage their own days.

So, let's be clear. Telework and remote policy actually works, and it works well. Workers want it because it helps reduce stress, it helps to avoid commutes, it gives them more time on the job. It has been life-changing for parents, military spouses. Employers like to use it because it helps them recruit new talent, especially in the younger generations, as much of our Federal workforce is in the retirement phase of their lives. And it is clear that this has become a talking point here in this Congress.

I was thinking about this as I walked over here this morning. I mean, this is one of literally dozens of hearings we have had this Congress about telework policies. And I find it strange that we are obsessing over this while we are on the brink of a government shutdown and haven't been able to fund a foreign aid package. I mean, we have real serious issues right now that our country is facing. So, to be spending this time doing hearings on telework policies seems a bit bizarre to me.

We are facing real challenges in this country, and the Department of the Interior, of course, employs tens of thousands of people, and they are all over this continent. They are doing everything from managing fish and wildlife to our national parks to serving the 570-plus Tribal Nations that are part of the great fabric of this nation, and trying to fight climate change. In this last year, we know that we saw the hottest year ever on record. So, I think that it is clear that it has not impeded the ability of the Department to deliver on its productivity.

I also do want to just take a moment to address the comments of the previous speaker in the dais here. The reason why we value diversity in the workforce is because our society is diverse. And for far too long we have had exclusionary policies and practices that did not allow people of color, women, like me, to serve in positions, and that is reflected across our Federal workforce. So, we are trying to make sure that we have a Federal workforce that is reflective of our society, that there is opportunity for every single person to participate and to serve our nation. And that is why we value diversity. And I think that is really reflected in not only the priorities of the Biden administration, but the fact that right now we have the very first Cabinet Secretary ever in our nation's history who is an Indigenous person. That is extraordinary. It is historic and it is important. So, I do want to just lift that up for a moment.

But Ms. Locke, I know you are here to talk about your work and analysis looking at telework policies. And I want to ask actually about GAO, which, of course, is an affiliate of our work here. Does GAO allow its employees to work remotely?

Ms. LOCKE. We can work remotely or do telework.

Ms. STANSBURY. And have you personally found and members of your staff found that it affects your ability to perform good or bad?

Ms. LOCKE. We assess the suitability of each position at GAO to determine if those positions could telework. So, those that were suitable for telework, they have no impact on our performance. And in fact, in 2023 we exceeded our savings by \$20 billion in a telework status.

Ms. STANSBURY. Which is another reason that both the private and the public sector are seeking to increase opportunities for

telework. It is not just that flexibility for employees, but it saves money for employers, as well.

And Mr. Green, you oversee the human capital enterprise for the 70,000-plus direct employees of the Department of the Interior. How have you seen telework affect the productivity of the Department?

Mr. GREEN. We have a very unique mission set in that many of our employees are public-facing, so 55 percent of them are already working in person every day. According to our payroll data, 65 percent of our employees are working in person every day. And we measure our organizational performance by the measures in our strategic plan. And my understanding of that is that we have actually increased in many areas in performance with telework, and we are also seeing higher levels of retention of our employees and better scores on our Federal Employee Viewpoint Surveys around employee engagement.

The tools that we have now, the technology, allows for managers and employees to stay connected and work together, so job satisfaction is actually even higher, according to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

Ms. STANSBURY. Thank you, Mr. Green. I think that is a really interesting point for folks who don't work in the Federal Government. They may not be familiar with the Federal Employee Viewpoint.

I am a former Fed myself, I used to work at OMB in the Interior branch, actually. And one of the things that you see is that year to year, as these surveys are done, they are really a barometer of the health and well-being of our Federal workforce which encompasses millions of Americans, of course, and workplace satisfaction is not just a matter of people being happy in their jobs, but it is a matter of national security, it is a matter of the Federal Government being able to carry out its mission, and it is the ability to actually serve the public in all of the different things that the Department does.

I want to emphasize what you just said, Mr. Green. You are saying that, as a result of the changes in HR policies and the increased flexibility, you have actually seen an improvement in overall workplace satisfaction and recruitment and retention?

Mr. GREEN. That is correct.

Ms. STANSBURY. I don't think I have any other questions. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. GOSAR. You are certainly welcome, thank you.

Mr. Green, in regards to the public face of these agencies, and that public face being in person like at the BIA, not everybody can just interact with an e-mail or telework, can they?

Mr. GREEN. Like the GAO, Ms. Locke, had stated, we go through an evaluation process. It is mainly mission support, non-public-facing folks that have jobs that don't require them to come into a facility to do many of the duties that they are assigned that can telework. Most of our employees are public-facing. They have to come to do work on the land and engage with the public every day.

Dr. GOSAR. OK, so the next question is for both of you. In the past, we have held hearings in regards to Department of the

Interior's security codes and their passwords. How has that issue been affected during this time of telework and remote learning?

Ms. Locke, would you want to go first on that?

Ms. LOCKE. We have not looked into their security codes, but I can tell you that during the peak of the pandemic, when we were all in telework status, there were cybersecurity issues that popped. And, fortunately, entities like OMB and DHS and NIST put out practices to help keep agencies safe. And in addition, the security officers were working remote so they could address those security threats and put out advisories about them.

But I do not have an answer regarding the——

Dr. GOSAR. Well, to your point there, I think you alluded to the problem as being that it is much more diffuse. If people are reporting for duty here in Washington DC, they are more located in one area, making it easier for the security evaluations and upkeep, would it not?

Ms. LOCKE. That is not my area of expertise, so I can't respond to that.

Dr. GOSAR. OK. Mr. Green, would you like to respond to that?

Mr. GREEN. That is not my area of expertise, either, but I can tell you that there have been major strides made with our CIO, our Chief Information Office, with leveraging new, secure technology.

To get a specific answer to a specific question, I would have to refer back to our experts back at the Department to get you an answer on that.

Dr. GOSAR. Once again to Mr. Green, if you are encouraging full-time use, what percentage of DOI is full-time job participation, in face?

Mr. GREEN. All of our employees, whether they are teleworking or not, are working every day to deliver for the American people. I would say that again 55 percent of our workforce is public-facing, and they have to come to the land every day to do their work. The balance of the folks are allowed to telework, either at an ad hoc basis periodically, based on situation, or have regular schedules where they can telework from 1 up to 8 days per pay period of telework.

Dr. GOSAR. In your evaluation, has there been any area of expertise within DOI that has been shortchanged with this, or that doesn't like this type of application?

Mr. GREEN. Looking at our individual employee performance management system, we are not seeing any individual employee performance issues.

And then again, as we evaluate the Department on our performance as a whole, we look at our strategic plan and we are actually seeing increases there. And we are actually seeing better results on our Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey around employee engagement, how connected they feel to the mission of the agency, how they feel connected to each other. These tools are vastly different than what we have had in the past, even 5 years ago, the tools were not available for employees to engage at the level that they are able to now.

Dr. GOSAR. Well, it is amazing what technology will do. I mean, you and I can be on different sides of the continent and we can

definitely see each other, talk to each other, see our expressions, all sorts of things that we couldn't have done before.

I want to come back to the Native Americans. Are there shortcomings in some of these aspects with Native Americans? I can think of a few, because if you are going out there and they don't have Internet, it makes it really, really tough to have application in that aspect. Would you agree? Could you kind of comment on those?

Mr. GREEN. There have always been challenges where Internet is available. But again, as to a specific circumstance, I would have to know a little bit more. I could take it back and get an answer about that.

But I would just say that, as a whole, even the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they are one of our bureaus that actually has a higher percentage of in-person work than many of our other bureaus. They are up in about the 79, 80 percent range, last I checked on in-person work. So, we haven't seen telework as being a challenge related to that, or the technology, because the vast majority of our work is done in person.

Dr. GOSAR. But I guess, you kind of made my point to a certain degree in that most of your Native Americans or your Indian Affairs folks are in person because I think they need a lot more help and kind of follow-through and guidance in regards to Federal registry. Right?

Mr. GREEN. I think you would see that out in all rural areas, because we have folks in 2,400 different locations providing service to the American public, and I think you would see that same dynamic, because we don't have a large concentration of mission support people in those locations. Those are locations where those folks are delivering services directly, so you would see a higher percentage of in-person work there because their jobs just don't lend themselves to telework or remote work.

Dr. GOSAR. And even in Alaska, you would see a higher percentage of those, as well, and you would see a better performance, or about the same performance.

Mr. GREEN. I think in most rural areas you would see that. I can't speak to Alaska specifically, as far as that particular data point. I would have to get that. But I would say I think that you would see that in most rural areas.

Anywhere where you would see a headquarters kind of concentration, like the National Capital Region, that is where you are going to see a concentration of most of these mission support roles, and those just happen to be the ones that the work that they perform, they perform work here for folks all the way across the country, and they are able to do it because of the secure technology. And those are the folks that are able to telework. And in some cases, there are remote work opportunities there, as well.

Dr. GOSAR. Ms. Locke, have you seen any changes? I would like to get your input on those same things in regards to Native Americans from that standpoint.

Ms. LOCKE. What I will say is I just visited the territories on another congressional request, and DOI was part of that review. And in talking with them, we did ask about telework. And in particular, Fish and Wildlife officials, as well as National Park

Service officials stated that since they started offering telework, their pool of applicants opened, they had a larger geographic area to choose from and more skill sets to choose from.

With that being said, they also acknowledged that while recruitment and retention had improved, that not every position was suitable for telework because they had to be in person. But they said even if they offered 1 day a pay period to telework, when those individuals who normally have to be in person just had to do administrative stuff behind the computer, that was beneficial to them.

Dr. GOSAR. Well, I find this very interesting that we stumbled, I mean kind of blindly in regards to the COVID national emergency, that we stumbled onto this, and we are seeing some results in regards to that. I find it very interesting that we have gone down that road.

Do you have any questions? No more?

Well, I just want to thank you, Ms. Locke and Mr. Green, for your indulgence today. We appreciate you. I wish that some of the other agencies would come forward. We would certainly appreciate them doing that.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony. The members of the Committee may have some additional questions for you, for the witnesses, and we ask that you respond to these in writing. Under Committee Rule 3, members of the Committee must submit the questions to the Subcommittee Clerk by 5 p.m. on January 23. The hearing record will be held open for 10 business days for your responses.

If there is no further business, the Committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:01 a.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

