

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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June 4, 2021

The Honorable Kathleen McGettigan
Acting Director
U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20415

Dear Acting Director McGettigan:

I write today to re-urge that the Federal workforce return to the fullest possible degree to its normal places of work. I first wrote to you on May 18, 2021, to urge that return and request a briefing no later than May 25, 2021 on OPM's plans to achieve it. Much to my surprise, while our staff have been working to schedule that briefing, I learned from reporting in the *Washington Post* that it appears "government officials are moving to make [the] pandemic experiment *permanent* by allowing more employees than ever to work from home — a sweeping cultural change that would have been unthinkable a year ago." According to the *Post*, the details of this plan are "being finalized" and may be announced as earlier as next month.¹

The entrenchment of pandemic-level telework for federal employees is the *polar opposite* of the return to pre-pandemic workplaces I have urged OPM to adopt. As I stressed to you in my initial letter, "[p]rolonging arrangements taken in an exigent situation is not a permanent solution."

Entrenchment of pandemic-era practices, moreover, would only make *worse* the service and fiscal concerns I highlighted to you in my May 18th letter. First and foremost, it could make permanent pandemic-era deteriorations in face-to-face service needed by veterans, Social Security beneficiaries, and others who need prompt, attentive service from public servants at federal agencies.² As I emphasized in my earlier letter, it is a *reversal* of this deterioration that our constituents need—including the most vulnerable of our constituents, including seniors and

¹ Lisa Rein, *Biden Administration Moves Toward Making the Pandemic Work-from-Home Experiment Permanent for Many Federal Workers* (May 24, 2021) (emphasis added), online at [Biden administration moves toward making the pandemic work-from-home experiment permanent for many federal workers - The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2021/05/24/biden-administration-moves-toward-making-the-pandemic-work-from-home-experiment-permanent-for-many-federal-workers/).

² See, e.g., Fedweek, *Calls Grow for Returning More Federal Employees to Their Regular Worksites* (May 4, 2021) (online at [Calls Grow for Returning More Federal Employees to Their Regular Worksites \(fedweek.com\)](https://www.fedweek.com/calls-grow-for-returning-more-federal-employees-to-their-regular-worksites/)).

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low-income Americans, as well as individuals who may not have internet access or the computer skills necessary to navigate an entirely virtual interaction with a government agency. Just as alarming, the institutionalization of pandemic-era remote-work practices could perpetuate lapses in the security of Department of Defense communications that arose during the pandemic from remote work. This must not be allowed to pass.

Second, the permanent continuation of pandemic-era remote-work practices would raise significant fiscal concerns. I must emphasize that, if the Biden Administration attempts to make these practices permanent, Congress cannot be expected to continue to appropriate funds to support current levels of ownership and leasing of *vacant* federal office space. Nor can Congress be expected to continue to support current levels of locality-pay increases for federal workers who no longer are working in high-cost locations, but instead are working from *their homes in lower-cost areas*.

Our staff is in the process of finalizing a briefing on June 11, 2021 to address OPM's plans for the return of federal workers to their workplaces. It is imperative that, at the briefing, OPM be prepared to disclose in detail its actual plans concerning the return of federal workers to their pre-pandemic workplaces, and to either refute or confirm the accuracy of the *Washington Post's* reporting suggesting that OPM is finalizing details of plans to allow permanent, broadly expanded levels of telework for federal workers. Equally imperative, if OPM indeed intends to implement such an expansion in the post-pandemic era, OPM must be prepared to explain in detail: the bases of OPM's decision to institute the expansion; the long-term impacts the expansion would have on the ability of federal workers to perform agency missions fully; and the costs associated with the expansion, including the costs of continuing to maintain and lease vacant office space, continuing current locality-pay levels; purchasing and supporting increased telework infrastructure; and ensuring necessary communications security.

If you have any follow-up questions regarding these topics, please contact Committee on Oversight and Reform Republican Staff at (202) 225-5074.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. Thank you for your cooperation with this inquiry.

Sincerely,



Jody Hice
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations

cc: The Honorable Gerald Connolly, Chairman, Subcommittee on Government Operations