

**Answers from Mr. Reardon, National President,
National Treasury Employees Union**

To

Chairman Connolly

On the September 25, 2019 Hearing:

“NextGen Feds: Recruiting the Next Generation of Public Servants”

1. Why is telework flexibility important for your members?

Telework is one of the key flexibilities available to federal workers. Until recently, the government regarded telework as a positive tool in providing workplace flexibilities to its workers. Last year, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) produced a report touting the benefits of telework. It wrote, “As noted in the key findings, employees that telework are more likely to exceed performance standards. In addition, the two most important reasons employees choose to telework are to minimize distractions (67%) and improve productivity (64%), resulting in improved morale (83%), better stress management (77%), increased desire to stay at current agency (76%), and other outcomes that benefit both employees and agencies.” Telework benefits both the employee and the government.

2. How has the Administration’s reduction in telework affected the federal workforce?

As I mentioned in my written testimony, NTEU recently surveyed more than 1,600 bargaining unit employees across the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) about the recent cuts to telework. Of those surveyed, five out of six said reducing or eliminating telework would be a factor in deciding to leave HHS and more than half said that reducing or eliminating telework would result in increased time and cost of commuting, reduced productivity, and an insufficient number of work stations. We cannot afford to lose employees over the elimination of telework.

According to OPM, managers recognize the benefits of telework, but lack the competencies to effectively manage the performance of teleworkers. If this is the reason for the increased reduction in telework, agencies should invest in more training for managers in this area instead of cutting back on this critical program.

3. Do you believe that proposals to slash federal employee retirement benefits have influenced agencies’ ability to recruit and retain highly qualified employees?

Yes. When the administration announced proposals to make federal employees pay more for their retirement benefits while earning less my members were outraged. According to the 2017 OPM Federal Benefits Survey, 78.3 percent of participants indicated that the availability of a retirement annuity through the Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS) or Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) influenced their decision to take a job with the federal government to a “great” or “moderate” extent while 87.9 percent of participants indicating that FERS/CSRS influenced their decision to remain with the federal government to a “great” or “moderate”

extent. If employee benefits are constantly under attack, prospective employees will likely pass on federal service while current employees may try to leave early so that their retirement benefits are not impacted. The federal government should be a model employer and lead by example and ensure that workers have economic independence when they retire—not join the race to the bottom.

4. Without paid family leave, how do new federal employees manage significant life events such as the illness of a parent or birth of a child?

A few weeks ago, we asked our members to relate stories of something that happened in their life that would have been made easier if they had paid family leave available. In two days, we received 250 stories. Many were heart-breaking. One woman burned herself out traveling 8 hours on Friday and then 8 hours back on Sunday to spend a few hours with her father, who was gravely ill. She had already gone through her sick leave when he first became ill. Sadly, she was unable to be by his side when he passed away because she was at work. Another woman had a child who developed a heart ailment. She quickly went through her accumulated sick leave and then was able to borrow more. She is hoping that neither she nor her child gets sick again, because she will not pay back the sick leave she already borrowed until December 2020.

Since federal employees earn thirteen days of sick leave per year, it takes an employee over three years to save enough sick leave to take the recommended time off after pregnancy (6-8 weeks) – and that’s if they don’t take a single day of sick leave during those three years. Pregnancies generally require at least 14 doctor’s appointments, so not taking sick leave prior to the birth of a child is almost impossible. Some of my members report that they have had to work while sick after using up all sick and annual leave to take time off to care for a sick family member or after the birth or adoption of their child.

5. In a recent hearing about the barriers to hiring at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Daniel Sitterly, the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration asked Congress to authorize a pilot program in which the VA could offer paid parental leave to its employees. Assistant Secretary Sitterly testified that paid parental leave is “a great incentive for retention.” Do you think the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act would help to attract and retain more federal employees?

When NTEU started working with Members of Congress to provide federal employees with paid leave in 2003, we wanted the federal government to be a leader and model employer in providing this benefit to employees. Now, federal agencies lag far behind the private sector and are finding it increasingly difficult to attract younger workers who see this benefit as a crucial part of their compensation. Federal agencies need to offer paid family leave benefits to continue to compete with the private sector that has instituted and expanded paid parental leave policies over the last ten years.

This paid leave bill would help our federal government recruit and retain dedicated and talented workers. The Institute for Women’s Policy did a study that found that turnover in businesses slowed at a significant rate when paid family leave policies were in place. Two years ago, the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution did a study that found the same

thing. Paid parental leave has been shown to lead to increased productivity, better morale and reduced absenteeism. Providing paid family leave to federal employees is a win-win for the government — employees would be allowed time to bond with their new child or take care of a family member with a serious health condition, and agencies would not have to cover the costs of recruiting and training new employees and would be better able to compete with the private sector for talented individuals.