



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD BY

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY,
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE
SUBCOMMITTEE**

ON

“Oversight of Federal Agencies’ Post-Pandemic Telework Policies: Part II”

October 18, 2023



Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume and Members of the Subcommittee:

The American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) thanks the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide a statement for the hearing, “Oversight of Federal Agencies’ Post-Pandemic Telework Policies: Part II” today. AFGE represents 750,000 workers in 70 federal agencies and the District of Columbia, including workers at the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Agency for International Development (AID) and the Department of Commerce, as well as most of the agencies whose witnesses appeared before the Subcommittee for the related hearing on September 14 of this year.

Across the federal government, AFGE’s members get the job done for the American public. They are nurse surveyors ensuring compliance standards, life safety engineers, accountants, census workers, food safety inspectors and claims processors. Many must perform all of their duties in person, but many thousands are able to telework a portion of their jobs and some can only perform their jobs through remote field work.

Among the agencies the Subcommittee is examining at this hearing is the Social Security Administration (SSA). AFGE represents approximately 42,000 SSA employees who ensure Americans receive the retirement and disability benefits they have earned. The abrupt shift to full telework in March 2020 surfaced challenges resulting from inadequate technology advancements and past agency leadership’s aversion to telework. It brought to light the resiliency of the agency’s employees to do their jobs remotely and proved that for many of SSA’s functions, telework can be just as efficient, if not more so, in serving the public’s needs. It also gave the agency a new tool in its efforts to recruit and retain its workforce as it works to raise morale.

As the Subcommittee considers post-pandemic telework, please take into account that public-facing agencies like SSA made a rapid shift to telework and did so with large success. This change is now a part of the fabric of the SSA workforce. SSA has worked to overcome backlogs that could have been addressed through modern technologies such as document scanning and verification equipment. Field offices are open to the public, utilizing better public service

practices than were in place pre-pandemic such as scheduled appointments where members of the public, including many elderly and medically fragile populations, do not have to wait for hours in a crowded lobby.

Field office claims representatives who have written telework agreements are able to telework up to two days per week, though supervisors may reduce that time based on operational needs. We caution, however, that any long-term further reduction to telework will result in greater attrition and fewer experienced claims representatives. The union has proposed the opposite, adding more telework for employees who stay at the agency longer, offering an incentive to stay with the agency and combat attrition.

SSA needs sufficient staffing and modern technologies for document verification, as well as a telephone system that allows the public to know that SSA is calling when they have a scheduled telephone appointment. Even today, many claims processors use their personal phones and an awkward system with no caller ID to assure claimants that a call is from a federal agency and is not fraudulent. Updated technologies will save time and reduce frustration for both beneficiaries and SSA personnel.

What SSA needs most are the resources to provide the excellent service the public deserves. According to a report released by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities on September 22, 2023, entitled, “Social Security Administration Needs Additional Funding to Avoid Exacerbating Customer Service Crisis,” SSA suffers from a severe and growing budget shortfall. Since 2010, SSA’s customer service budget has fallen by 17 percent and its customer service staffing has dropped by 16 percent to a 25-year low, while the number of Social Security beneficiaries seeking service has grown by 22 percent.¹ This disparity is only set to increase as nearly twenty million more Americans reach their retirement age over the next decade.

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that telework works. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 allowed for the expansion and utilization of telework throughout the federal government for positions deemed telework eligible. It was enacted with the express purpose of achieving greater flexibility in managing the federal workforce, providing agencies with a valuable tool to

¹ Kathleen Romig, “Social Security Administration Needs Additional Funding to Avoid Exacerbating Customer Service Crisis” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, September 22, 2023

meet mission objectives while helping employees enhance work-life balance. When utilized fully and fairly, telework contributes to employee engagement and morale and has a positive impact on recruitment and retention. Telework also reduces traffic and its attendant environmental effects, costs associated with office space and parking, as well as flexibility and continuity of operation in weather and other emergencies. Use of telework promotes healthier workers who do not suffer as much burnout or use as much sick leave and can enjoy a more robust work-life balance.

AFGE thanks the Subcommittee for its consideration of the important work conducted by the agencies before them and stands ready to provide resources to its members as you continue to make recommendations to support the modern federal workforce.