

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON REGULATORY
AFFAIRS AND FEDERAL MANAGEMENT**

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Introduction

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Federal telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency on behalf of the Department of Transportation (DOT).

Telework at DOT

The Department's long-standing support for and encouragement of telework across our wide-spread operations proved its value and stability when we were able to switch over much of our headquarters and field operations seamlessly in mid-March to maximum telework to meet the COVID-19 public health emergency. Reliance on telework programs at DOT is consistent with and supports the Department's mission, enabling DOT employees to ensure America has the safest, most efficient and modern transportation system in the world, and enhancing the quality of life in both rural and urban communities. DOT employees' ability to telework allows the Department to achieve important performance goals and improve the Department's capability to support homeland and national security requirements, all while supporting employees' work/life balance outcomes.

In 2013, well before the onset of COVID-19, DOT implemented an agency-wide policy in accordance with the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010. The policy encourages the use of telework, and includes notifying 100 percent of employees of their individual telework eligibility status. That policy is still in effect today. The DOT telework policy outlines important criteria for determining whether positions and employees are suitable to participate in telework arrangements and requires telework training for both managers and employees prior to starting a telework schedule.

DOT leaders encourage the use of telework to the maximum extent possible while maintaining office coverage and consistent operations. Throughout DOT organizations, telework programs are discussed at the corporate and individual organizational levels. Historically, feedback and suggestions from employees and supervisors have been used to improve and expand the telework program as appropriate—for example, we adopted recommendations to allow employees to telework while also offering flexible alternative work schedules that help employees' work/life balance. Occasionally, over the years, the Department has conducted organizational telework exercises to give employees and managers opportunities to practice working remotely and to test the information technology capacity to support telework. These efforts resulted in additional investments in emerging technologies and innovation, including secure Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI).

Telework During COVID-19 Public Health Emergency

DOT's transition to maximum telework was virtually seamless following the onset of the COVID-19 public health emergency. This was largely due to the Department having previously institutionalized robust telework programs throughout the agency, as well as ensuring employees and managers had experience working and managing remotely. Thus, DOT had already laid the groundwork to enable virtual teams of employees to adapt quickly to the maximum telework environment and minimize the impact of COVID-19 to agency operations. Because of advanced preparations across DOT, monthly Federal employee teleworkers increased from 14,587 in February to 30,874 in March—without disruption to the agency's mission or network.

The Department leveraged its existing telework policy, work scheduling procedures, and human resources flexibilities and authorities to enable increased telework. Even given the operational variability of DOT workforce missions, geographic locations and the needs of individuals within the workforce itself, DOT has been able to maintain a consistent level of operations and productivity during the health emergency comparable to pre-health emergency levels of production. Anecdotally, some individual offices reported increased productivity.

In response to employees' changing work-life balance needs, the Department allowed for greater discretion and flexibility with employee work scheduling options. For example, under a 'Maxiflex' schedule, DOT employees have discretion to vary their work hours during a day or week, provided the employee still meets their biweekly work requirement by working or

accounting for time with leave. As such, employees may adjust their work schedules to meet their dependent care responsibilities while schools, daycare, and eldercare facilities may be closed. DOT facilitated increased telework use during the COVID-19 public health emergency through widespread implementation of information technology such as Virtual Private Network (VPN) and Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI). Employees with government-issued laptops use VPN and others with computers at home are enabled to use VDI. The Department also used Skype for Business and Microsoft Teams for video and teleconferencing and chat features.

DOT advised its supervisors to re-evaluate telework eligibility and use discretion to allow employees who were not previously considered to have duties suitable for frequent telework (e.g., administrative and clerical employees, etc.) to telework while completing some work assignments outside their normal duties. Under normal circumstances, typically just under half of the total DOT workforce is eligible to participate in telework arrangements, and about a quarter of total employees telework monthly on average. Since the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency in FY 2020, under the Department's maximum telework strategy, more than 60 percent of the workforce was deemed eligible for telework. Since then, upwards of 60 percent of the total workforce teleworks monthly.

The remaining employees are in positions that require their physical presence to be able to perform their core responsibilities, including air traffic controllers at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and operational employees at the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation. Each Operating Administration within the Department has taken a proactive approach to ensuring those in our workforce that can telework are able to do so to the greatest extent possible.

Lessons Learned

Perhaps one of the most valuable lessons learned during the experience of the COVID-19 public health emergency was to use a considerable degree of flexibility when leveraging the telework policy, work scheduling procedures, and human resources flexibilities and authorities. DOT's Operating Administrations go to great length to identify telework-eligible duties within positions that on their face would seem ineligible but would allow for telework.

Maximum telework presented opportunities for employees and managers to address their changing work requirements from home while still being able to effectively execute their job functions and reduce commute times—many

offices even reporting increased productivity. Thus, some offices are reviewing plans to reduce their office footprint by eliminating leased space and maximizing remote work and telework once the Department recovers from the COVID-19 public health emergency. The maximum telework environment also provided DOT with an opportunity to test and implement relatively new and varied methods of communicating with both small and large groups (e.g., enhanced communication via Microsoft Teams and Zoom videoconferencing).

Yet, maximum telework also presented some ongoing challenges, including: 1) adjusting to new team dynamics and synergy virtually; 2) limited access to office supplies and equipment; and 3) connectivity issues for some. Several months into this new reality, thousands of our employees are now teleworking full-time, and managers are experiencing how their organizations can function successfully under these conditions, providing vital information for future decisions about operations.

Maximum telework, and the move to a virtual environment, within the Department has opened opportunities to improve programs and processes. For example, DOT moved its primarily in-person onboarding program to a fully virtual format immediately after maximum telework was instituted, without missing a pay period. Employees are sworn in, issued equipment, and provided a comprehensive orientation all in a virtual setting. This has expanded to our Departmental program with most Operating Administrations participating in this virtual program without any restrictions due to geographic locations. In addition, the flexibility of a virtual onboarding has allowed for more senior leaders to participate in the program.

Even prior to the start of the COVID-19 public health emergency, DOT considered developing a Remote Work policy (full-time telework), governing telework arrangements for employees who perform the majority or all their work hours in a telework status. Considering the real-world public health emergency experience, the Department will seek to gather more 'lessons learned' to inform the future development of such policies and programs.

The Department has been successful at implementing maximum telework for upwards of sixty percent of our total workforce. Even given the operational variability of DOT workforce assignments, geographic locations and the needs of individuals within the workforce itself, DOT has been able to maintain a consistent level of operations and productivity during the public health emergency comparable to pre-health emergency levels of production.

Closing

Thank you again, for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Federal telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency on behalf of the Department of Transportation. I will be happy to answer your questions.