



**HOMELAND SECURITY AND
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON REGULATORY AFFAIRS
AND FEDERAL MANAGEMENT**

UNITED STATES SENATE

NOVEMBER 18, 2020

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**JIM BORLAND
ASSISTANT DEPUTY COMMISSIONER FOR SYSTEMS
AND
THE DEPUTY CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER FOR
IT OPERATIONS**

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Chairman Lankford, Ranking Member Sinema, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to discuss telework at the Social Security Administration. I am Jim Borland, Assistant Deputy Commissioner for Systems and the Deputy Chief Information Officer (CIO) for Information Technology (IT) Operations. Today, I will provide an overview of our telework program and how telework, supported by IT, is helping us maintain the continuity of our operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will discuss our successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

Our Agency

For over 85 years, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has provided Americans income protection after the onset of a disability, at retirement, or after the loss of a loved one. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, we paid over \$1.1 trillion in benefits to over 70 million Social Security beneficiaries and Supplemental Security Income recipients.

In FY 2020 we:

- Completed over 8 million claims for benefits;
- Served approximately 20 million visitors in field offices;
- Handled over 34 million calls on our 800 number;
- Posted 289 million earnings items to workers' records;
- Processed 13 million original and replacement Social Security card applications;
- Processed over 220 million online transactions;
- Completed over 463,000 full medical continuing disability reviews and over 2.15 million non-medical redeterminations of eligibility; and;
- Provided access to the Social Security Statement, mailing over 19 million paper Statements and allowing individuals to access their Statements online more than 64 million times.

Telework Before the Pandemic

At SSA, telework is not one size fits all. Some employees have worked remotely for many years while others just started working offsite during the pandemic. Generally, workloads and technology drive this difference, and we continue to evaluate how best to achieve our mission.

Remote work continues to evolve. For example, 20 years ago, some employees were covered by a flexiplace agreement that allowed them to work at an alternate duty station (ADS), but technology was much different then. Our work was still heavily paper-based, creating telework challenges like the loss of personally identifiable information (PII) when a worker lost material carrying it between work and home. After September 11, 2001 we took a key step forward—building a virtual private network (VPN) into our infrastructure for Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP) purposes. With time, we addressed some of the telework concerns. For example, we stopped allowing the transport of PII to the ADS. Instead, employees downloaded their work to telework and then uploaded it again when they returned to the office; however, this solution was inefficient.

Beginning in 2015, the agency began replacing desktop computers with laptops, a significant step in streamlining telework and COOP preparation. It also helped us in our offices. Instead of needing to place desktop computers at employees' desks and in locations where they would interview the public or hold a hearing, employees were issued a single device—one laptop they could use wherever they could access our systems, either onsite or through VPN. In 2019, to improve mobility and public service, we began the conversion to softphones, which allows employees to answer their office phone using their laptop. These changes facilitated remote work, but even now, we cannot do all of our work offsite.

Last year, in the face of a customer service crisis, our executive team reevaluated our telework posture across the agency. We noted, in part, that the agency had not consistently collected metrics that would enable us to evaluate the impact of telework on public service or sufficiently addressed non-portable workloads. Thus, we ended a telework pilot in the part of our agency that oversees most of the frontline employees who directly serve your constituents. We also took steps to reduce telework across the agency to emphasize accountability and customer service.

Telework During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic tested our preparations. On March 17, 2020, we made the unprecedented decision to close our offices to the public, except for limited in-office appointments for critical services. We have remained open for business through our online and telephone services. The three key IT steps described above—VPN, laptops, and softphones—gave us the foundation to continue service remotely. We were able to procure and deploy equipment, expand bandwidth, purchase software licenses and provide training and IT support to quickly transition over 90 percent of our employees to telework. We were also able to help the Disability Determination Services that make medical determinations for our disability programs transition to telework. This maximal telework posture not only protects our employees but also the public we serve, who—by definition of the work we do—meet the CDC's high risk categories, and would generally need to be in close contact with employees in our offices, which also increases risk. Telework has been critical to allowing us to continue to serve the public safely during this time.

Challenges

Our biggest challenge remains that not all of our work is portable. For example, certain sensitive workloads require face-to-face interviews and requirements to obtain original evidence, which we need to process some applications for benefits and Social Security Number cards. We need to be in our offices to open mail and scan mailed documents into our systems so teleworking technicians can process them. Some notices are still manually printed and mailed from our offices. We are doing our best to balance these onsite workload demands with our ongoing obligation and commitment to keeping everyone safe. As time passes, these workloads could create a backlog unless we bring enough staff into the offices to keep up.

Although some of our work still requires a face-to-face interview, we have been able to find workarounds for some challenges. For example, in lieu of in-person service, we posted phone

numbers for our local offices online so that the public could call the same employees who would have provided in office service. Our hearing offices quickly began offering voluntary telephone hearings, and we are now rolling out online video hearings using software that allows our administrative law judges, claimants and their representatives to participate in a hearing from any private location using a smartphone, tablet, or computer. We have also been flexible with policy, like allowing telephone attestation as an alternative way to sign documents.

Some challenges are beyond our control. For example, we had to adapt to the pandemic's impact on the medical community. Our disability work requires medical examinations, medical evidence, and medical experts. Initially, medical services were focused on emergency issues to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to allow medical personnel to handle the pandemic. Thus, we initially paused in-person consultative examinations (CE). We have now temporarily expanded the use of non-public facing video telehealth technology for psychiatric CEs and psychological CEs that do not require testing. However, providers are still not fully available.

Lessons Learned

- Successful COOP requires a robust telework program.
- Public service and workload requirements should drive telework.
- Telework programs should be objectively evaluated; for example, performance, productivity, security and safety, employee recruitment and retention.
- Telework programs should provide management with oversight training, tools, and performance metrics, automated when possible, so that they can efficiently ensure we are serving the public timely and accurately.
- Telework programs require effective communication supported by technology.
- Telework programs require coordination of systems and personnel.
- Telework programs during non-emergency times need to serve the public at least as well as onsite work.
- Some work does not inherently lend itself to telework; therefore, different jobs may warrant different amounts of telework or even no telework at all. While during non-emergency times we can do non-portable work onsite, we need better capability to handle it when we cannot access our offices.
- Some employees prefer to work onsite while for others telework is a powerful recruitment and retention tool.
- Telework is a key driver for space acquisition.

Overall, the business processes and IT infrastructure we had in place before the pandemic enabled us to quickly transition to remote work for most services. However, with respect to technology, we learned:

- We need to create flexibility for remote work at our Teleservice Centers to ensure continuous communication and service to the public;
- We should plan for expanded video capabilities because we experienced an increased internal demand for video capabilities and for secure external service;

- It is important to quickly scale up helpdesk staffing because remote workers contact the IT services help desk more frequently and for longer durations than when they are in the office; and;
- We need to carefully assess risk when we are considering technology solutions.

Conclusion

The Telework Act of 2010 envisioned that remote work would allow us to continue to serve the public during an emergency. Overall, that has been the case for SSA. However, while we have made tremendous strides over the last few years, we still have more work to do. We have some workloads that are not portable and we are working on solutions, including getting input from our unions, employees, and managers. We also need to set up clearer, objective evaluation processes, including the impact on public service, our employees, and budget, to inform our decisions about future telework. We need to ensure we have accountability in place and that we have trained our managers on how to communicate effectively with our employees remotely. Technology remains the key to telework, whether that is offering robust online and telephone services, dependable hardware and software, supporting internal and external communication, or providing workload oversight.

We are pleased and, in truth, relieved that our technology has allowed us to continue to use remote work to serve the public during the pandemic. We are learning from this experience and making improvements, some of which will improve service long-term. We would like to thank the public, our employees, and you for being patient and supportive of us during this national emergency.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.