

STATEMENT OF
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U.S. OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL
WORKFORCE, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
UNITED STATES SENATE
on
"PROTECTING OUR EMPLOYEES: PANDEMIC INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS AND
THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE"
JUNE 16, 2009

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee:
Thank you for including the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in your discussion of this important topic. I am pleased to be here to discuss OPM's efforts to ensure the Federal Government is prepared to meet the human resources management challenges posed by a pandemic health crisis, such as the H1N1 flu outbreak.

OPM has a significant role in preparing the Government for emergencies, including a pandemic health crisis. One of Director John Berry's first actions when he took over the helm at OPM was to meet with members of the Chief Human Capital Officers Council to assess what their human resource issues and needs were in addressing a potential influenza emergency. This review led to the Director convening an "H1N1 Human Resources Readiness Forum" to help Federal agency human resources leadership identify and answer planning issues arising from a potential influenza outbreak. The Forum was held on May 8 and attracted 142 officials from 37 Federal agencies where a panel of OPM, Department of Labor, and Department of Health and Human Services experts gave advice and guidance and answered questions on a variety of health and HR issues. The Forum was a supplement to the memorandum on "Human Resources Flexibilities Available to Assist Federal Employees During Emergencies" which Director Berry had distributed three days earlier to Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies. The memorandum reiterated and expanded upon previous guidance on the wide variety of human resource management tools agencies have for continuing operations in a pandemic influenza emergency. Director Berry also announced a major initiative to reinvigorate agency telework programs, noting their importance as a central feature in continuing agency operations during an emergency.

OPM's essential function in this regard is to provide critical human resources services to ensure the Federal Government has the civilian workforce it needs to continue essential missions in an emergency. OPM is the central agent for the President and the executive branch with responsibility for providing guidance to agencies regarding Governmentwide human resources policies and flexibilities. These include emergency staffing authorities, leave flexibilities, evacuation payments, telework and flexible working arrangements. We also track the effect of a pandemic influenza on the Federal workforce through information on attendance and leave.

OPM is directly responsible for providing essential information relating to Federal Investigative Services during an emergency, including conducting background investigations for civilian, military and contract employees. Finally, in a worst-case scenario, OPM would coordinate with the White House to manage an orderly evacuation and resumption of normal operations for Federal employees in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, and advise Federal Executive Boards and other Federal entities nationwide. These determinations are formed in consultation with the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security, and other appropriate authorities.

OPM's primary objective is to ensure Federal agencies have the workforce they need to continue their critical missions, while preparing employees to protect their health and assuring that their pay is protected. OPM has been working on Governmentwide preparation for an influenza pandemic for several years, developing comprehensive human resources guidance and conducting briefings for Federal human resources specialists, as well as "town-hall" meetings for employees at numerous Federal agencies.

Director Berry believes it is imperative that we do everything necessary to protect the well-being of all Federal employees. OPM relies on public health and occupational safety and health officials, including experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, all parts of HHS, and at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in Labor, for advice about the safety, efficacy and appropriateness of administrative controls, as well as medications, respirators, surgical face masks and other personal protective equipment for first responders, medical staff and other front-line employees. We at OPM do not have the expertise to make those kinds of judgments. That is why OPM staff work to keep Federal agencies who have employees at the front line of the response informed about the latest expert advice on protective measures. For example, at the H1N1 Human Resources Readiness Forum we hosted a few weeks ago, representatives of the CDC, OSHA, and HHS's Federal Occupational Health Service were available to answer questions about personal protective measures.

More recently, since the onset of the current H1N1 flu outbreak, OPM has updated our pandemic influenza guidance. In addition, we have been collecting and are providing answers to additional questions, to supplement the guidance already on our web site. Feedback from the H1N1 Readiness forum indicated that the forum was extremely helpful in answering the questions that weigh most heavily on the minds of managers and employees when they think about how a pandemic health crisis will affect them.

After the outbreak of the H1N1 flu began, we also posted on the OPM home page a memorandum reminding agencies of the wide range of human resources policies and flexibilities available to meet their needs and the needs of their employees during emergencies. These authorities, which include leave flexibilities, alternative work schedules, telework, and emergency hiring authorities, are all aimed at getting the job done during an emergency, while assisting employees in taking care of their personal and family needs.

The H1N1 flu outbreak has demonstrated the importance of being able to quickly expand the use of telework to cope with pandemic health crises and other emergencies. Having this ability depends on telework being an integral part of normal operations. Telework can help mitigate the spread of influenza by promoting social distancing. It can also assist employees in balancing their ongoing work responsibilities with the need to care for their families. The recent H1N1 flu outbreak has provided a reminder of the need for social distancing to prevent the spread of

infectious disease. It has also demonstrated the effects of social distancing on workplaces, communities, and families.

Although progress is being made, telework has not been implemented widely enough in the Federal Government. Our most recent data on telework in Executive agencies show that, from 2007 to 2008, the numbers of employees who are teleworking did increase, but only incrementally. This is indicative of a longer-term pattern of very slow progress. That is why OPM Director John Berry recently announced a new initiative that we hope will help agencies ramp up their telework readiness. This initiative is driven not only by Director Berry's belief in the value of work/life programs generally, but more specifically in the importance of telework as a tool for emergency planning. With implementation of this new initiative, OPM believes we will see not only an improvement in the consistency and quality of telework policies and programs in Executive agencies, but a resulting increase in telework participation Governmentwide, as well. Beyond telework and other flexible work arrangements, agency Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can be very helpful to front-line employees and other Federal workers. The stress and anxiety of the flu outbreak, with massive media coverage, school closings, and other associated dislocations, have a lasting impact on how our employees function. All our agencies have EAPs; we need to be sure they are part of our pandemic planning and response efforts and that they have the resources necessary to help our employees remain productive during and after a crisis. Governmentwide, agencies are making progress to improve their pandemic readiness. For example, last fall, major agencies were tasked to re-certify their readiness using the Homeland Security Council's "meta-check list," part of which dealt with human resources elements that OPM developed in coordination with other agencies. In addition, OPM will continue to work Governmentwide to improve readiness as a member of the Homeland Security Council's H1N1 Flu Working Group and Pandemic Influenza Sub-Interagency Policy Committee.

In concluding, I would note that, in the recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus, we have been given a wake-up call. Public health experts have warned that the virus could mutate and return in a new, more virulent form during the fall flu season. We must be prepared. Federal agencies need to ensure their pandemic plans are up to date and their workforce is tele-ready. OPM stands ready to provide guidance and support.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.