

CHALLENGES WITH TELEWORK DURING THE
COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

EXECUTIVE BRANCH AGENCIES



PERFORMANCE AUDIT SERVICES
ISSUED JANUARY 28, 2021

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LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR
DARYL G. PURPERA, CPA, CFE

January 28, 2021

The Honorable Patrick Page Cortez,
President of the Senate
The Honorable Clay Schexnayder,
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Senator Cortez and Representative Schexnayder:

This report provides the results of our evaluation of the use of telework among the state's executive branch agencies during the COVID-19 public health emergency. The purpose of this audit was to provide information on the challenges the agencies experienced.

We conducted two surveys as part of our work. The first survey was sent to 88 leaders in 32 agencies and offices to gather information on the challenges they faced managing their agencies during telework. The second survey was sent to approximately 40,000 staff and supervisors in the same 32 agencies and offices to understand their experiences with telework. We also researched best practices from the federal government and the Society for Human Resource Management, as well as other states' experiences with telework.

We found most agencies did not have telework policies in place prior to the pandemic. According to the survey, 56.3 percent of the agencies and offices had no telework policy. In addition, only 16.3 percent of employees reported teleworking on a regular/intermittent schedule before the pandemic.

The agencies also did not consistently accommodate non-essential employees whose job duties could not be performed during telework. For example, some agencies assigned employees duties that could be performed remotely while others required employees to use leave.

Technology challenges, such as inadequate equipment and connectivity problems, were the most common barriers employees faced with telework. Agencies that relied on paper for their business processes faced more challenges than those with automated processes. According to the survey, 83.6 percent of the agency leaders and 47.2 percent of employees reported experiencing barriers related to technology. They included lack of equipment, problems with Internet connectivity, and lack of software such as digital signature software, instant messaging platforms, and web conferencing.

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The Honorable Clay Schexnayder,
Speaker of the House of Representatives
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We also found agencies did not always provide supervisors with sufficient guidance on how to manage their remote teams or how to monitor employee productivity. According to the survey, 26.6 percent of agency supervisors reported difficulties in leading their remote teams, including maintaining productivity while also balancing the needs of their staff during the pandemic.

The report contains our findings, conclusions, and recommendations. I hope this report will benefit you in your legislative decision-making process.

We would like to express our appreciation to the Department of State Civil Service and the executive branch agencies for their assistance during this audit.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Daryl G. Purpera". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Daryl G. Purpera, CPA, CFE
Legislative Auditor

DGP/ch

TELEWORK

Louisiana Legislative Auditor

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Challenges with Telework During COVID-19 Executive Branch Agencies

January 2021

Audit Control # 40200016

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide information on the challenges executive branch agencies¹ experienced with telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency in order to identify lessons learned and best practices to guide agencies for subsequent events that may necessitate telework.

Telework: A work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of their position from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work. Telework can be routine or situational.

Source: Federal Telework Enhancement Act of 2010

As a result of COVID-19, Governor John Bel Edwards declared a Public Health Emergency on March 11, 2020, and issued proclamations beginning on March 13, 2020,² to protect the health and safety of the public. These proclamations required the closure of all public schools and non-essential businesses, prohibited gatherings of more than 10 people, ordered citizens to remain in their homes, and implemented other social distancing measures, such as maintaining a distance of six feet from one another and wearing a mask. As a result, executive branch agencies (hereinafter referred to as “agencies”) transitioned many non-essential employees³ to telework effective March 23, 2020. Beginning on May 15, 2020, the state moved into phase 1 of recovery, which allowed state employees to return to work at 25% total office occupancy. Subsequent phases allowed 50% and 75% total office occupancy, respectively.⁴ However, state agencies have continued to use telework as necessary to maintain physical distancing measures and to accommodate employees with health risks or other needs.

In order to evaluate how agencies adapted to telework, we conducted two surveys. The first survey was sent to 88 agency leaders in 32 agencies and offices to obtain information on the challenges they faced in managing their agencies during telework. The response rate was 62.5% (55 respondents). The second survey was sent to approximately 40,000 state employees (staff and supervisors) in the same 32 agencies and offices to understand their experiences with

¹ We did not include Higher Education Institutions, and Boards and Commissions because they do not all use the LaGOV HR/Payroll System, and because of difficulties in obtaining email addresses for all their employees.

² 27-JBE-2020 (3/13/2020), 30-JBE-2020 (3/16/2020), 33-JBE-2020 (3/22/2020), and 52-JBE-2020 (4/30/2020)

³ The Office of the Governor followed guidance from the U.S Department of Homeland Security’s Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to determine “essential and critical infrastructure” workers.

⁴ The state entered Phase 2 of recovery on June 5, 2020 and Phase 3 on September 11, 2020. The Commissioner of Administration established the target of 20% of employees working in agency offices on a daily basis beginning May 4, 2020, and to increase the percentage from there. However, agencies were also given broad discretion on when to have employees return to the workplace.

telework. The response rate was 27.6% (11,028 respondents)⁵. We also researched best practices from the federal government, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), as well as other states' experiences with telework.

The objective of this audit was:

To provide information on the challenges executive branch agencies experienced with telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Our results are summarized on the next page and discussed in detail throughout the remainder of the report. Appendix A contains the Department of State Civil Service's response to the report, Appendix B contains the Office of Technology Services' response to the report, and Appendix C details our scope and methodology.

⁵ The response rate is an approximate number based on our calculation that between 36,000 and 40,000 employees received the survey and 11,028 employees responded to the survey. Although 11,028 respondents began the employee telework survey, not all completed the survey so the number of respondents answering each question will vary.

Objective: To provide information on the challenges executive branch agencies experienced with telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Overall, we found that agencies experienced various challenges when they transitioned to telework during the stay-at-home order. Specifically, we found the following:

- **Most agencies did not have telework policies prior to the pandemic.** According to the survey, 18 (56.3%) of 32 of agencies and offices surveyed had no telework policy. In addition, only 1,562 (16.3%) of 9,582 employees reported teleworking on a regular/intermittent schedule prior to COVID-19, which, together with the lack of policies, made the transition to telework more difficult. Best practices show that the key to successfully using telework in an emergency is to have an effective routine telework program.
- **Agencies did not consistently accommodate non-essential employees whose job duties could not be performed during telework.** For example, some agencies assigned employees duties that could be performed remotely, while others required employees to use leave. According to the survey, 953 (9.9%) of 9,582 employees reported that they did not telework. To better prepare for subsequent telework events, agencies should identify how they will accommodate non-essential employees who cannot work remotely.
- **Technology challenges, such as inadequate equipment and connectivity problems, were the most common barriers employees faced when transitioning to widespread telework.** Agencies that relied on paper for their business processes also faced more challenges than those with automated processes. According to the survey, 46 (83.6%) of 55 respondents from agency leadership and 4,525 (47.2%) of 9,582 employees reported that they experienced barriers related to technology. Best practices state that successful telework programs should ensure that employees not only have technology, such as laptops, but also tools conducive for collaboration, such as digital signature software, instant messaging platforms, and web conferencing.
- **Agencies did not always provide supervisors with sufficient guidance on how to manage their remote teams and measure and track employee productivity.** According to the survey, 655 (26.6%) of 2,461 agency supervisors reported facing barriers in leading their remote teams. Some supervisors reported struggling with maintaining productivity while also balancing the needs of their staff during the pandemic, and that they did not receive adequate guidance regarding policy changes or work priorities and expectations. Establishing clear expectations, providing training for supervisors, and creating telework agreements for teleworkers would help ensure that employees remain productive while teleworking.

Our findings are discussed in more detail in the sections below. In addition, we made recommendations to the Department of State Civil Service (DSCS) and the Office of Technology Services (OTS) on how to help executive branch agencies strengthen their processes and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of teleworking in the future.

Most agencies did not have telework policies prior to the pandemic. According to the survey, 18 (56.3%) of 32 of state agencies and offices surveyed had no telework policy. In addition, only 1,562 (16.3%) of 9,582 employees reported teleworking on a regular/intermittent schedule prior to COVID-19, which, together with the lack of policies, made the transition to telework more difficult.

The federal government began establishing telework policies in 2000, with approximately 42% of federal employees eligible⁶ to telework in 2018. In addition, states such as Washington, Nebraska, Tennessee, and Utah routinely use telework, and Florida, California, Connecticut, North Carolina, Oregon, and Virginia all had statewide telework statutes or policies in place prior to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The benefits of telework include improved employee job attitudes and performance, improved recruitment and retention of prospective and high-performing employees, and potential reductions in the amounts of required real estate and utilities costs.⁷ As the COVID-19 public health emergency has shown, another benefit of telework is helping to ensure the continuity of operations during emergency events. In fact, the Federal Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 required all Federal agencies to incorporate telework into their continuity of operations plans.⁸

Telework was not widely used by agencies in Louisiana prior to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Louisiana does not have a statewide telework statute or regulations, and there is no guidance to assist agencies in developing telework policies or programs. According to the survey, 18 (56.3%) of 32 of agencies and offices had no telework policy and only 1,562 (16.3%) of 9,582 state employees reported teleworking on a regular or intermittent basis before COVID-19. Agencies with routine telework programs in place prior to COVID-19 include the Governor’s Office of Homeland

Comments by Employees in Agencies with no Pre-COVID-19 Telework Policies:

“Simply having equipment for everyone to work remotely would have made things much easier, though our budget did not allow for that in the past. It has been prioritized since the pandemic.”

“Guidelines weren't set for teleworking, so some divisions are still doing things differently, which can create animosity amongst the staff when they find out that things aren't 'fair.'”

Source: LLA agency employee telework survey.

⁶ Per the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, agencies have discretion in making eligibility determinations for employees to telework subject to operational needs.

⁷ *Status of Telework in the Federal Government: Report to Congress* (FY2018)

⁸ The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines a Continuity of Operations Plan as an effort by individual Federal agencies to ensure that they can continue to perform their essential functions during a wide range of emergencies, including localized acts of nature, accidents, and technological or attack-related emergencies.

Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) and the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).⁹

Survey results indicate that the transition to telework was somewhat more challenging for agencies that did not have a telework policy and for employees that had never teleworked prior to the Governor’s stay at home order. For example, 1,855 (67.9%) of 2,730 employees in agencies that did not have telework policies before COVID-19 reported that their agencies’ transition into telework was *somewhat* or *very* organized. In comparison, 5,384 (78.6%) of 6,852 employees in agencies that had telework policies before COVID-19 reported that their agency’s transition to telework was *somewhat* or *very* organized. Exhibit 1 shows a comparison of survey responses regarding the telework experiences of employees from agencies that had telework policies prior to COVID-19 and those that did not.

Exhibit 1 Comparison of Telework Experiences of State Employees				
	Agencies <u>with</u> pre- COVID-19 telework policies		Agencies <u>without</u> pre- COVID-19 telework policies	
Transition to telework was organized	5,384	78.6%	1,855	68.0%
Ability to perform job duties while teleworking was somewhat or much better	3,812	55.6%	1,128	41.3%
Faced no barriers when teleworking due to COVID-19	2,870	41.9%	1,004	36.8%
Faced barriers to teleworking due to equipment not being available	882	12.9%	567	20.8%
Total Staff Responses	6,852		2,730	
Supervisors thought staff’s ability to perform job duties while teleworking was somewhat or much better	609	34.0%	209	24.3%
Total Supervisor Responses	1,794		860	
Source: Created by legislative auditor’s staff using agency employee telework survey results.				

Best practices indicate that the key to successfully using telework during an emergency is to have an effective routine telework program. However, when asked how they saw telework fitting into their agencies’ plans after the COVID-19 public health emergency, only 15 (30%) of 50 agency leaders said their agency would maintain, expand, or develop a telework program in the future. According to the *Guide to Telework in the Federal Government*, innovative workplace flexibilities, such as telework, not only improve the resilience of agencies in emergencies, but also play a vital role in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest workers, reducing real estate and utilities costs, and improving employee work-life balance and

⁹ Other state agencies that had telework policies in place prior to COVID-19 include Department of Education (LDOE), Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Department of Health (LDH), Department of Revenue (LDR), Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD), Division of Administration (DOA), Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry (LDAF), and the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ).

productivity. Developing telework policies would allow state agencies to be better prepared to use telework in future emergencies and leverage its other benefits.

Recommendation 1: The Department of State Civil Service (DSCS) should develop minimum standards for what should be included in state agency telework policies. These standards should conform to best practices, such as the *Federal Government's Guide to Telework in the Federal Government*.

Summary of Management's Response: DSCS agrees with this recommendation and states that it looks forward to addressing the recommendations in the report and ensuring teleworking options are equitably and fairly provided to state agencies' workforce. See Appendix A for DSCS management's full response.

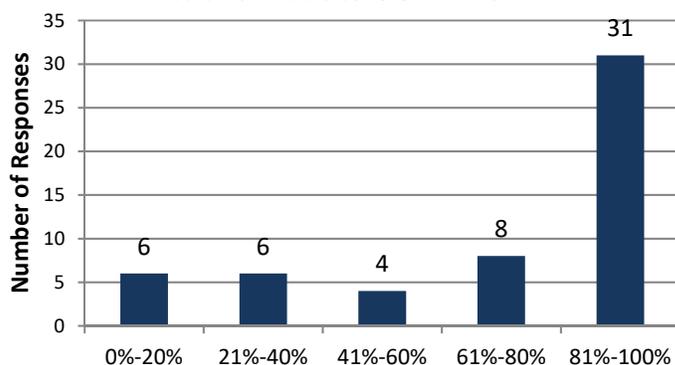
Agencies did not consistently accommodate non-essential employees whose job duties could not be performed during telework. For example, some agencies assigned employees duties that could be performed remotely, while others required employees to use leave.

Best practices recommend that when developing telework policies, agencies should determine employee eligibility to participate in telework. These determinations depend not only on an agency's mission, function, and structure, but also on the job duties of each position within the agency. For example, clerical staff, regulatory inspectors, and law enforcement may need to be on site to perform the majority of their duties, while programmers, accountants, and auditors may be able to easily work away from the job site. California's Department of General Services used its existing telework policy as a framework for determining which employees were eligible for telework when they transitioned as many employees as possible to telework in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

According to our survey, 7,350 (76.7%) of 9,582 agency employees reported that they teleworked for some period between the declaration of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the closing of our survey on October 19, 2020. In addition, 31 (56.4%) of 55 agency leaders we surveyed reported that more than 80% of their workforce was teleworking when their agency was engaged in maximum telework.¹⁰ Exhibit 2 summarizes agency leadership's response to what percentage of their workforce was teleworking when their agency was engaged in maximum telework due to the public health emergency.

¹⁰ Agencies with lower levels of telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency were the Department of Corrections (DOC), Department of Public Safety (DPS), DOTD, Department of Veteran's Affairs (LDVA), Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (DWF), the Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC) and the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ).

Exhibit 2
Survey Responses:
What percent of your employees were teleworking
when your agency was engaged in maximum
telework due to COVID-19?



Source: Created by legislative auditor's staff from results of agency leadership telework survey.

Some state employees reported that they did not telework during this time because their agencies did not allow it, due to the nature of their jobs or because they chose not to. Survey responses show that some agencies did not use telework because agency leadership was unfamiliar or uncomfortable with it. Approximately 300 (3.1%) of 9,582 employees reported that their agency leadership or supervisor did not allow them to telework. Some respondents commented that they could have performed their job duties at home and wanted to telework, but their agency or supervisor did not allow it. One employee commented that agency leadership had a negative attitude towards telework and could not provide any reasons why they would not allow staff to work from home. Another respondent explained that while other supervisors allowed their staff to work from home, his supervisor did not allow it.

Correctional officers and health care professionals were considered essential and had to report to their office/job site. However, some state employees whose offices were closed,¹¹ and scientists, engineers, and others who work in the field were not considered essential but could not telework during the stay-at-home order due to the nature of their job duties. Of the 9,582 employees who responded to the survey, 653 (6.8%) reported that their job duties did not allow them to telework.

Agencies had discretion in determining how to accommodate non-essential employees who could not telework. Some required employees to take leave, and others gave employees duties that could be performed at home. After the Governor's stay-at-home order, agencies had to determine how to accommodate employees who could not telework because of barriers such as not having a computer at home or because their job duties were not conducive to telework. Some agencies, like DEQ, gave employees who could not telework other job duties. One DEQ employee commented in the survey that they took on other projects while at home because they could not get into the office to pick up their regular work. In addition, DCFS reassigned several employees to work on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

¹¹ State facilities, such as Office of Motor Vehicles offices, DSCS' Baton Rouge Testing and Recruiting Center, and some LWC job centers were temporarily closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

(SNAP) due to the increased demand for benefits. According to our survey, 1,268 (13.7%) of 9,279 employees said that they performed duties outside of their normal responsibilities while teleworking.

Eventually, some state workers who were initially unable to telework were able to, but until that time, agencies wanted to keep them in paid status.¹² DSCS created emergency rules¹³ on March 18, 2020, to give agency leadership the discretion to authorize the use of “*Special Leave - Act of God*”¹⁴ even though state offices were open, as a way to accommodate employees who could not telework in paid status until the Federal government passed the CARES Act, which granted special sick leave and expanded FMLA.¹⁵ Survey data and analysis of state employee absence data for the duration of the Governor’s stay-at-home order show that agencies applied these emergency rules differently. Some agencies required employees who could not telework to exhaust their earned leave before authorizing the use of *Special Leave – Act of God*, while other agencies used their discretion to authorize the use of *Special Leave – Act of God* without requiring employees to exhaust earned leave.

Recommendation 2: DSCS should assist agencies in developing telework policies to ensure agencies identify how they will accommodate non-essential employees whose job duties may not be conducive to working from home.

Summary of Management’s Response: DSCS agrees with this recommendation. See Appendix A for DSCS management’s full response.

Recommendation 3: DSCS should develop rules to standardize the use of leave for non-essential employees whose job duties do not allow them to telework during emergency situations.

Summary of Management’s Response: DSCS agrees with this recommendation. See Appendix A for DSCS management’s full response.

Technology challenges, such as inadequate equipment and connectivity problems, were the most common barriers employees faced when transitioning to widespread telework. Agencies that relied on paper for their business processes also faced more challenges than those with automated processes.

¹² The Attorney General issued an opinion on March 23, 2020, regarding the constitutionality of compensating public employees who were unable to work due to COVID-19. The opinion concluded public entities could compensate their employees who are unable to work because of an office closure due to COVID-19.

¹³ GC2020-013

¹⁴ According to the Civil Service Rule 11.23(d), the appointing authority can authorize the use of the Special Leave – Act of God when it determines that the employee cannot work due to an act of God.

¹⁵ Civil Service repealed the special leave effective May 31, 2020 via GC2020-031.

Lack of technology can be a significant barrier to telework and best practices emphasize that employers must remove barriers that hinder employees from successfully performing their job duties remotely.¹⁶ Multiple organizations released guidance for emergency teleworking throughout 2020 in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.¹⁷ These organizations emphasized ensuring employees had necessary technology available to work remotely, including laptops, tablets, smartphones, access to reliable internet service, and access to state servers, as well as tools conducive for collaboration, such as digital signature software, instant messaging platforms and web conferencing.

According to the survey, 46 (83.6%) of 55 respondents from agency leadership and 4,525 (47.2%) of 9,582 employees reported that they experienced barriers related to technology. For example, employees reported issues with connectivity and lack of state-provided equipment, not being able to print or scan documents, and not being able to get physical signatures for agency forms or paperwork. Exhibit 3 shows the types of barriers agencies faced during telework.

Exhibit 3				
Survey Responses:				
What were some barriers you/your employees faced when teleworking started?				
Barriers	Employees		Leadership	
Not applicable, did not face barriers	3,874	40.4%	1	1.8%
Connectivity issues (VPNs, Virtual Desktops, internet access at home, remote access to agency data and applications, etc.)	2,969	31.0%	39	70.9%
Lack of access to paperwork or physical facilities	1,867	19.5%	17	30.9%
Lack of state-provided equipment (laptops, phones, tablets)	1,449	15.1%	25	45.5%
Other (Inability to print and scan documents)	1,139	11.9%	12	21.8%
Challenges with interoffice communication	924	9.6%	12	21.8%
Distractions and interruptions at home	796	8.3%	20	36.4%
Lack of support and leadership from management	715	7.5%	N/A	
Health concerns related to COVID-19	679	7.1%	23	41.8%
Technology/tools necessary for telework not available (web conferencing, instant messaging, project management, etc.)	514	5.4%	8	14.6%
Lack of skills or training in using tools necessary for telework (web conferencing, instant messaging, project management, etc.)	450	4.7%	8	14.6%
Number of Respondents	9,582		55	
Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using agency leadership and employee telework survey results.				

Both agency employees and leadership reported that technology issues were resolved quickly, however, agencies should review their telework-related technology needs and ensure that employees are prepared for future emergencies. Although 3,843 (41.2%) of 9,318 employees reported that technical issues were resolved in less than a week, 1,363 (14.6%) reported that

¹⁶ Government Accountability Office, "[Federal Telework: Additional Controls could Strengthen Telework Program Compliance and Data Reporting](#)", February 2017 and Government Accountability Office, "[Key Practices That Can Help Ensure the Success of Telework Programs](#)", November 2020

¹⁷ The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM); *Checklist for Emergency Telecommuting Preparation*; National Association of Chief Information Officers (NASCIO); *COVID-19 Planning and Response Guidance for State CIOs* (March 2020).

resolution of technical issues took longer, and 1,379 (14.4%) of 9,582¹⁸ employees reported that they continued to face lingering issues that were barriers to productivity or their ability to telework at the time of the survey. When asked what their agencies could have done to better plan for widespread telework, agency leadership commented that they would have moved to mobile devices such as laptops or tablets, ensured VPN access to agency data and applications, and had adequate licenses available for communication and collaboration tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

According to the agency leadership survey, 40 (80.0%) of 50 agency leadership reached out to the Office of Technology Services (OTS) for assistance, and most reported that OTS was helpful in providing the requested services and resolving issues. Exhibit 4 shows the types of services agencies requested from OTS as a result of the transition to widespread telework.

Exhibit 4 Survey Responses: Did your agency reach out to OTS for any of the following services?		
Service	Count	Responses*
Laptops and Desktops	26	52.0%
VPNs, Virtual Desktops, etc.	26	52.0%
MiFi's, Hotspots, etc.	17	34.0%
Collaboration or communication software (Zoom, Skype, Instant Messaging)	21	42.0%
Not applicable, we did not reach out to OTS	10	20.0%
Other (DocuSign/Adobe, call forwarding, cell phone setup for call center personnel)	12	24.0%
*The survey allowed respondents to select multiple options so the totals add up to more than 100%.		
Source: Prepared by legislative auditor's staff using agency leadership telework survey results.		

OTS, as the centralized agency for the acquisition of information technology systems, stated that it was able to act quickly and place large orders for laptops and connectivity devices for all its client agencies, thereby enabling them to be high on vendors' priority lists. In addition, OTS put in place security policies and procedures that made agencies better prepared for telework in terms of information security. Finally, OTS was already in the process of upgrading and expanding the Virtual Private Network (VPN) servers that served all client agencies. When agencies transitioned to telework, OTS expedited the VPN server upgrade and increased capacity so that all teleworking state employees could VPN into agency networks. One OTS official commented that Louisiana was better positioned to respond to this emergency due to the consolidation. A GOEA official commented that email connectivity was a big problem for their agency because it did not use state-wide email and that the agency was now in the process of migrating to state-wide email.

¹⁸ Although 11,028 respondents began the employee telework survey, not all completed the survey so the number of respondents answering each question varies.

According to best practices, moving to paperless business processes would not only prepare agencies to successfully telework in case of future emergencies, it would also enable agencies to modernize government by adopting new technologies and improving the state’s efficiency and effectiveness.¹⁹ Government agencies have long relied

The federal government began reducing its dependence on paperwork and switching to electronic documents and signatures since 1980 and aims to transition to a fully electronic environment by December, 31, 2022.

Source: Pub. L. 96-511 (Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980) and OMB Memo M-19-21 (Transition to Electronic Records)

on paper to document their operations. However, the COVID-19 public health emergency changed priorities by making connectivity, telework, and digital collaboration more important, and highlighted the need to move away from traditional, paper-based business processes.²⁰ Survey data shows that the majority of “other barriers” reported by state employees were related to not being able to print or scan documents from home, not being able to send and process physical mail and not being able to get physical signatures on agency forms and paperwork. Switching to paperless business processes has many benefits apart from facilitating telework, such as cutting costs on printing, mailing and storing paperwork, allowing easier data analysis, and supporting green initiatives, such as reducing waste in landfills. In our survey of agency leadership, DEQ commented that the agency used paperless processes before COVID-19, which facilitated the transition to telework. Transitioning to paperless business processes, reviewing the technology necessary for telework and ensuring that they are prepared to deploy it quickly will make agencies better prepared for future emergencies like COVID-19.

Recommendation 4: OTS should assist agencies in developing telework policies that outline the different technologies needed for successful telework, including whether laptops will be issued, what platforms should be used for communication, and how business processes that rely on paper will not be interrupted.

Summary of Management Response: OTS agrees with this recommendation and stated that it will continue to perform within each agency in the executive branch, the deployment of hardware and software (including mobile devices, communication and collaboration tools) and the ramping up of VPN connectivity as required for the workload of any given situation – emergency or routine. See Appendix B for OTS management’s full response.

Agencies did not always provide supervisors with sufficient guidance on how to manage their remote teams and measure and track employee productivity. According to the survey, 655 (26.6%) of 2,461 agency supervisors reported facing barriers in leading their remote teams.

¹⁹ President’s Management Agenda (2018) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ThePresidentsManagementAgenda.pdf>)

²⁰ GovLoop, “How COVID-19 made the Air Force More Paperless” (<https://www.govloop.com/how-covid-19-made-the-air-force-more-paperless/>), June 24, 2020 and GovLoop, “Landmarks in Paperless Government Legislation” (<https://www.govloop.com/landmarks-in-paperless-government-legislation/>), July 23, 2019.

According to telework research,²¹ one of managers' biggest concerns is whether employees are as productive away from the office as they are when physically present. Best practices state that employers should establish guidelines for remote work that include setting clear expectations for work times, task priorities, performance measurement mechanisms, and deadlines. However, because of unique issues due to COVID-19, other states and organizations²² released additional telework guidance that included providing more flexibility for teleworking employees who had to provide care for dependents while also working from home.

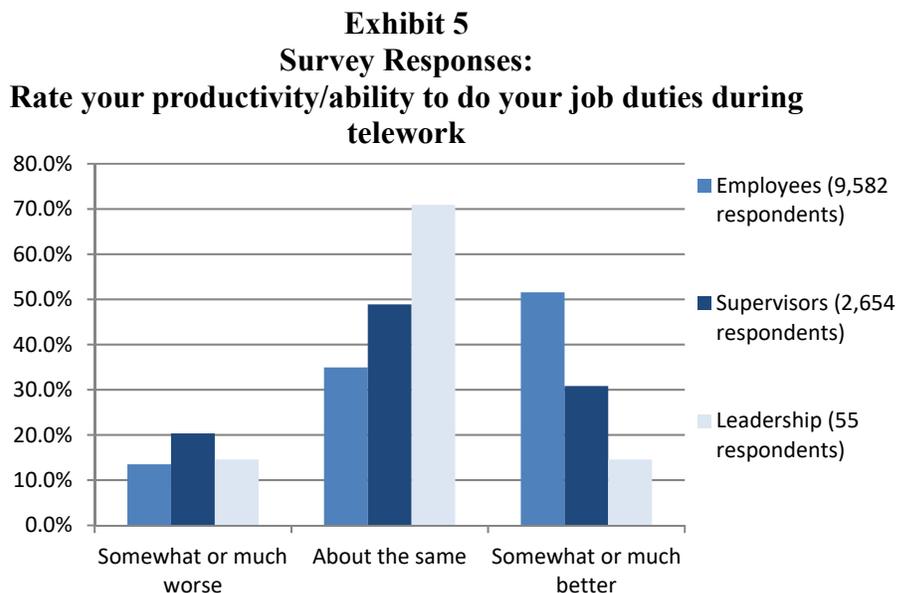
According to survey responses by some agency leadership, they managed employees and tracked productivity in various ways during widespread telework. These include the following:

- Providing training to supervisors on how to manage remote staff and instructions to create weekly work plans with their staff,
- Monitoring progress by having staff submit daily logs detailing the hours worked and/or tasks performed,
- Maintaining frequent communications with staff in order to discuss work related assignments and ensure that productivity was maintained.
- Holding weekly meetings with employees (supervisors and/or staff) to discuss issues and provide updated guidance.

While 4,940 (51.6%) of 9,582 employees said their ability to perform their job duties was *somewhat* or *much* better while teleworking, 1,297 (48.9%) of 2,654 supervisors and 39 (70.9%) of 55 agency leaders said productivity was about *the same*. Survey comments show that many employees were grateful to be able to telework during the public health emergency. One employee commented that “if one has the adequate technology such as: laptop, high-speed internet, cell phone, etc., periodic telework can be more productive than sitting in an office.” Another commented that “the ability to work remotely during a national state of emergency was phenomenal. I would rather have the ability to work remotely than simply be on extended paid leave.” Exhibit 5 shows how employees (staff and supervisors), and leadership responded to the survey question asking them to rate their or their staff's ability to do their job duties and their agency's productivity during telework.

²¹ *Managing Telework Programs Effectively*, J.A. Mellow, October 2007.

²² Connecticut, Florida, Nebraska, Washington, National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO)



Source: Created by legislative auditor’s staff from results of agency leadership and employee telework surveys.

However, some agency supervisors reported struggling with maintaining productivity while also balancing the needs of their staff during the pandemic, and that they did not receive adequate guidance to assist them. Many state employees had never teleworked prior to the Governor’s stay-at-home order, and supervisors had to manage these inexperienced teleworkers. In our survey, 655 (26.6%) of 2,461 agency supervisors reported facing barriers in leading their remote teams because they were tasked with assisting staff with IT challenges, clarifying task priorities, maintaining their teams’ productivity, and ensuring their staff had the flexibility to deal with childcare, home schooling, and potentially serious health conditions. Agency supervisors commented on the difficulties they faced in training or mentoring new employees, dealing with communication challenges, assisting staff members who were not technologically prepared to transition to telework, keeping up with reporting requirements and deadlines, and managing their own increased workloads.

Survey data shows that 609 (33.9%) of 1,794 supervisors in agencies with pre-COVID-19 telework policies reported that staff’s productivity was somewhat or much better during telework. In comparison, 209 (24.3%) of 860 supervisors in agencies without pre-COVID-19 telework policies reported that staff’s productivity was somewhat or much better during telework.

Source: LLA agency employee telework survey

In addition, 896 (33.8%) of 2,654 agency supervisors reported not receiving any guidance on how to manage their teleworking staff during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Survey comments by agency supervisors indicated that they would have liked to receive clearer directions around policy changes, better communication about work priorities and expectations, an accountability system to track employees’ performance, circulation of work schedules and contact information for all agency employees and clients, and simplified instructions for coding telework time. One supervisor commented that, “it was stated several times that ‘working from home is exactly the same as working from the office.’ In my opinion, a better acknowledgment

of the real-world shifts required to support staff could have leveraged the flexibility that work-from-home allows while still setting and maintaining the required levels of performance.”

In preparation for future state emergencies, agency telework policies should include telework agreements to help mitigate productivity issues and other supervisory challenges.

Telework policies should establish performance standards and systems to monitor the productivity of teleworkers, as well as training supervisors to effectively manage teleworkers, especially during emergency, widespread telework. Also essential is the creation of telework agreements that are signed by each employee and outline agency expectations, such as how routine communication between employee and supervisor will be handled, employee’s performance plan/expectations, and agency-provided equipment.

Recommendation 5: DSCS should assist agencies in creating telework agreements for every teleworker that includes items, such as duration of agreement, remote work site location(s), communication expectations, telework schedule, performance expectations, and agency-provided equipment to be provided by the agency for the employee to carry out their job duties.

Summary of Management’s Response: DSCS agrees with this recommendation. See Appendix A for DSCS management’s full response.

APPENDIX A: DEPT. OF STATE CIVIL SERVICE'S RESPONSE



Byron P. Decoteau, Jr., Director

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January 25, 2021

Mr. Daryl G. Purpera, Legislative Auditor
Louisiana Legislative Auditor
1600 N. Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Dear Mr. Purpera,

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on your performance audit report titled *"Challenges with Teleworking during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency."* The Department of State Civil Service and the State Civil Service Commission remain committed to providing human resources programs and tools that will enable our state agencies to attract and retain a workforce that will continue to carry out the operations of state services during and after the current health pandemic. While our rule making authority extends only to the classified workforce of state government, I must recognize the collaboration and efforts of the Administration that has worked to provide greater consistency between the classified and unclassified workforces during the pandemic response. Together our goal has been to safeguard our collective workforce.

COVID-19 has required state agencies to reposition and rethink how the work of state government is performed, providing the opportunity to reshape the future of work. Teleworking arrangements, while initially designed to accomplish social distancing measures to help combat COVID-19, is a valuable human resources tool that will continue to evolve alongside the future of work. To that end, the timing and scope of your performance audit is appreciated and welcomed.

The Department agrees with the performance report's recommendations to State Civil Service. We look forward to addressing the recommendations in the report and ensuring teleworking options are equitably and fairly provided to our workforce.

Sincerely,

Byron P. Decoteau Jr.
Director

APPENDIX B: OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY SERVICES' RESPONSE

Office of Technology Services
State of Louisiana
Division of Administration

JOHN BEL EDWARDS
GOVERNOR



JAY DARDENNE
COMMISSIONER OF ADMINISTRATION

January 21, 2021

Daryl G. Purpera, CPA, CFE
Louisiana Legislative Auditor
1600 N. Third Street, P.O. Box 94397
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9397

Dear Mr. Purpera:

Thank you for affording the Office of Technology Services (OTS) the opportunity to respond to the performance audit *Challenges with Telework during the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency* recommendation.

OTS will continue to perform within each agency in the executive branch, deployment of hardware and software (including mobile devices, communication and collaboration tools) and the ramping up of VPN connectivity as required for the workload of any given agency situation – emergency or routine.

We appreciate the efforts taken by the performance auditor to fairly present the overall picture of the efforts taken on behalf of the agencies by the Office of Technology Services (OTS) and agree with the recommendation. OTS will continue to be responsive in situations dealing with Covid-19 or any emergency situation.

Sincerely,



Richard "Dickie" Howze
State Chief Information Officer
Office of Technology Services, State of Louisiana

APPENDIX C: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

This report provides the results of our performance audit of telework in executive branch agencies during the COVID-19 public health emergency. We conducted this performance audit under the provisions of Title 24 of the Louisiana Revised Statutes of 1950, as amended. This audit covered calendar year 2020 because the Governor declared a public health emergency on March 23, 2020, and our evaluation included agencies' telework policies prior to the public health emergency. Our audit objective was:

To provide information on the challenges executive branch agencies experienced with telework during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally-accepted *Government Auditing Standards* issued by the Comptroller General of the United States. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. To answer our objective, we reviewed internal controls relevant to the audit objective and performed the following audit steps:

- Researched best practices for creating routine telework policies/programs and telework related emergency guidance issued due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.
- Reviewed federal and other states' pre-COVID-19 telework policies/programs.
- Met with seven state agencies to gain an understanding of the challenges they faced when transitioning to emergency telework as a result of the Governor's stay-at-home order.
- Using the information from the background steps, designed two surveys – one for agency leadership to understand how they managed their organizations during widespread telework, and one for agency employees (supervisors and staff) to understand the transition to widespread telework and their experiences with telework.
 - Created a list of agency leadership contacts to send the leadership survey.
 - Worked with OTS to create a listserv of all state employees in agencies using state-wide email and used it to distribute the employee survey. Identified key personnel in agencies that are not using state-wide email who distributed the employee survey to all their employees

- Requested pre- and post-COVID-19 telework policies from all executive branch agencies.
- Reviewed Civil Service guidance to state agencies regarding emergency leave for employees during the COVID-19 public health emergency.
- Used Business Objects leave report (ZT33) to determine how agencies used emergency leave during the COVID-19 public health emergency