Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives

FEDERAL TELEWORK

Interior Can Benefit from Strategic Workforce Planning and Following Key Practices

Statement of Dawn G. Locke, Director, Strategic Issues

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

FEDERAL TELEWORK

Interior Can Benefit from Strategic Workforce Planning and Following Key Practices

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies use telework to help accomplish their missions and maintain operations. In March 2020, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instructed agencies to maximize the use of telework to allow federal employees to remain safe while working from alternative locations and maintaining mission critical workforce needs. Agencies have continued to adapt their operating postures since the onset of the pandemic. These adaptations vary widely in response to federal agency mission areas.

In April 2023, OMB instructed federal agencies, including Interior, to increase meaningful in-person work—particularly at agency headquarters—while still using flexible operational policies such as telework. As Interior and other agencies continue to adapt to the changing work environment, it is important to understand agencies' plans and the extent to which they leverage key practices for telework.

This statement discusses several previously issued reports that have highlighted (1) the potential benefits of telework, (2) the challenges of telework, and (3) leading telework practices agencies should follow as they continue to adapt their operating postures. GAO reviewed previously issued reports and testimony on federal telework at Interior and other federal agencies as well as reports and recommendations on Interior.

GAO has ongoing work reviewing the implications of telework use at federal agencies. This statement reflects some of the recent policies and guidance issued by OMB and the Office of Personnel Management reviewed as part of that work.

What GAO Found

Telework offers benefits to federal agencies as well as to the federal workforce. These benefits include improving recruitment and retention of employees, reducing the need for costly office space, and an opportunity to better balance work and family demands. In addition, telework is a tool that agencies can use to help accomplish their missions during periods of disruption. Federal human capital officers have also identified telework as a workforce flexibility tool that can help address skills gaps by helping attract, recruit, and retain the best possible workforce.

GAO initially designated strategic human capital management as a government-wide high-risk area in 2001. The Department of the Interior (Interior) faces challenges in meeting its mission due to skills gaps identified in GAO's previous work. GAO's recommendations to Interior include the need for strategic workforce planning.

Telework-related challenges identified in GAO's prior work include measuring and shedding underutilized federal space; addressing information technology issues such as equipment shortages and limited network capacity; and obtaining reliable telework data. Federal agencies have long struggled to determine how much office space they need to fulfill their missions. Retaining excess and underutilized space is one of the main reasons that federal real property management has remained on GAO's High-Risk List since 2003. GAO found that agency officials continue to identify challenges to increasing space utilization, including a lack of benchmarks for full utilization that accounts for increased telework.

GAO previously identified key practices federal agencies should implement to help ensure successful telework programs.

- **Program planning.** Agencies are required to have a telework managing officer. They also need to establish measurable telework program goals.

- **Telework policies.** Agencies can help ensure their workforces are telework ready by establishing telework policies and guidance. To ensure that teleworkers are approved on an equitable basis, agencies should establish eligibility criteria, such as suitability of tasks and employee performance. Agencies should also have telework agreements for use between teleworkers and their managers.

- **Performance management.** Agencies should ensure that the same performance standards are used to evaluate both teleworkers and nonteleworkers. Agencies should also establish guidelines to minimize adverse impacts that telework can have on nonteleworkers.

- **Managerial support.** For telework programs to be successful, agencies need support from top management. They also need to address managerial resistance to telework.

- **Training and publicizing.** Telework training helps agencies ensure a common understanding of the program.

- **Technology.** Agencies need to make sure teleworkers have the right technology to successfully perform their duties. To that end, agencies should assess teleworker and organization technology needs, provide technical support to teleworkers, and address access and security issues.

- **Program evaluation.** Agencies should develop program evaluation tools and use such tools to identify problems or issues. Agencies can then use this information to make any needed adjustments to their programs.

United States Government Accountability Office

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss telework and the Department of the Interior.

Federal agencies use telework to help accomplish their missions and maintain operations, especially during emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instructed agencies to maximize the use of telework to allow federal employees to remain safe while working from alternative locations and maintaining mission critical workforce needs.

Prior to this abrupt and unprecedented change in agencies' operating postures, Congress had encouraged federal agencies to expand participation in telework, including by passing the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act).[1] The act, among other things, established requirements for executive agencies' telework policies and programs.

Agencies have continued to adapt their operating postures since the onset of the pandemic. These adaptations vary widely in response to the multitude of federal agency mission areas, including Interior's management of America's natural and cultural resources. Federal employees' job functions also vary widely and can include common core office functions such as budget, human capital, and information

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[1]Pub. L. No. 111-292, 124 Stat. 3165 (2010), codified primarily at chapter 65 of title 5, United States Code. The act defined telework as a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work. Prior to this act, the most significant congressional action related to telework was included in a fiscal year 2001 appropriations provision. This provision required agencies to establish policies under which eligible employees could participate in telework to the maximum extent possible without diminished employee performance. The Office of Personnel Management was tasked with ensuring application of this requirement to an increasing percentage of the federal workforce over time. Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations, 2001, Pub. L. No. 106-346, app., tit. III, § 359, 114 Stat. 1356, 1356A-36 (2000).

technology; and, for Interior, the numerous other functions specific to its 11 bureaus.

Interior's personnel must sometimes be present on-site to perform their work. For example, the visitor experience at national parks is shaped, in part, by direct visitor services activities such as ranger interpretive programs, guided tours, and educational programs at visitor centers. National Park Service staff also perform basic custodial duties and provide law enforcement operations.

In August 2023, the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee reported that Interior needs to reopen Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Regional Offices for in-person services because Tribes and their citizens are not getting proper services from BIA teleworkers.[2] The report stated that in-person access to officials to ask questions is particularly important for elderly members and those without Internet or reliable Internet.

In April 2023, OMB instructed federal agencies, including Interior, to increase meaningful in-person work—particularly at agency headquarters—while still using flexible operational policies such as telework to enhance employee recruitment and retention.[3]

Interior, similar to other federal agencies, will continue to face challenges in capitalizing on the lessons learned during the pandemic and finding the right balance of telework, remote work, and in-person work to accomplish its mission. As agencies consider their future of work in a rapidly changing environment, it is important that they follow key practices for implementing an effective telework program.

My statement discusses several of our previously issued reports that have highlighted (1) the potential benefits of telework, (2) the challenges of telework, and (3) leading telework practices agencies should follow as they continue to adapt their operating postures. In developing this testimony, we reviewed our previously issued reports and testimony on

[2]U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee, Policy Recommendations (Washington, D.C. Aug. 2023).

[3]Office of Management and Budget, Measuring, Monitoring, and Improving Organizational Health and Organizational Performance in the Context of Evolving Agency Work Environments, OMB M-23-15 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2023).

GAO-24-107162

our body of work on federal telework at Interior and other federal agencies as well as reports on and recommendations to Interior.[4]

We have ongoing work reviewing the implications of telework use at federal agencies. Specifically, we are examining how the use of telework has contributed to ongoing changes among selected agencies' customer service delivery, organizational performance, worker productivity and performance, and operations. This statement reflects some of the recent policies and guidance issued by OMB and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) that we reviewed as part of that work.

We conducted the work on which this testimony is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. 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 audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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[4]GAO, *Federal Real Property: Agencies Need New Benchmarks to Measure and Shed Underutilized Space*, GAO-24-107006 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 26, 2023); *Tribal Issues: Bureau of Indian Affairs Should Take Additional Steps to Improve Timely Delivery of Real Estate Services*, GAO-24-105875 (Washington D.C.: Oct. 26, 2023, reissued with revisions on Nov. 6, 2023); *Telework: Growth Supported Economic Activity during the Pandemic, but Future Impacts are Uncertain*, GAO-23-105999 (Washington, D.C.: July 26, 2023); *Tribal Programs: Actions Needed to Improve Interior's Management of Trust Services*, GAO-23-105356 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 27, 2023); *COVID-19: Federal Telework Increased during the Pandemic, but More Reliable Data Are Needed to Support Oversight*, GAO-22-104282 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 8, 2022); *Bureau of Land Management: Better Workforce Planning and Data Would Help Mitigate the Effects of Recent Staff Vacancies*, GAO-22-104247 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2021); *COVID-19: Selected Agencies Overcame Technology Challenges to Support Telework but Need to Fully Assess Security Controls*, GAO-21-583 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 2021); *Federal Telework: Key Practices That Can Help Ensure the Success of Telework Programs*, GAO-21-238T (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 18, 2020); *Federal Telework: Additional Controls Could Strengthen Telework Program Compliance and Data Reporting*, GAO-17-247 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 17, 2017); *Federal Human Resources Data, OPM Should Improve the Availability and Reliability of Payroll Data to Support Accountability and Workforce Analytics*, GAO-17-127 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 7, 2016); *Federal Telework: Better Guidance Could Help Agencies Calculate Benefits and Costs*, GAO-16-551 (Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2016); *Federal Telework: Program Measurement Continues to Confront Data Reliability Issues*, GAO-12-519 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2012); and *Human Capital: Further Guidance, Assistance, and Coordination Can Improve Federal Telework Efforts*, GAO-03-679 (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2003).

Potential Benefits

Telework offers potential benefits to federal agencies as well as to the federal workforce. These benefits include improving recruitment and retention of employees, reducing the need for costly office space, and creating an opportunity to better balance work and family demands. In addition, telework is a tool that agencies can use to help accomplish their missions during periods of disruption.

Last July, we reported on the impact of telework, both as it pertains to the workforce and various sectors of the economy. Studies we reviewed found that, while telework generally had a positive impact on worker productivity and firm performance in certain sectors, methodological issues complicate efforts to estimate its long-term impacts.[5]

Federal human capital officers have identified telework as a workforce flexibility that can help address skills gaps by helping to attract, recruit, and retain the best possible workforce. For agencies to leverage telework to recruit and retain employees to close skills gaps in their workforce, they must ensure their telework policies, procedures, and other controls are appropriately implemented. Agencies must also ensure that the technology needed for employees to telework functions as it should.

Since 2001, we have included strategic human capital management in GAO's High-Risk List. This is partially because of the need to address current and emerging skills gaps that are undermining agencies' abilities to meet their missions.[6] Last April, we reported that any progress to close mission-critical skills gaps will require demonstrated improvements in agencies' capacity to perform workforce planning, foster employee engagement, train staff effectively, and recruit and retain the appropriate number of staff with the necessary skills. We found that agencies face challenges in these areas of human capital management.[7] Effective implementation of telework policies and procedures could help improve

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[5]GAO-23-105999.

[6]GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-01-263 (Washington, D.C.: January 2001).

[7]See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, GAO-23-106203 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

talent management shortfalls, which is often how agencies experience skills gaps.

We have previously reported areas where Interior faces challenges in meeting its mission due to skills gaps. For example:

- In October 2023, we reported that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) identified staff shortages as a factor affecting its processing times for real estate services.[8] We recommended, among other things, that BIA develop a plan to address factors affecting its processing times for delivering real estate services, including staff shortages. BIA agreed with these recommendations and stated it would develop a plan for overseeing the entry of real estate data, among other things.

- In April 2023, we found that the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration (BTFA) within BIA lacked a strategic workforce plan that would help Interior better understand the resources it needs to manage trust funds, especially as demand for beneficiary services continues to increase.[9] We recommended that Interior develop a strategic workforce plan for carrying out trust functions and update agency collaboration guidance for trust operations and services. Interior generally agreed with our recommendations. As of October 2023, BTFA continues to finalize a statement of work to hire a contractor to assist with the development of a workforce plan. BTFA anticipates awarding the contract during the second quarter of fiscal year 2024 and completing the strategic workforce plan during the second quarter of fiscal year 2025.

- In November 2021, we found that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) made substantial changes to its organizational structure without a strategic workforce plan that addressed the two critical needs that define strategic workforce planning: (1) aligning the agency's human capital program with emerging mission goals, and (2) developing long-term strategies for acquiring, developing, and retaining staff to achieve programmatic goals.[10] We recommended that BLM (1) track data on vacancies and details for all offices, and (2) develop an agency-wide strategic workforce plan that aligns its human capital program with emerging mission goals and includes long-term staffing strategies. Interior agreed with our recommendations. As of

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[8]GAO-24-105875.

[9]GAO-23-105356.

[10]GAO-22-104247.

February 2023, BLM said it had hired a contractor to develop a strategic workforce plan and made some progress, but had not yet finalized such a plan. By implementing our priority recommendation in this area, BLM will better ensure it has the workforce it needs to achieve its mission and goals.

Challenges

Our prior work has identified a number of challenges related to telework. These challenges include:

Measuring and shedding underutilized federal space. Federal agencies have long struggled to determine how much office space they need to fulfill their missions. Retaining excess and underutilized space is one of the main reasons that federal real property management has remained on our High-Risk List since 2003. In a report we issued last October, we found that agency officials identified challenges to increasing utilization, including a lack of benchmarks for full utilization that accounts for increased telework.[11]

Differences in agencies' measures, calculations, and benchmarks can also contribute to differences in capacity and utilization measures across the government. A benchmark for measuring utilization that accounts for higher levels of telework could help the federal government more consistently identify underutilized space within and across agencies. This information could support better alignment of the federal real property portfolio with future needs and cost reductions from releasing unneeded space. We recommended that the Director of OMB should ensure that the Deputy Director of OMB, as Chair of the Federal Real Property Council, leads the development and use of benchmarks for measuring building utilization that account for greater levels of telework. OMB agreed with our recommendation.

In our October 2023 report, we reviewed the agencies' use of their headquarters buildings at 24 federal agencies—including Interior—for three selected weeks during January, February, and March 2023. We found that Interior's headquarters utilization was in the third quartile of the 24 agencies. The six agencies in the quartile used 23 percent of their
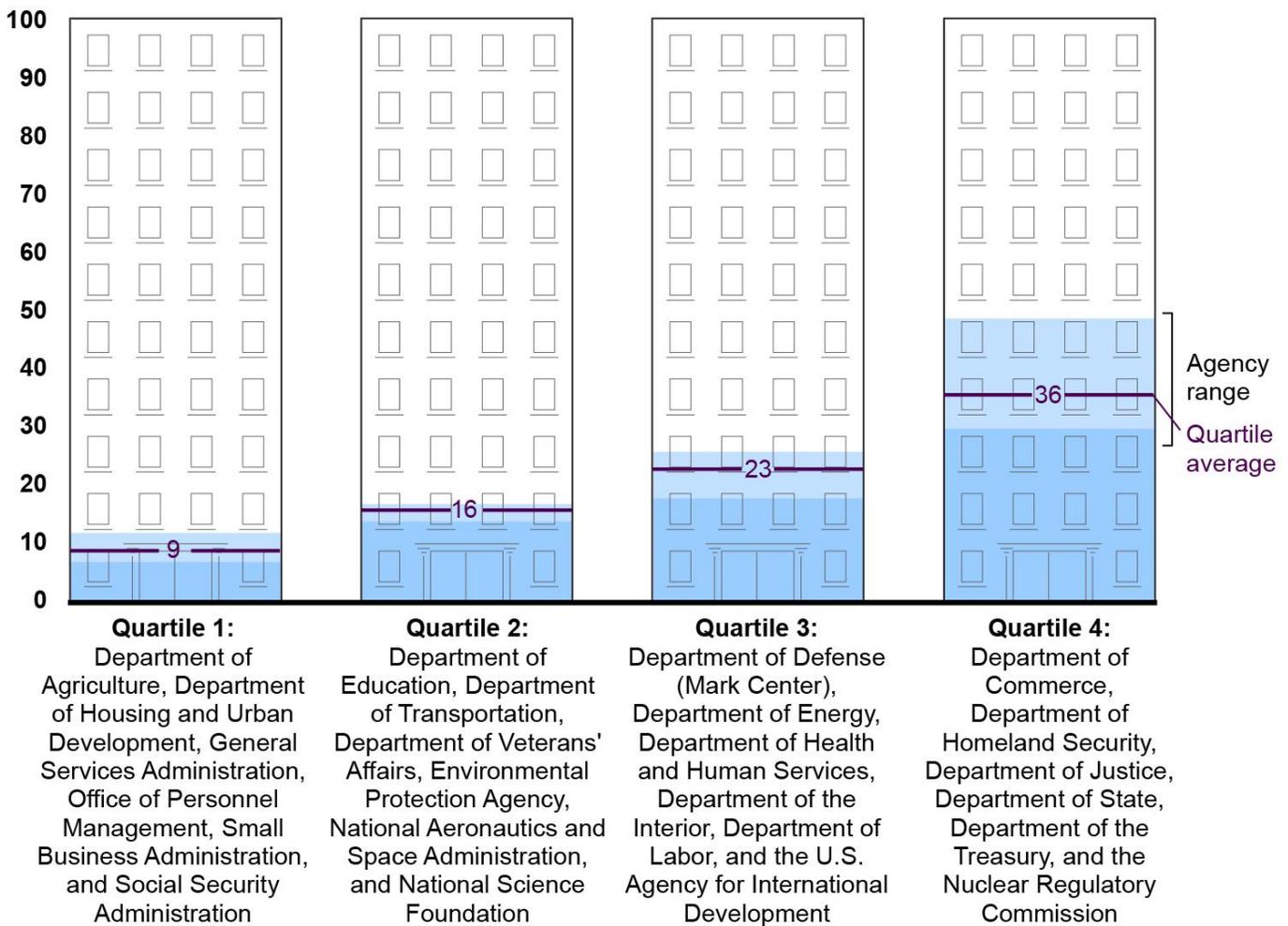
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[11]GAO-24-107006.

headquarters buildings' capacity on average over our sample period (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Estimated Weekly Averages of Utilization of Federal Headquarters Buildings across a 3-Week Sample (One Week in Each of January, February, and March 2023), by Quartile

Building utilization percentage

Quartile 1:
Department of Agriculture, Department of Housing and Urban Development, General Services Administration, Office of Personnel Management, Small Business Administration, and Social Security Administration

Quartile 2:
Department of Education, Department of Transportation, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and National Science Foundation

Quartile 3:
Department of Defense (Mark Center), Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of the Interior, Department of Labor, and the U.S. Agency for International Development

Quartile 4:
Department of Commerce, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of State, Department of the Treasury, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Source: GAO analysis of data from 24 federal agencies; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-24-107162

Accessible data for Figure 1: Estimated Weekly Averages of Utilization of Federal Headquarters Buildings across a 3-Week Sample (One Week in Each of January, February, and March 2023), by Quartile

Quartile description	Building Utilization Agency Range	Quartile Average
Quartile 1	5-7%	9%
Department of Agriculture, Department of Housing and Urban Development, General Services Administration, Office of Personnel Management, Small Business Administration, and Social Security Administration		
Quartile 2	3-14%	16%
Department of Education, Department of Transportation, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and National Science Foundation		
Quartile 3	8-18%	23%
Department of Defense (Mark Center), Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of the Interior, Department of Labor, and the U.S. Agency for International Development		
Quartile 4	19-30%	36%
Department of Commerce, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of State, Department of the Treasury, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission		

Source: GAO analysis of data from 24 federal agencies; GAO (illustrations). | GAO-24-107162

Note: Utilization is a ratio of a building's capacity and the extent to which an agency uses that capacity. Utilization differs from attendance because a building's capacity is based on the size of the building, not the number of people assigned to it. All assigned staff could go to a building, and it could still be underutilized if the building has more space than it needs. The quartile percentage represents a weekly average, but percentage ranges of space utilization vary by federal agency. In addition, daily in-person attendance rates generally varied throughout the work week. The Department of Defense provided us data on attendance in a government facility (Mark Center) located in Alexandria, Virginia, which we had identified as its administrative headquarters. The Office of Personnel Management indicated that additional non-agency staff occupy space in its headquarters building, and its numbers include those workspaces and attendance. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Small Business Administration officials noted that their headquarters buildings were undergoing renovation during the data collection period, contributing to a decrease in attendance. The Department of Energy headquarters includes the Forrestal, Germantown, and Portals locations. See GAO-24-107006 for information on how we calculated the extent to which the agencies are using the buildings.

Reliability of telework data. In 2012, we reported that OPM had been concerned about the reliability of telework data it received from executive agencies through its annual data call over the prior decade.[12] OPM also maintains data on telework use in its Enterprise Human Resources

[12]GAO-12-519.

Integration (EHRI) system.[13] In 2016, we found that several issues affected the reliability of the EHRI payroll system, including the telework variables within the database. We made five recommendations, including four to improve data reliability.[14] In 2019, OPM implemented one recommendation by updating its EHRI database payroll data standards to include data on the number and instances of telework use by federal employees and the number of hours of telework used.

In 2023, OPM officials told us they implemented another recommendation by developing a process to monitor system generated error reports in EHRI. However, it still needs to close two other recommendations to improve data reliability. Specifically, OPM needs to finish updating control activities to further leverage EHRI datasets and data quality. It also needs to develop a schedule for integrating payroll data into a larger suite of EHRI databases.[15] OPM officials agreed that payroll data in EHRI could eventually be substituted for OPM's current telework data calls but to do so would first require implementation of the above actions.

Until OPM develops a plan to fully implement all our recommendations to improve data reliability issues with its EHRI payroll data, it will continue to be unable to precisely assess telework usage across agencies and provide a full and accurate picture to Congress to support oversight. In

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[13]EHRI is OPM's primary warehouse for data about federal employees. OPM designed EHRI to leverage its existing IT infrastructure, staff, and tools to integrate federal personnel, payroll, training, and retirement databases. EHRI was developed following the electronic government initiative in 2001. This initiative was aimed at using IT to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens, business partners, and employees. It also was designed to improve the internal efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government.

[14]GAO-17-127. The four recommendations to improve data reliability were for OPM to (1) update EHRI payroll database documentation to be consistent with current field definitions and requirements, including the Guide to Human Resources Reporting and the Guide to Data Standards, Part B; (2) consistently monitor system-generated error and edit check reports and ensure that timely action is taken to address identified issues; (3) develop a schedule for executing plans to integrate the payroll data into the larger suite of EHRI databases; and (4) evaluate existing internal control activities and develop new control activities for EHRI payroll data, such as implementing transactional edit checks that leverage the information in the other EHRI datasets. OPM concurred with our four recommendations and implemented two of them. As of January 2024, one remains open, and one remains open and partially addressed.

[15]In addition to the four recommendations to improve data reliability, we also recommended that OMB improve the availability of EHRI payroll data—for example, by preparing the data for analytics, making them available through online tools such as FedScope, and including them among the EHRI data sources on the OPM website and Data.gov. As of January 2024, the recommendation remains open.

February 2022, we recommended that Congress consider requiring OPM to develop an implementation plan to improve the reliability of information in EHRI, including telework information.[16] In doing so, Congress should consider providing OPM a deadline for completing the plan.

IT. Agency officials reported a variety of IT challenges at the onset of the pandemic and took steps to try to mitigate these issues.[17] These challenges included equipment shortages, lack of training, and limited network capacity. Agencies told us they needed to ensure that teleworkers had the right technology to perform their duties successfully. Other areas of importance to agencies included assessing organizational and teleworker technology needs, addressing access and security issues related to telework, and providing technical support when needed.

Work portability and replicating on-site work process. Several agencies reported that some positions and procedures were not portable. They added that they needed additional time at the outset of the pandemic to revise guidance and policies to accommodate full-time telework for eligible employees occupying those positions. Agencies also experienced challenges replicating the office environment and some processes in a remote setting. These included challenges with hiring, security checks and fingerprinting new employees, mail delivery and processing, and accessing office supplies and equipment.

Implementation of Key Practices Can Help Ensure the Success of Federal Agencies' Telework Programs

In our prior work, we have also identified key practices for federal agencies to implement with their telework programs. These key practices can be grouped under seven categories: (1) program planning, (2) telework policies, (3) performance management, (4) managerial support, (5) training and publicizing, (6) technology, and (7) program evaluation.[18]

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[16]GAO-22-104282.

[17]We previously reported on (1) selected agencies' initial experiences in providing the IT needed to support remote access for maximum telework, and (2) the extent to which selected agencies followed federal information security guidance for their IT systems that provide remote access. See GAO-21-583.

[18]GAO-21-238T and GAO-03-679.

These telework key practices—several of which are required by statute—provide a roadmap for federal agencies to successfully implement their telework programs.

Program planning. The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (the act) required agencies to designate a telework managing officer (TMO).[19] Establishing such a leadership position is consistent with the key practices we identified. The TMO is the primary agency official devoted to the development and implementation of the agency's telework program and facilitates its compliance with the act. Agencies may also designate other officials to implement the day-to-day operations of the telework program.

Other key practices we identified related to program planning include establishing a cross-functional project team, establishing measurable telework program goals, developing an implementation plan for the telework program, developing a business case for implementing a telework program, providing funding to meet the needs of the telework program, and establishing a pilot program when initiating telework efforts.

Telework policies. Agencies should establish telework policies and guidance to ensure that their workforce is telework ready.[20] Another key practice to facilitate telework is to establish telework agreements for use between teleworkers and managers. Agencies are required to have such agreements. The act requires agencies to ensure an employee enters into a written agreement with an agency manager who outlines the agreed-upon specific work arrangement between the manager and the teleworking employee before the employee participates in telework.[21] Our previous work found that telework agreements should establish job duties and expectations, performance standards, measurable outcomes and deliverables, and periodic review.

Other key practices related to telework policies include establishing eligibility criteria to ensure that teleworkers are approved on an equitable

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[19]Prior to the act, some agencies designated telework coordinators to be responsible for overseeing the implementation of telework programs and reported on the status of these programs. See, for example, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-199, div. B, tit. VI, § 627, 118 Stat. 3, 99 (2004).

[20]The act required agencies to establish a policy under which eligible employees may be authorized to telework within 180 days after enactment. 5 U.S.C. § 6502(a)(1)(A).

[21]5 U.S.C. § 6502(b).

basis using criteria such as suitability of tasks and employee performance; establishing policies or requirements to facilitate communication among teleworkers, managers, and coworkers; and developing guidelines on workplace health and safety issues to ensure that teleworkers have safe and adequate places to work offsite.

Performance management. Our past review of telework-related literature found that agencies should ensure that the same performance standards are used to evaluate both teleworkers and nonteleworkers. In addition, agencies need to establish guidelines to minimize any adverse impacts that telework could have on nonteleworkers before employees begin to work at alternate worksites. Following these practices can help eliminate any perceived unfairness and reduce potential sources of tension between teleworkers and nonteleworkers.

The act makes performance a criterion for continued program participation and states that telework policies should ensure that telework does not diminish employee performance or agency operations.[22] It also requires agencies to ensure that teleworkers and nonteleworkers are treated the same for the purposes of performance appraisals, among other management activities.[23]

Managerial support. Our previous review of telework-related literature found that, to establish an effective telework program, it is critical to obtain support from top management and address managerial resistance to telework. Managers may resist telework in part because the change requires them to shift from managing by observation to managing by results. Managers' acceptance of telework is highly dependent on top management's commitment to those changes.

Training and publicizing. Telework involves different ways of working, as well as supervising employees. A key practice we identified from telework-related literature is that both employees and supervisors should receive training to ensure a common understanding of the program. Telework training should include two key components: it should (1) address policy issues and include general information, such as policy updates and an orientation to telework; and (2) focus on telework program activities, including such topics as IT applications, performance

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[22]5 U.S.C. § 6502(b)(1) and (3).

[23]5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(3).

management, and time management.[24] It is also important to inform the workforce about the telework program.

The act requires agencies to provide an interactive telework training program to telework-eligible employees and to managers of teleworkers.[25] The act further requires that employees successfully complete the training before entering into a telework agreement.[26] OPM guidance also recommends managers complete telework training prior to approving telework agreements.

Technology. Our prior review of telework-related literature found that agencies should assess teleworker and organization technology needs; develop guidelines about whether the organization or employee will provide necessary technology, equipment, and supplies for telework; provide technical support for teleworkers; address access and security issues related to telework; and establish standards for equipment in the telework environment. Agencies must also have an appropriate IT infrastructure in place that allows large numbers of employees to telework simultaneously.

Program evaluation. Telework-related literature we previously reviewed recommends that agencies develop program evaluation tools and use them from the very inception of the program to identify any problems or issues with the program, and develop an action plan to guide any necessary changes for telework or the organization. The literature also emphasized the need for tracking systems that can help accurately ascertain the status of telework implementation in the agencies and, subsequently, the federal government. Such a tracking system should include a formal head count of regular and episodic teleworkers, as well as nonteleworkers.

The act requires OPM to report annually on an assessment of the progress each agency has made in meeting agency participation rate goals, and other agency goals relating to telework, such as the impact of telework on energy use, performance, and productivity.[27] To assist in

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[24]GAO-03-679.

[25]5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(1).

[26]5 U.S.C. § 6503(a)(2).

[27]5 U.S.C. § 6506(b)(2)(F).

meeting this requirement, OPM collects data on telework via an annual data call to all executive branch agencies.

Assessments that include information on benefits, net cost savings, and costs can help decision makers determine the overall effects of their telework programs and the progress achieved.

According to OPM, since its 2017 telework data call, agencies have improved in their ability to track cost savings but not all agencies reported information on cost savings.

In conclusion, telework is a tool that allows agencies to provide employees flexibilities on where they work as they fulfill agency missions. The use of telework also allows the government to maintain operations during periods of emergency, as evidenced by large increases in telework during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, agencies such as Interior can take steps to enhance telework implementation and better manage available resources. For example, using benchmarks that account for higher levels of telework can help agency officials better manage federal space and reduce costs. Improving the reliability of telework data can help agencies make more informed management decisions about investing resources, planning for continuity of operations events, assessing compliance with the act, and managing physical space needs. In addition, following telework key practices—several of which are required by statute—provides a roadmap for federal agencies such as Interior to successfully implement their telework programs.

Chairman Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contact
and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Dawn G. Locke at (202) 512-6806 or LockeD@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. In addition to the contact named above, Shea Bader (Assistant Director), Mark Ryan (Analyst-in-Charge), Clifton G. Douglas, Jr., Dawn Fore, Keith O'Brien, Ulyana Panchishin, Michelle Sager, Walter Vance, and Clarette Yen made key

contributions to the testimony. Other staff who made key contributions to the reports cited in the testimony are identified in the source products.

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