

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis

Committee on Government Reform Hearing “Beneficial or Critical? The Heightened Need for Telework Opportunities in the Post-9/11 World” July 8, 2004

Good morning. I want to welcome everyone to today’s oversight hearing on the status of telework programs and policies in the Federal government. We’re here to determine why many Federal supervisors have been slow to implement telework across all levels of the government workforce. For years now, many of us have recognized that telework offers significant benefits to managers, employees, and society. More recently, and perhaps more importantly, we now realize that telework needs to be an essential component of any continuity of operations plan. Something we once considered advantageous and beneficial has evolved into a cornerstone of emergency preparedness.

The innovations of the information age—laptop computers, broadband Internet service, blackberries and so forth—continue to make location less relevant in the working world. Telework capitalizes on these advances, offering a broad range of benefits to employers and employees.

I’ve long argued that, because of these benefits, we need to be encouraging telework wherever possible, across the nation. Expanding telecommuting opportunities reduces traffic congestion and air pollution. It promotes a productive workforce and increases employee morale and quality of life – often resulting in higher rates of worker retention. It’s pro-family. It provides a whole new arena of opportunities for people with disabilities. And it’s a great way for retirees to get the part-time employment many of them are looking for.

Unfortunately, logic doesn’t always prevail in Washington. Politics is like a wheelbarrow; nothing happens until you start pushing. 9-11 gave us a new reason to push for telework.

The war on terror makes the ability to work at off-site locations more than an attractive option for employees and employers; it’s now an imperative. The ever-present threat of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil should compel those in authority to incorporate telework into any disaster contingency plans. Here in the Washington area, we know that, in fact, many occurrences can interrupt government operations, from snowstorms and hurricanes to anthrax mailings and Tractor Man. These disruptions are very costly to people all over the country and the world who rely on a functioning federal government every day.

Today’s hearing is set against the backdrop of Section 359 of Public Law 106-346. This law, authored by one of our distinguished guests today, Congressman Frank Wolf, requires each executive branch agency to establish a telework policy “under which eligible employees may participate in telecommuting to the maximum extent possible without diminished employee performance.” The law made the Office of Personnel

Management responsible for ensuring that the requirements were applied to 25 percent of the Federal workforce beginning in April 2001 and to an additional 25 percent each subsequent year. That means, theoretically, that 100 percent of the Federal workforce is supposed to be eligible to telework by next April.

I'm sorry to report we're not nearly there yet.

According to OPM data, only 102,921 employees of 751,844 who were eligible had the capacity to telework in 2003—less than 14 percent. More unsettling is the fact that agencies are defining for themselves what employees they consider quote-unquote “eligible.” Part of our work today will be to determine whether a governmentwide definition of “eligible employees” would be appropriate and constructive.

We've long understood the barriers that prevent greater telework implementation. Many managers remain unenthusiastic about allowing their employees to be out of sight during workdays. Some worry telework will worsen employee-management relations; others worry employees may abuse the policy. Telework requires a great deal of management confidence and employee responsibility. Our biggest challenge as we move forward may simply be changing organizational attitudes about the possibilities technology affords managers and employees in the contemporary workplace.

It's important to note that there are bright signs on the horizon. As the government's telework coordinators, OPM and the General Services Administration have recently directed several efforts to boost telework programs.

Among its many activities in the last several weeks, OPM has hosted special training sessions for employees from nine agencies with extremely low telework participation; hosted emergency preparedness training forums for agency managers that emphasized integration of telework into continuity of operations plans; and Director Kay Coles James personally guided agency representatives through the Fairfax Telework Center in suburban Virginia for a first-hand look at the operations of an off-site telework hub. I am also aware of telework plans being crafted for Boston and New York, so that the convention chaos does not force federal agencies in those places to lose even an hour of productivity.

In addition, GSA has provided agencies with the needed guidance, technical assistance, and oversight of the establishment and operation of telework programs. Most notably, GSA recently collaborated with the Department of Homeland Security to develop a continuity of operations plan that emphasizes telework.

I know firsthand how telework can benefit a workplace. Ann Rust of my district staff currently teleworks four days a week at the George Mason University telework center in Herndon, Virginia. The staff director of this committee, Melissa Wojciak, teleworked after both of her two children were born, giving a 21st century definition to the term “maternity leave.”

The bottom line is: why do Federal employees have to commute to and from their office each day to perform work that often could be done equally well, or even more efficiently, at a more convenient location? Our frustration with the slow pace of implementation is peaking. That's why we'll hear from Congressman Danny Davis today about his proposal to establish a demonstration project to evaluate Federal employees' ability to perform essential and non-essential operations in the event the employees are not able to work at their official duty stations.

More directly, that's why we're seeing language like that added by Mr. Wolf to the CJS appropriations bill, threatening to withhold funding for those agencies under his jurisdiction that underperform. Unfortunately, after all these years during which federal agencies have not followed the law, I fear this is the type of action required to get the wheelbarrow moving. I am therefore prepared to follow Mr. Wolf's lead and work to implement similar language that would apply to all federal agencies. Let the message be clear: we are serious and ready to help OPM and GSA hold agencies' feet to the fire.

We have three panels of witnesses today who will help us better understand where we've been and where we're going. On the first panel, we are very pleased to have the distinguished Director of OPM, Kay Coles James, and the equally distinguished Administrator of GSA, Steven Perry.

Our second panel features Pamela Gardiner, Acting Inspector General for Tax Administration at the Department of the Treasury; Kathleen Wheeler, Deputy Chief Human Capital Officer from the Office of Policy, Management and Budget at the Department of the Interior; and Christopher Mihm, Director of Strategic Issues at the General Accounting Office.

Finally, our third panel is comprised of Dr. James Kane, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Software Productivity Consortium; Steve DuMont, Vice President of the Internet Business Solutions Group at Cisco Systems; Eric Richert, Vice President for iWork Solutions Group at Sun Microsystems; and Carol Goldberg, the former Telework Program Manager for Fairfax County, Virginia.

Thank you all for being here today.