

NTEU 224

The National Treasury Employees Union Chapter 224

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Commissioner Saul,

On October 23, 2019, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued a memorandum to human resource directors providing guidance for reporting requirements under the Telework Enhancement Act. OPM's guidance states, "Telework is an important flexibility that can be used to meet a variety of agency human capital and budgetary objectives. **OPM is committed to supporting the expansion of telework and assisting agencies to meet their goals.**"¹ (Emphasis added.) Within days of OPM's release of the memorandum, SSA cancelled telework for 12,000 operations employees.² SSA's reduction of telework in the operation component contravenes OPM's commitment to expanding telework.

Unlike Operations employees who engage in face-to-face interactions with the public, the vast majority of employees in OHO have little or no contact with the public. Employees who work in case pulling units pull cases for hearing offices virtually, but have no direct contact with the public. Attorneys and paralegals who draft decisions have no direct contact with the public. Computer assistants may need to be available to troubleshoot problems with hearing equipment, but generally, they remote into agency laptops to help resolve technical issues. Regardless, they have little or no direct contact with the public. Hearing customer service representatives (HCSRs) and hearing customer service specialists (HCSSs) have some public contact and may need to be in the office occasionally to perform some duties, but perform the majority of their tasks virtually. There is no justification for completely eliminating or even reducing telework for the majority of OHO employees based on an unsupported or perceived need for public contact.

Let me remind you that OHO employees were vital in helping SSA meet their performance goals in FY19. On October 10, 2019, Deputy Commissioner Gruber and Assistance Deputy

¹ <https://chcoc.gov/content/2019-telework-call-data>

² <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2019/10/ssa-ends-telework-program-for-operations-employees-citing-need-to-focus-on-customer-service/>

Commissioner Garrison-Daniels acknowledged the OHO employees' "amazing" accomplishments. These "amazing" accomplishments included:

- Hearings Pending: 575,421 – *surpassing our goal* of 591,200 and ending the year with over 282,000 less people waiting for a hearing than October 2018
- Total Dispositions: 793,863 – *surpassing our goal* of 778,500
- Average Processing Time: 506 days – not only *exceeding our goal* of 515 days, but providing the people we serve with hearing decisions *89 days faster than FY 2018* (595 days)
- Aged Cases: *exceeding our goal* of processing 95% of our aged cases, by making 98.2%
- Processing nearly 8,500 cases in FY19 that were 1000 days old or older (Emphasis added.)

NTEU OHO employees *exceeded or surpassed* the Agency's goals while teleworking up to four days per week.³ Moreover, almost 1000 NTEU employees worked overtime or credit hours to help SSA reduce the backlog, in large part because they could do so while teleworking.⁴ Despite our hard work and dedication to SSA's mission and goals, our telework is being threatened for no good reason.

Commissioner, during your business career, you are likely aware of the multiple studies that show have heard that happy workers are productive workers. Deputy Commissioner Gruber's list of the "amazing" accomplishments of teleworking OHO employees proves this axiom beyond any reasonable doubt. NTEU OHO employees are productive because telework provides the work-life balance that keeps them happy and productive. In fact, the 1,012 NTEU OHO employees who responded to NTEU's survey confirmed that eliminating or reducing telework would negatively impact their job satisfaction. As well, nearly 400 NTEU OHO employees confirmed that reduction or elimination of telework would make their job cost prohibitive due to time lost commuting, general vehicle wear, gas costs, increased automotive insurance due to increased number of commute days/mileage, parking, before and after school child care, before and after work adult dependent care, and mass transit costs.⁵

NTEU believes employee morale and "amazing" employee productivity, as well as the work-life balance issues noted above, are compelling reasons for keeping telework status quo. I would like to have an in-person meeting to share and discuss the survey results in more detail. Additionally, NTEU has also collected dozens of statements from OHO employees across the country attesting to the importance of telework to their productivity and morale for the purpose of sharing those statements with you. I look forward to hearing from you and/or your staff to schedule this meeting.

³ NTEU recently surveyed our bargaining unit employees (BUEs) about telework. 1,063 responded. Of those responding, 567 indicated that they telework three days a week, while 361 reported teleworking four days a week.

⁴ 915 of the 1050 survey respondents indicated that they worked overtime and credit hours to help SSA reduce the writing backlog because they would do so while teleworking. 713 indicated that they would not work overtime or credit hours if the Agency eliminates or reduces telework.

⁵ *Id.*

In closing, I wanted to share that SSA thoughtfully reminds employees that each claimant has a face. NTEU respectfully suggests SSA apply this gracious tenet to its dedicated employees when deciding the future of telework.

Respectfully,

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