

Dear California Association of Professional Scientists:

2020 was, undoubtedly, a year for the history books. As a society and as state workers, we have faced many expected and unexpected challenges, including the sudden transition of a majority of the state workforce from an in-person environment to teleworking from home. However, the last year has proven that, as a whole, state workers are more than capable of maintaining, if not improving, their workload and quality of work while teleworking. Thus, as COVID-19 vaccines are distributed and the world begins the slow but steady return to some sense of normalcy, we, the rank-and-file workers of the State of California, wanted to offer some thoughts on the benefits of a flexible telework policy. It is our hope that the California Association of Professional Scientists (CAPS) can use the content of this document to help negotiate for a stronger and more flexible telework policy with the California Department of Human Resources (CalHR) in the near future.

Before delving into this document's content, it cannot be overstated how many state workers are extremely appreciative that so many sections, divisions, and departments were so proactive in transitioning to a predominantly telework-based model when the pandemic was in its early stages. This prompt decision allowed many to continue to safely carry out work for the betterment of California and its citizens. It also goes without saying that we recognize that many individuals, including those representing both the public and private sectors, have had to continue their essential job duties and functions without the availability or possibility of telework. We owe these individuals a great deal for the hardship and sacrifice they have had to endure.

As we enter a new stage of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we are incredibly glad to hear that management and CalHR are considering maintaining some degree of telework options for the indefinite future. However, it is also our understanding that a structured telework policy is under consideration. In the context of this letter, we define a structured telework policy as one that would allow limited telework. It also includes proposals to require all employees to be physically present in the office on the same, recurring days of the work-week.

As opposed to a structured telework policy, a flexible telework policy refers to one that allows individuals more choice in establishing their own,

preferred telework schedule. It is important to note that a flexible telework policy would not prevent individuals from working full-time or a majority of the time in the office based on preference.

We, as employees of the State of California, contend that a flexible telework policy offers many benefits that should be considered during negotiations. A short summary of these benefits include the following:

- Improved mental health and productivity
- Improved physical health and safety
- Reduced absenteeism
- Financial and economic benefits, particularly for early-career individuals
- Environmental benefits

We believe that CAPS should advocate for a flexible telework policy to be adopted by CalHR. At the very least, it would be beneficial and reasonable to allow a flexible telework option initially; if it does not work as intended, then a structured telework model could be opted for at a later time. It is our understanding that telework is ultimately a privilege, but its many beneficial impacts should be carefully considered as negotiations with CalHR take place.

The aforementioned benefits are described in more detail in the following sections of this letter.

I. Mental Health

A flexible telework policy offers an array of benefits, with one being the significantly enhanced mental health and well-being of many state employees. One reason for such a stark difference is the relationship between working environment and mental state. Many departments and agencies employ a conventional office set-up with rows of similar or identical cubicles or work stations. While this type of environment is functional, even preferred, for some, it adversely affects the mental health of others. For instance, some floors in the California Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) headquarters were recently renovated to accommodate more state workers. It should be noted that square footage itself has not increased, and yet many of these

floors have been rearranged to accommodate as many workers as possible.

The result is a series of micro-cubes and narrow corridors that are confined, lack sunlight, and are isolating. While preferences for a productive work environment vary, this type of layout is not conducive to a happy or healthy workplace for many. For instance, a lack of sunlight has a substantial link to decreased mental and physical health.^{1,2} Prior to teleworking, it was not uncommon for many employees to share their experiences with one another of enhanced feelings of depression and mental malaise due to this type of environment. Conversely, many state workers have expressed significantly enhanced emotional and mental health as a result of teleworking in comfortable conditions with access to sunlight and space.

One potential argument against telework is that in-person work allows for social connection, which is undoubtedly important. However, the nature of many jobs and working environments does not permit frequent or enhanced social bonding. For instance, the micro-cubes referenced above allowed noise to travel readily, such that casual conversations were rarely held on the office floor so as not to distract others. Further, many jobs and associated duties are relatively independent.

A flexible telework policy would not inhibit social bonding between workers, as many options exist to facilitate connections. Colleagues can, for instance, still connect at social functions outside of work. A flexible telework policy also would not disallow those with a preference to work in office to socialize with others. Almost certainly, some portion of the workforce will prefer to work in the office at least part of the time. Other state workers with a preference for telework may also choose or be required to visit the office on occasion to carry-out work-related activities, thereby facilitating connections. For many, telework has even facilitated increased frequency of socializing via video conferencing platforms such as Teams, given such platforms'

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2728098/>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2290997/>

convenience, ease-of-use, and lack of concern for noise level that may be distracting to others in an office setting.

There are almost certainly employees who enjoy working in an office setting and reap mental health benefits from this type of environment. Thus, to maximize the overall mental wellbeing of the state workforce, employees should be given a choice and the flexibility to work in an environment which best suits their needs and enhances their productivity the most. Requiring all employees to return to the office based on a structured telework schedule will negatively impact mental health for a large portion of the workforce, which counteracts the State of California's commitment to "promoting employee wellbeing and health."³

It should also be noted that many of the individuals involved in making decisions about the future of telework and state service likely have access to private offices, many of which have access to sunlight. We strongly encourage such individuals to consider the perspective of rank-and-file employees who, prior to the pandemic, would spend 1,920 hours every year working in such an environment as the one referenced above. This amounts to 80 full, 24-hour days spent in poor working conditions that have a negative impact on the mental health of many.

II. Productivity

Enhanced productivity is a clear benefit of a flexible telework policy for state workers, with perhaps the most significant consequence being enhanced quality and frequency of deliverables and projects. This trend may be attributable to a number of factors, with one of them being fewer distractions that are regularly presented in a conventional office setting. Mental health and productivity also have a strong and well-known link.^{4,5}

³ <https://www.calhr.ca.gov/employees/Pages/eap.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/what-employers-need-know-about-mental-health-workplace#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20supplied%20by,reduced%20productivity%2C%20and%20medical%20costs.>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/mental-health-in-the-workplace>

Because many employees have had improved mental health states while teleworking, productivity has increased in many agencies and divisions. Instituting a structured telework policy is sure to deleteriously impact mental health of a substantial portion of the public sector workforce, thereby reducing productivity and decreasing the rate of work being completed for the well-being and betterment of the citizens of the California. The simplest remedy to this dilemma is to maximize individual choice in preferred work environment. By instituting a flexible telework policy, individual preferences could dictate choice of work environment to bolster productivity and thus benefit the citizens of the state.

III. Physical Health

This flexible telework benefit is especially pertinent given current global circumstances. Though vaccine rates for COVID-19 are currently increasing, the pandemic is far from over, if there is indeed an endpoint. Many scientists fear that COVID-19 will become endemic, similar to the influenza virus, as the virus mutates and new strains and variants emerge.⁶

The current vaccines on the market, such as Pfizer-BioNTech, have thus far demonstrated a reasonable degree of protection against many of the currently existing strains.⁷ However, evolutionary pressures may drive the development of vaccine-resistant strains. Further, over a quarter of Americans have indicated they do not intend to be vaccinated against COVID-19.⁸ Thus, it would be hazardous to have employees return to cramped and confined office spaces that readily facilitate the spread of illness. While many offices have instituted safeguards, such as hand sanitizing stations, it would be unreasonable to expect these precautions, or rely on them, to completely prevent the spread of current or future COVID-19 strains.

Many offices host hundreds of workers that work in close quarters, and it should be expected that not all workers will wear masks or use other

⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00396-2>

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/info-by-product/pfizer/pfizer-bioNTech-fags.html#safety-efficacy>

⁸ http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NPR_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_202103291133.pdf#page=3

safeguards during the entirety of their time spent in the office. Some state buildings, such as the California EPA headquarters, host thousands of employees, all working alongside one another in tight spaces for many hours every day. The safest precaution to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to continue to allow flexible telework, particularly when many state employees can execute their jobs in a home environment.

The benefits of a flexible telework policy extend beyond COVID-19. Many state workers have expressed a reduction in frequency of illness since teleworking, which makes sense given the close-contact quarters of many state buildings. Poor mental health and other physical conditions, such as lack of sunlight, also likely contributed to increased rates of illness prior to the pandemic.^{9,10,11}

While an argument can be made that state workers are given a generous leave policy, for which many of us are very grateful, it can be countered that many employees do not always use such leave when sick, instead preferring to work in the office and therefore spreading illness. Ultimately, leave is finite, and many employees would prefer to continue to work with a minor cold rather than drawing from their limited pool of sick or annual leave hours. A flexible telework policy would allow people to continue to work from home while ill, where they may feel more comfortable and would not be exposing their coworkers to pathogens.

Physical health also has a clear impact on productivity. When employees do take leave as a result of illness, this has an impact on output and an associated economic impact, as referenced below.

Finally, it should again be emphasized that many of the individuals making decisions pertaining to the future of telework and state service likely have their own office or working quarters, which allows them a greater degree of physical separation from rank-and-file employees who work in close quarters with one another. We encourage these

⁹ <https://gumc.georgetown.edu/news-release/sunlight-offers-surprise-benefit-it-energizes-infection-fighting-t-cells/>

¹⁰ <https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/full/10.1289/ehp.116-a160>

¹¹ http://www.uppitysciencechick.com/kiacolts-glaser_dep_immune_function.pdf

decision-makers to consider the perspectives of a majority of the state workforce when deliberating the future of telework.

IV. Environmental Protection

Teleworking has allowed many employees to reduce their environmental footprint. This is particularly relevant given the climate emergency. Recent research has shown that the pandemic reduced emissions of potent greenhouse gases (GHG) like carbon dioxide, in large part due to a reduction in commuting.^{12,13,14} This fact is significant, especially because humanity is racing against the clock to mitigate the impacts of this impending crisis.

While it can be argued that many state offices are proximal to at least one form of public transportation, many employees choose to drive to work, even with subsidies for public transportation and challenging parking conditions in many locations.^{15,16,17} The reasons for the dominance of driving as a mode of commuting are many, but urban sprawl and underinvestment in public transportation arguably play a substantial role. In Sacramento, host to many state agencies, urban sprawl abounds and continues with little end in sight. Much of the region's light rail and bus infrastructure only reach limited areas of the surrounding suburbs. Thus, many state workers have little choice but to drive to work.

The need for a flexible telework policy that encourages decreased GHG emissions is also engrained in regulatory and policy developments at the state level.^{18,19} For instance, the State Water Resources Control Board adopted a resolution in 2017, Resolution No. 2017-0012, that states the "response to climate change must be comprehensive and

¹² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00090-3#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20contributed%20the,the%20end%20of%20the%20year.>

¹³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-020-0797-x>

¹⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1309104217302003>

¹⁵ <https://www.livestories.com/statistics/california/transportation-commute>

¹⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/10/03/americans-commuting-choices-5-major-takeaways-from-2016-census-data/>

¹⁷ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/acs/acs-32.pdf>.

¹⁸ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB32&showamends=false

¹⁹ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB32

integrated into all Water Boards' actions."²⁰ Government Code §14200.1 also recognizes the environmental benefits of telework, stating that telecommuting "can be an important means to reduce air pollution and traffic congestion and to reduce the high cost of highway commuting."²¹

A flexible telework policy is applicable in this case by reducing the need for commuting, which, as demonstrated above, is responsible for significant emissions of GHGs and other air pollutants that contribute to the climate emergency and harm human health. As a part of California's environmental agencies, such as California EPA, and as scientists, we should be serving as an example to the rest of California and the country by instituting and enabling environmentally-friendly practices, such as flexible telework.

Aside from lessened emissions of GHGs, a flexible telework policy has other environmental benefits, including reduced generation of waste. For instance, trash cans and recycling bins at state offices are often full of single-use plastics. Some of this waste will be sent to landfills, while much of it will inevitably end up in the world's oceans due to a lack of recycling processing infrastructure in the United States and a tendency to export this waste abroad.²² Though there have been efforts to reduce the use of single-use plastics, many employees still regularly used them at work simply because of their cheap price, convenience, and widespread availability. Working from home has allowed many state workers to instead use reusable materials, such as glass, for daily activities like eating and drinking.

Allowing flexible telework is especially important on this front given the global production of plastics is expected to double by 2030.^{23,24} It would seem contradictory for state agencies, such as the California EPA, to promote sustainable practices at the state-wide level while simultaneously discouraging environmentally-friendlier practices like flexible telework.

²⁰ https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/board_decisions/adopted_orders/resolutions/2017/rs2017_0012.pdf

²¹ https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=3.&title=2.&part=5.&chapter=3.&article=&op_statutes=1990&op_chapter=1389&op_section=1

²² <https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/blog/2019/3/6/157000-shipping-containers-of-us-plastic-waste-exported-to-countries-with-poor-waste-management-in-2018>

²³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-018-0212-7>

²⁴ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_New_Plastics_Economy.pdf

One argument against telework as it pertains to the environment is that telework may promote increased energy usage by decentralizing where employees are working. However, California is rapidly transitioning to an energy stack supported by renewables and carbon-neutral forms of energy, as required and promoted by recent state-level policy initiatives.^{25,26} Thus, increased energy usage does not necessarily equate to increased emissions from the energy sector. Additionally, it is still unclear whether this assertion that increased telework amounts to increased energy usage is actually true, given this is the first mass-telework experiment in the history of the United States. However, it is undeniable that the beneficial impacts on GHGs and pollutant emissions, as well as reduced waste, clearly bolster the case for a flexible telework policy.

V. Temporal Benefits

This benefit of a flexible telework policy relates closely to the aforementioned mental health component. A back-of-the-napkin calculation to examine the relation between flexible telework and time saved from lack of commuting shows significant benefits. Assuming the average commute is 30 minutes one-way, then state employees save 10 full days a year by teleworking, or 240 hours. It is worth noting that 30 minutes is a conservative assumption for many, as commute times are exorbitant in many of California's population centers, where most major state offices are located, due to urban sprawl.

Further, commute times are increasing for many employees due to housing prices and again, urban sprawl – as housing prices increase, many people choose to live further from urban cores, where housing prices may be more affordable.²⁷ This trend of increased commute times has a wide array of impacts, including deleterious impacts on health and stress.^{28,29} Employees that are stressed are generally less

²⁵ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB350

²⁶ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB100

²⁷ <https://www.sacbee.com/news/databases/article238667598.html>

²⁸ <https://www.ajpmonline.org/pb/assets/raw/Health%20Advance/journals/amepre/AJPM%20Jun2012%20Hoehner%20Commuting%20Distance%20FINAL%202020.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3360418/>

productive. Further, a less healthy workforce has economic costs due to increased sick leave and reduced rates of productivity.³⁰

Flexible telework also offers enhanced family and work-life balance for many state employees by reducing commuting and providing enhanced control over schedules. This increased flexibility, in turn, results in significantly reduced absenteeism.³¹ Flexible telework is particularly beneficial in reducing absenteeism for state employees who are caring for high-needs individuals in their home, such as infants or elderly parents. In these cases, employees would likely need to use significantly more leave credits if required to work in the office, resulting in delays in completing their work as well as additional administrative work for managers, who would need to temporarily assign employees' projects to other staff. If a flexible telework policy is adopted, individuals would be able to manage their family needs while getting their work done at the same time, ensuring continuity of service to the public.

VI. Safety

Reducing the need for employees to commute also reduces the chance of injury or death from, for instance, motor vehicle accidents. For example, one study found that if the 50 million Americans with compatible jobs started teleworking half-time, almost 95,000 annual traffic-related injuries and deaths would be prevented.³² This benefit of a flexible telework policy also translates to other areas of safety as well. For instance, wildfires, which are increasing in frequency and magnitude due to the climate emergency, pose direct and indirect threats to health. For example, wildfires release large quantities of particulate matter and pollutants that negatively impact human health.³³ A flexible telework policy would allow state employees to relocate to safer, less exposed areas during active fires, thereby reducing exposure to wildfire smoke and other airborne emissions.

³⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/model/evaluation/productivity.html>

³¹ <https://www.trpc.org/Archive/ViewFile/Item/171>

³² <https://www.lgc.org/newsletter/benefits-of-maintaining-telework-policies/#:~:text=Telework%20can%20boost%20productivity%2C%20improve%20performance%20and%20reduce%20absenteeism.&text=Global%20Workplace%20Analytics%20estimates%20that,absenteeism%2C%20turnover%20and%20increased%20productivity>

³³ <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/wildfires-climate-change>

VII. Financial and Economic Benefits

As a whole, many state employees have been able to save more while teleworking, which gives employees greater ability to save for houses, pay off student debt, and bolster local businesses near their homes.³⁴ Additionally, new employees often face increased financial burdens when entering state service, particularly if joining early in their careers. State service offers many benefits, but pay poses a challenge to many state employees, particularly if they live in a high cost-of-living (COL) region such as Sacramento. Coincidentally, many state offices are located in high COL urban centers. For instance, Sacramento had the highest increases in rent in the nation over the last year.³⁵ A flexible telework policy would encourage employee retention and monetary well-being by allowing early-career employees to live in more affordable areas, rather than encouraging them to seek higher-paying jobs elsewhere.

This benefit also has a tie-in with the issue of equity and opportunity that many agencies have emphasized in recent years. Those with less savings and less prior opportunity may face bigger hurdles when joining state service if a structured telework policy is ultimately favored, particularly for those from out-of-region, because they would be required to find housing in areas adjacent to state offices. Such housing is often out-of-reach for many given the high COL in and near California's urban centers.

Financial savings also extend to state organizations.³⁶ A flexible telework policy has already allowed some state agencies and departments to downsize their real-estate portfolio, saving millions in rent and other maintenance costs. This saves tax-payer money, and also allows state agencies to re-invest savings in other critical needs that directly benefit the citizens of California.

Economically, some may argue that telework harms businesses in urban centers proximal to state offices, as state workers are no longer commuting in droves to said areas. However, it should not be, and is

³⁴ <https://telework.govops.ca.gov/track-telework/>

³⁵ <https://www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/news/2021/01/21/sacramento-tops-the-nation-for-rent-increases.html>

³⁶ <https://telework.govops.ca.gov/track-telework/>

not, the duty of state workers to prop-up urban cores due to poor urban planning and lack of investment in affordable housing. This is the responsibility of local and state government bodies to increase density in urban centers that actually supports local businesses by, for example, promoting affordable housing near these areas. Only in this scenario can business in such areas as downtown Sacramento truly be economically sustainable.

VIII. Employee Retention and Hiring

It goes without saying that telework is the way of the future, with many private, non-profit, and governmental entities already cementing permanent and/or flexible telework practices.^{37,38,39} Because of the many benefits described above, organizations that offer flexible telework options are more likely to retain employees and attract new talent. Those that do not adapt may lose valuable talent and individuals to organizations that offer more flexible telework options. Several state agencies, such as some sections and divisions in the California Department of Technology, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and California Department of Transportation, have already announced or indicated permanent telework options or highly flexible telework options – these are the agencies likely to attract and retain the most number of talented individuals.

This benefit is also, again, pertinent given the high COL of living in urban centers near state offices, as prospective candidates may be more interested in working for state agencies if they do not have to devote as much time and resources to finding affordable housing and commute long distances to and from work.

IX. Innovative Culture

Please see content below.

³⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/06/telecommuting-will-likely-continue-long-after-the-pandemic/>

³⁸ <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/8156-future-of-remote-work.html>

³⁹ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19#>

In prior telework discussions within some divisions and agencies, one reason that was brought up to support the structured telework model was to facilitate efficient and face-to-face meetings. However, a flexible, individual-choice telework model can work equally as well, and may in fact facilitate more efficient meetings in the future. For one, many private and governmental entities have been allowing flexible telework options for years with little to no downsides. Additionally, technology that has now been widely deployed (e.g. Microsoft Teams) supports this flexible telework option, in which some people may choose to spend more time in the office, but those who prefer to spend more time at home may do so. We have the added benefit of having already used this technology for over a year and we have proved that it works, so there should be fewer barriers to implementing it.

Further, it should be acknowledged that there are likely individuals who wish to return to the office full-time or work a majority of the time in the office, and that there are potential concerns over office space and usage. However, a flexible telework system is still easily workable with this in mind. For instance, if office space does pose an issue, then those who wish to stay in the office a majority of the time could have their own cubicles that would not be shared, while a hotel or reservation system might be employable for those who wish to telework a majority of the time. This solution has long been employed by private entities, such as RedHat. Further, Microsoft Teams and other technology readily permit easy meetings and facilitation between those in the office and teleworking individuals.

While many individuals would personally enjoy greater flexibility in telework options, all of the above points to the collective benefits provided to the state and agencies as a whole. This topic also fits into one of the lower-ranking items on the employee engagement survey hosted by agencies like the State Water Resources Control Board on behalf of CalHR - fostering a culture of innovation. As state workers, we have proven that we are more than capable of maintaining quality work and productivity while teleworking. Further, it is our understanding that recent surveys given both by individual agencies and CalHR have shown that a majority of the state workforce desires continued flexible telework, and Governor Newsom has also signaled his support. The legislature has also enshrined its support for flexible telework in law by adopting Government Code §14200.1, which

states that it “is the intent of the Legislature to encourage state agencies to adopt policies that encourage telecommuting by state employees.”⁴⁰

Instituting a structured telework policy would resemble telework policies that existed prior to the pandemic and, frankly, would negate many of the benefits of a flexible telework policy referenced above. Thus, where possible, employees should have a choice in *how* they want to work, particularly when every individual has varying preferences in the type of work environment in which they best perform. At the very least, it would be beneficial to allow the flexible telework option initially. Allowing flexibility reflects a willingness to try new things and offer employees choice in their work environment. Additionally, agencies that offer greater individual choice are more likely to attract and keep talent in the long-run.

As employees of the State of California, we again wish to express our genuine appreciation for those who were willing to institute telework at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, as we transition to a new era of increased, flexible telework, we encourage all entities involved in deliberating the future of telework to encourage flexible telework. Flexible telework policies will result in happier, healthier, and more productive state employees that are better able to serve the people of California.

Sincerely,
Scientists of the State of California

⁴⁰https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=GOV&division=3.&title=2.&part=5.&chapter=3.&article=&op_statutes=1990&op_chapter=1389&op_section=1