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Lessons from States that Embraced Telework Before the Coronavirus



A man is confronted with a closed sign at the Douglas County Treasurer's office in Omaha, Neb. on March 18, 2020. In-person services were suspended due to the coronavirus outbreak. AP PHOTO

By [Katherine Barrett & Richard Greene](#) | APRIL 1, 2020

COMMENTARY | How to avoid certain pitfalls now that many—or most—employees must now work from home.

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In 2019, according to the Center for State and Local Government Excellence, only about 19% of local governments had any kind of telework arrangements in place and fewer than half the states did. Even in states that had some telework capacity, only a handful provided that option for more than a modest portion of employees.

Over the last few weeks, however, as the world has turned upside-down in the wake of a monster pandemic, governments from coast to coast are setting up hastily erected teleworking systems to keep operations running while protecting workers' health.

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On March 16, at a special conference call that focused on telework and leave for members of the National Association of State Personnel Executives, some 30 states participated. “Basically, everyone is doing telework now,” says Leslie Scott, executive director of NASPE. “My sense is that it changed from ‘telework if you want’ to ‘you will telework.’”

This is a far easier effort in states than in municipalities. Employees can work from home in many of the functions that states provide, like overseeing contracts or working with counties on human services. For localities, however, more labor is hands on, like firefighting or sanitation. It’s simply impossible to put out fires, or remove trash, from the comfort of a home office.

Of course, even when jobs lend themselves to remote work, it’s not simply a matter of turning on a switch that mandates employees to work at home. There are a range of challenges now facing cities and states, from just understanding which employees have sufficient broadband connections to successfully work from home to how supervisors can successfully manage from afar.

But there are lessons that can be gleaned from the experiences of states that began implementing more widespread teleworking policies long before the coronavirus pandemic.

One of the most straightforward issues is just what kind of technological capacity employees have at their newly converted home offices. Pam Goins, the new director of the National Association of State Chief Administrators, says that at a mid-March phone meeting of about sixty people, “several states mentioned that they had been doing surveys to find out the extent of technological connectedness in a home environment.”

complications that crop up when workers use their own computers and phones. Once they start using them for public sector work, their contents must generally be available to overseers in the state or locality.

Washington state, which has been all-systems go on telework since the pandemic hit, had a great deal of prior experience with this issue. By 2019, the state had deemed 37% of its 65,000-employee workforce telework eligible, with approximately 22% of those eligible to telework engaged in regular or frequent teleworking. And it was aware of the privacy issues involved, as well as the need to comply with state public records laws. “If I’m using my personal phone or personal computer for work, the data on the phone or computer may be subject to public disclosure,” says Scott Nicholson, deputy assistant director of state human resources in Washington.

There are, unfortunately, no easy solutions here. Generally, people shouldn’t use their home equipment, says Trish Holliday, founding partner of consulting firm Holiday/Kenning and the former chief learning officer



for the state of Tennessee. “That’s got to be the conversation. There’s no easy answer, especially in crisis mode.”

One possible solution? States are trying to send out publicly owned laptops to employees in their homes. Nebraska, which has gained expertise in telework as a result of its use in natural disasters like tornadoes and floods has, for about the last five years, been in the business of making certain that laptops were available to the men and women who had to deal with situations that required technology, but where none was easily available. “We have a very mature plan,” says Jason Jackson, director of the department of administrative services there.

Two of the states with good lessons for other entities that are just beginning to use telework are Utah and Tennessee. Both states have emphasized telework for years and learned some lessons that are critical to states and localities now embarking on that path.

Rebecca Hunter, former commissioner of the department of human resources in Tennessee, emphasizes the importance of regular communications among the people who work for agencies. “We started with a class for supervisors and employees and saw how difficult it is for supervisors to oversee employees remotely,” she says. The state successfully developed an online training program for supervisors, which helped enormously.

Communication and team building were two points emphasized in these training sessions to help managers and supervisors know how they could ensure that the work was done and that employees stayed engaged and connected.

Once again, Tennessee wasn’t working its way through a public health tornado, so it had time for this effort. But it’s only wise for other states to begin to emulate that work. (And, fortuitously, developing an online training program is a job that can be done at home.)

When Utah began to encourage widespread telework in the fall of 2018, it recognized that “you have to figure out how to measure the work done by the people working at home,” says Jeff Mottishaw, senior consultant in the Utah Governor’s Office of Management and Budget. This isn’t easy and relies on “managing performance instead of presence.” This will take some time to develop in governments that are starting telework from a standing stop.

This, of course, is a critical ingredient for men and women who suddenly find themselves in both their work roles and as caretakers for young children who used to be in school. Says Washington’s Nicholson, “We’ve had to drastically change,” putting aside the usual focus of employers to count workers’ hours and days. “People who have kids need to take an hour off to put someone down for a nap or to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” 🍪

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