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Whether Working from the Office or Remotely, ELEC Remains Committed to Providing Excellent Public Service

JEFF BRINDLE | August 09, 2022, 11:08 am | in [Edward Edwards](#)

In April 2021, anticipating that state government would establish a permanent remote work program, management at the Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) prepared a telework plan.

Entitled N.J. Election Law Enforcement Commission: Teleworking Recommendations 2021, the plan is available on the [Commission's website](#).

“This is a blueprint for how New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC) might move forward in the event telework becomes a permanent part of state government,” states the introduction.

“Management’s preference is to have employees return to the office and provide in-person services to a deserving public. However, recognizing that a full return of employees to the office may not occur, given how the nature of work is changing, facilitated by the pandemic, this report highlights issues, needs and costs associated with the implementation of a hybrid-telework plan.”

While state workers did temporarily return fulltime to the office on January 18, 2022, the New Jersey Civil Service Commission April 6, 2022 approved a pilot telework program for a trial period of one year starting July 1.

“Telework will accelerate the modernization of New Jersey’s State government to reflect the evolving workplace landscape,” said Governor Phil Murphy in announcing the program. “Our union partners have been integral to the creation of this telework pilot program. Through collaboration, we can continue to build a workforce equipped to handle the demands of the modern workplace.”

The pilot program requires employees to be in the office at least three days per week with two days working remotely. It required public employees to submit requests to participate in the program, providing supervisors with the option to deny a request for operational purposes.

The ELEC telework plan identified services able to be performed remotely without any loss of service to the public while highlighting functions best provided in person.

Cyber-security issues as well as the cost of new technology, including a modernized phone system, were factored into the plan.

ELEC has equipped participating workers with laptop computers, monitors and other gear to enable them to do the state's business securely and efficiently from their homes.

The new phone system is soon to be installed, and in the process, designed to provide advanced ability to patch would-be-callers directly through to appropriate staff in the event a permanent remote work program becomes a reality.

Employee schedules have been readjusted once again, some software has been modified and other steps outlined in the ELEC plan have and will be taken to maintain excellent service even with some workers operating from their homes.

Just as during the height of the pandemic, ELEC has functioned well.

For its part, the Commission adapted quickly and instituted an emergency plan that not only allowed it to operate remotely but also to fulfill its mission of disclosure. Right from the start, the public was able to speak with a live person, thereby eliminating the need to leave a voice mail requesting a response.

Candidates, committees, lobbyists, and public contractors continued to file reports electronically and the public continued to receive timely, online access to reports. Further, virtual training sessions replaced in-person training, enabling candidates and treasurers to avail themselves of information provided by professional compliance staff.

Moreover, analytical press releases, white papers and columns continued to be published as receptionists and compliance staff responded in-person to phone call inquiries while at the same time legal and investigative functions continued to be maintained.

During this time, the Commissioners themselves held virtual meetings, allowing the public access to Commission proceedings. This remains a continuing option when necessary.

From the outset of the pandemic and the initial implementation of an emergency telework program, it has become clear that State government will ultimately follow the private sector toward a permanent telework program.

As for the pilot program, a total of 38 out of 59 Commission employees opted to take part while others decided to remain in an alternative week program (AWP) and forgo the pilot telework option at least for now. Further guidance and options continue to be provided and available as experience with the program develops.

Though the current program is a pilot program of a year's duration, signs point to a telework schedule for public employees that will become a permanent feature of how government operates in the future.

There are many good reasons for State government to follow in the footsteps of the private sector and institute a permanent telework program, including the reduction of traffic congestion and pollution; the impact of inflation on gasoline and prices in general; increased time working rather than commuting; increased family time; and the preference of employees, especially the young, for greater flexibility.

On the other hand, government would seem to require greater personal interaction than the private sector to be effective as well as accountable. Though times are changing, it is difficult to think of government operating on an entirely impersonal, virtual model; particularly with respect to meetings that offer the opportunity to members of the public to express their point of view.

Further, as government readies itself for the new age of teleworking, it is hoped that enough employees will be in the office to help sustain cities like Trenton.

It has been a difficult time for the Capital City. The prospect for public employees to return to the office three days per week is at least promising for a business community that has been negatively impacted by the scourge of the ongoing pandemic.

As a personal aside, perhaps it is time for the city, in conjunction with the State, to capitalize more on Trenton's incredible Revolutionary War history as a magnet to draw more tourists and dollars into the city as part of a revitalization strategy.

While my personal preference continues to be that government is better suited to operate in person, it nevertheless is important as a manager to read the tea leaves in terms of the future and plan for the changes to come.

Preparing for the telework model is realistic and pragmatic.

Thanks to ELEC Commissioners, management and staff, the Commission is prepared to embrace inevitable change while not sacrificing old fashioned service or accountability.

Whether or not teleworking by State government takes place on a permanent basis, the planned and incremental approach taken by the Administration has positioned State government well for this possibility in the future.

The government's initial teleworking phase has been done well during the last two years of the pandemic. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that despite the difference between government and the private sector, teleworking, if it becomes a feature of State government, cannot be implemented effectively.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.

