

# Future of Work Initiative

Informational report on changes to the Multnomah County workplace brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic








Multnomah County Auditor's Office  
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In 2023, our office began an audit of Multnomah County's Future of Work initiative. We ended the audit early due to gaps and some ambiguity in telework schedule data, the county's limited ability to improve use of space given the conditions in the local real estate market, and conflicting and shifting best practices in telework. This report updates the public on what we learned during the audit's planning phase.

## Table of Contents

	The county has gone from treating telework as an exception to establishing a countywide framework for ongoing telework	3
	Telework has brought benefits to the workforce	5
	Staff disagree about when and whether they should be required to work in-person	6
	Some managers are experiencing challenges with supervising employees in a telework environment	7
	Client feedback can provide useful information on preferences for receiving county services	9



Picture of vacant office space in a county building.

## **The county has gone from treating telework as an exception, to establishing a countywide framework for ongoing telework**

In response to the pandemic, the county launched a telework pilot to establish new policies and tools

The county adopted broad-based telework in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the health emergency requiring all but essential workers to work from home. Prior to the pandemic, the county allowed very few employees to telework and considered telework an exception. When all employees who could work from home were required to work remotely due to public health guidelines, it proved that more widespread telework could be successful.

In 2021, the county began building the framework for ongoing telework as part of the Future of Work initiative, the collection of projects that supported changes to the county's workplace since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To support ongoing telework, the county developed an assessment tool to determine every position's eligibility for telework and an agreement for managers and their employees to decide an individual's telework schedule. Central Human Resources (HR) developed these tools and processes and rolled them out to county departments.

The county also finalized six guiding principles for the Future of Work:

- Prioritize community needs
- Support hybrid and remote work whenever it makes sense
- The Future of Work is iterative
- Recognize not all work can be done remotely
- Remote workers will need to work onsite occasionally
- Maintain connection and build a culture of safety, trust, and belonging

From October 2021 to April 2022, the county conducted a telework pilot to implement the new telework agreements. Following the pilot program, Central HR took on a consulting role, while department HR units were responsible for implementation and addressing ongoing and emerging issues.

### Telework policies and the number of employees who telework have mostly stayed the same, since the pilot

Since the end of the pilot, the number of county employees who regularly telework has remained relatively steady. Over half of county employees do not have a telework agreement in place, meaning that county management has deemed their positions unsuitable to telework, or the employees only telework on an ad hoc basis. About a quarter of employees have an agreement for routine telework, and the remaining fifth have an agreement for hybrid telework.

#### The number of employees who telework did not change significantly in the two years after the pilot

	Nov 2021	Oct 2022	Nov 2023
Routine	22%	26%	25%
Hybrid	22%	21%	17%
No Telework Agreement	56%	52%	57%

Source: Data provided by Central HR

Once the pilot ended in November 2021, the telework policy has remained the same, and Central HR does not currently have dedicated staff to evaluate and monitor telework on an ongoing basis. Central HR told us that in Spring 2024, they began a three-year review of telework to assess the telework policy and its implementation. As part of the review, Central HR is gathering data from the biannual countywide employee survey and feedback from department leaders and HR managers.

## Telework has brought benefits to the workforce

County employees, managers, and leaders have identified numerous benefits of telework. Benefits include higher job satisfaction and productivity, advantages for employee recruitment and retention, and reduced stress, particularly for employees of color and those with disabilities.

In the last two countywide employee surveys, conducted in 2021 and 2023, analysis by the county's Evaluation and Research Unit showed that employees who telework reported higher job satisfaction and lower stress than employees who worked on-site.

**“Employees said that the opportunity to work remotely increased their work-life balance [...]. Many employees expressed wanting the option to telework or to maintain the opportunity to telework.”**

2023 Countywide Employee Survey

Telework is also an important tool for employee recruitment and retention. Central and department HR staff told us that nationwide data as well as the county's recruitment and retention outcomes show that current and potential employees value the opportunity to work remotely.

According to leadership in Central HR, department leaders are reporting higher productivity, with fewer interruptions and reduced commute time, and benefits for employees of color and employees with disabilities. A survey of employees with disabilities, conducted by an employee resource group, showed that employees report higher productivity, less stress, and greater flexibility to manage their disabilities when they are able to telework.



## **Staff disagree about when and whether they should be required to work in-person**

In our interviews, the survey of employees with disabilities, and the countywide employee survey, there were conflicting perspectives about when and whether employees who work from home should be required to work onsite. For example, opinions differ on whether team collaboration and cohesion are a legitimate reason for requiring employees to work in person.

The guiding principles of the Future of Work initiative state that remote workers will need to work on-site occasionally. Leadership in Central HR also told us that team-building is a business need and can be a reason to require employees to work a hybrid schedule. One department, the Department of Community Services, is in the process of bringing all employees back in person at least once a week.

Some employees expressed in surveys that building relationships and collaborating with coworkers while working remotely is challenging, and they value having opportunities to interact face-to-face with colleagues.

However, some union stewards and other employees felt team-building and collaboration activities were not legitimate reasons to require employees to work in-person. Several division directors that we interviewed reported receiving pushback from employees on being required to attend in-person all staff meetings.

## **Some managers are experiencing challenges with supervising employees in a telework environment**

### Union stewards report that managers sometimes struggle to manage performance for teleworking employees

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management telework guidelines emphasize that there should be no difference in how teleworking and non-teleworking staff are treated in terms of performance management.

However, we heard that performance management for teleworking staff may be inconsistent. Several union stewards mentioned hearing from employees who felt their managers were struggling to address performance issues and supervise teleworking employees effectively. According to stewards that we interviewed, some employees have been asked to work onsite to address performance issues unrelated to teleworking, or had their telework agreements rescinded due to unrelated performance issues.

Union stewards also said these decisions are not always documented well or explained to the employee. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management guidelines state that managers need to document and demonstrate the reasons for terminating a telework agreement.

### HR staff report that more consistent training could help managers

HR staff in several departments told us that managers were experiencing challenges with managing hybrid and remote teams, and felt that more training and centralized resources were needed.

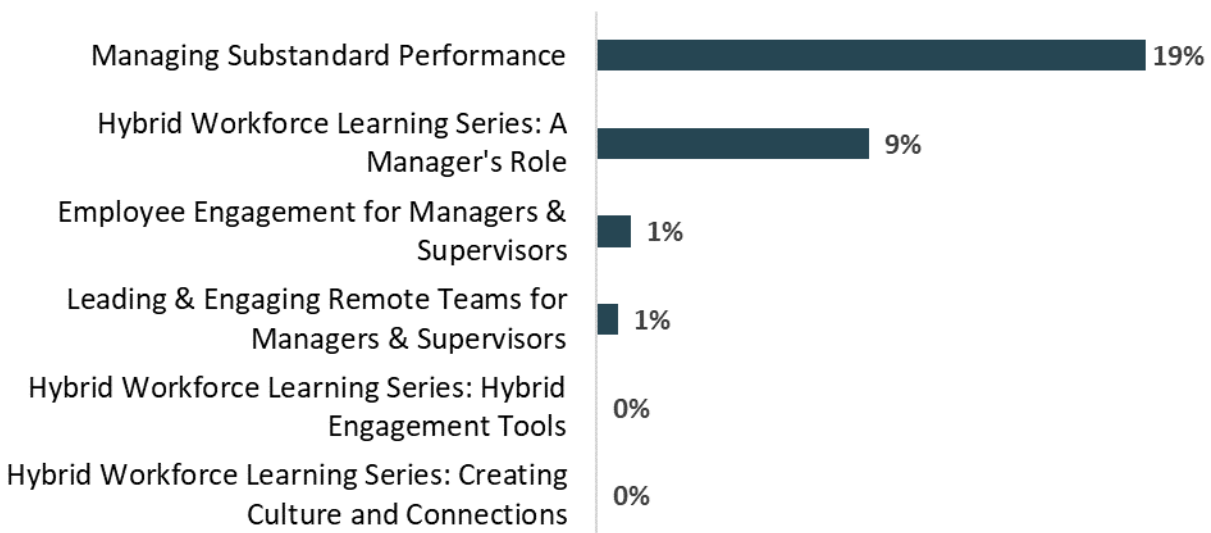
We found 32 courses about supervising employees that are currently available to managers in an analysis of available trainings in Workday, the county's enterprise

resource planning system. Trainings cover a variety of topics, such as ADA accommodations, coaching, employee engagement, and microaggressions.

Less than 10% of current managers have completed a majority of these trainings. When we looked at the trainings most relevant to managing performance and supervising in a hybrid work environment, we also found that these trainings were not widely taken. Some managers may have received similar content through coaching or consultation with Central HR, but these engagements are not tracked.

**Only a small percentage of managers have completed the trainings most relevant to managing employee performance and engaging hybrid and remote employees**

Percent of Current Managers Who Have Completed Relevant Trainings



Source: Workday

To better promote training resources and assist managers in supporting their employees to complete relevant trainings, Central HR told us that they plan to launch 'learning journeys' in early 2025. These learning journeys will bundle courses together for easier understanding of available trainings, and this will include a learning journey specifically for managers.



## **Client feedback can provide useful information on preferences for receiving county services**

### Some programs have gathered community feedback and changed the ways they provide services

According to the guiding principles of the Future of Work, “Our overarching guiding principle is to ensure we are meeting the needs of the communities we serve. This means that decisions regarding the future of work are first rooted in our community and based on business needs. Departments are encouraged to reach out to the communities they serve to ensure alignment with how the services are delivered.”

We wanted to know how well county programs were connecting with the communities they serve to ensure that they are providing services in ways that meet community needs. We focused on the Department of County Human Services because it provides many direct services for some of the county’s most vulnerable communities, including seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, survivors of domestic and sexual violence, and low-income residents. While some programs paused in-person services at the height of the pandemic due to public health guidelines, these programs have resumed in-person services and in some cases also expanded services provided online or over the phone in response to community needs.

In interviews with the department’s leaders, we found that some programs have surveyed clients on their preferences for how to receive services, such as in-person or over the phone, assessed the needs of their communities they serve, and made changes to how they deliver services. Others have not done any assessment of community needs related to the method of service delivery.

For example, Bienestar de la Familia – a program that offers culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate services focusing on the county’s Latino/a/x community – conducted a survey to determine how clients preferred to receive services, in addition to

conducting regular client satisfaction surveys. According to staff, the survey showed that some clients preferred to go to a location in person to receive services, while others preferred to interact with staff over the phone. The option to receive services over the phone is especially beneficial for clients who may be burdened by the need to travel for services, such as people with limited mobility or small children. Due to space constraints, Bienestar has staff who work remotely, and telework has ultimately increased the program's capacity to serve clients.

Similarly, the Gateway Center for Domestic Violence changed from conducting client intake in person to conducting intake over the phone during the pandemic. Staff found from post-visit surveys that many clients preferred the phone intake process.

## There are opportunities to engage clients more consistently about how to meet their needs

Other programs have not yet assessed client needs, such as Weatherization, which provides low-income residents with home improvements to increase energy efficiency. Department leaders highlighted the benefits of engaging clients about their needs and how they would prefer to receive services, and demonstrated that there may be opportunities across the county to engage clients more consistently.

We also found that management and frontline staff can sometimes disagree about whether remote service delivery is adequately meeting community needs. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, Health Department employees who conduct mental health evaluations in jails began doing assessments remotely. According to department HR, the courts would now like these evaluations to be conducted in person again. While the department employees would prefer to continue teleworking and conducting evaluations remotely, management believes that clients would be better served by having the evaluations conducted in person.

## Looking Ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic forced Multnomah County to make significant and abrupt changes to how and where employees do their work. Four years later, over 40% of county employees continue to work from home for at least a portion of their workweek.

While the number of employees who telework has not changed significantly since the telework policy was fully implemented, the latest countywide employee survey highlighted that some employees are concerned about the implementation of telework. Employees raised concerns about changes being made to telework agreements that they believe are unnecessary or would have a negative impact on their work and about inequitable implementation of telework policies. We heard similar concerns in our interviews. We also heard from employees and managers that they have experienced difficulties in maintaining and fostering connections with their colleagues, and challenges with performance management in a hybrid work environment.

Even though the Future of Work initiative no longer has dedicated staff or funding, these concerns and challenges remain. We hope this report can be useful as Central HR moves forward with its review of telework, improvements to manager training, and efforts to address concerns with telework implementation.

## Work Done

At the end of the planning phase of each audit, our office determines whether the audit should continue into fieldwork. During fieldwork, the audit team focuses on specific objectives.

We chose not to proceed with an audit of the Future of Work initiative for several reasons. Gaps and ambiguity in the data on telework schedules meant that we would be limited in any data analysis we could perform; the county's limited ability to improve use

of space given the conditions in the local real estate market indicated we could not focus on efficiencies in the use of space and county facilities; and conflicting and shifting best practices in telework meant that we would have difficulty comparing existing conditions to recognized criteria. When government performance auditors end an audit before it is completed, we are to document the results of the work we've done, which we have done with this report. While this report is not an audit report, it did go through our standard quality review process.

Our work focused on departments that provide direct services to vulnerable community members, including the Health Department, Department of County Human Services, and Department of Community Justice, to better understand whether widespread telework had impacted services. For this informational report, our team:

- Reviewed planning and process documents created by Central Human Resources
- Reviewed results of the 2022 office space study and the 2021 and 2023 countywide employee surveys
- Reviewed relevant personnel rules and union contracts
- Conducted research on best practices in change management and studies on hybrid work
- Conducted 19 interviews with Central HR, Facilities, Department HR, AFSCME President & Lead Stewards in DCHS & Health, DCHS Division Directors, & IDEA ERG Co-Chairs
- Took a tour of the Multnomah Building to view vacant and modified workspaces
- Conducted a preliminary analysis of telework status and appeals data
- Conducted an analysis of Workday Learning data

## Photo Credits

Photos by the Multnomah County Auditor's Office

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August 23, 2024

Dear Auditor McGuirk,

Thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the Future of Work Auditor's Report; we appreciate the opportunity to expand on your findings.

**Continuity:** Our work to support a hybrid future of work has not stopped nor become one of only consulting and has in fact grown. Central HR, through its Organizational Change team and ongoing leadership involvement and direction, continues to manage the telework policy, process and administration, as well as training, annual telework reports, and a cross departmental Future of Work Committee. Our new Learning Journeys program will build a foundation of skills to empower every manager in leading our hybrid workforce. In the next year, we will be looking into making the Learning Journeys trainings mandatory for managers and exploring training opportunities for all staff.

**Community First:** Our telework policy and processes center our work around service needs and requirements. In our telework process, over half of county employees do not telework or do so ad hoc because we assess "position first." Employees with concerns about inappropriate implementation of telework policies can use the appeals process to ensure additional review of managerial rationale. The number of appeals through 2023 was under 25.

We are aware of the differing perspectives among frontline staff about how to best serve the community, and we are committed to ongoing dialogue, gathering data, and learning how to better address these concerns at the team, department and countywide level. The flexibility to provide both in person and remote services that emerged during the pandemic contributes to better quality of care overall. Our staff and leadership assess the needs of and circumstances surrounding the individuals we serve when making a determination as to whether or not to provide a particular service remotely or in person. The Health Department shares that the ability to preserve staff safety through remote services when circumstances call for this also alleviates disruption of care. With that said, our client facing



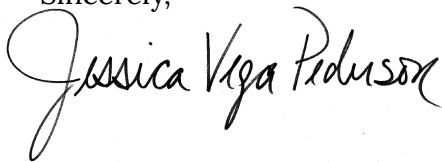
services in Behavioral health are predominantly community based and provided in person. Remote Services are only offered in extenuating circumstances.

**Connection:** We believe connection is important, and achieving it varies for each employee and team. We encourage through training that managers consider thoughtful, planned in-person connections for employees and their teams. Our telework policy supports managers bringing teleworkers in person in this effort with language negotiated with and ratified by all our unions.

**Culture:** How telework has been implemented and sustained reflects the culture and priorities of our organization and its leadership to be community first, operationally effective and employee supportive. We remain committed to embracing the changing nature of work and exploring innovative ways to best serve our community and will continue to evolve telework in that effort.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Vega Pederson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jessica Vega Pederson  
Multnomah County Chair