

CRS Report for Congress

Telework Centers and Federal Continuity of Operations Planning

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Summary

Telework, the officially sanctioned practice of federal employees working some of the time away from their traditional offices, has gained renewed attention following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and concern about a potential avian flu pandemic. Federal agencies, coping with hurricane devastation and disruption of operations in the Gulf Coast region, are reviewing overall continuity of operations (COOP) planning to prepare for possible future catastrophic events. Telework centers may play a role in such plans.

The General Services Administration (GSA) created its first telework centers in 1993 to serve as alternative locations in which federal staff could work away from their main offices. Currently, GSA sponsors a network of 14 telework centers in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Thirteen formal federal COOP agreements have been established with the GSA-sponsored telework centers, which have emerged as a component of COOP planning in the event federal buildings are shut down. As mandated by Congress and authorized by federal agencies, the number of federal teleworkers has increased over time. Federal employees who telework usually do so at home or at a GSA telework center.

This report briefly discusses telework and federal COOP planning, recent legislative actions, and focuses on the role of GSA telework centers as an element of COOP planning. It will be updated as events warrant.

For a more comprehensive examination of the telework issue, see CRS Report RL30863, *Telework in the Federal Government: Background, Policy, and Oversight*, by Lorraine H. Tong and Barbara L. Schwemle.

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Telework Centers and Federal Continuity of Operations Planning

Introduction

Telework¹ — the officially sanctioned practice of working some of the time away from the traditional office — has been promoted in the public and private sectors as a benefit to both employees and organizations. Cited telework benefits include reductions in traffic congestion, fuel consumption, pollution, and transportation costs. Other suggested benefits include increased productivity, a reduction in stress, and time saved in commuting. However, telework may not be suitable for all employees or all work in federal agencies due to the nature of the work, performance problems, or main office coverage requirements. There may also be situations where distractions at the off-site location make the delineation between home and work difficult, or the alternative location lacks all the office amenities (e.g., technology and access to subscription databases) necessary to perform the employees' work.²

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the anthrax attacks soon thereafter, telework gained renewed attention. In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and concern about a potential avian flu pandemic, federal agencies are reviewing continuity of operations (COOP) planning to prepare for future emergency situations. These emergencies could include catastrophic terrorist attacks, natural disasters, public health crises, or civil unrest that could result in evacuations and federal building shutdowns.

This report will briefly discuss telework in the federal government and COOP planning, and then focus on the role of the General Services Administration (GSA)-sponsored telework centers as an element in COOP planning.

Telework

Telework in the federal government has developed in stages during the past 15 years, often at the prompting of Congress:

¹ Telework has also been referred to as telecommuting, flexiplace, or use of alternative work sites. In addition to working at home and telework centers, teleworkers have conducted work at hotels, libraries, and internet cafes.

² For a more comprehensive look at telework in the federal government, including the benefits and limitations of telework, see CRS Report RL30863, *Telework in the Federal Government: Background, Policy, and Oversight*, by Lorraine H. Tong and Barbara L. Schwemle.

- In 1990, Congress authorized federal agencies to spend federal funds during FY1991 to pay for telephone lines, related equipment, and monthly fees in the homes of teleworkers participating in a telework pilot program.³ Five years later, this authorization was made permanent.⁴
- A provision in the Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1999 (which included funding for the Department of Transportation),⁵ provided that “[f]or fiscal year 1999 and each fiscal year thereafter, of the funds made available to each Executive agency for salaries and expenses, at a minimum \$50,000 shall be available only for the necessary expenses of the Executive agency to carry out a flexiplace work telecommuting program.”
- In October 2000, Congress enacted legislation that included a provision authored by Representative Frank Wolf requiring each executive agency to “establish a policy under which eligible employees of the agency may participate in telecommuting to the maximum extent possible without diminished employee performance.” The provision also required the Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to “provide that the requirements of this section are applied to 25 percent of the Federal workforce, and to an additional 25 percent of such workforce each year thereafter.”⁶
- The October 2000 legislation also required OPM to conduct an annual survey of federal agencies’ implementation of telework.⁷ OPM’s 2004 survey (containing responses from 82 of 86 agencies surveyed, published in December 2005) indicates that the federal telework program has grown substantially in recent years. In 2004, 752,337 of the 1.7 million federal employees in the 82 agencies were eligible to telework — up from 521,542 employees eligible in 2001. The reported number of federal employees who actually teleworked nearly doubled during this period, from 72,844 in 2001⁸ to 140,694

³ P.L. 101-509, Sec. 624.

⁴ P.L. 104-52, Sec. 620.

⁵ P.L. 105-277, Title IV, Sec. 630.

⁶ P.L. 106-346, Sec. 359.

⁷ OPM compiled fiscal year data for FY1999 through FY2003. The reporting period was changed from fiscal to calendar year beginning in 2004; therefore, the 2004 survey (issued in Dec. 2005) covers the period Jan. 2004 to Dec. 2004.

⁸ The OPM 2001 telework survey, released in Jan. 2002, is based on responses from 63 agencies. Part of the increase may be due to the greater number of agencies (82) reporting in 2004.

in 2004. In fact, the reported number of federal teleworkers increased 37% in the previous year — up from 102,921 in 2003.⁹

- Those developments notwithstanding, Congress continued to press agencies to expand telework opportunities. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2005 withheld \$5 million in appropriations from the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State; the Judiciary; the Securities and Exchange Commission; and the Small Business Administration unless they could certify, within two months of enactment of the act, that telework opportunities were available to 100% of their eligible workforces.¹⁰ The act also required each of these departments or agencies to provide quarterly reports to the appropriations committees on the status of their telework programs and required them to designate telework coordinators to oversee the implementation of the telework programs. In September 2005, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reviewed these departments' and agencies' certifications, reported that they lacked consistent methodologies and measures, and recommended that Congress “determine ways to promote more consistent definitions and measures related to telework.”¹¹
- The FY2006 Science, State, Justice, Commerce, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act again withheld \$5 million from the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State; the Securities and Exchange Commission; and the Small Business Administration unless they certified, within two months of the enactment of the legislation, that they had increased the number of eligible teleworkers over the 2005 levels. The act also withheld \$5 million in funds from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the National Science Foundation unless, within the same time limit, they certified that they had made telework opportunities available to 100% of their eligible workforces.¹² Language in the conference report included the conferees' expectation that these entities will address the GAO recommendation (mentioned above) concerning standards and consistency in identifying and reporting participation of telework-eligible employees and provide information on their progress in the quarterly reports. These departments and agencies are also expected

⁹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *The Status of Telework in the Federal Government*, Dec. 2005, available at [http://www.telework.gov/documents/tw_rpt05].

¹⁰ P.L. 108-447, Sec. 622.

¹¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Agency Telework Methodologies, Departments of Commerce, Justice, State, the Small Business Administration, and the Securities and Exchange Commission*, GAO-05-1055R, Sept. 2005, available at [<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d051055r.pdf>].

¹² P.L. 109-108, Sec. 617 and Sec. 619.

to implement time and attendance systems that will allow more accurate reporting.¹³

- Language in the House report (109-520) to the FY2007 Science, State, Justice, Commerce, and Related Agencies appropriations bill (H.R. 5672) would again withhold \$5 million from the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State; the Securities and Exchange Commission; the Small Business Administration; the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; and the National Science Foundation unless these agencies certify that they have increased the number of eligible federal employees to telework. At the committee's direction, the agencies are to provide a report to the committee (in no less than six months from enactment of H.R. 5672) detailing their plans to increase eligible number of teleworkers at their agencies, and identifying the major obstacles to telework. The House passed H.R. 5672 on June 29, 2006. There is no comparable provision in the Senate bill as reported, and no further action was taken on the bill before the 109th Congress adjourned. Currently, these agencies are funded under H.J.Res. 102 (P.L. 109-383), the third in a series of continuing resolutions, through February 15, 2007.

Continuity of Operations

Continuity of Operations (COOP) planning is an organization's internal effort to ensure that capabilities exist to continue essential functions across a wide range of emergencies.¹⁴ Presidential Decision Directive 67 requires federal agencies to develop "Continuity of Operations Plans for Essential Operations" to ensure enduring constitutional government and continuity of government operations.¹⁵ Federal Preparedness Circular 65, prepared by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), provides guidance to federal executive branch departments and agencies to use in developing viable contingency plans for COOP.¹⁶

¹³ U.S. Congress, Conference Committees, *Making Appropriations for Science, the Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce, and Related Agencies for the Fiscal Year Ending September 30, 2006, and for Other Purposes*, conference report to accompany H.R. 2862, 109th Cong., 1st sess., H.Rept. 109-272 (Washington: GPO, 2005), p. 208.

¹⁴ For further information about COOP, see CRS Report RL31857, *Executive Branch Continuity of Operations (COOP): An Overview*; and CRS Report RL32752, *Continuity of Operations (COOP) in the Executive Branch: Issues in the 109th Congress*, both by R. Eric Petersen; CRS Report RL31594, *Congressional Continuity of Operations (COOP): An Overview of Concepts and Challenges*, by R. Eric Petersen and Jeffrey W. Seifert; and CRS Report RL31739, *Federal Agency Emergency Preparedness and Dismissal of Employees*, by L. Elaine Halchin.

¹⁵ See a summary of Presidential Decision Directive 67, available at [<http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd/pdd-67.htm>]. The text of this directive is not available to the public.

¹⁶ See [http://www.fema.gov/txt/government/coop/fpc65_0604.txt] for Federal Preparedness (continued...)

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the anthrax attacks shortly thereafter, managers at federal agencies began to take a fresh look at telework as a way to maintain operations during emergencies. Subsequently, many federal agencies have begun to integrate telework into their COOP planning. In 2003, OPM identified emergency planning as one of the key elements in its strategic focus. OPM's report on its 2003 telework survey stated, "Telework is essential for agencies' emergency planning, whether for snowstorms, natural disasters, or terrorist events. For an agency to be effective in an emergency, a solid telework program must be in place before the event."¹⁷ The following year, in 2004, OPM and GSA began making visits to federal agencies to strengthen the connection between telework and COOP planning. The OPM report on the 2004 telework survey indicated that 35 agencies had incorporated telework as part of their COOP initiatives, and another 38 were considering including telework in their COOP plans.¹⁸

On April 28, 2005, the House Committee on Government Reform held hearings on "*Who's Watching the COOP? A Re-Examination of Federal Agencies' Continuity of Operations Plans.*"¹⁹ At that hearing, Committee Chairman Tom Davis said, "it is imperative that we incorporate telework into our government's continuity planning." Also in April 2005, OPM reported the results of its emergency preparedness survey, which asked agencies if they were prepared for a natural disaster. All 85 agencies surveyed responded in the affirmative. The survey indicated that more than 60% of these agencies utilized telework arrangements as an emergency preparedness tool, with 57.6% having "prearranged agreements to transfer work to other agency locations" and 63.5% with telework capability in place from home or telework centers.²⁰

GSA Telework Centers

Although teleworking most commonly involves working from home, some employees cannot, or choose not to, telework from home (e.g., because of lack of needed equipment or software, distractions, or a combination of these reasons). A telework center is a facility that provides an alternative office setting that is closer to an employee's home and would reduce travel time between home and the office. A center generally offers a professional environment, equipped with office furnishings, technology equipment, and on-site technical assistance for employees to perform their work.

¹⁶ (...continued)
Circular 65.

¹⁷ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *The Status of Telework in the Federal Government, Report to Congress*, May 2004, available at [http://www.telework.gov/documents/tw_rpt04].

¹⁸ The OPM 2004 survey is available at [http://www.telework.gov/documents/tw_rpt05].

¹⁹ See [<http://reform.house.gov/GovReform/Hearings/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=25680>] for details about the hearings.

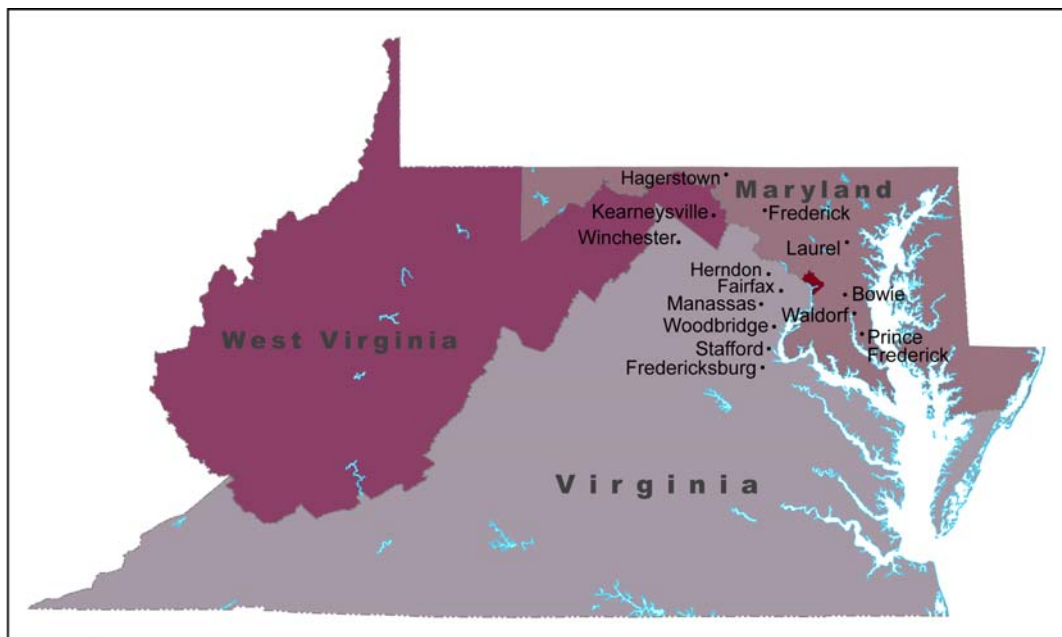
²⁰ See U.S. Office of Personnel Management website at [<http://www.opm.gov/emergency/EPSurvey2005>].

GSA currently sponsors 14 telework centers in the greater Washington, DC, metropolitan area that are designed to serve primarily federal employees in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. GSA partners with other organizations (e.g., universities) to staff and operate the centers, and the directors of the centers are affiliated with these organizations. GSA has statutory authority to establish the telework centers and to provide funding to acquire, lease, and equip the centers.²¹

In Maryland, the telework centers are located in Bowie, Frederick, Hagerstown, Laurel, Prince Frederick, and Waldorf. In Virginia, the centers are located in Fairfax, Herndon, Manassas, Fredericksburg, Stafford, Woodbridge, and Winchester. There is also a center in Kearneysville, West Virginia.

Figure 1 shows the locations of the centers, spanning the region from near the Chesapeake Bay to the Blue Ridge Mountains.²²

Figure 1. Locations of GSA-Sponsored Telework Centers in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area



Source: Information based on a map from the Washington Metropolitan Telework Centers website, Oct. 25, 2005, and from the GSA telework centers. Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (K.Yancey Oct. 26, 2005)

²¹ P.L. 103-123, 107 Stat. 1226.

²² The 14 telework centers are GSA-sponsored. In addition to the information about the centers on the GSA and OPM websites, the Directors of the GSA telework centers have created a Metropolitan Washington Telework Centers website that provides information and links to the centers, available at [<http://www.wmtc.org>]. Also listed on this website is another center called the Executive Office Club, a private corporation that is not sponsored by GSA but that makes its facilities available to federal and private teleworkers.

Background

The first GSA-sponsored telework centers were established in 1993 and were intended to help alleviate poor air quality and traffic congestion problems, and to promote a more family-friendly workplace. Representatives Steny Hoyer and Frank Wolf drafted legislation to provide \$5 million to fund three telework centers in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area; this funding was included in the FY1993 Treasury-Postal Appropriations Act.²³ The telework center in Winchester, Virginia, was the first center to open. The following year, Congress passed legislation²⁴ adding \$1 million to fund the centers, removing one center from Maryland, and adding two centers: one in Hagerstown, Maryland,²⁵ and another in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Four more centers were established between October 1993 and May 1994.²⁶ Additional GSA-sponsored telework centers were established in the late 1990s, and now there are a total of 14 centers.²⁷

Other federal telework centers have been temporarily established outside the Washington metropolitan area to help cope with emergency situations (e.g., after the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City and the 1994 earthquake in Northridge, California).²⁸ There have been other instances when GSA has worked with local communities in different regions of the country to provide guidance in creating telework centers, but they were not GSA-funded or sponsored centers.²⁹

Facilities, Equipment, Security, and Amenities

According to GSA, the telework centers provide a professional environment and state-of-the-art office equipment and telecommunications technologies:

²³ P.L. 102-393, 106 Stat. 1745.

²⁴ P.L. 103-123, 107 Stat. 1241.

²⁵ Earlier, a preliminary telework center was established at the Hagerstown Junior College. Although GSA and Hagerstown worked with the private sector on this center, it was not an official federal initiative.

²⁶ Dr. Wendell Joice, *The Evolution of Telework in the Federal Government*, U.S. General Services Administration, Feb. 2000, p. 25. (Hereafter cited as Joice, *The Evolution of Telework in the Federal Government*.)

²⁷ According to GSA officials, the telework centers were established as a pilot program, and the centers are still technically considered pilots. GSA notes that before programs can be evaluated, there must be adequate implementation. The level of usage and participation necessary for a complete evaluation and establishment of a refined model of the centers has not yet been achieved.

²⁸ Joice, *The Evolution of Telework in the Federal Government*, p. 26.

²⁹ A number of commercial enterprises offer facilities similar to the GSA telework centers. They are not affiliated with GSA and are not subject to free trials and other government funding. Further information about these private corporations is available at [<http://www.officesuitesplus.com>], [<http://www.abcn.com>], and [<http://www.regus.com>]. GSA does not sponsor the U.S. Department of Agriculture telework center located in Beltsville, Maryland. This center is primarily used by Agriculture employees; others who use it must pay a fee. See [<http://www.usda.gov/da/telework.htm>].

- Pentium class PC-compatible computers;
- Internet access with high-speed modems;
- Latest office productivity software;
- E-mail and file transfer capabilities;
- Laser and color printers;
- Fascimile and copy machines; and
- Digital telephone systems with voice mail.

Modular cubicles and private offices are available at the centers, and other amenities may include vending areas, equipped kitchens, free parking, and conference rooms (some with video-conference capability). On-site technical support is provided as needed during business hours, and access to the centers is available 24 hours per day, seven days per week.³⁰ Federal employees may bring in their own laptop computers to use at the centers or use the centers' equipment. The workstations are equipped with many of the same security measures that exist at federal agency headquarters (e.g., firewalls, anti-virus software, and virtual private networks). The centers also make available personal storage space with locks. After business hours, access to the centers can be gained with a card key.³¹

Fees and Usage

Fees for using a telework center vary somewhat depending on its location and size. As of December 2005, most of the Maryland and Virginia telework centers charged full-time teleworkers' employers between \$500 and \$545 per month. However, the West Virginia center charged \$770 per month, and the Woodbridge, Virginia, center charged \$980. The fee charged for one day a week per month at most Maryland and Virginia centers was between \$100 and \$109, while the West Virginia center charged \$154, and the Woodbridge, Virginia, center charged \$196.³² Most teleworkers average one day per week, and only a handful work four or five days per week from the centers. Although some federal agencies limit telework to one day a week, they have the flexibility of negotiating short- or long-term arrangements for their employees. Processing the necessary agency paperwork to begin use of a center takes approximately 30 days or longer.

According to GSA, the telework centers are currently operating at approximately 60% of capacity, with federal employees making up 95% of total teleworkers and the remaining percentage from the private sector. OPM and GSA officials said reasons agencies have cited for not using the telework centers have included concerns about the cost of using the centers, some teleworkers' preference to work from home, and the distance of the centers from employees' homes.³³

³⁰ Information is from the Washington Metropolitan Telework Centers website, available at [http://www.wmtc.org/telework_information.html#link4].

³¹ Information is based on telephone conversations with GSA telework analysts on Oct. 3, 2005.

³² Fees for the telework centers are listed on the U.S. General Services Administration website, available at [<http://www.gsa.gov>].

³³ Information is based on several telephone conversations with GSA telework analysts in Oct. 2005, and OPM annual telework reports.

In 1999, the six agencies with the largest numbers of employees working at the centers were the Department of Defense (128); GSA (68); and the Departments of Transportation (47), Agriculture (29), Treasury (23), and Health and Human Services (10). In comparison, in 2004, the top six agencies were the Departments of Defense (125), Commerce (42), Agriculture (36), Health and Human Services (36), Transportation (35), and Education (35). The House of Representatives also had three employees working at a center in 2004.

As **Table 1** below indicates, use of the telework centers peaked in 2002, when 459 employees from 20 agencies used the centers. Since then, the number of participating agencies has remained constant, but the number of individual users has declined. The greatest drop in use occurred between 2003 and 2004, when the number of individual users declined by 49, from 435 to 386.

Table 1. Federal Agency Telework Center Users and Fees 1999 - 2004

Year	Number of participating agencies	Number of individual federal users	Fees
1999	14	337	\$317,043
2000	15	332	\$436,861
2001	15	407	\$802,546
2002	20	459	\$825,603
2003	20	435	\$889,304
2004*	20	386	\$838,085

Sources: 1999-2004 OPM reports to Congress, *Status of Telework in the Federal Government*, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, available at [<http://www.telework.gov/documents.asp>].

* OPM compiled data for fiscal years from 1990 through 2003. In 2004, the data collected were changed from fiscal to calendar year (Jan. 2004 to Dec. 2004).

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, GSA witnessed a spike in inquiries from agencies and private sector organizations from different regions of the country expressing interest in possibly setting up similar telework centers or inquiring about the possibility of partnering with GSA. A similar increase in inquiries had occurred earlier, immediately following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the anthrax threats shortly thereafter. According to GSA, in the past few years, inquiries did not translate into significant numbers of new teleworkers signing up and continuing to use the centers — after the initial strong interest, the interest waned until

the next crisis or catastrophic event.³⁴ GSA currently has no plans to establish additional telework centers.³⁵

Free Trial and Open Houses

Because the telework centers have not been operating at full capacity, GSA and the centers have increased their marketing efforts to promote greater use. In addition to numerous methods of advertising directed at attracting federal agencies' interest, GSA has provided federal employees with several opportunities to work at the centers, free of charge to their agencies. The latest free trial period began on September 7, 2005, and ended on December 31, 2005. Employees already teleworking at the centers were able to increase their number of days at the centers without additional charges.³⁶ During the trial period, 81 new federal teleworkers worked at the centers an average of two days per week, and 27 teleworkers who were already using the centers increased the number of days working there by an average of one day per week.³⁷

OPM's 2004 telework survey found that a previous 60-day free trial of the telework centers (conducted in 2004) had a similar result, attracting 35 new federal teleworkers, including those from seven new agencies. After the trial period, 24 of the 35 teleworkers continued to use the centers. Several times during the year, various telework centers hold open houses to attract more teleworkers.³⁸

Continuity of Operations (COOP) Agreements

The 14 GSA-sponsored telework centers currently have 13 formal agreements in place to reserve a total of 130 workstations with various federal agencies as part of their COOP strategy. The centers normally accommodate a total of 340 workstations, but other facility space (i.e., the conference rooms) could be converted quickly to accommodate more teleworkers in a COOP situation.³⁹ For COOP purposes, the cost of reservations for each workstation ranges by location from \$1,000 to \$1,500 annually. The cost of actually using the workstations during a COOP emergency

³⁴ Since the anthrax attacks in 2001, there have been other instances of emergency building shutdowns and evacuations due to concerns about possible anthrax attacks (e.g., there were three incidents of suspected anthrax contamination at Department of Defense mail facilities in March 2005). Testing did not indicate the presence of anthrax at the three locations. In some cases, employees could not return to their workplaces for days while testing was conducted.

³⁵ Information is based on telephone conversations with GSA telework analysts on Oct. 6, 2005.

³⁶ Current users were obligated to pay for the days they had already reserved prior to the free trial offer.

³⁷ Data provided by the Director of the Southern Maryland Telecommuting Centers via e-mail on Jan. 20, 2006. No data are available yet on how many teleworkers who participated in the trial will continue working at the centers.

³⁸ See open house schedules at Washington Metropolitan Telework Centers website, available at [<http://www.wmtc.org/wmtc.openhouse.html>].

³⁹ Information is as of Dec. 12, 2005. No further details about the participating agencies and the COOP agreements were provided for security reasons.

would be prorated (calculations would be based on the amount of time spent working at the centers) in accordance with the GSA-approved fee schedule.⁴⁰

In the event of a government-wide COOP situation, those federal employees directed to work at the telework centers could have an opportunity to interact with their counterparts from other agencies also working at the centers. Such an opportunity could be useful in facilitating communication and coordination among federal agencies and provide an *ad hoc* interagency COOP center.

Recent Legislative Actions Regarding Telework and COOP

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused serious disruption to the ability of the Gulf region's oil refineries to supply gasoline and natural gas.⁴¹ Congress and the Bush Administration⁴² took action to address possible gasoline shortages with a number of initiatives, including encouraging greater use of telework.

Various Members of Congress continue to express interest in and support for telework. In a September 15, 2005, letter to President Bush, Representative Wolf urged the Administration to make telework a priority to improve continuity of operations after Katrina. He called the GSA free offer to federal employees to try telework centers an "important step forward in promoting telework." Representative Wolf also stated, "Telecommuting has proven benefits, not only for continuity of operations, but also energy savings, air quality, employee productivity, and employee cost savings. In short, telework is a winner all around. As the nation's largest employer, the federal government should be the model for telework for every level of government as well as the private sector."⁴³

On September 21, 2005, telework coordinators⁴⁴ from federal executive agencies and the Judiciary held their quarterly meeting with a session focused on COOP, hosted by OPM and GSA. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) representatives and the Director of the Southern Maryland Telecommuting Centers were among the OPM and GSA panelists leading the discussion on COOP planning. At the meeting, agencies were encouraged to seek FEMA guidance for COOP planning, and GSA

⁴⁰ Information is based on a telephone conversation with a Southern Maryland telework center administrator on Feb. 2, 2006.

⁴¹ By Sept. 2005, gasoline prices nationwide had risen to over three dollars a gallon, although by mid-Nov. 2005, prices had returned to almost pre-Katrina levels.

⁴² President George W. Bush called on Americans to conserve energy and reduce driving. In a Sept. 26, 2005, memorandum to executive departments and agencies, the President directed the federal government to conserve fuel so as to reduce overall demand and allow supplies to be directed toward the hurricane relief effort. He encouraged federal employees to use public transportation, to carpool, and to telecommute. For the Sept. 26, 2005, press release, see [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050926-4.html>].

⁴³ See [<http://www.house.gov/wolf/news/2005/09-16-telework.html>] for Rep. Wolf's letter.

⁴⁴ Agencies have designated telework coordinators (required by P.L. 108-447) as part of their overall planning to implement and improve telework policies. The coordinators have established a forum to exchange experiences and ideas and have established working groups to focus on specific issues. Fifty-three agency representatives attended the first Quarterly Telework Coordinators' Meeting on Nov. 5, 2002. Attendance at the meetings continues to be high, now averaging 70 attendees.

highlighted the use of telework centers and the offer for agencies to try the centers free of charge from September 7, 2005, through December 31, 2005.⁴⁵

On November 16, 2005, Representative Jon Porter, Chairman of the House Government Reform Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization, held a hearing to examine the efforts of agencies and corporations to help workers cope with gasoline price volatility after the hurricanes caused oil supply disruption. Representative Wolf and Representative Jim Moran both testified on the merits of telework to reduce fuel consumption, traffic congestion, pollution, and transportation costs for employees. Issues of productivity, family friendly policies, and telework as a COOP component were also briefly raised during the hearing. Committee Chairman Tom Davis also attended the hearing to express his support for telework.

On May 11, 2006, Representative Danny K. Davis introduced H.R. 5366,⁴⁶ the Continuity of Operations Demonstration Project Act. The bill would establish a program to enhance the government's COOP capability in the event of an extended emergency situation. Under the bill, the Chief Human Capital Officers Council⁴⁷ and the Interagency Continuity of Operations Working Group⁴⁸ would be jointly charged to provide for a demonstration project under which two or more agencies would perform a range of government essential and nonessential services and operations to test employees' ability to work from home or alternative sites away from their usual duty stations for a period of not less than 10 consecutive working days. The council and the working group would be required to submit to the House Government Reform Committee and the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee a report evaluating the project no later than 12 months after enactment of the legislation. The bill was referred to the House Government Reform Committee, but no further action was taken on the bill before the 109th Congress adjourned.

Issues for Consideration

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the subsequent anthrax threats, catastrophic natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the threat of a flu pandemic have prompted a number of federal agencies to reexamine existing COOP policies, and to improve, refine, and test procedures for the immediate, short, and long term. Telework has emerged as one component of strategic and

⁴⁵ On Sept. 2, 2005, OPM Director Linda M. Springer issued a memorandum to heads of departments and agencies to urge "renewed efforts by Federal agencies and departments to increase the use of telework, carpooling, and public transportation by employees." For the memorandum, see [http://www.chcoc.gov/transmittal_detail.cfm?ID=662].

⁴⁶ This bill was similar to H.R. 4797, legislation Rep. Danny Davis sponsored in the 108th Congress. No action was taken on that bill.

⁴⁷ Established by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296, Sec. 1302), the 25-member council comprises the Director of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), who serves as chairman; the Deputy Director for Management of the Office of Management and Budget who serves as vice chairman; the Chief Human Capital Officers of the 15 executive departments and eight additional agencies designated by the OPM Director. See [<http://www.chcoc.gov>] for more information about the council.

⁴⁸ FEMA established the working group pursuant to Federal Preparedness Circular 65, available at [http://www.fema.gov/txt/government/coop/fpc65_0604.txt].

comprehensive COOP planning. Many federal agencies have formulated COOP planning and procedures, and most of them have established or are in the process of setting up alternative work locations for emergency preparedness and disaster recovery. Many agencies already have implemented active telework policies and have incorporated telework centers as part of their emergency preparedness and disaster recovery policies. Others are exploring integration of the telework centers as part of their COOP strategy.

Telework centers may not, however, be suitable for some federal agencies as a component of their COOP planning for various reasons. Such reasons may include the centers' locations, size, and layout. Additional security arrangements and special technology critical to certain agencies, especially during COOP situations, may not be available at the centers. Other reasons the centers may not be a viable alternative may be that some agencies have already committed resources for alternative locations, or that some agencies may prefer an environment solely operated by and under their authority and control.

Strategic Planning for Telework Center Use

If an agency chooses to test the viability of telework centers as a COOP component, the agency might take a number of preliminary and intermediate steps. For example, it might consider the following:

- providing agency employees who have been identified as “essential” personnel an opportunity to work at the centers on a limited basis;
- providing agency employees who live in close proximity to telework centers an opportunity to work at the centers on a limited basis;
- when agencies are not using all of their allocated funding for telework center use, rotating employees from different job positions to work at the telework centers on a very limited basis; thus, over time, more and more staff will have had at least one day’s work experience at an alternative site;
- training employees to be efficient and effective teleworkers at the centers and/or other locations; refining contingency policies and procedures; and conducting drills/exercises for teleworkers to work at the centers with little or no notice, to respond to different kinds of emergencies;
- encouraging all employees who have worked at the telework centers to provide feedback on their experiences and evaluate the information; and
- creating a task force comprising telework coordinators, information technology specialists, managers, and teleworkers (who have used the centers or other off-site locations) to recommend whether or how to use the telework centers and to provide oversight; in addition, such a task force could conduct a comparative analysis of the experiences of teleworkers who use the centers with the experiences of those who

telework at home or elsewhere, and apply any lessons to the agency's telework and COOP policies.

Federal agencies have reacted with heightened interest in telework centers as a possible component of COOP planning in the aftermath of disasters and emergencies. However, research⁴⁹ showed that such interest diminished over time — until the next catastrophic event. Proponents of telework maintain that strategic planning and vigilance in refining emergency policies and procedures — to prepare rather than react — would strengthen agencies' response to and recovery from any future disasters.

⁴⁹ Research conducted includes discussions with GSA telework specialists and other telework analysts.