

---

---

# PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

---

---

## *Telework Programs*

### Wisconsin

#### **Summary**

The Bureau of Quality Assurance at the Wisconsin State Department of Health and Family Services implemented a teleworking program for surveyors across all program types in Spring 2005, after conducting and evaluating the results of a 16-week pilot telework program. Teleworking is voluntary for surveyor staff hired prior to March 2005 and is required for all new hires.

#### **Introduction**

This report describes the structure and functioning of Wisconsin's telework program, its impact, and lessons learned that might benefit other agencies considering telework programs. The information presented is based on interviews with agency management staff and review of documentation supporting the program.

#### **Background**

The agency began to explore teleworking as a means to reduce travel expenditures and overhead for office rent and expenses as well as for its potential as a staff retention and recruitment strategy. After receiving several staff requests to work from home, agency management conducted a preliminary assessment of possible cost savings and decided to proceed with a pilot telework program.

#### **Intervention**

One hundred five of 120 surveyors currently participate in the telework program. Teleworkers must sign an agreement that documents the planned work schedule, confirms that the employee will abide by the telework policies and procedures, and states that the agency may revoke telework status at any time. Teleworking staff also must complete a Safety and Ergonomic Checklist and provide annually a certificate of homeowners or renters and liability insurance coverage.

The agency provides teleworkers with laptop computers, printers, cell phones, and phone

cards. Office furniture equivalent to that provided in the office environment, as desired by the employee, also must be provided to meet collective bargaining agreements. Long-term care surveyors are required to attend monthly scheduling meetings at the regional offices and other meetings or trainings as directed by supervisors. Surveyor staff from all program types must bring their laptops to the office monthly for maintenance and software updates.

The agency provides mandatory training on teleworking, presented via interactive Webcast. The training addresses Internet connectivity and other IT issues, supervisory procedures, administrative processes, and recommendations on setting up the home office. Surveyors who participated in the pilot program provided insights on coordinating the workday and handling communications in the home-based office environment.

Efforts are made by supervisors to ensure the equitable distribution of workload across teleworking and office-based staff. Supervisors are responsible for monitoring teleworkers to ensure that program efficiency, productivity, and service are maintained or improved.

The agency pays for monthly Internet fees for teleworkers using broadband connections; dial-up users utilize a toll free number to access the agency network. Surveyors are required to utilize broadband services if available in their area, due to lower speed and ASPEN-related difficulties associated with dial-up service. Most surveyors use ASPEN Survey Explorer and have

secure home access to ASPEN Central Office (ACO). Teleworkers with dial-up connections access ACO through a Citrix server. Digital senders are being installed at all regional offices, allowing instant scanning and transmission of large documents to teleworking staff.

### **Implementation**

The agency began a four-month telework pilot program in May 2004, with participation of 31 surveyors representing the five regional offices. Pilot teleworkers used laptops already issued by the agency and their personal Internet Service Provider.

A workgroup involving representatives from all program types and agency functional areas was assembled to help structure the pilot program, evaluate its effectiveness, and refine the program based on pilot findings. Key workgroup tasks included gathering information and documentation from operational telework programs at three Wisconsin State Agencies and several other states' survey and certification agencies, developing the pilot telework program policies and procedures, and participating in monthly conference calls with pilot teleworkers to discuss barriers, resolve problems, and share best practices.

The pilot program yielded informative experience with IT needs, travel policies, and other operational processes. The pilot's evaluation elicited feedback regarding telework's impact on various aspects of job performance and satisfaction from teleworkers, supervisors, and office-based colleagues. The agency's telework workgroup refined policies, procedures, and operational systems based on pilot findings and began agencywide implementation of the telework program on a staggered schedule, region by region.

### **Impact**

Because agencywide implementation is still in its early stages, data supporting cost savings or staff retention and recruitment improvements are not yet available. However, the pilot program's evaluation found that work productivity and timeliness, team and supervisory communication

and relationships, job satisfaction, and morale were maintained or improved by the transition to teleworking, according to the majority of survey respondents. Additional findings from the telework pilot pointed to the need to speed access to ACO and other programs by requiring broadband rather than dial-up Internet service; provide computers, printers, cell phones, fax machines, and a second phone line to teleworkers; and create online access for completing a variety of routine forms. Agency staff continue to consider strategies to address the pilot finding that telework increased workload for many office staff, due to time spent obtaining information from facility files or reports on behalf of teleworkers. Findings from the pilot program prompted the agency to institute a telework policy that authorizes supervisors to require teams to gather in-person when necessary to most effectively complete documentation on a particular survey's findings.

Significant annual cost savings resulting from office space reduction are anticipated; one office space will be retained for every four teleworking surveyors to accommodate staff meetings and other occasions that require group office space.

Agency management will examine the telework program's impact on travel costs, although substantial savings are not anticipated given the high frequency of surveyor travel regardless of office location. The impact of teleworking on retention and recruitment are the most significant, long-term benefits expected. Increased job satisfaction and enhanced quality of life reported by surveyors participating in the pilot program are expected to translate into higher retention rates. The agency also anticipates attracting more candidates due in part to the telework feature of the position.

### **Lessons Learned**

Agency management recommends teleworking to other state survey agencies, commenting that the "upfront headaches are worth the long-term benefits." Valuable planning activities noted by the agency include examining telework policies and procedures in use by other entities, reviewing relevant collective bargaining agreements, and

considering state travel policies. Agencies are advised to require signed agreements that explicitly state the agency's ability to revoke telework status at any time. To ensure that all required documentation is completed before surveyors begin teleworking, it is useful to assign a single staff member to oversee collection of telework-related documents and forms.

The agency encourages focused supervisor and surveyor training addressing the impact of teleworking on traditional work processes, including changes in peer and supervisor communication, document review procedures, planning, and organizing. Particularly during program start-up, it is critical to establish effective communication mechanisms and encourage feedback on ways to improve the telework system and processes.

Anticipating and resolving IT issues as early as possible will ease the transition to teleworking. In addition to planning for Internet service installation, computer maintenance, and software support, specific recommendations include explicitly stating the levels of Internet service that will be reimbursed, requiring regularly scheduled transport of laptops to the central or regional office for maintenance, and developing step-by-step instructions to assist teleworkers in connecting their computers and installing computer software updates from the network. The use of digital senders in regional offices has substantially increased the efficiency of hard copy document transmission from the office to teleworker homes.

Additional practical considerations include physical office downsizing plans, furniture distribution, and consolidation of office telephone lines for use by multiple staff when at the office.

Looking to the future, the agency now addresses teleworking in applicant interview questions to assist with selection of individuals who will thrive in the telework environment.

### **Contact Information and Resources**

For more information about the telework program at the Wisconsin Bureau of Quality Assurance, please contact Janet Eakins at 608/266-2055 or [eakinjl@dhfs.state.wi.us](mailto:eakinjl@dhfs.state.wi.us).

Wisconsin's Telework Policy & Procedures Manual, Telework Application, Telework Agreement, Telework Safety and Ergonomic Checklist, Telework Evaluation Surveys, and training materials used in the agency's telework program are available as a resource for agencies considering establishing a telework program. The Telework Final Report summarizing the pilot findings and the surveys used in the pilot evaluation also are available. These documents and the DHFS Webcast site can be accessed online by clicking on the Promising Practices Supplemental State Resources link. Wisconsin's Telework Training Webcast also can be accessed online at the following link: <http://media1.wi.gov/DHFS/viewer/NoPopupRedirector.aspx?peid=595f733f-26e9-4871-8007-e258f9180f6c&shouldResize=False#>.

*This document is part of an issue brief on teleworking practices in state survey agencies. The issue brief is one of a series by the Division of Health Care Policy and Research, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in state survey agencies. The entire series is available online at CMS' Website, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/SurvCertPromPractProj>. The issue briefs are intended to share information about practices used in state survey agencies and are not an endorsement of any practice.*