

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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April 4, 2023

The Honorable Bill Nelson
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 E. Street SW
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Administrator Nelson:

According to information recently obtained by this Committee, in January of 2023, only 31% of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) employees reported for in-person work at your headquarters building in Washington, D.C., on a day-to-day basis. If accurate, this means that the vast majority of NASA headquarters employees remain on a mostly telework or remote working schedule more than one year after President Biden called for all federal agencies to return to in-person work.¹ We are concerned with the impact this is having on mission readiness as well as the costs associated with paying for buildings and other facilities that are not being used to their full potential.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most federal agencies, including NASA, adopted remote work-from-home policies to help slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus.² Since then, medical advancements have resulted in the availability of three vaccines and several medical therapeutics available to treat COVID-19.³ It's no longer reasonable for federal employees in

¹ Hans Nichols, Glen Johnson, and Stef Knight, *Scoop: Biden to send more US workers back to office*, Axios (Feb. 27, 2022), <https://www.axios.com/2022/02/27/federal-workers-biden-office>; Eric Katz, *Biden Uses the State of the Union to Call Feds Back to Their Offices and for Increased Government Oversight*, Government Executive (Mar. 1, 2022), <https://www.govexec.com/management/2022/03/biden-state-of-the-union-feds-offices-government-oversight/362641/>; Jake Lahut, *Biden: 'It's time for Americans to get back to work and fill our great downtowns again' instead of working from home*, Business Insider (Mar. 1, 2022), <https://www.businessinsider.com/biden-work-from-home-state-of-the-union-fill-downtowns-2022-3>.

² Press release, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, *NASA Administrator Statement on Agency Coronavirus Status* (Mar. 14, 2020), <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-administrator-statement-on-agency-coronavirus-status>; Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, and Rachel Minkin, *How the Coronavirus Outbreak Has – and Hasn't – Changed the Way Americans Work*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 9, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/12/09/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-has-and-hasnt-changed-the-way-americans-work/>.

³ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *COVID-19 Treatments and Medications* (2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/treatments-for-severe-illness.html>.

Washington, D.C., to continue to work remotely while leaving taxpayer-funded office buildings mostly vacant.

We know that the lack of in-person communications can lead to errors and delays. For example, a recently published report attributed the one-year delay of NASA's Psyche asteroid mission to, among other things, a lack of informal and impromptu communication among staff caused largely by remote work.⁴ The report, which was conducted by an independent review board stated, "[r]emote work conditions exacerbated the isolation of various teams, impeding team integration."⁵ It further stated that in the past, personnel, "...relied on senior members of projects and technical line organizations 'walking the floor,' dropping in for conversations at office doorways, or chatting in the cafeteria."⁶ And, "[w]ithout these informal communication mechanisms, contextual cues and situational awareness were lost. Team members working the floor found it difficult to report problems up the chain over Webex, especially when attendees kept their cameras off."⁷ NASA concurred with these findings, writing that, "[t]he completion of Psyche requires increased simultaneous on-site presence to facilitate informal communications and mission success."⁸ While the need for in-person work differs between roles, this report highlights, and NASA agrees, that there is an intrinsic value to face-to-face communications.

Given President Biden's declaration last September that the COVID-19 pandemic is over, NASA needs to explain when and how it plans to transition its workforce back to in-person status.⁹ As a result, please respond to the following inquires by April 18, 2023.

1. If President Biden instructed all federal agencies to return to in-person work, then why does NASA headquarters remain on a mostly telework or remote work basis?
2. Please provide the average monthly occupancy rate for January, February, and March of 2019 and 2023 for all NASA centers and facilities.
3. Certain positions at NASA may not require or benefit from in-person work. As a result, there may be a need to keep certain unique positions on a remote basis. Please provide an estimate for the number of positions currently at NASA which will likely remain on a remote basis as well as their titles and locations.
4. Please provide the number of NASA headquarters employees who telework three or more days a week.

⁴ Psyche Independent Review Board, Psyche Independent Review Board Report (Nov. 4, 2022), [S1803701522110315460 \(nasa.gov\)](https://www.nasa.gov/links/1803701522110315460).

⁵ *Id.* at 24.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Letter from Thomas H. Zurbuchen, Associate Administrator, Science Mission Directorate, and Laurie A. Leshin, Director, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, to Science Mission Directorate (Nov. 4, 2022), [S1803701522110315460 \(nasa.gov\)](https://www.nasa.gov/links/1803701522110315460).

⁹ David Cohen and Adam Cancry, Biden on '60 Minutes': 'The pandemic is over', Politico (Sep. 18, 2022), <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/09/18/joe-biden-pandemic-60-minutes-00057423>.

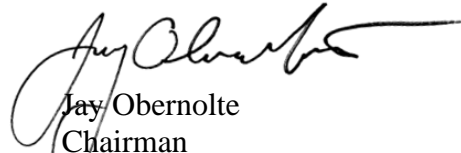
5. Please provide a copy of the existing telework policy, including any forms employees must sign to be eligible for telework, as well as any criteria supervisors are using to adjudicate requests.
6. Is the framework developed by NASA at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic still being followed?

Should you have any questions or concerns please contact Dario Camacho of the Committee's Majority staff at (202) 225-6371. Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this important matter.

Sincerely,



Frank Lucas
Chairman
House Committee on
Science, Space, and Technology



Jay Obernolte
Chairman
House Committee on
Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Investigations
and Oversight



Brian Babin
Chairman
House Committee on
Science, Space, and Technology
Subcommittee on Space & Aeronautics

cc: The Honorable, Zoe Lofgren, Ranking Member, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology