

**REPORT OF THE
CHIEF LEGISLATIVE ANALYST**

DATE: October 24, 2025

TO: Honorable Members of the City Council

FROM: Sharon M. Tso *KEK*
Chief Legislative Analyst *for*

Council File: 25-0357
Assignment No.: 25-05-0431

Telecommuting Policies in Other California Jurisdictions

SUMMARY

On May 20, 2025, Motion (Rodriguez – Harris-Dawson) was adopted by the Council directing, among several instructions, the Chief Legislative Analyst to report on current telecommuting and return-to-work policies in other jurisdictions across the state. This report responds to this instruction.

RECOMMENDATION

Note and File, inasmuch as the report is for information purposes.

BACKGROUND

Telecommute, telework, and remote work refer to arrangements that allow for an employee to perform the duties and responsibilities of their position from a location other than the office. Hybrid work refers to an employment schedule in which an employee conducts the duties and responsibilities of their position from both the office and a location other than the office.

For the purposes of this report, the analysis will cover telecommuting, telework, or hybrid work programs/policies as they relate to the express requirement to work remotely or in-person. Unless relevant, this report will not review specific requirements associated with remote work, such as equipment or check-in policies.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, discussions and policies on telecommuting were uncommon. According to an October 2020 report by the California Center for Jobs and the Economy titled "California Workers: Build Equity and Reduce Costs," telecommuting, telework, work-from-home, or remote work policies significantly increased due to efforts to comply with distancing requirements of state, county, or local public health orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health orders required many employees to perform their duties remotely from home, while workers defined as "essential" were required to work in person. The requirements of relevant public health orders heavily influenced early telecommuting policies. Based on this Office's research of telecommuting policies, practices and policies among the government jurisdictions surveyed were subsequently modified in accordance with local transmission and infection rates.

Some notable considerations in implementing work-from-home and return-to-office policies include the nature of the work performed by an organization, the need for negotiations or discussion with labor unions, as required, as well as organizational and economic considerations related to return-to-office orders.

DISCUSSION

In accordance with California law, remote work policies must ensure that employees are treated fairly and equitably, adhering to the same labor laws as those applicable to in-person employees. Employers must uphold anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, conduct training, and promptly address any complaints. Additionally, employees are expected to meet the same performance standards as they would when working on-site.

According to the League of California Cities, 30 percent of public sector organizations in California had established telecommuting programs in early 2020, prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these jurisdictions, including San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara, are located in northern California and established these programs in an attempt to reduce vehicle traffic congestion in the region. Many smaller jurisdictions surveyed did not adopt telecommuting/telework policies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and opted to follow the public health orders relevant to their jurisdictions.

The City of Los Angeles' current telecommuting practice, which provides office/department heads with the authority to determine telework schedules, was developed and implemented directly as a result of the City's COVID-19 emergency declaration. The City continues to comply with employment and accessibility regulations including the Fair Employment and Housing Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the California Family Rights Act. An update to the Citywide Telecommuting Policy is currently being developed by the City Administrative Officer's Employee Relations Division with participation from City departments and labor organizations and is expected to be considered by the Executive Employee Relations Committee this calendar year and then forwarded to the Council for action.

According to the American Community Survey (ACS), remote work increased dramatically across all major industries between 2019 and 2021. Then, with the removal of all social distancing policies in 2022, the percentage of remote workers fell slightly. Remote work participation, however, was still higher than its 2019 level in all industries except agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting, which returned to its 2019 level. The ACS showed that there was a larger percentage of remote workers in 2021 compared with 2019 in all major industries, four major industries saw significant increases in remote work (by over 30 percentage points). Professional, scientific, and technical services, information, finance and insurance, and management of companies and enterprises had over 39 percent of their workforce working remotely in 2021 compared with less than 17 percent in 2019. Another 12 industries had between 10 and 25 percent of their workforce working remotely in 2021. The four major industries with the largest percentage of their workers remote in 2021 still had at least over 33 percent of their workforce working remotely in 2022.

There is a large and growing number of studies that exist on telework and the impact on employees and employers. Numerous studies report both positive and negative impacts on job satisfaction and productivity from telecommuting. Overall, however, the impact of telecommuting is

inconclusive. According to a study by Seattle University, remote work may be beneficial to both employers and workers, such as providing a wider candidate pool, better work-life balance, increased productivity and retention, and a reduction in absenteeism. Despite the benefits of working remotely, the study also found that in some cases, remote work increased productivity but also led to employees working longer hours and experiencing a larger amount of stress. Additionally, the study found that it may be difficult for employees to advance their careers when working remotely due to "proximity bias." A June 2020 Stanford Law School "Report to the California State Controller's Office provides considerations for the creation of remote work policies and notably identifies several equity considerations to the effectiveness of remote work. It should be noted that several factors may impact conclusions on the impacts of telecommuting, including, but not limited to, study methodology, telecommuting access within a survey (often determined by demographics), type of workers surveyed, and the number of remote workers prior to and following the pandemic.

Agencies/jurisdictions may be subject to a "return to office" order issued by a jurisdiction's executive that directs departments to establish such minimum on-site work requirements. It should be noted that such orders are not considered revisions of telecommuting policies. For example, San Francisco Mayor Lurie and Governor Newsom both cite productivity concerns and the impact of telework on cohesion. As previously mentioned, however, studies are inconclusive as to whether telecommuting aids or harms productivity. Challenges to employment and business from the lack of in-person workers in civic centers, and accordingly, tax revenue, have also been cited as a basis for return-to-work policies. Return-to-office orders have been issued or are under consideration in notable jurisdictions, including the State of California, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Portland.

Below is an overview of the telecommuting policies in several major California jurisdictions. The overview provides the status of telecommuting and hybrid work policies before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the end of the public health emergency.

State of California

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State of California had considered the use of telecommuting. In 2009 the Governor's Office of Emergency Services published a "Statewide Concept of Operations for Pandemic Influenza" that requested state departments to develop telework plans and in 2010, the Department of General Services advised state departments to promote telework as an employment incentive.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic and the issuance of the Statewide "stay-at-home" order on March 19, 2020, the Governor instructed state departments to maximize telework to the extent possible and, in June 2020, state departments were directed to reopen. Subsequently, in October 2021, the State adopted an updated telework policy directing state departments to establish separate departmental procedures to implement State telework directives.

In April 2024, Governor Newsom directed state agencies to implement a hybrid telework policy requiring employees to work in-person days at least two days per week. On March 3, 2025, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-22-25, which ordered state agencies to update telework policies to reflect a new requirement of at least four in-office days per week beginning

July 1, 2025. The Executive Order cited “experience and research about the benefits of in-person work,” including enhanced collaboration, cohesion, as well as improved supervision and accountability. The Executive Order also noted ongoing disparities among in-person work expectations across departments, employee classifications, and efforts to promote trust with members of the public.

On March 5, 2025, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) filed an Unfair Practice Charge with the Public Employment Relations Board against Executive Order N-22-25. The SEIU requested the Executive Order to be rescinded and that the decision-making on telework and return-to-work policies be returned to state departments. Members of the California State Assembly also opposed the Executive Order for allegedly bypassing collective bargaining and for not providing sufficient time to allow employees to prepare for a return-to-work, in addition to the lack of a fiscal impact study relative to the costs of return to work.

On August 12, 2025, a California State Auditor report found that that a one-size-fits-all approach to telework is counter to State policy and may limit opportunities for significant cost savings. The report noted that the Governor’s return-to-office orders could have made better use of information regarding needs and costs, including the potential savings of \$225 million annual if State employees telework three or more days a week.

County of Los Angeles

The Los Angeles County Telework Program (Telework Program) was initially conceived in 1989 to support the County's regional clean air and traffic mitigation goals. The Telework Program outlined the qualifications, training, and approval criteria for all teleworkers and established the County’s standard for telework. The last update was made in 2008.

On March 4, 2020, Los Angeles County issued a “Safer at Home” order and directed departments to shift to a work-at-home preference for their employees. On December 18, 2020, the County directed departments to implement emergency telework protocols and to implement telework to the greatest extent possible. The emergency protocols allowed departments to establish telework policies that supersede the County’s existing telework policies during a declared emergency. These policies generally included the need for telework training, telework agreements, and selection criteria.

On July 27, 2023, the County adopted a new Countywide Telework Program Policy incorporating best practices learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included updated criteria for determining compatibility with routine telework arrangements, integration with other alternative work arrangements, and authority for departments to implement emergency telework protocols that supersede routine telework practices in the case of safety concerns.

City of San Diego

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City had no telecommuting policy or procedures in place. On March 13, 2020, the Mayor ordered non-essential city employees to work from home. On September 1, 2022 the City of San Diego implemented a Telework Program that allows city

employees, at their department's discretion, to work from home upon meeting the program's requirements, including the completion of a Telework Agreement. The City continues to use the policy adopted during the pandemic to regulate employee's use of telecommuting.

City of Long Beach

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the City did not have a telecommuting policy in place. Notably, the City is one of the few cities in Los Angeles County with its own public health department, providing Long Beach with a degree of autonomy relative to public health directives. On March 19, 2020, the City issued a "Safer at Home" order requiring non-essential businesses to halt operations. On March 20, 2020, the Long Beach Human Resources Department issued Emergency Telecommuting Program Guidelines to guide departments in assessing the feasibility of telecommuting for city workers. The guidelines noted that Long Beach's telecommuting program was "temporary and will be administered by each department based on department operational needs and subject to the Department Director's or designee's approval." Public meetings were held virtually for approximately a year. On September 23, 2021, the City implemented a Hybrid Work Program, which allows employees to request a hybrid work schedule, inclusive of remote work. A request, made by the employee, is reviewed by a supervisor and approved by the applicable department. It requires submission of a safety checklist and a hybrid work agreement for approval. This Hybrid Work Program has not been updated since its implementation and continues to govern the City's telecommuting procedures.

City and County of San Francisco

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the City and County of San Francisco had adopted a Telecommuting Program Policy, which allowed employees to work in a designated area outside the office as requested. Employees were required to request telecommuting from their supervisor, complete telecommuting training, and complete a telecommute application and agreement form.

On March 16, 2020, San Francisco, five other Bay Area counties, and the City of Berkeley implemented shelter-in-place orders to reduce the impact of COVID-19. On May 26, 2020, the City and County of San Francisco's Department of Human Resources established an Interim COVID-19 Telecommuting Policy Program that instructed departments to maximize the use of telecommuting as determined by each department and allow employees who can telecommute to do so full-time.

On February 25, 2025, San Francisco Mayor Lurie issued a memo requiring employees working hybrid schedules to transition to performing their work in the office for at least four days a week beginning on April 28, 2025. The memo cited "critical operational benefits" to the City of San Francisco, including improved performance, stronger team culture, and better work environments for new employees. The return-to-office directive was delayed until August following negotiations with two major unions to allow more flexibility for workers. The updated effective date is August 18, 2025.

Sacramento

The City has had a telecommuting policy since 1995, which was updated by the City's Telework Policy in 1999. The policy permitted employees to work off-site through mutual agreement between an employee and their supervisor. An employee was required to complete a Telecommuting Agreement in order to be eligible for telecommuting.

The Policy was updated in 2022 following the outbreak of the pandemic through the "Remote Work Policy." The policy updated language to stress that telecommuting was allowed at the discretion of the City. Sacramento's Remote Work Policy has not been updated since 2022.

The economy of the Sacramento civic center is notably dependent on state and local governmental workers, as the state capital of California. A 2023 study, "Quantification of the Economic Impact of Remote Work Policies on City of Sacramento and Sacramento Downtown" was commissioned by the Downtown Sacramento Partnership to measure the impact of remote work policies on the City and downtown businesses. The report found that the State of California's telework policy and resulting loss of workers patronizing local businesses had an estimated negative economic impact on Downtown Sacramento of over \$218.5 million annually. The report further provided additional statistics on the office vacancy rates in Downtown Sacramento and the impact on local businesses.

CONCLUSION

There is a broad range of telecommuting policies in California. The vast majority of which were adopted directly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Telecommuting policies adopted prior to the pandemic were often updated as well. The most common telecommuting practice was to delegate authority on telecommuting to individual departments/divisions. In the aftermath of the pandemic, hybrid work schedules have become increasingly common; however, several jurisdictions have implemented return-to-office orders that require a minimum level of office attendance, citing productivity and economic reasons.

It will be important to continue to review empirical studies to explain the relationship between telework, worker well-being, productivity, as well as constituent/client needs. This information will help guide the development and implementation of regulations, policies, and procedures to support telework practices that support both worker health and business operations.

Fiscal Impact

There is no General Fund impact resulting from this report.



Valentina S. Diba
Analyst

Attachment:
Motion

MOTION

The City of Los Angeles has grown to employ a diverse workforce of over 50,000 people. This growth has necessitated the acquisition or lease of new office space in the Civic Center and Historic Core of Downtown Los Angeles, as well as other areas throughout the City. This new office space ensures that the City workforce has the space to operate and provide quality City services.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all sectors, including government services, to reshape work environments. Many City departments implemented a telecommute option, which allowed City operations to remain functional while ensuring the safety of its workforce. Post-pandemic, every sector is evaluating the future of work. Depending on the jurisdiction, some public sector agencies have mandated a return to the office for their workforce, while others have adopted a hybrid model.

The City has not adopted one model for its civilian workforce relative to in-person or remote work. Each department has its own office policy. As a result, the City funds the office space required to support a large workforce, while also allowing employees to work a majority of the time from home. In addition, labor agreements stipulate certain workspace requirements for City employees; however, this practice may be outdated given a diminished need for office space.

For this reason, the current use of City resources for office leases and workspace may be excessive and inefficient. The City should audit costs associated with leases and maintaining traditional office space in the context that a significant number of City employees work from home. This analysis may be used to determine whether there are efficiencies to be gained from consolidation of leases, and/or execution of one office policy for the City's civilian workforce.

I THEREFORE MOVE that the Council instruct the General Services Department, with the assistance of the City Administrative Officer (CAO), to report with an overview of the City's current office lease portfolio, including an inventory of office space and costs associated with each lease.


I FURTHER MOVE that the Council instruct the Information Technology Agency, with the assistance of the CAO, to report with an overview of the City Departments' costs and inventory associated with at-home work station equipment.

I FURTHER MOVE that the Council instruct the CAO to report on City telecommuting policies within each department; and to provide an analysis of whether consolidating leases, streamlining different departmental policies, and revising space requirements found in current labor agreements relative to office standards, may bring about a more cost effective use of City funds.

I FURTHER MOVE that the Council instruct the Chief Legislative Analyst to report on current telecommuting and return-to-work policies in other jurisdictions across the State.

PRESENTED BY:

SECONDED BY:


MONICA RODRIGUEZ
Councilwoman, 7th District



ORIGINAL

APR 04 2025
