



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

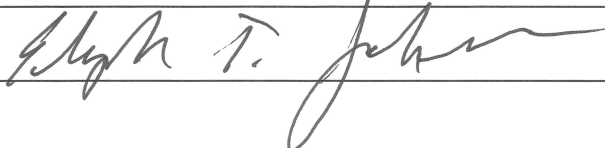
PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Prince William
Program Title: Spearheading Full-time Telework
Program Category: Health and Human Services

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Elijah T. Johnson
Title: Acting County Executive
Signature: 

Spearheading Full-time Telework Program

VACo 2022 Achievement Award

Executive Summary

The Benefits, Employment and Child Care Division (BECC) of Prince William County Department of Social Services has always carried a large caseload, serving individuals and families in need of medical, food and cash benefits.

When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency in early 2020, forcing businesses across the country to shutdown for the health and safety of their staff and customers, BECC was able to continue to meet customer needs without missing a beat. Division staff were used to teleworking periodically prior to the pandemic but had never done so on a fulltime basis. Through the fast acting, collaborative efforts of BECC management and other County departments, additional technology, resources, and practices were quickly put in place to facilitate fulltime remote work for staff so they could continue to serve the community with the same level of service as before the pandemic.

The division has also gained additional benefits as a result of expanding full-time telework, including improved office space utilization and, the ability to attract talented workers without regard to geography. Allowing staff to have a better work-life balance and, eliminating cost of daily commuting to most staff are believed to lead to higher retention rate.

Challenge and How Program was Carried Out

In early 2020, public health officials worldwide were sounding the alarm about a fast-spreading virus, which was causing severe illness and death to those infected. Businesses and government entities

across the country eventually shut down in an attempt to flatten the curve and prevent the virus, known as COVID-19, from spreading further.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Prince William County Department of Social Services (PWC/DSS) Benefits, Employment and Child Care Division (BECC)¹ allowed many of its 140+ staff members to telework one to two days per week. County, Department and Division policy and procedures were already in place to facilitate these periodic telework schedules and to monitor staff productivity and performance.

By mid-March 2020, concern for the health and safety of staff and the need to ensure continuity of operations prompted Division management to send all but a few administrative support staff members home to telework on a full-time basis. This decision was made even before widespread shutdowns were ordered. Eventually, County buildings were closed to the public for more than a year, leaving just a handful of staff onsite to receive and upload mail and serve the occasional customer who still needed face-to-face service.

Even though many staff members had been teleworking up to two days per week prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff were not immediately equipped with the technology and know-how to work and serve their customers virtually on a full-time basis. With the assistance and cooperation from numerous County entities, members of the Division's management team were able to coordinate the necessary tools, technologies and training needed for staff to continue to meet customer needs even as applications for public assistance were skyrocketing.

Some of the steps taken to facilitate fulltime telework included:

¹ The BECC Division was separated into two Divisions in May 2021. The Divisions are now the Public Assistance Division and the Customer Support and Services Division.

- Replacing all laptops without cameras with laptops with cameras to facilitate optimal communication during meetings and training sessions. The cameras also served to provide staff with a degree of social connection to their co-workers, minimizing the social isolation inherent to fulltime telework.
- Distributing hotspots to staff that did not have dependable Wi-Fi connectivity.
- Installing software on staff laptops to allow staff to make and receive calls as easily as with a standard desk phone.
- Training staff on the use of MS Teams and WebEx. These technologies were quickly utilized to hold meetings, deliver trainings, and interview job applicants.
- Holding more frequent virtual team meetings to communicate the frequent federal and state policy and procedural changes occurring in response to the pandemic.
- Modifying work-tracking tools to help management closely monitor and track productivity.
- Assigning -onsite staff the responsibility of preparing outgoing mail for teleworking staff.
- Training onsite staff to evaluate submitted medical records to facilitate the completion of paperwork teleworking staff needed to send them to the Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS) for certain Medicaid eligibility determinations.²
- Establishing procedures to facilitate the need for some customers to pick up their SNAP/EBT cards even though County buildings were closed. A dedicated phone line was established, signage was placed outside DSS buildings and safety protocols were established.
- Establishing in-office hoteling stations to allow staff to work in the office if needed.

² Medical records cannot be uploaded to state or County systems per HIPAA rules.

Conclusion

While many other organizations struggled to meet their customer needs due to a combination of COVID-19 illness among their staff and their inability to quickly switch and adapt to fulltime telework, the PWC/DSS BECC Division was able to continue to serve its customers at the same level it had been providing prior to the pandemic. Not only did Division staff meet its customers' needs throughout the pandemic, but they also did so even as the number of SNAP, Medicaid and TANF applications more than doubled from the prior year.³

During the pandemic, PWC/DSS has proven to be a robust, nimble organization with the ability to scale challenges and adapt to changes without sacrificing quality operations and service. Public assistance staff have been teleworking fulltime for more than two years with continuing success. Even though County buildings reopened to the public several months ago, the Department has continued to allow most Division staff to telework fulltime given the benefits reaped by staff and the community alike.⁴

Some of these benefits include:

- Fulltime telework allows staff a better work-life balance
- Fulltime telework has eliminated the cost of daily commuting for most staff
- Fulltime telework seems to be a contributing factor in the Division's high retention rate
- Fulltime telework has eliminated the geographic limitations inherent to traditional onsite work arrangements, allowing the Division to attract a talented workforce
- Fulltime telework optimizes office space utilization
- Fulltime telework reduced carbon emissions and reduced traffic congestion on Virginia roads

³ Prince William County received a combination of 678 SNAP, TANF and Medicaid applications during the week ending 4/6/2019 and 1,411 applications during the week ending 4/4/2020.

⁴ Onsite staffing remains sufficient to provide quality service to building visitors and provide support to teleworking staff

Brief Overview:**Spearheading Full-Time Telework Program**

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, organizations, including local department of social services agencies, were forced to quickly find ways to continue to provide services to customers while lowering the risk of infection in the workplace. The forward-thinking, fast-acting efforts of the Benefits, Employment and Child Care Division (BECC) management team of Prince William County Department of Social Services seamlessly implemented Fulltime Telework, not only keeping staff safe but also ensuring customers were served timely even as applications for public benefits dramatically increased due to job losses caused by the pandemic shutdowns.