

To: Legislative Advisory Committee on the State House
Date: July 13, 2021
Re: Staff testimony

The following responses are from the points of view of the Committee Services Support Team (Faith Brown; Senate Finance, Julie Tucker; House Human Services, and Ron Wild; House General).

What did the General Assembly staff learn from working remotely during the pandemic?

- We learned that we can work and carry out our duties remotely if necessary.
- We learned a satchel-full of new technologies and techniques.
- Through consultation with legal counsel and IT, we were able to digitize documents and processes that had previously been handled, copied and stored manually. This had the additional cost/time savings benefits of conserving paper, toner, related copying costs and staff time.
- In the case of the Senate, it was demonstrated that technology can assist Senators in their committee and Floor work. Senators were able to track bills, related documents and testimonies. On balance, the introduction of technology was far more of a benefit than a distraction.

What worked well?

- By and large we maintained normal functions with an increase in transparency.
- It was much easier for attorneys to be in “two places at once”. They could move between committees without breathless scrambles up and down stairs and along crowded corridors.
- IT was quite responsive. Their support was instrumental in keeping the entire process afloat.
- Absence of commute and attending costs.

What would you keep?

- Dedicated YouTube channel for each committee to stream and store hearings.
- Remote testimony as an option for witnesses rather than for the Committee to choose, which was the pre-Covid practice.
- Ability of Committee members to fully participate and vote remotely.
- Retain practice of digital documents vs paper.

What didn't or was only done for the sake of getting it done?

- Hearings were a strain for witnesses and Committee members. It was sometimes difficult for members to focus on testimony. Multiple screens (heads) were a distraction. Even after two remote legislative sessions, some members struggled with technology (finding meeting links, muting, speaking, camera placement, finding documents, internet stability, etc.)
- Although it was technically easier to invite and have witnesses via Zoom, it was very challenging for staff to speak privately with their Chairs and other members. Gone were the brief opportunities prior to and following meetings. Thus, complicating and delaying development of agendas and confirmation of witnesses.
- During the remote sessions, Committees of Conferences became unpredictable. In some cases committee work was caught short by the unexpected absence of a CoC.
- Staff were called upon to use personal space for offices. This created an array of work environments; many less than ideal – at least one bathroom was turned into an office. Although there were some offsets, staff were not compensated for unavoidable increase in heat and electric expenses. The remote sessions exacerbated the expectation for staff to have and use smart phones for texting to members and witnesses.
- Although Zoom facilitated prompt interaction, new staff were trained, monitored and interacted with in one-on-one sessions, but none the less functioned in vacuums. Veteran staff members also struggled with similar issues.
- The above can also be applied to new members of the legislature. Absent were the bonding relationships so vital to committee work. Absent were the opportunities for staff to meaningfully assist new members orient themselves to the State House and its workings.

In summary, as the term implies, two years of remote work has left us distanced and disconnected. However, that said, we do not support (encourage?) a return to “normal”. We feel that it would be a mistake to return to the building without significant adjustments. The virus will remain a concern. Many staff and legislators have vulnerabilities and underlying health histories which make them susceptible to infection. Others may return home each day to young (unvaccinated) children. Despite the virus, we have been healthy during the last two years and do not wish to compromise our conditions. Additionally, committee staff have concerns about room capacity and whose role it will be to enforce occupancy.