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OP-ED

Telecommuting: State Stuck In The Slow Lane

Nearly 20 years ago, then-President George H. W. Bush introduced his Statement of National Transportation Policy, saying, "sometimes the best transportation policy means not moving people, but moving their work . . . a trend known as telecommuting.

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Millions have already found their productivity actually increases when they work nearer the people they're really working for — their families at home."

Today, more than 100,000 federal employees telecommute at least one day a week. Twenty-five percent of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's workforce telecommutes.

So how's Connecticut doing? By the state's own account, as of 2005 (the most recent numbers), less than half of 1 percent of our workforce was telecommuting, and the numbers have not grown appreciably since. Yet, according to Telecommute Connecticut, the Department of Transportation's partners in promoting telecommuting, 9 percent of the state's private sector workforce telecommutes.

Why is it that the largest employer in the state lags so far behind? Simply put, policies are never a substitute for action. The legislature has enacted laws enabling the Department of Administrative Services to develop and implement telecommuting programs for state employees, and the department posted a policy on its



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website making telecommuting an option for state agencies. But lacking any clear goals in the law or the policy, more than 10 years have passed since the laws were enacted with virtually no progress.

Lawmakers are now considering legislation that would strengthen and improve telecommuting options for state employees. The bill was passed unanimously by the Government Administration and Elections Committee and is awaiting a vote by the General Assembly.

From an environmental standpoint, if the state were able to keep pace with the federal

government and private employers, we could get some 5,000 cars off our roads at least one day each week. This would keep hundreds of tons of smog-forming pollutants, such as nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds, and thousands of tons of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, out of our air each year. It would also reduce our consumption of gasoline by more than a million gallons annually.

Employee productivity could also be realized. In addition to improving employee morale, telecommuting programs are also known to reduce medical leave from work. As a union

steward, I frequently see fellow members on sick leave with illnesses that may keep them from driving to work, but wouldn't prevent them from working at or closer to their home. If it was available, many of these workers could have requested a work-at-home assignment.

Numerous states have passed laws requiring telecommuting options for their employees. For example, California requires state agencies to develop and implement telecommuting plans in work areas where it is practical and beneficial. Georgia has empowered its state Technology Authority to provide and approve plans, policies and goals to increase telecommuting among state employees.

Minnesota prohibits state agencies from proposing or implementing capital investment plans for state office buildings unless it has a telecommuting plan for employees normally assigned to the building.

Earlier this year, the governor of Virginia signed a bill establishing a goal for state agencies to have 20 percent of their eligible workforce, with the exception of the state police, telecommuting by Jan. 1, 2010.

Our lawmakers should take note of what other public service agencies are doing to help the environment, relieve congested transportation systems and support working families.

Stephen Anderson is a supervising air pollution control engineer for the state Department of Environmental Protection and a union steward for CSEA/SEIU.