

Telework for Trainees: What you Need to Know

The Federal Government is a leader in the use of innovative workplace arrangements like telework. In June 2014, President Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum entitled, Enhancing Workplace Flexibilities and Work-Life Programs to help attract, empower and retain a talented and productive workforce in the 21st century. Telework can also help essential Federal functions to continue during emergency situations. There is a direct relationship between the Continuity of Operations (COOP) plan and telework.

Success Factors for Effective Telework

To be a successful teleworker you need to have work habits that support independent task performance. These work habits help in any job, but they are particularly important for successful telework and may include:

- the ability to work with minimal direct supervision;
- organized and productive work practices;
- good planning skills;
- effective time management skills;
- effective communication; and
- ability to handle work tools (computers, email, printers, networks, etc.) independently.

Communication and Trust

You and your supervisor need to discuss and agree on all the details of the telework arrangement. This will avoid misunderstanding about the terms and conditions (e.g., what days you will telework, what hours you will work on those days, how you will communicate, etc.). You will need to speak with your supervisor at least daily. If you will be seeing or communicating with patients during telework days, it is also very important to determine how you will get clinical supervision for these clinical encounters. You can have your supervisor join VA Video Connect (VVC) calls with you or discuss each patient with your supervisor before documenting the encounter in the electronic health record. The key difference between the telework relationship and the in-office relationship is that your supervisor cannot see what you are doing when you are working at home. Are you working or walking the dog? Are you working or chatting on the phone with friends? It all comes down to trust that you will perform your duties to the best of your abilities.

Establishing Communication Procedures - When establishing your communication practices, be clear about:

- What kinds of things need to be communicated?
- Who you need to communicate with: supervisor, coworkers, customers?
- How often should you communicate?
- How will you communicate (e.g., phone, voice mail, email, SKYPE, ZOOM or video calls)?
- How can you get help if you have difficulty with network connectivity, network access or other technical problems?

You may be recalled into the VA facility if you are needed for duties that cannot be performed by telework.

Telework Challenges

Living up to Supervisor's Expectations: The best way to meet your employer's expectations is to create reasonable ones and then be dedicated to living up to them. Be open and honest when you and your supervisor negotiate the telework agreement. There should be no difference between performance expectations based on a traditional supervisory arrangement and those based on a telework arrangement

Preparing to Work in Your Home - Identify a suitable work location that includes:

- adequate workspace,
- control over lighting and sound,
- access to telephone and electrical outlets, and
- safety and security of work materials.

Separating Home and Work: If you are concerned about your productivity level, you may want to try some of these telework tips:

- eat breakfast;
- establish a regular telework routine including getting dressed each day;
- identify a space in your home where you feel comfortable teleworking, ensuring it is quiet enough to make phone calls or video calls;
- try to minimize distractions like household noise, the TV or family/roommates;
- develop a to-do list for your day and prioritize your work;
- stay focused on completing your to-do list; and
- stay flexible if you get different assignments.

Overcoming Barriers to Telework

Work Planning/Scheduling Requirements - When you are in the office every day, an impromptu meeting is not a problem. If you are a part-time or full-time teleworker, however, you need to plan meetings in advance or be available to participate via telephone. When making or receiving work assignments, you may need to coordinate schedules. Be flexible to accommodate your supervisor's scheduling requirements. Effective work planning can support team efforts across time and space. Just as when you work in the office, work closely with your supervisor and coworkers to establish guidelines for working in a team environment.

Information Security Issues - Health professions trainees must take responsibility for the security of the data and other information that they handle while teleworking. This means they should:

- be familiar with, understand, and comply with their agency's information security policies.
- participate in agency information security training (this is covered in the Mandatory Training for Trainees course).
- follow security protocols for remote connectivity.
- maintain security of any relevant materials, including patient files, correspondence, and equipment.

VA Video Connect (VVC) remains the preferential method to conduct video Telehealth encounters between the veteran and provider. However, VHA clinicians may also use video chats, including (but not limited to): Apple FaceTime, Facebook Messenger video chat, Google Hangouts video, or Skype. VHA Telehealth providers are encouraged to provide notification to patients that these third-party applications potentially introduce privacy risks, and providers should enable all available encryption and privacy modes when using such applications. However, applications that are public facing shall not be used to provide telehealth. This includes but is not limited to, Facebook Live, Twitch, TikTok or similar communication applications. Remember to not expose Veteran protected health information (PHI) via regular email, text messaging or chat. PHI must be encrypted.

Thank you for completing this brief training on VA telework. Should you have additional questions, contact your clinical supervisor.

VHA Telehealth Services (Intranet/Internal): <http://vaww.telehealth.va.gov/> Telehealth Helpdesk: 1-866-651-3180

VA Remote Access Request Portal (Intranet/Internal): <https://vaww.ramp.vansoc.va.gov/>

- Remote Access Information (Intranet/Internal) <https://vaww.oit.va.gov/services/remote-access/>
- Remote Access Information (Internet/External) https://www.oit.va.gov/resources/remote-access/?utm_source=intranet-ra-page&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=covid-19

This training program has been abstracted for health professions trainees by Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA). Contact OAA by emailing VHA10X1ActionOAA@va.gov