



Commuter Choice® Leadership Initiative Phone Forum Making the Case: Strong Commuter Benefits at Federal Facilities May 21, 2003

Available exclusively to Commuter Choice® Employers, phone forums provide cutting-edge information on a range of topics related to commuter benefits. Moderated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), these forums feature experts on key topic areas.

On May 21, 2003, the Commuter Choice® Leadership Initiative held a phone forum focusing on commuter choice programs at federal facilities. Patty Klavon, EPA forum moderator, provided opening remarks and introduced the featured participants.

Featured Participant Presentations

Valerie Broadwell, EPA Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina

Valerie Broadwell is a transportation planner with EPA's Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards in Research Triangle Park (RTP), North Carolina. Less than 2 years ago, EPA's RTP offices moved into a new, million square foot building that houses approximately 2,000 employees. EPA decided to limit the amount of parking available at the new facility to 1,600 spaces to minimize the facility's footprint. To make the reduced number of parking spaces work, EPA decided to offer a menu of commuter benefits to encourage employees to use alternative forms of transportation.

EPA conducted an employee survey about the parking situation and received negative feedback from employees about the parking reductions. Ms. Broadwell responded to the feedback to manage

employee's resistance and introduce the alternatives. The commuter benefits that were offered included transit subsidies, preferred parking for carpools, compressed work schedules, telecommuting, showers, bike racks, an onsite convenience store, and area bus service. In addition, the agency set up a transportation Web site with information for commuters.

Currently, 40 employees use the transit subsidy, three vanpools have been organized, 75 percent of employees use compressed work schedules, and 300 employees telework at least two times per week. To help promote telework, EPA allows employees to take home laptop computers.

In addition, EPA developed an in-house emergency ride home (ERH) program as a security blanket for those employees who were concerned about using alternate forms of transportation. Approval of the in-house ERH program took a year, and this EPA facility was the first federal facility to implement an ERH program. The program, which is available to those who take the bus or vanpool, is working very well in combination with the other commuter benefits EPA offers.

Ms. Broadwell cited interactions with parking professionals from Duke University and the City of Durham and other parking managers as useful resources in the development and implementation of the commuter benefits program at RTP.

Additional information is available on RTP's Public Transportation Web site at www.epa.gov/rtp/transportation/index.htm. If you have questions regarding the program at EPA's RTP facility, contact Valerie Broadwell at broadwell.valerie@epa.gov.

Philippa Houston, Defense Financial and Accounting Service, U.S. Department of Defense

Philippa Houston is the Special Programs Administrator at the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Defense Financial and Accounting Service (DFAS) in Columbus, Ohio. DFAS's commuter benefits program began in 2000 and was started with the assistance of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) RideSolutions. MORPC assisted DFAS with transportation fairs, employee education and registration, and vanpool setup, and made an ERH available for those employees participating in a vanpool.

DFAS currently has 115 employees using DFAS's subsidy program, which utilizes a voucher system through the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). These employees receive up to \$100 in vouchers on a quarterly basis and can redeem the vouchers for bus passes or vanpool fares. To ensure proper use of the vouchers, DFAS requires employees to submit receipts for commuting expenses on a monthly basis.

For new employees who are hired in the middle of the quarter, the program provides for reimbursement of transit expenses. However, once employees are enrolled, they must use the vouchers—they are no longer eligible for reimbursement. If DOT is delayed in sending the vouchers, employees have to pay out of pocket without reimbursement, which can be a drawback of the voucher system.

Currently, DFAS does not have an active telework program in place primarily because of the security concerns associated with DOD work. For additional information on DFAS's programs, contact <philippa.houston@dfas.mil>.

Ann Toohey, Office of the General Counsel, EPA

Ann Toohey, an attorney-advisor for EPA's Office of General Counsel, introduced sev-

eral of the legal issues associated with in-house ERH. As a result of a 1993 statute (5 USC 7905) that mandated that federal agencies encourage employees to use means other than single-occupant vehicles to commute to work, federal agencies have a greater opportunity to provide ERH to employees. Currently, there are no explicit rules or regulations instructing federal agencies on how to set up an in-house program; however, several concepts are important to keep in mind. First, the program should have a documented registry of who is eligible to use the service, and the program should include a specific monetary cap on fare reimbursement. In addition, ERH use should only be used in emergency situations. These limits are important to ensure that the system is not abused while still encouraging the use of alternate transportation.

For additional information on in-house ERH programs, contact Ann Toohey at <toohey.ann@epa.gov>

Stan Kaczmarczyk, U.S. General Services Administration Office of Governmentwide Policy

Stan Kaczmarczyk is the Director of the Innovative Workplaces Division of the U.S. General Service Administration (GSA) Office of Governmentwide Policy. This new division of GSA was formed in May 2000 to handle a host of workplace environment issues that can impact productivity, recruitment, and employee retention. Benefits of teleworking programs include environmental benefits; easing traffic congestion; improving work-life balance; increasing recruitment and retention potential; increasing employee performance and productivity; and potential real estate cost savings in the long term.

Three of the primary barriers to a successful telework program are technical issues, security, and management resistance.

Mr. Kaczmarczyk believes that if an employer gives his/her best employees the best equipment, the employee will figure out how to effectively and efficiently get the work done at home. He also believes it is important to note that the responsibilities of the employee and the employer are the same regardless of whether the work is being conducted in the office or at home. In addition, telework programs can be customized to fit the needs of a specific office. Currently, 5 percent of the federal workforce is teleworking but there is always room for improvement. For additional information, contact the telework team leader, Dr. Wendell Joice at <wendell.joyce@gsa.gov>. Mr. Kaczmarczyk can be reached at <stan.kaczmarczyk@gsa.gov>.

Open Discussion

Following the featured speakers' presentations, other forum participants asked questions and provided additional information on some of the points discussed.

- Debra Imhoff from the National Park Service asked if there are set policies in place for the telework program at RTP. Ms. Broadwell explained that management was required to negotiate with the union to develop policies, and both the employee and management must sign an agreement form prior to that employee beginning telework. Examples of this form are available at <www.epa.gov/rtp/transportation/index.htm>.
- A representative from the Small Business Administration in Puerto Rico asked if EPA provides a laptop computer and cell phone for every employee for purposes of telecommuting. Ms. Broadwell explained that laptops are available for employees to take home, but EPA does not provide employees with cell phones. Most employees use a government-issued calling card or their personal cell phones when working from home.

- Kristin Nester from Fairchild Air Force Base asked if there have been any changes to telecommuting policies within DOD. The speakers were not aware of any recent developments, and the participants discussed some of the security concerns associated with telecommuting by DOD employees.
- The participants also discussed the implementation of telework programs on an agency-wide basis versus and office-by-office basis.

Closing

Patty Klavon closed by thanking the featured participants for their presentations and thanking all Commuter Choice® Employers for participating in the forum. She also mentioned that additional information on topics discussed, including telework and ERH benefit briefs, is available at <www.commuterchoice.gov> or by calling 888 856-3131. In addition, DOT's Federal Transit Administration Web site, <www.fta.dot.gov/library/policy/cc/cc.html>, provides information on the federal executive order for transit subsidies along with other tools to help federal agencies implement transit benefits.