

Flexible Workplace Policy

Focus Group Conversation Sessions



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OVERVIEW

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created barriers that challenged the county to reimagine service delivery and provide employees innovative ways to continue to conduct business. A temporary [Ad Hoc Telecommuting Policy](#) was quickly authorized to eligible employees to perform some or all of their work in an alternate work location, including an employee's home. A Flexible Workplace Policy Team was convened in February 2021 to lead in building a permanent flexible workplace environment. The Flexible Workplace Policy Team focused on building a permanent flexible workplace environment while also ensuring alignment with the county's [Residents First Strategic Priority](#); [Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals](#); service delivery framework, [Strategic Facilities Plan](#), and continued [Talent Attraction, Retention, and Promotion](#) (TARP) efforts.

The process toward a permanent flexible workplace environment included a countywide survey available for all employees, employee focus group conversations, and a multitude of communications. This report focuses on the employee focus group conversations.

Purpose

Employee engagement is critical in reimagining and creating a permanent flexible workplace environment and policy for its employees. Throughout the year, despite the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought, the county showed the continued efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery countywide even when working remotely or in an alternate work location. In addition to the countywide employee engagement survey, focus group conversation sessions were conducted to collect targeted feedback from employees and community members.

Although not all responses and preferences were met, majority of the results from the focus group conversations was used to shape future related countywide policies and guidelines.

Method

Targeted recruitment and communications to specific departments and employees were done for the focus group conversations to ensure as many voices were represented and given an opportunity to share their feedback and concerns. These targeted employees included labor representatives, frontline staff who have continued to deliver in-person services, advisory groups, trusted messengers representing residents' interests, and employee resource groups for racially and ethnically diverse employees.

In May and June 2021, focus group conversations with specific employee populations were conducted. All employees in the targeted populations were invited to and given the opportunity to log into an online Zoom meeting and answer questions and share experiences related to working from home and providing remote services. Responses from each employee remained anonymous and only the employee's department or group was identified for record. Table 1 details the departments and groups who were engaged in a focus group conversation session.

**Table 1.** Focus group conversation sessions by departments and groups.

Target	Department or Group	Employees Engaged ¹
Labor Relations	Labor Management Committee	12
Frontline Staff	Financial Assistance Services ²	30
	Social Services	11
	Workforce Solutions	18
Departments with Previous Flexible Workplace Policies	Child Support Services	12
	Financial Assistance Services ³	30
	Public Health	90
Resident Experience	Courts	9
	Service Center Navigators	12
	RECERT ⁴ Trusted Messengers	12
Employee Resource Groups	Asian Decent Network, Black Excellence and Latinx	39

Scope

During each focus group conversation session with each of the departments or groups, a list of questions was developed from the Flexible Workplace Policy Team. There was at least one facilitator for each session based on the number of employees in attendance. Notes were taken at every session and recorded onto a tracking sheet for analysis.

1. What are some of the events, accomplishments, or key elements of working from home that you experienced over the last year?
2. Do you feel you have been able to learn and grow under current work from home policies?
3. What have you liked and disliked about your current work environment? What are some of the barriers you have faced?
4. What have been the high and low points? Where did you struggle and where did you have a breakthrough?
5. Has your or others' ability to work from home been beneficial to you or Ramsey County residents?
6. If you have been able to work from home over the past year, has this experience lived up to your expectations?
7. Reflecting on your work from home experience over the past year, how would you rate it in terms of the County's ability to serve residents?
8. What does the County's experience with working from home during the pandemic tell us about who we are and where we need to go in the future? Who else do we need to talk to?
9. What resources are needed to make a more permanent flexible work policy successful? What policy changes are needed?

¹ Employees engaged only reflect the number of employees who participated in the actual focus group conversation sessions. This value does not represent the number of employees in each department or group.

² Financial assistance services were a department that represented frontline staff and an area with previous flexible workplace policies. The value 30 is the total number of employees engaged and only one focus group conversation was conducted.

³ Financial assistance services were a department that represented frontline staff and an area with previous flexible workplace policies. The value 30 is the total number of employees engaged and only one focus group conversation was conducted.

⁴ The Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT) was a group of community members created and led by the Racial and Health Equity Administrators to support racially and ethnically diverse residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Resident Benefits

Under the Ad Hoc Telecommuting Policy, services were able to be offered in a virtual setting. This authorized employees to serve residents in a way that did not require travel and allowed residents a new way to meet with appropriate employees to accomplish what was usually done in-person, through an online platform, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Financial Assistance Services (FAS), Public Health, Social Services, and Workforce Solutions (WFS) employees during their focus group conversation sessions shared their new utilization of online platforms and learned how to quickly work creatively with clients through the phone or online. Frontline staff, such as Navigators, continued to provide in-person services and commute on-site to a Ramsey County facility to help residents who walked up to a facility, specifically at a Ramsey County Service Center. Various departments had a common theme that highlighted the ease of virtual visits with clients, for instance:

- FAS employees were able to serve residents quicker remotely
- Social Services and WFS employees utilized telehealth and phone options which improved resident engagement, especially clients who had social anxiety
- Public Health employees shared that majority of their clients expressed their appreciation of not having to drive to the facility to pay and find parking
- Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT) Trusted Messengers heard from community members and residents that virtual service delivery and events hosted by the county offered increased flexibility and ease when attending, which increased participation compared to if the event was in-person.

Employees from various departments and groups mentioned the added privacy feature with working with clients remotely as well. Previously, employees would have to find a private office or space on-site or speak in a volume where nearby employees or residents were not able to hear. The online option to meet with clients increased privacy when discussing cases or issues.

Resident Challenges

The focus group conversation sessions also revealed that although virtual service delivery enhanced access for many residents, it also created barriers for some residents, especially non-English speakers, those with lack of technology access, and residents with disabilities.

For employees, it was difficult to reach residents with technology issues. Clients on the other end of the line were often frustrated from technical disruptions and it was hard to provide immediate translation over the phone. It was also acknowledged that some services and documents required of the client lacked reliable electronic versions or easy to fill online forms. Even if that was something that was created, there were clients who did not have reliable internet access to complete and turn in the form appropriately. This created another barrier of mailing documents back and forth.

Many virtual services presented a steep learning curve for residents, and employees reported:

- Clients struggled with the lack of personal connections that come with remote service.
- There are a lot of community members who are not comfortable with technology or have tech access barriers.
- Some residents are unaware that virtual options are available.
- A hybrid model is needed to fill gaps and provide equitable access for all residents.



Employee Benefits and Challenges

Although there were a mix of experiences shared during each focus group conversation session, there were major themes regarding important considerations and lessons learned from working from home that employees thought would be good to note.

Examples of benefits and challenges from employees included:

Increased productivity.

Employees expressed the need for the incoming Flexible Workplace Policy to leverage available technology to allow the county and its employees to continue to benefit from the enhanced productivity associated with remote work. On the other hand, a few employees cited at-home distractions, but most employees reported that flexible work options enhanced their productivity.

Several employees regardless of department or group, had several commonalities:

- Home environments were quieter.
- Less time was lost to having side conversations with peers.
- Some employees took more time to explain programs to clients in a remote setting.
- Majority of employees cited their ability to stay more focused at home.
- Being able to work during times usually spent commuting or travelling to meetings.
- Ability to stay more organized, improve time management, respond to requests more quickly and maintain better concentration.
- Reduced number of employees calling out sick and increased the number of hours their colleagues are willing to work.
- Team meetings are generally shorter and more productive virtually.

Relationships and team building.

Another emphasis was related to ensuring the Flexible Workplace Policy allowed employees to interact with and work alongside their teams on a regular basis to reduce isolation, improve morale, encourage professional growth and foster team building.

Focus group conversations with employees revealed that many believe flexwork options and new technology have improved relationships and team connections, as well as enhanced collaboration through Zoom and chats on Microsoft Teams.

- Labor representatives stated that work has allowed team leaders and peers to build trust and have cultivated more grace and understanding from managers.
- Similarly, FAS employees have found their supervisors are more accessible and able to be there for them more often.
- Employees in Social Services and WFS reported that virtual work environment enhanced their professional development, creating more opportunities to participate in new trainings, attend more meetings/webinars and build more connections across departments.

However, there were opposite comments heard as well:

- Some employees struggled to build and maintain personal connections with their team.
- Many employees preferred in-person meetings and missed face-to-face human contact.
- Several wanted to see peers more often and felt team building was difficult to do.
- New employees had challenges during onboarding and not feeling connected to their team.
- Interactions with peers seemed limited to scheduled online meetings, making it challenging to brainstorm and collaborate organically.



Mental health and work/life balance.

Most employees who participated in the focus group conversation sessions said that flexible work options have improved mental and physical health. According to labor representatives, employees were generally more comfortable at home and were able to eat healthier and make more time for exercise and other forms of selfcare, since they were not required to be in the office on a daily basis. Other staff reported that they were able to work different hours outside of the standard county office hours of 8:00am to 4:30pm, which helped to lower stress, multitask household chores and better manage time. Other employees, such as FAS, shared they had more time with family and pets at home. All of these factors overall contributed to employees feeling healthier – mentally, physically and emotionally. Furthermore, employees appreciated being able to work from home when they were not feeling their best and accrue sick time for when it is needed most.

Although many employees appreciated the improved mental health and work/life balance, others had issues with more stress and fatigue instead. Due to increased productivity, employees shared how the virtual work environment have eroded boundaries:

- Difficulty disconnecting because their work and home environments were the same place.
- The pace of work would go late into the evening, leaving little time for rest and relaxation.
- Virtual meetings would often be scheduled back-to-back, leaving little time for breaks
- Physical health is now worse due to the lack of exercise

Technology and ergonomics.

There were rising concerns around considerations of ensuring employees working from home were given access to high-speed internet, work cell phones and ergonomic furniture to work most effectively. It was brought up that several jobs within the county were still very paper-intensive and many forms or documents were not available electronically yet. This required extra time and work for employees who had to print, scan, file and mail paperwork to clients and residents. A recurring issue that came up was the lack of an at-home work printer. Some employees work with confidential information that need to be transmitted securely. In order to ensure confidentiality, employees requested the use of fillable forms, scanning technology and acceptance of electronic signatures to help alleviate challenges and the need for at-home work printers.

Other related feedback included:

- Inefficient home workspaces, such as lack of standing desks that were available in the office.
- Sitting all day have made working less comfortable and efficient.
- The need for easier or more possible ways to bring office furniture and supplies home.
- Some have invested considerable amounts of their own money into the ergonomic equipment and quality internet service they need to work at home safely.
- Others reported having to use their personal cell phones for county business.
- Difficulty getting a hold of Information Services for immediate and urgent needed assistance.
- Not enough proper technology training and support to avoid minor technology issues.

Equity

Nearly 50% of the Ramsey County workforce continued to commute to county facilities and provide essential direct services to county residents during the Ad Hoc Telecommuting Policy. Many of these employees are still expected to provide resident services and work in-person to continue meeting their specific job classification and function. This means that not all employees will have the ability to have flexwork, because of the importance of Residents' First and recognizing specific employees' critical roles that are needed in-person.



Employees who provided resident-facing services expressed frustration with the limitations of flexwork and how it would at times hinder their own work on-site in a county office or facility. Sometimes it would be hard to reach employees or peers who are working remotely. These employees expressed interest in finding ways they can also utilize flexwork regardless of their job classification or function. Racially and ethnically diverse staff who participated in focus group conversation sessions reported inequities in the availability of flexwork options. Regardless of intentions of management, they shared the continued need to diversify Ramsey County workforce and that requires equitable opportunities for advancement and professional growth.

Some employees during the focus group conversation were afraid of coming back in-person, reasons of not wanting to come back included:

- No feeling of safety or comfortability in the office.
- Have had experience of workplace harassment or abuse.
- Lack of support when it came to the workplace culture creating an unhealthy environment.


RECOMMENDATIONS

After feedback from over ten different county departments and groups, a continued flexwork environment with a hybrid approach may be best in addressing as many concerns as possible from employees. Most importantly, a hybrid model supports the continued and diverse needs of residents. Keeping in mind the challenges and advantages of in-person and virtual services, being able to offer both will ensure a variety of access for residents to receive services they require.


Based on the focus group conversations, the future Flexible Workplace Policy should:

- Support a hybrid model of virtual and in-person service delivery to enhance remote access while also providing face-to-face interactions for residents facing technological and other barriers.
- Leverage available technology to allow the county and its employees to continue to benefit from the enhanced productivity associated with remote work.
- Allow employees to interact with and work alongside their teams on a regular basis to reduce isolation, improve morale, encourage professional growth and foster team building.
- Establish clear barriers between work and personal time so that employees are able to find a balance between their professional and home life while continuing to benefit from the increased flexibility of a virtual work environment.
- Provide ongoing training and support to avoid work disruptions and give future consideration to ensuring staff has access to the high-speed internet, cell phones and ergonomic furniture they need work most effectively.
- Address disparities and help ensure that all county employees have safe and healthy work environments, as well as access to needed support and opportunities for advancement and professional growth.

APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP CONVERSATION PRESENTATION

 RAMSEY COUNTY

**Flexible Work Policy
Focus Group Conversation**

 RAMSEY COUNTY

Outline

1. Goal of Flexible Work Policy Workgroup
2. Key definitions
3. Focused conversation
4. Next steps

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Virtual Agreements

- Be open-minded.
- Listen actively/respectfully when others are speaking.
- Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing ("I" instead of "they," "we," and "you").
- Respectfully ask challenging questions and refrain from personal attacks.
- Be engaged and provide feedback.
- The goal is not to always agree -- it is to gain a deeper understanding.
- Be aware of your facial expressions --they can be perceived as disrespectful as words.
- Do not dominate the discussion, allow others to be heard.
- "Step Up and Step Back!"

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Goal of Flexible Work Policy Workgroup:

Develop a ***Flexible Work Policy*** that transitions and transforms our organization to build a permanent workforce environment that aligns with our Resident's first strategic priority, our core values, service delivery framework and strategic facilities plan in serving our community while leveraging technology and a flexible work environment to attract and retain a talented workforce.

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Spectrum of Workforce Needs



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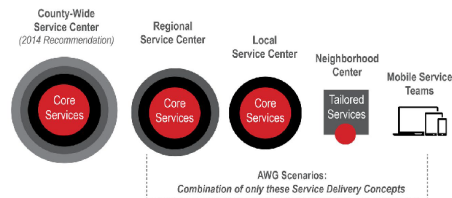
Residents First: Accessible and Strategic Facilities Vision

- **Residents First Facilities**, with an integrated delivery of the core services, in a place that is easily accessible by transit, vehicles, bikes, and pedestrians.
- **Neighborhood locations** offering a mix of tailored services that are easily accessible in suburban and Saint Paul locations.
- **Mobile service teams** bringing services into neighborhoods.
- **Leveraging technology** for delivery of services, anywhere/anytime.
- Technology and policies promoting opportunities for staff to work from multiple different locations.

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Residents First: Accessible and Strategic Facilities

- Saint Paul location, downtown, for core and other beneficial services, access to transit and affordable parking.
- Neighborhood locations with a mix of tailored services, scalable and flexible (urban/suburban existing or new, i.e. SPOC).
- Mobile Service Teams with integrated service offerings at partner & community sites.



*Any/All Service Delivery Concepts Assume Technology Leveraged

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Key Definitions

- **Flexwork** is when an employee works on a regular schedule at a designated non- county facility or office, such as his or her home.
- **Mobile work** is when an employee's job function requires travel to meet and work off-site with clients, customers, or partners.

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Questions?

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Focused Conversation

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Focused Conversation

What are some of the events, accomplishments or key elements of working from home that you experienced over the last year?

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Focused Conversation

What are some of the events, accomplishments or key elements of working from home that you experienced over the last year?

Do you feel you have been able to learn and grow under current work from home policies?

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Focused Conversation

What have you liked and disliked about your current work environment? What are some of the barriers you have faced?

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Focused Conversation

What have you liked and disliked about your current work environment? What are some of the barriers you have faced?

What have been the high and low points? Where did you struggle and where did you have a breakthrough?

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Focused Conversation

Has your or others' ability to work from home been beneficial to you or Ramsey County residents?

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Focused Conversation

Has your or others' ability to work from home been beneficial to you or Ramsey County residents?

If you have been able to work from home over the past year, has this experience lived up to your expectations?

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Focused Conversation

Has your or others' ability to work from home been beneficial to you or Ramsey County residents?

If you have been able to work from home over the past year, has this experience lived up to your expectations?

Reflecting on your work from home experience over the past year, how would you rate it in terms of the County's ability to serve residents?

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Focused Conversation

What does the County's experience with working from home during the pandemic tell us about who we are and where we need to go in the future? Who else do we need to talk to?

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Focused Conversation

What does the County's experience with working from home during the pandemic tell us about who we are and where we need to go in the future? Who else do we need to talk to?

What resources are needed to make a more permanent flexible work policy successful? What policy changes are needed?

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Focused Conversation

What does the County's experience with working from home during the pandemic tell us about who we are and where we need to go in the future? Who else do we need to talk to?

What resources are needed to make a more permanent flexible work policy successful? What policy changes are needed?

What are the next steps?

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 RAMSEY COUNTY

Focused Conversation

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