

---

---

# PROMISING PRACTICES IN STATE SURVEY AGENCIES

---

---

## *Telework Programs*

### North Dakota

#### **Summary**

Faced with losing qualified applicants from rural areas of the state due to the requirement to move to Bismarck, the Division of Health Facilities at the North Dakota Department of Health implemented a community-based workplace program in 2000. The program has effectively expanded the recruitment pool and currently supports five surveyors across the state.

#### **Introduction**

This report describes the structure and functioning of North Dakota's community-based workplace program for surveyor staff, its impact, and lessons learned that might benefit other agencies considering telework programs. The information presented is based on interviews with agency management staff and review of documentation supporting the program.

#### **Background**

The agency established its community-based workplace program as a strategy to strengthen recruitment by gaining access to professionals outside of the Bismarck metropolitan area who are not able or willing to commute or relocate their family, often due to farming or ranching ties in the rural community. The program also was expected to enhance surveyor retention by increasing morale and job satisfaction and permitting the agency to retain valuable staff who must relocate a distance from Bismarck.

Telework programs are encouraged by the North Dakota state government as a means to address concern that rural communities are being drained of professionals by large Bismarck-based employers; teleworking is viewed as a mechanism that "reverses the migration of health care professionals from the rural areas of the state."

#### **Intervention**

Five of 27 surveyors currently participate in the community-based workplace program. The

agency limits participation in the program to a maximum of one-third of all surveyors at any one time. Managers, team leaders, and nonsurveyor staff are not eligible to participate. Eligible surveyors must be permanent, full-time employees, live more than 25 miles from the Bismarck central office, and must have passed the Surveyor Minimum Qualifications Training. Surveyors also should be qualified in two or more program types to provide sufficient activity for a 40-hour workweek from a community-based location. Surveyors may apply to participate after one year of employment; the waiting period is designed to ensure time to develop a strong experience base and demonstrate the capacity to effectively work without close supervisory monitoring. Community-based surveyors must sign a program agreement and complete a safety checklist that addresses 19 factors related to a safe and healthy work environment.

The agency provides community-based surveyors with dedicated phone lines, covering costs of installation and monthly service fees. Surveyors use their own computers and printers, but receive technical support for hardware as well as for agency-supplied software. Community-based surveyors are required to be at the Bismarck office two weeks per quarter. One week is dedicated to staff training. The additional week, or four 10-hour days, in the office can be distributed throughout the quarter as elected by individual surveyors. The required additional office days are intended to ensure in-person contact with agency managers and socialization

with office-based staff as well as providing opportunity for surveyors to obtain office supplies, utilize facility files, receive computer and printer maintenance checks, view Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) training videos, or reconvene teams to develop deficiency documentation for a completed survey. Office- and community-based staff are required to work the same core hours during the standard four-day workweek. Supervision of community-based surveyors relies heavily on e-mail communication regarding schedules and activities.

The agency began establishing secure home access to ASPEN Central Office (ACO) and the state network in January 2005. To facilitate community-based work and increase efficient use of time, the agency has developed on-line access to a single file of necessary survey forms, eliminating the need to obtain multiple forms from the Web or the agency network in preparation for each survey.

### **Implementation**

The agency conducted a year-long pilot program to work through logistical and policy issues prior to establishing a permanent program and to examine the cost impact and effect on office-based morale of allowing a portion of staff to work from an alternate location.

### **Impact**

Agency management reports that recruitment efforts have yielded a higher-volume response since the advent of the community-based workplace program, with many applicants indicating that the program drew them to apply for a surveyor position. The increased flexibility and reduced travel time associated with the program also appear to have contributed to retention of experienced and productive staff. The program also is perceived to have expedited facility revisits by having surveyors located throughout the state.

Verbal feedback on the community-based workplace program is obtained during quarterly meetings between individual surveyors and management staff. This structured input as well

as ongoing feedback from both community- and office-based staff helps identify and resolve interpersonal, technical, or other problems associated with the program. Office-based staff have expressed concerns regarding workload inequity and productivity of community-based surveyors, although workload concerns diminished considerably when home access to ACO was established, which reduced reliance on office-based staff to assist with revising deficiency documentation. Contrary to the concerns of office-based staff regarding productivity, agency management estimate that community-based surveyors accomplish 10 to 15 percent more surveys than their office-based colleagues due to the expectation that they conduct revisits in their geographic area or survey independently for their other program types. Agency management commented that, in their experience, community-based staff tend to actively strive to fill every minute of the workday.

The agency has reduced office space and associated expenditures as a result of the community-based workplace program, although other cost savings have not been identified to date. However, agency management anticipates long-term financial benefits related to retaining surveyor staff.

### **Lessons Learned**

Agency management advises setting specific program goals and structuring the program to function effectively within the agency's operations and travel regulations. Documentation of the program's eligibility criteria, policies, and procedures is recommended, as well as requiring a signed agreement that explicitly states the agency's right to revoke community-based work status. A workplace safety checklist also is suggested.

Efficiency and productivity can be maximized by establishing teleworkers in regions of high facility concentration and requiring training in multiple programs, particularly in states with relatively low volume of facilities and surveyor staff.

If a telework program limits participation to a subset of staff, it is critical to address potential resentment and perception of inequity in workload, productivity, or work environment among office-based staff. It is advisable to establish mechanisms that encourage communication on problems and suggested improvements related to the program. Agency management should ensure that community-based staff are accessible during agreed upon hours and request that they limit comments about the benefits and comforts of working from home that might cause resentment among office-based workers who do not have the telework option.

Although time-consuming and challenging, agency management strongly advocates establishing secure home access to the state network and ACO. Rural states may encounter difficulties related to dealing with multiple phone companies across the state and establishing sufficient bandwidth to home-based offices,

although the North Dakota agency has been successful in installing broadband service for all community-based surveyors.

### **Contact Information and Resources**

For more information about the community-based workplace program at the North Dakota Division of Health Facilities, please contact Bruce Pritschet, Director, Division of Health Facilities, at 701/328-2352 or [bpritsch@state.nd.us](mailto:bpritsch@state.nd.us).

North Dakota's Policy & Procedure Manual, Community-Based Workplace Program Agreement, and Safety Checklist used in the agency's community-based workplace program are available as a resource for agencies considering establishing a telework program. These documents can be accessed online by clicking on the Promising Practices Supplemental State Resources link.

*This document is part of an issue brief on teleworking practices in state survey agencies. The issue brief is one of a series by the Division of Health Care Policy and Research, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in state survey agencies. The entire series is available online at CMS' Website, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/SurvCertPromPractProj>. The issue briefs are intended to share information about practices used in state survey agencies and are not an endorsement of any practice.*