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**Capitol View**

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**Pillen Wants All Hands on Deck**

Governor Jim Pillen wants all state government employees at their desks in their assigned departments beginning next month.

He said the pandemic-era remote is over, although both empirical and anecdotal evidence nationwide show a workplace change that was pandemic caused has become the new normal. Oh, and never mind the fact that some state agencies have remote and telework policies that have been in place for 15 years. And, of course, not every department has the physical space available for more employees.

But those are just hard facts and nasty details. The governor is adamant about wanting bodies to be present so he can run government like a business. That was an old Pete Ricketts dream, but even he was realistic enough to realize that changing times call for changing best practices.

Not the new guy in the corner office when he’s there. Let’s remember that Pillen has chosen to live at his home in Columbus and get chauffeured to work by a State Patrol security detail. It’s highly unlikely he’ll have his feet under his desk 8 hours a day. Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander.

His move caught the state employee union off guard. One would think he would have at least discussed the issue with union management. But, as we have learned since the election, that’s not the Pillen way. As for him not being in the office, he’ll say I have to serve the entire state.

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Guess what governor, so do your state employees. In my humble opinion, they have done a great job of adjusting to the pandemic and making things work. Don’t forget the folks in the different time zone out west who lose an hour trying to contact people at their desks in Lincoln.

There has been considerable pushback from state employees, many of whom say they’ll likely look for work in the private sector. Pillen writes that off as the cost of doing business. Wait until he sees the number of vacancies created. State government has about 2,500 vacancies now. More than 2,855 state employees who have been working in hybrid or remote settings.

Sen. Myron Dorn of Adams said at a recent forum that he had already heard from a Lincoln company that is excited about what Pillen's order could mean for the private sector, which has faced its own hiring challenges in Nebraska. Nebraska has an unemployment rate of 2.2 percent and there were 60,000 job openings this summer.

"They were kind of optimistic now because they have the possibility to grow their workforce," Dorn told the Lincoln Journal-Star. "Yes, in return … we now maybe reduced our state workforce. Don't know. We'll see how the numbers play out."

The Nebraska Association of Public Employees has considered demanding an immediate bargaining period over the issue, said the group’s executive director Justin Hubly. That could make things interesting.

Many disgruntled employees have been contacting Omaha Sen., Meghan Hunt, a vocal critic of Pillen. In general, their complaints center on concerns for their finances, mental health, family life and the state's ability to recruit and retain help. Many have also raised voiced concerns over the costs of commuting and parking — particularly in downtown Lincoln — that will accompany the return-to-office order.

A 2020 study by University of Nebraska-Lincoln economists showed that Nebraska is losing $745 million a year when parents leave the workforce or move elsewhere because of a lack of childcare.

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Some employees have told Hunt that they've already started to seek jobs in the private sector that will allow them to continue working from home, a trend that could exacerbate Nebraska's public workforce shortage.

"Everybody's got to make decisions in their best interest, so if there are public servants whose best interest is for them to do something where they can work from home — I believe I was elected to be governor to make sure that we have tremendous return for what everybody does, and the best way that happens is when you're at work face to face," Pillen said in a news release.

Consider this: The Department of Labor offered hybrid work setups specifically as an incentive to retain four unemployment insurance adjudicators: the Nebraska Department of Transportation employs more than 360 remote or hybrid workers, the Department of Revenue has 208 hybrid or remote employees; more than half of the state's remote or hybrid employees — 54% — work for the Department of Health and Human Services, which has had a telecommuting policy in place since 2008.

Some state agencies reduced their physical office space in recent years. The Department of Natural Resources has 72 hybrid employees and a telework policy in place for more than 15 years. They reduced physical workspace by 30% when the agency moved from the State Office Building to its Fallbrook facility in 2022.

The Department of Administrative Services adopted its work-from-home policy in 2021 to make room for the Department of Insurance move into a state space at a savings of $500,000 per year. A 2021 memo to Ricketts from the State Building Division warned that the state "is nearing capacity in all of its major office buildings."

So, Governor, tell us again why this is such a good policy to adopt right now. Choose your battles wisely.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.