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THE STATE WORKER

## California Assembly committee gives initial OK to state employee telework bill


By William Melhado

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Assemblyman Alex Lee, D-San Jose, speaks at a press conference in 2023. On Wednesday, an Assembly committee approved Lee's bill to protect state workers' ability to telework. Hector Amezcua [hamezcua@sacbee.com](mailto:hamezcua@sacbee.com)

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Over 100 California state employees crowded outside a hearing room of the Capitol Wednesday morning, waiting their turn to testify in support of a bill to protect their ability to telework.

The Assembly Committee unanimously passed [Assembly Bill 1729](#) and cheers from the hallway, where the mass of state employees had gathered to watch the vote, could be heard inside the hearing room.

The legislation, authored by Assemblymember Alex Lee, D-San Jose, would effectively suspend Gov. Gavin Newsom's return-to-office order and allow state agency leaders to [establish their own individual telework policies](#). Introducing his bill, Lee pointed to the potential financial benefits of reducing office space costs if state employees are allowed to maintain current remote work conditions.

"Since we are, of course, in a deficit situation, \$225 million is nothing to joke about," Lee said, referring to the [potential savings identified](#) by the California state auditor. "It is real health care money, it is real school money, money that could be spent more efficiently."

Workers from a wide range of departments and represented by a number of labor groups spoke in support of the bill Wednesday morning. Anica Walls, the president of SEIU Local 1000, the largest representative of state employees, and Ted Toppin, the executive director of Professional Engineers in California Government, both testified in support of the bill.

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“I wanted to thank all the state workers for coming out,” Assemblymember Tasha Boerner, D-Encinitas said. “It was so fascinating to hear the range of careers people can have (at the state.)”

Boerner said she was a proponent of telework because, among other benefits, it offers flexibility to parents. The ability to do laundry during breaks in the workday is a lifesaver, the assemblymember said outside the hearing room.

In 2022, Boerner [proposed a bill](#) that would have established telework protections for employees in California. She said she was glad to see the issue in front of lawmakers again and asked to be added as a coauthor of AB 1729.

## Lawmakers generally amenable to telework

Outside the committee room, Krystal Coles watched a livestream of the hearing with a group of other state employees. Coles, an SEIU Local 1000 district labor council president, noted that the state workers she represents at Sacramento’s May Lee Complex have concerns about parking and the increasing cost of gas if the return-to-office order goes into effect.

“That’s my guy,” Coles said, cheering in response to Lee’s comments. She and other state employees noted the bipartisan support the bill received on Wednesday.

A longtime public employee prior to his position in the Legislature, Assemblymember Tom Lackey, R-Palmdale, said public employees are often mischaracterized and that stereotyping can be hurtful.

“It’s important that we understand flexibility needs and the diverse needs within the public employee system,” he said, expressing support for the bill.

Assemblymember Tina McKinnor, D-Inglewood, said she initially had reservations about this legislation because earlier in her career as a public worker she didn't understand how employees could effectively work from home. McKinnor has since

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"I love this modernizing government," McKinnor, who chairs the Committee on Public Employment and Retirement, said.

While voting "aye," Assemblymember Michelle Rodriguez, D-Ontario, appeared to be the most skeptical of the legislation.

"In particular, I think it's important that we more closely examine the impact of state workforce policies on our local economies, as well as how evolving workplace structures including remote work may shape professional advancement opportunities especially for navigating career growth for women," she said.

Rodriguez said she reserved her right to reassess her position on the bill as it moves to the Assembly floor.

## **State workers support giving departments independence**

No one spoke in opposition to the bill on Wednesday, but if the Legislature passes it there is one major hurdle: the governor's desk.

When asked about AB 1729, the Governor's Office has previously said that it does not comment on pending legislation. But Newsom has maintained his support for mandating state employees work four days of in-person, calling it a necessary way to increase collaboration and mentorship.

Employees gathered at the state house Wednesday questioned Newsom's reasoning for requiring employees to return to government offices four days a week.

"We haven't heard the benefits for the employer or employees to come in," said Danica DuPaty, an Employment Development Department analyst. DuPaty said her work in the department's compliance office is done on the phone and working in proximity to other employees only makes her work more difficult to have those conversations.

The issue with Newsom's directive, she said, is that it is a blanket order that doesn't consider the operational needs of each department.

Several state workers expressed support for Lee's bill because it would give agencies discretion to set their own telework policies.

The other reason some stakeholders, including Newsom, want to see a greater return of state workers to government offices is to increase foot traffic in downtown Sacramento. But several workers said Wednesday that their working conditions

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“I don’t know if I can swing another \$120 a month to pay for parking,” said Trecina Littlejohn, another EDD analyst.

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