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# United States Senate

COMMITTEES  
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AND FORESTRY  
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AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

January 23, 2024

Ms. Shalanda Young  
Director  
Office of Management and Budget  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
1650 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Director Young,

It appears your memos are being ignored.

In April 2023, you wrote to the heads of executive departments and agencies, “It is the expectation that ... agencies ... will ... substantially increase meaningful in-person work at Federal offices, particularly at headquarters and equivalents.”<sup>1</sup> Now, nine months later, most agencies still haven’t listened.

What’s more, most agencies are facing stiff objections from the unions representing their workforces to get employees back in the office, even for just two days a week.<sup>2</sup> Truth be told, it should not surprise anyone that unions have been so successful in getting agencies to bend the knee when senior Biden administration officials have not been showing up to the office either.

I was shocked—as surely you were too—to learn Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spent much of the past month recovering from surgery, which he failed to disclose even to the Deputy Secretary or Commander-in-Chief.<sup>3</sup> It was not lost on me that amid the fallout, *POLITICO* reported “DOD officials said their office was told by Austin’s aides that the secretary was working from home for the week.”<sup>4</sup> If true, this begs the question, is Secretary Austin working from home so frequently that he can disappear into the hospital for an entire week to

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<sup>1</sup> OFFICE OF MGMT. & BUDGET, EXEC. OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, M-23-15, MEASURING, MONITORING, AND IMPROVING ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF EVOLVING AGENCY WORK ENVIRONMENTS (2023).

<sup>2</sup> FEDERAL NEWS NETWORK STAFF, *A Running List of Agencies’ Return-to-Office Plans*, Federal News Network (January 22, 2024, 3:14 PM), <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2023/12/heres-what-we-know-so-far-about-agencies-return-to-office-plans/>.

<sup>3</sup> GORDON LUBOLD & NANCY A. YOUSSEF, *How Lloyd Austin’s Deputy Ended Up Running the Pentagon From the Beach*, THE WALL ST. J., (JAN. 11, 2024), [https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/lloyd-austin-pentagon-deputy-beach-243bdf91?mod=Searchresults\\_pos1&page=1](https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/lloyd-austin-pentagon-deputy-beach-243bdf91?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1).

<sup>4</sup> ALEXANDER WARD, LARA SELIGMAN, & JONATHAN LEMIRE, *Pentagon Didn’t Inform Biden, White House for Days about Austin’s Hospitalization*, *POLITICO*, (JAN. 8, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/06/pentagon-took-3-days-to-inform-white-houses-nsc-of-austins-hospitalization-00134176>.

undergo invasive surgery, and folks simply just think he's working from home again? When department secretaries do work from home, are they as nonresponsive as someone under general anesthesia?

Three years into the Biden administration, it is clear: the federal workforce—and major players in the Biden administration—are taking their lead from President Joe Biden, who has spent about 40 percent of his time in office on vacation. Notably, President Biden was staying at a swanky vacation home of a Democratic donor on “tropical St. Croix”<sup>5</sup> at the same time Secretary Austin was in the hospital and Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks was running the Pentagon from Puerto Rico.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the Administrator of the General Services Administration (GSA) has also been absent from her D.C. office. Administrator Carnahan has been thumbing her nose at you from Missouri, where she has spent most of her time working, all while “the agency’s ‘full re-entry’ plan called employees back to their offices.”<sup>7</sup> It should be no surprise to learn GSA has an 11 percent office space utilization rate.<sup>8</sup>

The Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that “without a strong tone at the top to support an internal control system, ... results ... may not be ... acted upon to remediate deficiencies.”<sup>9</sup> This principle of risk mitigation and fraud prevention applies perfectly to remote work and telework abuse and fraud. When Secretary Buttigieg goes missing for months at a time, what incentive does the average Department of Transportation civil servant have to do his or her job diligently?<sup>10</sup> I can only hope the federal investigators responsible for making sure the Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft doors don't fly off mid-flight again won't take their lead from Secretary Buttigieg and others, and actually show up to work.

I am left drawing the unavoidable conclusion that the “tone at the top” across the Biden administration has undercut your efforts. With the new year comes new year's resolutions. I would encourage yours to be to redouble your efforts to get folks back in the office. That should include agency leadership as well.

Given the American people no longer trust senior leaders in the Biden administration to be where they say they are, every agency and department head should publish their schedule

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<sup>5</sup> Lisa Friedman, *Biden Begins Weeklong Vacation in Caribbean to Ring in the New Year*, N.Y. TIMES, (DEC. 27, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/27/us/politics/biden-vacation-st-croix.html>.

<sup>6</sup> GORDON LUBOLD & NANCY A. YOUSSEF, *How Lloyd Austin's Deputy Ended Up Running the Pentagon From the Beach*, THE WALL ST. J., (JAN. 11, 2024), [https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/lloyd-austin-pentagon-deputy-beach-243bdf91?mod=Searchresults\\_pos1&page=1](https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/lloyd-austin-pentagon-deputy-beach-243bdf91?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1).

<sup>7</sup> ALEX THOMPSON, *Scoop: Biden Agency Head Works Mostly from Missouri, not D.C.*, AXIOS, (OCT. 20, 2023), <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/20/biden-agency-head-works-remote-missouri-dc>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, *FEDERAL SPACE UTILIZATION: AGENCY HEADQUARTERS THREE-MONTH AVERAGE SPACE UTILIZATION STATISTICS* (2023), [https://www.ernst.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy23\\_all\\_staff-1150574-v1-qfr\\_pdf\\_federal\\_space\\_utilization\\_fouo.pdf](https://www.ernst.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy23_all_staff-1150574-v1-qfr_pdf_federal_space_utilization_fouo.pdf).

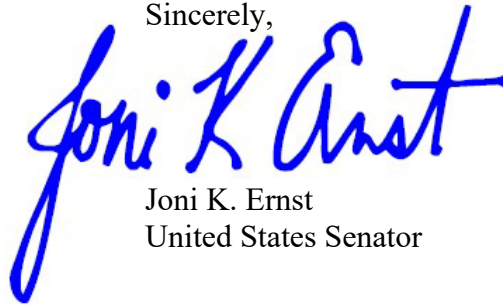
<sup>9</sup> U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, *STANDARDS FOR INTERNAL CONTROL IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT*, GAO-14-704G (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Emily Goodin, *Pete Buttigieg Avoided Requests from Republican and Democratic Lawmakers Along with Invites to Zoom Meetings During his Paternity Leave – Even Though He Said He Would Be Available 24/7*, DAILYMAIL, (JAN. 12, 2024), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11630035/Pete-Buttigieg-avoided-requests-GOP-Dems-paternity-leave.html>.

online. And since even President Biden can't trust leaders to be where they say they are, you must audit those calendars, on a quarterly basis at minimum, and let us know if leaders continue to pull the wool over our eyes.

Thank you for your time and attention to this letter, and I look forward to hearing what additional steps you have planned to get our federal employees back in the office no later than February 23, 2024.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joni K. Ernst". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The "J" is large and loops down, and the "K" and "Ernst" are connected in a fluid manner.

Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senator