Employee Union Tells SSA NO More Cuts to the Frontline Under Trump Mandated Reform

Jessica LaPointe, Madison, WI, Unity Editor

Upon the Office of Budget Management (OMB) April release of the Trump mandated Comprehensive Plan for Reforming the Federal Government and Reducing the Federal Civilian Workforce, Union alarms rang across the Nation and Council 220 President Witold Skwierczynski requested immediate pre-decisional input (PDI) with top Agency officials. At the May 2017 AFGE - SSA Forums meeting in Baltimore, Skwierczynski and Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) President, Richard Couture, made it clear that more cuts to frontline staff, office closings, and critical face-to-face services would stray the Agency from its core mission. Therefore, Union officials offered other cost saving suggestions that would strengthen Social Security program integrity, administrative efficiency, and the overall quality and timeliness of public service.

According to Union meeting notes, the Agency’s view is that the most expensive administrative costs are with personnel and office space. The Acting Commissioner of Social Security, Nancy Berryhill, sent a message to attendees that frontline service is integral to the Agency’s core mission, but we cannot keep doing business as usual. Therefore, the Agency will be identifying current activities that do not align with its core mission.

This mission, as stated in the current Agency Strategic Plan is, “To deliver Social Security services that meet the challenging needs of the public,” with a specific focus to, “Provide service that is efficient, compassionate, and balanced while protecting the integrity of our programs,” according to Berryhill’s website. The notes further indicate that the Agency sees President Trump’s mandate as a way to “right size government” by eliminating redundancies and duplications.

President Skwierczynski, expressed his concerns that the Trump Administration’s intentions are to reduce the size of the Federal workforce while streamlining and eliminating agencies and programs to the degree that government becomes ineffective-ultimately to justify the privatization of otherwise successfully run government programs like Social Security.

The ODAR Council President, Richard Couture, made it clear to management that the Union is opposed to staff reductions on the frontline because SSA is not going to get the public’s work done by reducing staff. Furthermore, the Union is not in favor of eliminating field offices because face-to-face interaction with the elderly and disabled is mission critical and the most effective way of protecting the public’s vulnerable and sensitive personal information. Finally, he argues the mandate sends the wrong message - at the wrong time - to those in direct service. He hopes the agency will draw a line and stand firm on no more frontline staff reductions.

Union recommendations for SSA reform (as presented at the meeting):

Restructuring and merging:

Right now The Social Security Administration (SSA) is in charge of administering only pieces of the retirement, disability, Medicare, and Supplemental Security Income claims process. To address this separation, SSA should: Eliminate the State-run Disability Determination Service (DDS). SSA itself should make medical decisions on disability applications. This would result in a quicker decision and more user-friendly experience for claimants, as well as cost savings for the Agency by eliminating payments to DDS for services and for funding for building leases, and would reduce personnel costs by reducing layers of management.

Eliminate the Center for Medicare Services 800#. This would result in cost savings for CMS and provide a single source benefit for our customers. Train SSA employees to answer Medicare questions and to work with insurance companies.

Require the Commissioner's Budget to go straight to Congress and take SSA's administrative expenses off budget:

Right now, SSA’s budget is constrained by arbitrary overall limits on discretionary expenses and it has to compete with other agencies for resources, even though its administration expenses are funded by FICA taxes and not general tax payer revenue. Congress would be able to determine the appropriate level of administrative expenses for SSA without being (Continued on page 2)
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(Con’t)

constrained by artificial budget caps and sequestration limits.

This would create Agency transparency by educating the public directly on how their FICA tax dollars are administered, rather than having this communication filtered by the President.

Reduce layers of Management and centralize office oversight:

Right now the Agency has too many highly paid staff not in direct service positions, and duplicate offices tasked with oversight.

Eliminate the Area Directors’ offices and reassign Area Director staff to direct service positions.

Eliminate the Office of Disability and Review (ODAR) Regional offices and combine those staff with Regional Commissioners’ offices to consolidate functions within the Region (i.e. labor relations and IT).

Centralize management and oversight at Headquarters (HQ).

Eliminate the regional training divisions since there is already one at HQ.

Eliminate the cumbersome layers in the EEO process.

Consider the Denver/Seattle Model, that consolidates regional staff into 5 components (i.e. keep the regions, but have RO staff oversee two current regions).

Define a reasonable ratio of employees to managers in offices:

Right now manager-to-employee ratios in the field are 1 to 8, and overall 1 to 11.

Realign ratios by restructuring supervisory roles to team leader positions that are returned to the bargaining unit. Reassign-review functions to management. Consolidate manager duties in field offices. Eliminate Assistant District Manager position for offices with 40 or fewer employees.

Allow all tele-service-center staff to telework one day a week.

Prohibit the Office of General Counsel (OGC) from getting involved in labor relations:

OGC does not understand the Contract or our structure, and there are unnecessary delays in cases in which OGC is involved.

Utilize technology to review manager work and ultimately reduce layers of management:

Create managerial time studies like they do for employees.

Do management PACs reviews.

Hire Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) and concentrate on developing them into Claims Specialists (CS):

SSA should concentrate on hiring CSRs from the outside and promoting CSTs from existing staff. There are too few promotional opportunities for employees in the field. Employees shouldn't be forced to applying for outside vacancies in order to get a promotion.

Close card centers and reassign their work and employees to field offices.

Review contracting out as a whole.

Your input on reform is appreciated. Please talk with your local Union reps and ask them to share your ideas with the National Counsel.

To read a detailed breakdown of the OMB’s Comprehensive Plan for Reforming the Federal Government and Reducing the Federal Civilian Workforce visit the UNITY online supplement at WWW.AFGEC220.org.

Error in May UNITY:

David Black was former General Counsel for SSA not AFGE
Trump’s Budget Proposes Reductions to Employee Pay, Benefits and Programs

Jessica LaPointe

President Donald Trump released his Fiscal Year 2018 Budget proposal titled: A New Foundation for American Greatness on May 23, 2017. Aside from minor gains for federal civilian employees, it contains shocking reductions to federal employee benefits - mostly in retirement.

The President offered a 1.9% overall pay increase to justify a 1% increase in Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) employee contributions each year for the next six years. He requests to eliminate the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for current and future FERS retirees and reduce the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) COLA by .5%. He proposes to eliminate the FERS supplemental retirement payment for employees who choose to retire before Social Security eligibility age (i.e. 62). His budget changes retirement benefit calculations from the current High -3 to High-5 earning years. It also asks Congress to eliminate the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program (PSLF). For a minor win, the President makes good on his campaign promise to provide six weeks of paid leave for new parents, including in adoption cases.

The President justifies changes to federal employee retirement benefits and contributions by highlighting a Congressional Budget Office report dated April 25, 2017 that claims federal employees are paid, through wages and benefits, at a “very generous” rate of 17% higher than the private sector. President Trump’s assertions about overpaid federal employees contradict the findings of the Federal Salary Council, established by the Federal Pay Comparability Act of 1990, in a memorandum of 12/14/16 that based on Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys, federal pay would have to increase by 34.07% in 01/18 to match the pay of people who work in comparable non-federal occupations. He affirms, “the Administration believes the implementation and phasing in of retirement changes will not impact the Federal Government’s recruiting and retention efforts.”

In an article for Federalnewsradio.com titled Pay, benefits and workforce reductions in the President’s 2018 budget proposal, dated May 23, 2017, Nicole Ogrysko quotes Tony Reardon, National Treasury Employee Union President, as saying, “If these attacks on retirement were to become law, Congress would be yanking the rug [from] underneath these employees. It’s going to put federal employees who are impacted by them in a position of having a very difficult retirement.” Reardon points out these changes muddle the agreement federal employees make with their employer upon retention.

These changes would financially strap current retirees who count on yearly COLAs to keep up with the cost of inflation and pay their bills. In a May 30, 2017 Federalnewsradio.com article, by Mike Causey, titled Retirement life after COLAs disappear, Financial Planner Arthur Stein explains that a 72-year-old FERS retiree would be out up to 18% in COLA money with a 3% rise in inflation.

This would reduce their purchasing power by almost 30%.

Both sides of the political spectrum are concerned about these proposals. Ogrysko’s article quotes Representative Rob Wittman (R-Va.) as arguing; “We continue to ask our federal civilian workforce to do more with less and that is the wrong approach. As Congress works on the budget going forward, I hope we reconsider this targeting of Federal employees as an offset to deficit reductions and instead consider other reduction efforts that focus on addressing the true drivers of debt.”

Ogrysko also quotes Representative Gerry Connolly (D-VA.) as disagreeing with the President’s analysis, by stating, “Cuts of this magnitude will make it impossible to recruit and retain the qualified workforce we need to meet our nation’s challenges.”

The President justifies eliminating the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program by saying the program, “Favors some career choices over others and is complicated for borrowers to navigate.” He offers to create a simpler plan that, among other strategies, forgives student loan debt for all borrowers, in any occupation, after 15 years instead of 20 under current law.

One benefit in Trump’s budget that Americans have been waiting patiently for is the proposal of paid parental leave. The proposal asks to pay a full six weeks of leave for new moms and dads, including adoption. According to several news sources and a Politifact.com article, dated January 16, 2017, the United States is the only industrialized nation that does not offer this benefit. Currently only 12% of US private sector employers offer it.

Supporters of paid paternal leave are happy to see the President include this proposal in his budget and that he is extending it to new dads as well. However, some say six weeks is not enough – they are asking for at least 12 weeks to care for and form a proper bond with their children before going back to work.

Call to Action

Call 888-775-3148 and tell your lawmaker how important your pay and benefits are and to oppose any cuts to federal pay and benefits in next year’s budget.
Big Win for Social Security Employees:
Management denied ability to delegate down in the third step grievance process - no exceptions.

Pam Espinoza,
Trinidad, Co, Council 220 3rd VP, President Local 1802


Arbitrator Clark based his decision upon the bargaining history of the parties and the language of the 2012 National Agreement, or Contract, between SSA and AFGE, which supports the Union’s position that Step 3 decisions cannot be delegated from the Area Directors to District Managers outside of the grievant’s chain of command.

“Delegating down” occurs when a Step 3 grievance decision is heard by an official who is lower in authority than the designated 3rd Step official. SSA has a long history of violating delegating down provisions found in Article 24 of the Contract.

During 1992, Contract negotiations, SSA proposed a 2-step grievance process that allowed delegating down and the Union proposed a 3-step process that did not. The parties agreed on a 3-step process that did not allow delegation to officials down in line function.

The Union interpreted this as not allowing delegation to anyone lower than the Area Director. The Agency believed they were allowed to delegate grievance decisions to District Managers outside the grievant’s chain of command.

This fundamental disagreement led to the filing of a national grievance in 1984, called “the Miller decision.” The Miller decision determined the parties intended to prohibit delegating grievance decisions to officials lower than the Area Director. However, the Miller decision also held it was permissible to delegate grievances to officials within the Area Director’s office because they could exert authority over a District Manager’s decision.

The Agency and Union lived with this decision until 1990 when the parties re-negotiated the terms of Article 24 to allow delegation to District Managers. This was not a good change for employees. Council 220 President Witold Skwierczynski stated, “Step 3 decisions delegated down to District Managers became rubber stamps that diluted the effectiveness of the grievance process.” As a result, in 2000, the parties returned to the 1982 language. This language is currently found in Article 24 of the 2015 Contract.

Despite clear interpretation of delegating down language, SSA continued to circumvent the agreement. AFGE was forced to arbitrate the issue again. AFGE Local 3448 in Ohio grieved the issue in 2015. The case known as “the Jenks decision” found the bargaining history of the parties supported the position that the Agency was prohibited from delegating Step 3 grievance decisions to District Managers outside of the grievant’s chain of command, but applied only to Local 3448.

AFGE reps across the country should insist the Agency stop all instances of delegating down now that a national grievance has been successfully litigated and SSA’s exceptions have been denied by the Federal Labor Relations Bureau. If the Agency refuses, grievances should be filed at the local and regional level, using the national grievance as precedent.

This decision ensures employees have a fair and equitable grievance process with increasing levels of authority. A Step 3 grievance decision is no longer a rubber stamp. This encourages an employee to engage in the grievance process because his or her supervisor’s superior will hear his or her voice on the issue. Than an official with full knowledge of the employee’s issue and full decision, making authority will decide on the issue. This gives employees the greatest chance at resolving their issue at the lowest possible level and reduces the need for costly arbitrations on behalf of the Agency which could be consider a win for both parties.

Meet at the Rally Point!
https://www.facebook.com/SSARallyPoint/
Honoring Veterans’ Special Status

Amad Ali, New Albany, IN, EVP Local 3571

When it comes to veterans, some people say, “when you volunteer, you know what you are getting into – you do not deserve special status.” The “special status,” they are referring to are the benefits that veterans receive, such as job preferences in the private and public sectors, varying types of disability benefits, and marketplace discounts. Many of these naysayers have no personal or family members with military experience. Our founding fathers laid the foundation for modern America with the ideal of free speech. Veterans serve to protect this ideal along with many others. Whether a veteran served in combat or not, and regardless of military branch, the brave choice to serve and protect Americans and their ideals deserves commendation.

Packing-up and leaving the civilian world for a military one is when anxiety starts to build because the cadet begins to contemplate the various imminent degrees of their sacrifice. Once they achieve basic training, the door opens wider to a world of challenges that only those who experience will ever fully understand. Americans often take veterans’ sacrifices for granted. The parades, Veterans and Memorial Day celebrations, and the “thank you for your service” comments are nice and appreciated, but only display a cursory understanding of a veteran’s service. Movies, books, and the media offer a decent snapshot into what it means to serve, but Americans will not know how it feels unless they actually serve, are a close relative to a veteran, or have taken the time to empathize with the life of a veteran.

Veterans make up less than 1% of the population. Most are dutiful, proud, and brave with magnanimous cores of integrity. Many respond to an internal call of duty and perform very challenging tasks under extremely difficult circumstances – all for very low pay. They have endured generations of gibes from Americans who are unappreciative, out of touch, and disrespectful. The irony is, veterans are proud to have served and protected Americans’ rights to express such views. They volunteer and yes, know much of what they are in for when they sign on the dotted line. Americans will continue to express their veteran support or lack thereof. Veterans will continue celebrating and honoring their proud traditions of service to their country - and at times receive job preferences and a 10% discount at Waffle House. These benefits do not replace lives lost nor heal the bodies, hearts, and minds of the wounded in the line of duty. Nevertheless, they are attempts to make a veteran’s life whole, expressions of gratitude, and appreciated.

To explore internal SSA veteran employee benefits and resources from the intranet visit The Office of Human Resources Veterans Employee Terminal at http://dhr.ssa.gov/employeeterminal/


Letter to the Editor: SSI

Dana Duggins, Redding, CA, EVP Council 220

So often I read criticisms about how children’s SSI benefits should be taken away. For politicians who resent any form of public assistance, this is music to their ears. To the parents of a disabled child, this agonizing personal attack strikes fear in their heart. I know, because I am the parent and grandparent of disabled children.

When my son became stricken with Leukemia, he also became a paraplegic. His hospitalization lasted nearly 6 months at two different San Francisco Bay area specialty hospitals, more than 3 hours from our home. This required my husband or myself to be with him at all times. However, the hospitals do not provide lodging for parents, nor do they pay for the cost of travel back and forth. There is no per diem or travel allowance. It is all out of pocket. While normal childhood medications seldom require a copayment, the medications for cancer and paraplegia have large deductibles. Home health care is not free, nor is the specialty equipment needed for a paraplegic. His wheelchair was $8000. Our stairs had to be converted to a ramp costing $2400. Our bathroom door and his bedroom door had to be converted to 36” so he could access each room costing another $2000. None of which was covered by our homeowner’s insurance. Then there was the monthly check-up appointments back to the hospital - the list goes on and on.

Parents of children with mental illnesses absorb a mountain of unseen costs. Every time there is a problem at school, which is frequent, you must leave work to address the issue. There are weekly doctor appointments, (medical, psychiatric, counseling, blood draws, etc.) which require a deductible and more time off work. There are medications that have large co-pays and the Medicaid program does not cover most of them.

No one is getting rich on SSI! Disabled kids are a tragic situation for the entire family, not a gimmick to get rich on the government’s dime. People need to be a lot more empathetic to tragic situations and less critical of those who need assistance.

I applaud Kathleen Romig’s insightful reporting on a subject near and dear to me. I strongly urge my brothers, sisters, and colleagues to take the time to read it. The attacks on disabled children and their families are very frightening and show just how far backwards our politicians want to take our country. Does this really make America great again?

To read a summary of Kathleen Romig’s article and access the full article, SSI: A life for Children with Disabilities, visit our July UNITY Online Supplement at www.afgec220.org.
Social Security is in trouble. It is not in financial trouble despite the drumbeat of those who falsely claim the program is unsustainable and that benefits must be cut. Rather there is an invisible crisis that threatens to dramatically reduce popular support for this essential and successful retirement and disability protection program. Social Security can be thought of as a three legged stool: benefit payments is one leg, revenues the second leg, and the third equally important although less considered leg is program operation by the Social Security Administration. These are the men and women who get the checks out to 60 million Americans on time, in the correct amount, every month of the year. It is a daunting challenge that the Agency has performed extremely well over the years. Attack any one of these legs and the stool collapses.

The problem is that it costs money to operate this massive system and Congress (mainly Republicans) has routinely refused to recognize this reality. The Social Security Administration is being unnecessarily starved of resources and the result has been a steady deterioration in the services it provides to the American public. Field offices have been closed, staff has been cut and hours of operation have been reduced. Consequently the waiting times for filing applications, reaching the 1-800 number for questions and appealing benefit decisions have skyrocketed.

According to a recent analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “SSA’s core operating budget has shrunk by 10 percent since 2010 after adjusting for inflation, even as the demands on SSA have reached all-time highs as the baby boomers have aged into their peak years for retirement and disability.” Ironically, SSA’s budget has been decimated even though its funding comes not from taxpayer general revenue, but directly from payroll contributions to the Social Security Trust Funds. Social Security beneficiaries pay for the administration of the program and all of the services it provides. Yet Congress treats SSA as a discretionary program forcing it to compete with countless vital taxpayer financed programs for its support. The reason is a bit arcane.

In 1990 a law was passed that moved all receipts and disbursements of the Social Security system out of the federal budget. But in 1991, the Office of Management and Budget ignored the law and included SSA’s administrative costs inside the budget as discretionary spending. The practice has continued to the present time. But that little noticed change has had dramatic ramifications for SSA and led directly to the crisis the Agency now confronts.

Today, the Old Age, Survivors and Disability Trust Funds have almost $3 trillion in reserve and the annual operations of the program are less than one percent of program spending. Not only are cuts of any sort entirely unjustified, but significant increases are essential and easily afforded.

OMB needs to obey the law and treat SSA as it does the rest of the program. Failing that, Congress must enact legislation strengthening the existing law regarding the budgetary treatment of Social Security. One way or another, it needs to happen soon – before beneficiaries decide they no longer believe they are getting their money’s worth. Once that point is reached, it threatens the entire program.

Security beneficiaries pay for the administration of the program and all of the services it provides. Yet Congress treats SSA as a discretionary program forcing it to compete with countless vital taxpayer financed programs for its support. The reason is a bit arcane.

For decades, Social Security benefits have been a vital cornerstone of disability and retirement security for the vast majority of Americans. Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown is currently working on a bill that would end any debate on the future solvency of the system, broaden Social Security benefits, and take Social Security Administrative expenses “off budget.” Senator Brown is expected to introduce the “Protect and Expand Social Security Act of 2017” in the United States Senate. The final language has not been made public, but it is anticipated that the bill will include provisions to:

- Increase benefits for all beneficiaries through PIA adjustment,
- Improve COLA increases by using the Consumer Price Index for Elderly Consumers,
- Increase Benefits for Long-Career, Low-Wage workers,
- Reduce Federal income taxes on benefits,
- Establish a caregiver credit, and
- Protect adult children with disabilities.

The bill will also likely include updates to the SSI program. Among them, updates to SSI eligibility requirements, removal of the marriage penalty for SSI couples, and eliminating dedicated accounts.

In order to secure solvency of the trust funds, the bill would lift the payroll cap for earnings above $250,000 and implement a 10% Net Investment Income tax.

In order to allow SSA to accomplish these significant upgrades, the bill proposes permanent exemption for SSA from federal hiring freezes, expanded hiring for entry-level positions and modernization of SSA’s internal IT systems.

Perhaps the bill’s key provision for SSA employees is it would allow Social Security’s administrative budget to be removed from
Brown Bill Will Address Solvency, Expand Benefits and Take SSA Off Budget (con’t)

the political budgeting process, or go “off budget.”

What does “off-budget” mean?

SSA’s operating expenses are often considered among the most efficient in all of government. Year in and year out, SSA’s administrative costs come in at about 1% of program spending. Despite the fact that SSA’s operating costs come out of FICA taxes, Congress currently determines the agency’s administrative expenses as part of the larger pie of discretionary spending, and SSA is left fighting for its piece.

Social Security’s budget has effectively shrunk by 10% since 2010, after adjusting for inflation. In that time, the number of claims filed have gone up substantially. The bill contends that SSA’s budget ought to be set at a level that allows the agency to meet administrative and public demands, and not caught up in the political gridlock of Washington D.C.

In the end, the administrative budget would still be subject to the annual appropriations process and Congressional oversight. This crucial aspect of Senator Brown’s bill will allow Social Security to restore a level of public service that has been its trademark for so many years.

AFGE Quality of Public Service Campaign Kickoff!

The Union is kicking off its first organizing campaign in three years this July. It is sending trained professionals from the Union Organizing Institute and the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) National Headquarters to visit 700 Social Security offices across the nation. Their mission is to talk with SSA employees about current issues encourage them to take action to preserve their jobs, benefits, civil service rights and the community based field office structure and to gather information about work life that will shape employee/management contract bargaining set to begin in 2018. In addition, they are looking for your help to recruit new members, and are offering a generous recruiter cash payout of $100 with a matched $100 payout to the new member-often times paid on the spot! Our strength in numbers is vital as Congress and the Trump Administration are preparing to scale back the Federal workforce and reduce our pay and benefits.

The Union is labeling this campaign the Quality of Public Service Campaign; because offices have been understaffed and underfunded for the last seven years as the agency transitions to greater use of online services. This change has resulted in office closings, stressed-out employees (who are constantly asked to do more with less), and deteriorating public service. The Union hopes these office visits will re-energize workers by informing them about what the Union is doing, in Washington and with management, to advocate for a safer and healthier work environment, lobby for more staff, and improve the overall quality of the public service that our SSA employees provide. During these office visits, the Union will unveil its Social Security Customer Service Bill of Rights – a Union-drafted document inspired by the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Much like the historically pivotal governing document, designed to better protect civil liberties, the Union hopes its version will be used as a call to Congress to better protect, not only Social Security benefits and services, but also, the employees who administer them, and the American people who earned the right to receive timely and accurate benefit payments by making FICA tax payments over lifetimes of hard work and professional achievement.

Member benefits help extend our paycheck, but the Union is much more. According to David Cann, AFGE Director of Field Services and Education, benefits do not transform who you are - being a union member does. With a unionized workforce, the relationship between boss and employee evolves into a partnership by eliminating unilateral decision making and widening the employer’s perspective. Union members become family. They share victories and commiserations that strengthen co-worker relationships and allow them to feel ownership in the Contract process and the final product that will shape their life for years to come.

Organizers will be encouraging employees to call, write and visit their legislators and communicate with them regarding life in a Social Security office. Congress needs to know how staffing cuts have adversely affected service delivery and how the emphasis on internet claims and MYSSA adversely affects customers.

In the words of Loni Schultz, AFGE Council 220 Chicago Regional Vice President, SSA employee and AFGE member for over 40 years; “I am proud of my service to the elderly and disabled at Social Security. I am proud of my service to my Union. There is no higher calling in life than the fight for social justice. Raise your voice and take action. Divided, we each are but one. Together, we are strong and unstoppable.”

Take pride in your Federal service by joining AFGE, your employee Union, and by encouraging a co-worker to join today! For enrollment and additional benefit information visit: https://www.afge.org/member-benefits/join/

Join AFGE Today!

Please welcome these professionally trained organizers to your office and join in their efforts to rally staff around issues that affect everyday lives.
Monique Buchanan, Detroit, MI, EVP Local 3239

Webster’s Dictionary defines AWOL (Absence without Leave) as, “Absent often without notice or permission/absent or missing.” As it concerns Federal Employees at the SSA Tele-service Center (TSC), managers are incorrectly charging employees AWOL for periods of absence from work.

Our 2012 National Agreement between AFGE and SSA addresses AWOL in Article 31, Section 5. This section states an employee has the responsibility to report unanticipated use of leave by the start of the fixed shift, the end of the am flex band, or the required report time for training or activities. In addition, the section acknowledges there may be occasions when the employee is unable to call in timely. If the employee does not report an absence timely, it is possible an employee will face an AWOL charge, therefore;

“If the employee’s leave status has not been clarified by the end of the shift, the absence may be charged to AWOL. A charge of AWOL may be amended to approved leave when an acceptable reason or evidence is provided to meet the existing provisions for approving leave.”

This means, if the employee calls or comes into work, gives an acceptable explanation for their absence, then management can reverse the AWOL charge to another leave category (annual/sick/credit/comp/LWOP).

In the Salinas, California Tele-Service Center (TSC), Tele-Service Representative (TSR) and Council 147 Representative Christina Barnachia has encountered AWOL situations in her role as Council Representative and TSR. Christina called in a request for annual leave one morning before the end of the flex band. The Supervisor told her “OK” and the call ended. When Christina returned to work the following day, a memo titled “For the Record” was on her desk. The memo informed her she was charged AWOL for the previous day’s absence. Management told her she was needed at work to answer the phones. Christina stated that, “They deny annual leave requests in advance for the reason of ‘workload purposes’ and will charge you AWOL if you cannot come in. They won’t tell us what the ‘workload’ is. They [TSC management] have control of the call volume. I feel it’s an abuse of power to deny leave and then charge someone AWOL when they can’t come in.” Currently Christina is representing an employee in a grievance on this issue. She further added, “Quite a few employees told me they were charged with AWOL because they were away from their desks.”

TSR Juliane Salazar has been with the Detroit Michigan TSC for over 20 years. A few years ago, Juliane encountered multiple AWOL charges. Management told her per “regulations” if she did not call in on time, she would be charged with AWOL. Juliane contacted a Union Representative, was successful in her grievance and has not had any more charges of AWOL. Salazar states, “Now that I have won the grievance, I don’t get nervous like I used to… I am glad I contacted someone in the Union to help me.”

A few reminders: AWOL charges can lead to discipline and affect your retirement date and leave accrual. If this matter concerns you, consult your local Union representative for more information.

For the Field Office Focus article, please visit our online supplement at www.afgec220.org