By Jim Campana
Second Vice President

Need to figure out whether it makes sense to retire at 62 or 65? Wondering how much your monthly Social Security benefit will be? Been married three times and wondering what that means for your benefit?

Answers have never been farther than your local Social Security office, where employees are extensively trained to give accurate and helpful answers. There is a reason Social Security is the most popular of all government programs.

But that will change if the Social Security Administration’s “Vision 2025” comes to pass. Bureaucrats are mulling closure of most of SSA’s more than 1,000 community field offices in the U.S., where 43 million people sought services last year.

Even as the number of visitors continues to grow, Vision 2025 would virtually eliminate face-to-face service, replacing it with internet services and an 800 phone number.

Thirty thousand field office employees would be laid off—following nearly 11,000 positions already eliminated. When SSA sought its employees’ input for Vision 2025, they responded overwhelmingly that field offices were vital to the agency’s mission.

“Americans are going to be cheated out of what they deserve,” said Witold Skwierczynski, president of the National Council of SSA Field Operations Locals. “Every Social Security beneficiary deserves the personal assistance they have paid for their entire lives.”

The 800 number, now plagued with long wait times, would likely be automated. Beneficiaries would have to navigate through questions before they could speak with a live representative. And the Council parent Union American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) suspects SSA would outsource the call centers to other countries.

“The plan makes the assumption that by the year 2025, people will want to conduct all their business via the internet and will not leave their houses,” said Matt Perlinger, a claims representative in Omaha.

“Our offices are busier than ever. People continue to demand face-to-face service in order to understand the complex program that is Social Security. It’s the caring and dedicated SSA employees that take the time to thoroughly explain these programs.”

The loss of in-person services would create a serious hardship for the millions of seniors who do not have a computer or internet access. It would also increase the distances they will need to travel to get to whatever offices remain.

Although needs are expanding as baby boomers retire, SSA isn’t waiting for 2025. Management has already shuttered 70 field offices and reduced hours at the rest by closing at noon on Wednesdays and at 3:00 on other weekdays.

Skwierczynski noted that, according to surveys of SSA employees, many claimants who file on the internet make decisions that could lead to the permanent loss of benefits. SSA employees are trained to catch those mistakes.

Ryan Gurganious, claims representative in North Carolina, cited an example: “When a disabled person is working, we’ll ask them, ‘In your job, do you have any special expenses you have to pay to be able to work?’ They might say, ‘I have a wheelchair. I have to buy bus passes to get to work.’”

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Coalition fights Vision 2025

Council President Witold Skwierczynski (center) addresses October Washington, DC, rally of coalition groups brought together by AFGE to deliver over 500,000 signatures on a petition to fight community field office closings under Vision 2025. Story, page 2.
Petitions to keep offices open submitted

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) led a coalition nationwide to push back against a Social Security Administration plan to close many of the agency’s community field offices and move clients to the internet.

The Union, along with Social Security Works, the Alliance for Retired Americans, and the Daily Kos, conducted events in early October in Washington, D.C., Oakland, California, Queens, New York, and Columbus, Ohio.

A half-million-signature petition was delivered to SSA that states, “Help stop future Social Security office closures!” There is still time to sign the petition at the www.AFGE.org link to Save Our Social Security.

National Council President Witold Skwierczynski and American Postal Workers Union President Mark Dimondstein were among the speakers in Washington. Alliance activist Diane Fleming told her story about how she has relied on Social Security, and the Southeast DC office nearby, for information about her benefits.

The Union states budget cuts SSA’s ability to handle the influx of retiring baby boomers, and that the new plan to shutter many field offices will only further hinder access for less web-savvy seniors.

The agency’s Nancy Berryhill, Deputy Commissioner for Operations, testified in June to the Senate Special Committee on Aging:

“We make the decision to consolidate a field office only after a time-intensive, thorough review. This analysis is thoughtful and deliberative, and it is especially important because populations and communities change over time.”

Yet, in its report, the Committee’s staff concluded:

“The Social Security Administration has faced and will continue to face difficult budgetary decisions. It is beyond question that eliminating superfluous services, including certain field offices, makes sense for an agency looking for ways to serve more with less. However, it is also clear that the agency has not done enough to consider the impact of the decisions it has made in recent years on the people who rely on Social Security the most: the poor, disabled or otherwise limited elderly populations.”

Fighting the continued erosion of community-based service, AFGE highlighted the findings of a 2013 Pew Research Center survey which showed more than 40 percent of Americans over age 65 do not use the internet, and 60 percent lack a broadband connection.

“Congress has cut fourteen of the last sixteen SSA budget requests. And now, these cuts are being felt, as the Social Security Administration is forced to shutter dozens of field offices around the country,” said Alliance Executive Director Richard Fiesta, who also spoke at the DC rally.

Computers can’t replace human contact in offices

By Howard Egerman
Council 220 Representative

Ronald Reagan famously told us that government is the problem, not the solution. However, there is one part of the government that is truly a part of the solution and truly is of the people, by the people, and for the people -- Social Security’s network of field offices.

However, the Social Security Administration released a plan resulting from a taxpayer-paid contract with the National Academy of Public Administration called Vision 2025, which calls for the end of Social Security field offices and 800 number service as we know it today.

My Union, the American Federation of Government Employees, feels strongly that this plan is short-sighted and comes from the same blurry vision that over the last few years has resulted in the closing of more than 70 field offices nationwide. When, each day, 10,000 Americans turn 65 years old the agency has lost 11,000 employees.

The agency plans to eliminate direct service in offices throughout the country. As workers in our communities, we have grown up with the people we serve, attended their schools, churches and synagogues, and participated in civic events.

We are not some out-of-state or offshore contractor who knows nothing about the people we want to help. We are not machines. We are people who can answer their needs and respond to their questions.

While our country and our world has changed with technology, not everyone has a computer or a smart phone or even a phone, period. Not everyone understands complex government programs. Sometimes people simply want to talk to other people about the major events in their lives. That is where we come in.

Social Security is the most successful insurance program in the world, with administrative costs taking up less than two percent of money collected. Yet programs like the Vision 2025 plan are brought forward.

Congressman Brian Higgins of New York proposed legislation, HR 3997, the Social Security Accountability Act, to stop the continued office closings and develop a process addressing the public’s needs.

Like the people we serve, Social Security and Medicare have birthdays. Medicare’s 49th birthday was July 30 and Social Security turned 79 August 14.

Our country has changed. Typewriters and adding machines that were used when I was a young employee are no longer with us. But a client’s need to talk with a human being continues.

We urge everyone to contact their member of Congress and Senators to help ensure that the Social Security Administration vision for the future is one that is not shortsighted or nearsighted, but corrected to see the needs of the public and serve it well.

(Egerman’s article was printed by the Oakland Tribune’s online “My Word” in August.)
For those of you who have not been part of this campaign, the genesis for the resistance to “Vision 2025” is the increased reliance on the use of a variety of forms of technology to deliver Social Security services to the public.

The agency fully embraced the Vision 2025 report by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) in July. More than 80% of SSA executives in Headquarters and Regional Offices approved the plan, which calls for the closing of nearly all community SSA field offices.

The agency’s administration envisions a future for SSA that forces the public to use web-based applications for information and the primary access point for services. That future is already here: employees stand next to “self-help” computers to guide applicants through the MySSA.gov process instead of providing direct service.

SSA’s model for service in the next 10 years is to use online and virtual service “channels” (NAPA’s terminology), funneling the public into a singular path for service that is impersonal and needlessly exposes individuals to the likelihood of cheating themselves on the benefits earned under law.

This Vision is unacceptable.

The Vision for SSA’s future must be guided by a robust ethic of public service values rather than a business model of efficiency. A public service model places employees, human beings who are trained professionals, at the center of service delivery in locations that are accessible by the public.

SSA is rapidly moving the agency to a business model of self-help, a “You Are On Your Own, Do It Yourself” model of service, as if the American public is shopping online for a deal.

It is not. The American public visits Social Security offices most often at a critical moment of life: retirement, disability, loss of a loved one, loss of livelihood. Our calling at SSA is to deliver personal service to the public and administer very complex programs benefiting everyone in the U.S. timely and accurately.

Automated service should be one option but not the almost exclusive option as SSA now envisions.

Our campaign to Save Our Social Security is a Vision for the future that increases the agency’s presence in the communities across the U.S. We want more offices available, not fewer.

We increased staff to meet the needs of a growing retirement population.

Our campaign vision is one that insists people make the difference and that an ethos of public service makes people central in providing service. We believe that millions of Americans who need our services for retirement, survivor and disability claims will continue to want trained federal employees to assist them in making their claims. The self-help vision of SSA for service delivery leaves benefit applicants adrift in uncertainty, confusion and error-plagued claims which often result in underpayments or overpayments.

The portal MySSA.gov being offered by the agency to access personal information is vulnerable to hackers, opening the way for benefits to be stolen. Many thousands of beneficiaries have already experienced the horror of having their direct deposit payments hijacked. The site is too high-risk for safe use.

Many thousands of users of MySSA.gov are victims of identity theft. Many thousands more will fall victim until SSA changes course. We must help SSA change course.

The Social Security Administration has seen its budget frozen and reduced, resulting in 11,000 fewer staff to provide customer service to the roughly 43 million Americans who visited Field Offices in 2013.

The agency has created a disastrous “Vision 2025” strategic plan that would only allow beneficiaries to go online to receive service – a huge departure for an agency known as “the Face of the Federal Government.” There are two pieces of legislation that could halt these closures and bring accountability to the Social Security Administration:

• In the Senate, Sen. Charles Schumer has introduced The Social Security Access Act of 2014 (S. 2742)

• In the House, Rep. Brian Higgins has introduced The Social Security Administration Accountability Act of 2014 (H.R. 3997)

On your personal computer (not a government computer), go to https://www.afge.org/?Page=StopFieldOfficeClosings and send a letter to your Senators and Representative.
By Debbie Fredericksen
Past President, Local 3129

AFGE rallied 250 members attending its Human Rights Conference in Minneapolis to support SSA Local 3129’s protest against Social Security’s plan to shut down community based service.

AFGE members gathered in a “Save Our Social Security” rally in front of the Minneapolis Social Security office in September to protest Vision 2025. The plan would close virtually all Social Security Field Offices by 2025 and force business to the internet.

Congressman Steny Hoyer, Maryland, joined AFGE National President J. David Cox, to warn about the doors to offices around the country being closed if SSA has its way with its Vision 2025 plan. Acknowledging AFGE’s leadership on fighting the plan, Hoyer said the Union needs to continue such actions to keep offices open in communities around the country.

Congressman Keith Ellison joined Hoyer and Cox to denounce reduced office hours and office closings. He represents the district that includes the Minneapolis office. He empathized with the plight of local citizens who had come to the office to conduct business with Social Security but found the doors locked. He said notes to his office are more effective than a phone call, but even enough phone calls on an issue will be heard.

Retiree Marie Misten-Fiedler spoke as well, naming five small towns in rural Minnesota that have no libraries with internet services.

“How are people in this type of community able to do business with the Social Security Administration?” she asked. “It is difficult enough to be elderly and interact with Social Security, but the fact that there is no Internet service at all makes it almost impossible to do business with SSA once field offices are closed.”

She echoed the Union’s concerns about the integrity of personal data being sent via the internet, in light of the increasing incidents of compromised personal data.

To combat this growing concern, AFGE asked everyone attending the rally, public and employees alike, to make calls, but especially to write letters to their congressional representatives expressing their concern about office closures.

Congressman Ellison addresses AFGE rally. Congressman Hoyer, far left, also addressed the crowd.